

Heike Bauer
ENGLISH LITERARY SEXOLOGY: TRANSLATIONS OF INVERSION, 1860-1930
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Reviewed by Dustin Friedman.

Heike Bauer's topic is surely familiar. In this extensively researched study, she returns to well-trod scholarly ground by studying the shifts in cultural understandings of sexuality that occurred during the European fin-de-siecle. She reinvigorates this topic, however, by revising Michel Foucault's now standard account of what happened at the turn of the century to the science of human sexuality, or "sexology." Rather than focusing—as Foucault does—on the historical formation of a concept of "sexual identity," Bauer highlights instead the specific cultural and individual contexts in which sexology emerged as a defined area of study in mid nineteenth-century Germany and came to permeate British literary culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By tracking the now obsolete concept of sexological "inversion" as it became "translated" (both literally and figuratively) into different national and political contexts, Bauer demonstrates that "modern sexual theorization went far beyond questions of sexual identity and was tied to a politics of gender, knowledge, and authority" (20).

Bauer's introduction maps the new avenues of inquiry opened by an emphasis on sexual discourse rather than sexual identity. By tracing the formation of discourse, she shows how sexology touched the lived experience of individuals, which includes the specific personal and cultural circumstances in which sexological discourse proliferated. Bauer investigates these contexts by means of language and gender, both of which she construes in light of what Walter Benjamin calls "translation." As Bauer summarizes the argument of Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923), translation calls for

more than “mere linguistic knowledge, as cognition and the production of meaning are tied in to a process of culturally-specific association” (16). Accordingly, she insists that we weigh not only the linguistic translations of German sexological texts into English, but also the effect of these translations within different cultural and political circumstances. Within English literary culture, we must also assess their “translation” from the male-dominated realm of formal sexology to the realm of women’s literary writings. This way of approaching translation enables Bauer to show that the term “inversion” signified differently when applied to men and women. When applied to male sexuality, it denoted the politicization of sexual discourse within the framework of an emerging state; when applied to women, it referred to transgressively feminist behavior rather than non-normative sexual practices *per se*.

Bauer’s introduction is followed by four chapters and a coda. In the first chapter, she aims to show how “the theorisation of the sexual body was linked closely to discourses surrounding an emerging national body” in mid nineteenth-century German states (21). Examining the works of three of the defining figures of German sexology—Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, and Magnus Hirschfeld—Bauer finds that their “different forms of translation . . . indicate how the sexual body was theorised in culturally-specific terms during different stages in the development of German sexology (22). Reading Ulrichs’ writings in light of the formation of the German empire in the 1860s, she argues that he conceived the “Urning” (a female soul in a male body) in response to the emerging nation’s heteronormative understanding of citizenship. While German laws criminalized physical intercourse between men, Ulrichs used the Classical humanist tradition to argue that gender inversion was spiritual and philosophical rather

than corporeal in nature. According to Bauer, this “translation” of inversion from the punitive legal context of the state to the “extra-legal and meta-national” language of the Western classical tradition created a new cultural discourse of sexuality that could spread across Europe’s educated (i.e. male) elite. By contrast, she writes, Krafft-Ebing’s *Scientia Sexualis* (1886-1902) represents the emergence of sexology “as an independent area of scientific investigation.” In translating Krafft-Ebing’s work into English, Bauer notes, F.J. Rebman cut his references to lesbianism and kept only elements that would resonate in a specifically British context, such as the pollution of the body, degeneration, and the upholding of empire. Bauer thus shows how national cultural contexts informed sexological discourse.

Turning to the writings of Magnus Hirschfeld, originator of the “third-sex” theory of sexual inversion, Bauer shows how sexology was institutionalized and internationalized in early twentieth-century Europe and how sexuality was nationalized within Weimar Germany (44). Hirschfeld, she notes, knew only too well the cultural “untranslatability” of certain sexual terms and acts and their inextricable connection to specific national political contexts. Knowing how language shapes our conceptions of sex, Hirschfeld defined “the sexual body no longer as a universal somatic entity but as a cultural construct” that relied both on particular national circumstances and a common ‘Western’ frame of reference. Both of these, moreover, had the effect of excluding women and marginalizing women’s sexuality in early sexological discourse (51).

In chapter two, Bauer assembles another trio of writers —John Addington Symonds, Havelock Ellis, and Edward Carpenter—to show how “English writings on sex were shaped by processes of translation which fashioned a distinct English literary mode

of sexology” (54). In these writings, she finds, only Ellis’ more overtly sexological studies include a place for female inversion, while the more Ulrichsian literary-philosophical discourses of Symonds and Carpenter tend to ignore women altogether.

According to Bauer, the methodological differences between Symonds and Ellis spring largely from differences in their approach to gender. Examining *Sexual Inversion* (1896), co-authored by Symonds and Ellis and originally published in German, Bauer finds that Symonds’ literary approach to sexuality is dominated by men. He used translation, she writes, in order to link cultural discourse “to the experiential realities of men who loved men” in various centuries and nations (59). In Bauer’s account, Symonds shook one institution while stabilizing another. By presenting male inversion as a hyper-virile form of masculinity and by valuing male prostitution above marriage, he undermined Victorian ideals of the family even as he reinforced notions of class-based privilege.

Havelock Ellis took a different tack. Though demonstrably influenced by German romantic literature and philosophy, he based his sexology on scientific method rather than narratives of personal experience. It is through this excessively objective form of sexual theorization that Ellis represents his wife’s same-sex desires in the first extensive account of female inversion to appear in English. Ellis thus diverges not only from Symonds but also from Carpenter. Though Carpenter strongly endorsed feminist ideals, his concept of “soul inversion” was exclusively male, and in his sexualized version of democracy he used it to show that men can make “extra-reproductive generative contributions to the future of society” (77). Bauer concludes, then, that “English sexology was fashioned out of complicated narrative threads which conceived, developed and

translated a *scientia sexualis* from and within the literary sphere” (74), and also that when read in the light of cultural translation, “the modern scientific approach was indebted to cultural debates” (80). All in all, these first two chapters prove Bauer a meticulous researcher and an astute reader of texts.

Bauer’s third chapter examines novels by three New Woman writers: Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, and Edith Ellis. According to Bauer, women writers developed a specifically “feminist discourse of inversion, distinct from its sexological counterpart, . . . to explore and critique contemporary ideas about gender, degeneration and the social order,” but this discourse “marginalised same-sex desire” (83). Women writers, Bauer claims, formulated a feminist politics that directly responded to nineteenth-century degeneration theory, which associated womanhood exclusively with the reproductive body. In response, by “translating” theories derived from European scientific, socio-political, and philosophical thought, Bauer’s three novelists created characters who exhibited “the restorative potential of female masculinity” (86). In *Story of an African Farm* (1883), for instance, Schreiner inverts and deconstructs cultural assumptions about gendered and racialized bodies. Schreiner, Bauer contends, believed that women could reverse the effects of degeneration by appropriating qualities associated with “masculine” intellectualism. Similarly, Bauer writes, Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) shows less interest in female sexual desire than in educating women about the female body outside the restrictively masculine realm of medical science. Finally, Bauer examines the feminist politics of Edith Ellis’s novel *Attainment* (1909). Since this novel represents women whose social roles are not limited to sexual reproduction, its critiques of degeneration and eugenics discourses spring, she argues, from a class politics

governed by the “socio-sexual” rather than the “psycho-sexual” construction of identity discussed in sexological texts (110).

This chapter is a mixed bag. While offering a number of astute and provocative insights into the New Woman novel, the chapter as a whole is distorted by Bauer’s insistence on the connection between this kind of novel and the sexological concept of “inversion.” Stressing the absence of female sexual desires in these texts, which she comes close to taking as deliberately intended, she claims that these novelists “rendered invisible the sexological female same-sex invert” (86). But did they? While Bauer demonstrates that these novelists knew about contemporary sexological theory, she does not show why “inversion” is necessarily the key to their portrayal of gender transgression. After all, the association between feminism and “female masculinity” in English literature goes back at least as far as the late eighteenth century, when writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Burney, and Maria Edgeworth used insubordinate women characters to explore many of the same feminist issues addressed by New Woman writers. Perhaps Bauer could have read these novels as new attempts to adapt older forms of “female masculinity” to the socio-political milieu of the late nineteenth century. In any case, Bauer’s analysis of the New Woman novel, while suggestive, does not adequately support her claim that these three writers “understood translation as a deliberate mode of feminist intervention” that enabled them to criticize the exclusionary gender politics of sexological discourse (110).

Bauer returns to more solid ground in the next chapter. In a provocative extended reading of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), one of the foundational works

of gay and lesbian literature in the twentieth century, Bauer argues that it “provides a distinct contribution to the emergency of modern sexual theory which challenged the ways in which sexology emerged as a gendered field of study” (113). Reading the novel in light of Hall’s experience, her study of sexology (especially German texts), and her literary method, Bauer shows that Hall turns Stephen Gordon—a lesbian with a man’s name—into a “super-invert,” one whose “sexual identity elevates her above others in a deliberate bid to counteract both sexological and socio-political stereotyping of women who love women” (113). In thus explaining the politics of Hall’s novel, Bauer applies Judith Butler’s “notion of fictionalisation as resistance by means of a complex process of translation linked but, crucially, exceeding the experiential realities of author and reader alike” (115). From this perspective, the novel’s invention of the “mannish lesbian” in the figure of Stephen Gordon represents Hall’s “translation” of her lived experience into the more widely accessible form of literary fiction, enabling her “to push the boundaries of existing fictional representations of love between women in English while also exceeding the limits of auto/biographical observation that bind the sexological case study” (118). Thus, Bauer argues, Hall established a place for female same-sex desire within the social order. By adapting degeneration theory and Nietzschean philosophy, she created a strong, healthy, and desirable female “super-invert”—a figure whose value others have failed to see because it is linked to ideas that were also famously used to serve theories of racial superiority. Through the figure of the super-invert, however, Hall inaugurated a heretofore non-existent cultural discourse of female same-sex desire that lived outside the male-dominated realms of sexological discourse and Ulrichsian humanist histories of male-male love. Bauer confirms this point by examining Hall’s infamous obscenity trial

and the cultural reaction to her novel. The publicity surrounding it, she argues, not only transmitted an alluring concept of lesbian desire to women who otherwise would not have known about it, but also successfully established Hall's authority as a theorist of lesbianism.

As Hall explains in her coda, the concept of "inversion" was effectively eliminated along with German sexology during the Nazi era. By mid-century, sexual theory came to be dominated by Freudian psychoanalysis and the work of Alfred Kinsey in America. But according to Bauer, the concept of inversion remains critically relevant because it problematises the intersection between gender and sexuality." She also urges us to construe translation as "not only a marker of difference but [...] a framework for understanding the common discursive ground shared by theorists with frequently opposing view of sexual and social deviancy" (146).

Bauer's book has one notable lacuna. Besides the shortcomings of her chapter on New Woman novelists, noted above, she does not address any of the work done on translation within postcolonial theory. Given her emphasis on nation, empire, and the transmission of discourse, she could have amplified the Benjaminian/ Butlerian model of translation by considering how—as post-colonial theory explains—translation served to solidify national culture in both the colony and the metropole . Ultimately, however, the extensive archival work and linguistic analysis found in the first two chapters make an entirely convincing case for a revised understanding of the influence of national, political, and cultural debates on the formation of sexology in Germany and England, and Bauer's revisionary reading of *The Well of Loneliness* will surely have to be taken into account by all future scholars of Hall's novel. Bauer has written an intelligent, insightful study

that will undoubtedly prove influential for studies of fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century sexuality.

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