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Section 2: Constructions of Desire

Introduced by Heike Bauer

A defining, yet often overlooked, feature of nineteenth-century biological discourses is their concern with sexual matters. In the 1850s and 1860s the rise of evolutionary theory gave centre stage to issues of reproduction, which, bolstered by developments such as the advances in germ theory and the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's work and attendant formation of genetics around 1900, prompted new debates about heredity that soon spilled out of the scientific laboratory and into the realm of the social.¹ If Darwin and his scientific colleagues were concerned with sexual matters primarily for the role they played in the evolution of species, evolutionary thinking affected much broader discursive transformations, which were soon applied to social debates about gender, morality, and society. It is perhaps no surprise that at a time of imperial expansion and modern European nation-building efforts, it was especially the potential consequences of real and perceived sexual transgressions that came under scrutiny.² In England, for example, it was the campaigns to control the spreading of venereal diseases, which prompted some of the earliest public debates about sexual conduct.³ Targeting garrison towns, they especially focused on women who sold, or were suspected to sell, sex. Any women walking out in public — in other words, working, rather than middle or upper class women — could be forced to undergo an invasive medical screening procedure designed to test if they were infected with venereal diseases. Garrison towns were targeted because of the realisation that venereal diseases were rampant amongst the military, prompting fears about the real impact of 'improper' sexual conduct on the health and strength of the nation. Feminist campaigners, especially those advocating 'social purity' via the abolishment of prostitution, soon challenged the blaming of women for the spread of contagious diseases, pointing out that it was the men who paid for sex who brought disease into the (in this instance largely middle-class) home, thus fundamentally threatening the well-being of its inhabitants and any future offspring.⁴

Yet while the debates about venereal diseases indicate how sex came to be spoken publicly in gendered and classed reproductive terms that focused on the health — and evolution — of the nation, empire and 'race', it was especially those bodies and desires that did not conform to reproductive norms and gendered social expectations that would come under scrutiny as the nineteenth-century drew to a close. In 1886 the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a textbook based on patient case studies, which inaugurated the emergence of a dedicated, if in disciplinary terms porous, sexual science.⁵ *Psychopathia Sexualis* helped to publicize recent coinages such as 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality', and introduced new sexual classifications such as 'sadism' and 'masochism'. This vocabulary shifted the focus of attention away from reproduction and onto a catalogue of sexual desires and

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practices, which indexes the emergence of a modern concept of sexuality, understood as a form of identity and identification gathered around sexual desires and object choice. The new vocabulary of sex was primarily associated with deviancy from an implicit, yet largely untheorised ‘heterosexuality’ (itself a product of the nineteenth-century when the term was first coined if little used). Not long after the publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing took up a prestigious chair in psychiatry at the University of Vienna where he came into contact with the young Sigmund Freud, who would become another hugely influential figure in the conceptualisation of modern sexuality. In contrast to Krafft-Ebing, whose work exemplifies the scientific investment in classifying sex including for use in the courtroom to aid the establishment of culpability of the accused, Freud’s psychoanalysis turned attention to relationship between taboos, unconscious desires and subjectivity.

Sexology and psychoanalysis both made extensive use of the so-called ‘case study’, an analytical method based on patient accounts.⁶ While Freud’s case studies gave precedence to his own interpretation of the dreams and other stories told to him by the people who came to his consulting room, Krafft-Ebing enlarged the different editions of *Psychopathia Sexualis* by including a growing number of autobiographical and biographical life narratives, which were derived from his clinical encounters as well as from the letters he received by readers who felt inspired to send him their own accounts of their intimate desires and sexual practices. These ‘case studies’, which were anonymized and typically included information about the person’s age, sexual development and health of their parents, constitute an overlooked link between the emerging sexual sciences and the older discipline of biology. For around 1900 ‘biology’ still retained some of its associations with ‘biography’, as biology could be used to describe the ‘study of human life, character, or society’ broadly, even as it increasingly came to mean specifically the scientific study of living organisms.⁷

The conceptual overlaps between sexual and biological discourses, and their loose formal links to life writing indicate that the conception of desire was a dynamic process. Despite the measurable influence of sexological terminologies and psychoanalytical conceptions of subjectivity on the emergence of modern sexual subjects, it would be reductive to conceptualise the way in which humans came to think of themselves as sexual beings as a sterile product of the clinic. Individual and collective articulations of the visceral and emotional aspects of desire emerged not merely in response to pathologizing discourses or the legal and political contexts that governed intimacy, but as part of long cultural histories. Literature, for example, played a role in the emergence of concepts such as ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’, which were coined by Krafft-Ebing after reading the works of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Krafft-Ebing was quick to read fiction back onto everyday life, scientifically framing — and claiming — sexual practices that would in turn be reclaimed by subjects who saw their own desires reflected or attacked by the sexological discourses.⁸ The complexity of this process

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exceeds Foucault's notion of 'reverse discourse', according to which sexual discourse was produced within the *scientia sexualis* and then adapted by the subjects whose desires fit the sexological classifications.⁹ Instead, as the essays in this section indicate, the constructions of desire are products of intricate negotiations between disciplinary, socio-political and cultural factors, which bring individual experience into proximity with real and imagined communities.

The essays brought together here turn attention to the often overlooked discursive, conceptual and formal links between biological and sexual discourses around 1900. Taking as their focus 'desire', rather than the loaded terminologies of sexual identity, they cover topics relating to evolution, reproduction, perversion and inversion, key concepts in modern debates about sex, science and society. The first three essays, by Michael Eggers, Charlotte Woodford, and Linda Leskau, all turn to biological discourses to explore how love and desire were articulated against and through the social taboos that surrounded them. While here the focus lies primarily on individual experience, the final essay in this section, Cyd Sturgess's exploration of female same-sex desire in Berlin and Amsterdam, examines how a collective 'Sapphic self-fashioning' challenged and expanded the male dominated sexological and biological discourses about gender and desire. Together, these essays show that desire has complex social and cultural contingencies, which exceed reductive claims about scientific 'truth' — claims that are still all too often made in relation to gender, the body and desire, as evidenced, for instance, by stranglehold of evolutionary psychology on popular debates about the behaviour of human and non-human animals today. By teasing apart the specificities, distinctions and overlaps between biological and sexual discourses, the essays reveal the importance of culture for the articulation of desire, critique the shape and impact of gendered social norms, and explore the politics and aesthetics of desire around 1900. Demonstrating that the borders between science and literature remained wide open at the fin de siècle, this work traces the most intimate aspects of human existence to show that sexual subjectivity is not merely the product of scientific and clinical environments or isolated psychic processes, but deeply enmeshed in cultural and social life.

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¹ A key text for understanding the nineteenth-century reach of evolutionary thinking remains Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plot: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth Century Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983). For more specific discussions of the interlinked scientific and social debates about 'sex' and heredity see e.g. Kimberly A. Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's Rights in Gilded Age America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); and Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² For a critique of the interlinked histories of sexuality and colonialism see e.g. Anjali Arondekar, 'Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol.14, Nos 1/2 (2005), pp. 10-27; and Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

³ For an overview of the debates see Emma Liggins, 'Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s', *Critical Survey*, Vol.15, No.3 (2003), pp. 39-55. Ann Heilmann and Stephanie Forward have gathered an impressive collection of texts that indicate the intricacies of these debates in their (eds), *Sex, Social Purity and Sarah Grand* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4 vols. Anne R. Hanley presents a detailed study of 'how medical professionals acquired, developed and applied their knowledge of venereal diseases' in her *Medicine, Knowledge and Venereal Diseases in England, 1886-1916* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 3.

⁴ See Lesley Hall, 'Hauling Down the Double Standard: Feminism, Social Purity and Sexual Science in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Gender & History* Vol.16, No.1 (2004), pp. 36-56.

⁵ For studies of the emerging sexual science and the critical issues at stake in the modern construction of sexuality and gender see e.g. Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion 1860-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experiences of Modern War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Anna Katharina Schaffner, *Modernism and Perversion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Siobhan Somerville, 'Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body', *Journal for the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1994), pp. 243-266; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008); Robert Deam Tobin, *Peripheral Desires: The German Invention of Sex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁶ Joy Damousi, Birgit Lang Katie Sutton (eds), *Case Studies and the Dissemination of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'biology'.

⁸ See for instance Katie Sutton's discussion of this complex process in 'Representing the "Third Sex": Cultural Translations of the Sexological Encounter in Early Twentieth-Century Germany', in Heike Bauer (ed.), *Sexology and Translation: Cultural and Scientific Encounters Across the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), pp. 53-71. For nuanced analyses of the complex links between discourse, narrative and subjectivity see also Jana Funke, 'The Case of Karl. M [artha] Baer: Narrating "Uncertain Sex"', in Ben Davies and Jana Funke (eds), *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.132-153; and Ina Linge, 'Gender and Agency Between "Sexualwissenschaft" and Autobiography: The Case of N.O. Body's *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahre*', *German Life and Letters*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2015), pp. 387-404.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: an Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 101.