

STABLE IDENTITY: HORSES, INVERSION THEORY, AND THE WELL OF LONELINESS

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Oh, god, not again: *The Well of Fucking Loneliness*. When will the nightmare stop?

– Terry Castle (394)

I. GENDER BUBBLE: RETHINKING THE FORTUNES OF STEPHEN GORDON

In the afterword to a collection of essays on *The Well of Loneliness*, Terry Castle conjures up the figure of Radclyffe Hall dribbling a basketball in the Greatest Lesbian Writers of the World Basketball Championship. Embarrassing though she is (“huge baggy men’s underpants,” “godawful mopey look on her face”), Hall powers down the court. “She’s making us all look *bad!* She wants to be the Man!” cries Castle’s narrator, accompanied by the frustrated howls of other queer literary luminaries (394). Too late: the masculinized female invert that Radclyffe Hall both embodied and created cannot be ignored—and Stephen Gordon, Hall’s alter ego and hero(ine) of *The Well of Loneliness*, remains the slam-dunk of modern lesbian representation, a still-pivotal figure for thinking about queer female subjectivity and the business of reading queerly.

As this examination of *The Well* illustrates, however, even as the homosexual emerges as that famous Foucauldian “species,” the queer subject does not materialize into narrative with coherence—not even when she steps out in a form as hyper-articulated as Stephen Gordon.

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This essay interrogates that lack of coherence through the historical lens of *fin de siècle* inversion theories, using the axial figure of the horse in *The Well of Loneliness* to investigate the novel's use of "the animal" as a critical constituent element in articulating both female inversion and desire. I show that even as the narrative endorses the stable gender/sexual identities of inversion theory, it concurrently intersects with another kind of stable—and the horses in it—to articulate far more radical narrative possibilities. As *The Well* constructs the female invert, it mobilizes multiple aspects of inversion through Stephen Gordon's relations with animals, articulating manifold possibilities for sexual desire and narrative pleasure.

The Well of Loneliness was, of course, written as an educational and political statement. Willing to brave an obscenity trial and public outcry, Hall espoused inversion theory as fact, accepting a pathologizing framework in order to both reveal truths about same-sex identity/desire and make certain claims about justice.¹ But, although Hall firmly believed inversion theory was the best way to organize her liberatory project, the daringly political quickly became politically unbearable. By the 1970s, lesbian-feminists had turned against *The Well*, dissecting its negativity, its disempowering identificatory framework, and its (re)production of masculinist, heterosexist, classist values.² Stephen Gordon was tried again and found to be politically obscene, a classist oozing internalized homophobia, a product of destructive medical humbug, and a whopping historical millstone around the collective lesbian neck.

In 1984, with the appearance of Esther Newton's essay "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian," the millstone shifted. Newton moved away from judging *The Well* as a low watermark in lesbian culture and focused on the figure most poorly explained by inversion theory, the femme. Hall's usurpation of masculinity was, she argued, a means to convey desire. Noting that the story of Stephen Gordon's femme lover, Mary Llewellyn, had "yet to be told," Newton called for a subtler analysis of how gender and sexuality functioned as complexly situated aspects of history and identity (574–75). Since Newton, *The Well's* representation of gender and sexuality has been continually reassessed and its use of gender performance(s) often understood as a liberatory aspect of queer narrative.³

This critical back-and-forth regarding Hall's depiction of female homoerotic desire is not only a matter of queer literary chronology; it also reflects a central concern of this project: that is, the extent to which thinking about *The Well* has remained largely within the familiar framework of always examining the erotic relative to gender. We have—for reasons of both history and theory—identified the

erotic within a category of identity we have sought (at least most recently) to undo, consistently looking at textual pleasures solely as a function of gender, or of gender's deconstruction. Of course, *The Well* is so dependent upon gender binaries that (whether we find the novel gender-conservative or gender-radical) textual erotics may appear to be exclusively organized by the masculine/feminine binary. But must queer readings of *The Well* view the erotic as exclusively articulated through gender binaries? What emerges if we begin at narrative pleasures and approach an abject novel through its rare but significant moments of delight? And what will it do to critical takes on Stephen Gordon and queer narrative if we find pleasure in unexpected places?

Amidst the many re/assessments of the narrative's complex use of linked structures of gender and sexual identities, there has not yet been adequate consideration of *The Well's* formulations of pleasure. Of course, that *The Well* could even *have* an axial narrative of eroticized physical and emotional pleasures may at first seem too sanguine a claim. There are no explicit descriptions of sexual contact between women in *The Well*, and from Diana Souhami ("Nothing very sexy goes on in it" [vii]) to Sarah Chinn ("very little sex happens in *The Well of Loneliness*" [300]) and back to Terry Castle ("too apt to peter out in feeble redundancies just when everything is hotting up" [395]) there is a consensus that nothing very sexy is going on.

But *The Well* is, in fact, deeply invested in articulating both invert identity *and* invert pleasures. It does so, however, in ways which rely on the novel's particular and powerfully historicized articulations of human-animal relations. When such relations are read carefully alongside *The Well's* use of inversion theory, the novel opens up at several new levels, revealing radical articulations of identity and desire. Formulated through the conservative, gender-binary-driven collection of ideas called "inversion theory," *The Well* mobilizes the weird logics of late-Victorian sexology to facilitate new narrative spaces for radical pleasures. The figure of the horse emerges as the pivotal agent for both the novel's articulation of stable sexual identities *and* for its surprisingly radical multiplicity of erotic narrative strands.

Two specific erotic strands run through the gloomy "invert narrative" of *The Well*, each of which is primarily articulated via the equine figure: first, the horse enables the novel's substantial auto-erotic narrative, which concurrently establishes invert identity while creating a narrative of intense pleasure through the masturbatory joys of horse riding; second, *The Well's* engagement with inversion theory's interest in breeding and race splices the human/animal

binary onto the mutually determined, hierarchized binaries of masculine/feminine and Anglo/Celtic. In particular, the Anglo/Celtic racial binary structures a human/animal romance plot where the Stephen/Raftery bond moves across both the novel's project of articulating desire between women and inversion theory's concerns with race, breeding, and degeneration. These trajectories of masturbation and romanticized bestial relations reveal new textual erotics; elusive pleasures—caught in hierarchized yet radically eroticized identificatory systems—enter the narrative system at the stable door.

The Well's narrative trajectories of autoeroticism and race identity—each crucial to inversion theory—have remained largely unexplored for several important reasons. Inversion theory's powerful focus on gender helps explain selectivity towards the aspects of inversion we tend to address—and so does a related cultural tendency to link gender performance and “homosexuality.” Newton notes that Krafft-Ebing's fusion of masculinism with lesbianism “became, and largely remains, an article of faith in Anglo-American culture” (566), and Lisa Walker observes the pervasiveness of the belief that “homosexuals exhibit characteristics of the same sex because they are ‘trapped’ in the wrong bodies” (2). While inversion is no longer invoked *per se*, contemporary ideas about homosexuality continue to resonate with inversion's gender-centered premises. And recent resistances to such tightly intertwined organizations of gender performance and sexual identity have organized dissent around those same concepts, this time by deconstructing them.

Gender, stable or unstable, still rules the theoretical roost. Conceptually, we continue to function in a gender bubble, and the idea that masturbatory pleasures and/or the human-animal boundary have a primary connection to imagining “sexual identity” is far less familiar than the links between sexual identity and gender performance. This distinction has everything to do with cultural junctures that reify some elements of sexual practice (but not others) as constitutive for identity: same sex desire has become “homosexuality” while other elements that have played critical roles in constituting the invert have faded with time. For example, as Eve Sedgwick notes, while cultural prohibitions on the masturbator have existed (and still do), cultural interests in masturbation never produced a “sexual identity” or *kind of person* (“Jane Austen” 140). Nonetheless, autoeroticism *was* quite crucial for sexological formulations of inversion.

The same is true for the human-animal binary and its relation to perverse identity. We have inherited certain associations between sexual behaviors and species status via a well-established Western

tradition that relies on the concept of “the animal” to articulate humans as (sexual) beings and give meaning to human (sexual) practices. Associations do live on, in fractured but real ways, and we continue to configure sexuality via the human-animal spectrum. Queer positive thinkers, for example, often display great interest in the “heterosexual” and “homosexual” behaviors of animals.⁴ Opponents of queer rights and same-sex marriage frequently invoke inter-species sex and bestiality as related threats.⁵ Yet while the idea of the animal has complexly functioned as both metaphor and mirror for human sexuality, that divide (while fundamental to inversion theory) is now far less important than the object-choice dyad of heterosexual/homosexual.

But the delights of autoeroticism and of human/animal love cannot be torn from the inversion framework of *The Well*, and both masturbatory and bestial narratives surface forcefully through the equine figure—a figure that resonates with an undeniable erotic charge:

So most of us lesbians in the 1950's grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon's swagger, Stephen Gordon's breeches, and Stephen Gordon's wonderful way with horses. We suspected that if women were horses Stephen Gordon would have been a happier girl; but that somehow seemed disrespectful. (Cook 719)

Stephen Gordon's passion for her horses is so clear and the erotic and affective elements of that passion so pervasive and real, the connection cannot be missed: the housemaid, Collins, Stephen's first crush, is “transmigrated” into Stephen's first horse, also named Collins, and Stephen immediately likes her tutor, Mademoiselle Duphot, because of her “equine resemblance” (55). Indeed, we might view the connection as a simple one: burgeoning homoerotics are redirected towards horses which operate as *ersatz* objects of desire. It is easiest, of course, to follow Cook's lead and view horses as stand-ins for women; but this substitution requires willed naiveté, a decision to *not-see* the significances of the animal as animal, and as horse, in *The Well*.⁶ And these significances, when and if acknowledged, do comprise uncertain terrain. As Gillian Whitlock has gingerly remarked, readers who pay attention to such things are confronted with “the awkward question of Stephen Gordon's relationship to animals,” because “[w]hy these anthropomorphized animals should carry such importance in the novel is curious” (570). Awkward, certainly. Curious, indeed. Yet imperative, too, since animals are critical for understanding how *The Well* mobilizes a seemingly rigid

taxonomical system like inversion in order to articulate radicalized trajectories of desire.

The centrality of the role of “the animal” is located in the narrative’s complex relation to inversion theory itself—although “inversion theory” can be invoked only in the broadest sense, saturated as it is with inconsistencies. Hall was influenced by several prominent inversion theorists, and she freely combined their ideas. As Laura Doan notes, Hall’s use of sexology was “at best, haphazard, and, at worst, wildly eclectic” and she “freely plundered, contradictions and all, anything deemed useful to her project” (163, 174). Through this “plundering,” *The Well* juxtaposes multiple ideas about invert identity, heedless of inconsistencies among the models of inversion it yokes together. There should be no expectation, therefore, that the novel reflects one version of sexological discourse; *The Well* is a pastiche of co-opted scientific concepts.

Two inversion theorists—Karl Ulrichs and Richard von Krafft-Ebing—are mentioned early in *The Well* as touchstones for the truth of Stephen Gordon. Stephen’s sympathetic father solves the riddle of his daughter by reading German “Third Sex” rights crusader Ulrichs (1825–1895) and eminent Austrian sexologist Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902). Krafft-Ebing’s writings take center-stage in the novel’s sensational scene of self-discovery when, after her father’s death, the teen-age Stephen opens his books and finds herself both reflected and revealed in inversion theory: “Krafft-Ebing—she had never heard of that author before. All the same she opened the battered old book, then she looked more closely, for there on its margins were notes in her father’s small, scholarly hand and she saw that her own name appeared in those notes—She began to read” (204). Hall’s climactic use of Krafft-Ebing makes a powerful case for reading *The Well*’s sexological framework as inherently tied to nineteenth-century sexology. It also seems quite likely that Hall modeled much of Stephen Gordon, and some of the novel’s plot, on a case study from Krafft-Ebing’s major work, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).⁷

The Well is also closely tied to British sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939). Although Krafft-Ebing and Ellis are not entirely commensurate thinkers, “to a contemporary reader the difference is one of degree rather than kind” (O’Rourke 4). Readers interested in *The Well*’s use of inversion theory often invoke Ellis, as it was he whom Hall prevailed upon to write the novel’s preface. Hall’s use of Ellis is especially visible in terms of his ideas about sexuality and race, specifically relative to the novel’s deployment of an Anglo-Celtic racial framework. Together, Krafft-Ebing and Ellis provided Hall with conceptual structures for sexual inversion—and pleasure—far

more complex than the simple conflation of gender performance with same sex desire.

II. "THE JOY OF RAFTERY LEAPING UNDER THE SADDLE": AUTOEROTICISM AND THE MAKING OF AN INVERT

In *The Well of Loneliness*, masturbation as a locus of pleasure is grounded in the potential sexual stimulation inherent for a woman riding astride. Female anatomy, the movement of a horse, and the social constructs that attempt to keep them apart present a narrative flashpoint of panic and pleasure. Stephen's insistence on riding astride defies her gender role and reveals her determined pursuit of sexual delight, a resolve confirmed by her satisfaction in the ride and the unremitting panic of others. At the very beginning of her equestrian adventures, there is much ado made by Stephen's mother when it comes to the question of her daughter riding astride: "There had been quite a heated discussion with Anna, because Stephen had insisted on riding astride. In this she had shown herself very refractory, falling off every time she tried the side-saddle—quite obvious, of course, this falling off process, but enough to subjugate Anna" (39). Stephen's "obvious" efforts to ride in a position that offers sexual pleasure are matched by parental attempts at suppression. Colonel Antrim, father of Stephen's ultra-feminine antithesis, Violet, declares, "Violet's learning to ride, but side-saddle, I prefer it—I never think girl children get the grip astride, they aren't built for it" (40–41). The belief that girls do not have "the grip" clearly reveals parental fears that girls may be all too "built for it."

This parental distress is, of course, justified: the sexual possibilities involved in the configuration of a horse's body relative to the riding female body are evident everywhere early in the novel. When Stephen and her first horse, Collins, ("[s]o strong, so entirely fulfilling") hunt for the first time, it is the riding itself that constructs what is arguably the novel's most extravagantly sensual scene of somatic pleasure:

The strange, implacable heart-broken music of hounds giving tongue as they break from cover; the cry of the huntsman as he stands in his stirrups; the thud of hooves pounding ruthlessly forward over long, green, undulating meadows. The meadows flying back as though seen from a train, the meadows streaming away behind you; the acrid smell of horse sweat caught in passing; the smell of damp leather, of earth and bruised herbage—all sudden, all passing—then the smell of wide spaces, the air smell, cool yet as potent as wine. (42)

Powerfully brought forward into the present tense, Stephen's first ride to the hunt reads as an intensely erotic experience: cries, pounding, undulation, and smells of sweat and leather all culminate in an intoxicating orgasm of stillness and peace. Stephen's entrance into the masculine universe of the hunt is an equally powerful foray into the world of sexual experience, a doubled initiation into "the joy of Raftery leaping under the saddle" (70).

The erotics of riding are further iterated by the ceaseless commentary generated by Stephen's riding astride. Roger Antrim, the novel's insufferable icon of boy-privilege, fails to successfully taunt Stephen until he hits upon her riding style and the sexualized improprieties of that enterprise:

"What about a certain young lady out hunting? What about a fat leg on each side of her horse like a monkey on a stick, and everybody laughing?" . . . Roger was launched on his first perfect triumph. . . "And my mother said," he continued more loudly, "that your mother must be funny to allow you to do it; she said it was horrid to let girls ride that way; she said she was awfully surprised at your mother; she said that she'd have thought that your mother had more sense; she said that it wasn't modest; she said—" (51–52)

Roger's recasting of Stephen's active, private ecstasy as a moment of passive, public shame, as well as his second-hand disparagement of Anna's and Stephen's sexual propriety, enrage and humiliate her. However, this distressing scene (which culminates in Stephen's thrashing of Roger) does not dissuade her; she still rides astride at the age of eighteen—to the continuing bourgeois horror of Mrs. Antrim ("A young woman of her age to ride like a man, I call it preposterous!" [91]) and the far more insidious disgust of Ralph Crosby: "[c]omes swaggering round here with her legs in breeches. Why can't she ride like an ordinary woman? . . . that sort of thing wants putting down at birth, I'd like to institute state lethal chambers" (151). The figure of Stephen astride a horse is repeatedly summoned to the narrative center, an image of transgressive desires resolutely pursued in the face of public disapproval.

Stephen's masturbatory connection to her animal corresponds to the larger logics of inversion theory. There is a consistent link between the inversion and masturbation, and most perverts are understood in relation to autoerotic activities. Nominally, Krafft-Ebing claims that only non-congenital inverts are actually *produced* by masturbation: "frequently the cause of such temporary aberration

[as same sex activity] is *masturbation* and its results in youthful individuals” (188, Krafft-Ebing’s emphasis). Non-congenital inverts (*unlike* Stephen Gordon) are formed by masturbation. Krafft-Ebing’s reasons: “[Masturbation] despoils the unfolding bud of perfume and beauty, and leaves behind only the coarse, *animal* desire for sexual satisfaction . . . The glow of sensual sensibility wanes, and the inclination toward the opposite sex is weakened” (188, Krafft-Ebing’s emphasis). Masturbation spoils heterosexual desire, reducing one to “animal” levels.

But the role of masturbation in inversion theory is incoherent. Krafft-Ebing also predicts disaster for those who do not masturbate: “For various reasons . . . the individual is also kept from masturbation. At times, under such circumstances, *bestiality* is resorted to. Intercourse with the same sex is then near at hand—as the result of seduction or of the feelings of friendship which . . . easily associate themselves with sexual feelings” (189–90, my emphasis). The “bestiality” to which Krafft-Ebing refers, as historian of sexology Oosterhuis notes, is not literal bestiality but, importantly, an all-purpose umbrella term for perverse acts (50). Krafft-Ebing complexly connects masturbation with animals, arguing that masturbation triggers “animal” sensuality while not masturbating can cause “bestial” (perverse) behavior.

Conceptualizations about autoerotism float loosely within inversion theory, anchored by the unstable, flexible link between perverse acts and animal sexuality, and welding the idea of invert to the animal. In Krafft-Ebing’s case-study surveys of female inversion, masturbation is cited as a significant factor in most cases—regardless of whether the invert is “congenital” or not. While Krafft-Ebing’s approach to masturbation is paradoxical, it also reveals his conceptual structures as organized along a double-axis of object choice and bestial autoeroticism. Gender is critical, of course, but masturbation is the gatekeeper of Krafft-Ebing’s “sensual sensibilities” and the autoerotic is never far from both inversion and bestiality. Stephen’s autoerotic horse-riding echoes and confirms Krafft-Ebing’s theories, just as her inversion narrative reflects the role of masturbation in general and the animality of her desires in particular.⁸

Deeply influenced by Krafft-Ebing’s theories of masturbation, the novel exists in a larger historical context that is equally panicked about masturbation. *The Well* resonates with (and in opposition to) the *fin de siècle* British purity movement, at its zenith from about 1880 to 1914. These years encompass the height of the anti-masturbation campaign in Britain, a period during which, as Peter Gay notes, the “persistent panic over masturbation is far easier to

document than to explain” (309).⁹ But I would claim that part of the elusive rationale for such panic is the tight intersection of the anti-masturbation movement with the sexological narrative tradition, a juncture that further illuminates the radical narratives of autoerotic pleasure in *The Well*.

The anti-masturbation movement, which Alan Hunt attributes to the concurrent solidifying of a British tradition of anti-sex feminism with anxieties about waning masculinity and empire, produced discourses of warning that are strikingly analogous to sexological case studies (587). A great deal of *fin de siècle* popular science and politics took place in terms of restraining the autoerotic—suppressive efforts that I wish to see as grounded in the sexological tradition of linking masturbation to perverse identity and illness. Predicated on exactly the kinds of ecstatic-testimonial caution narratives that also typify sexological case histories, anti-masturbation logics can be at least partially understood through their relation to sexological structures. Hunt cites anti-masturbatory medical tracts, speeches, and sermons as “apocryphal melodrama,” where “the vagueness and elusiveness of the characters blend with a storyline in which, from small beginnings, ill-chosen companions or a thoughtless servant, a first experience of masturbation leads downward to a catastrophic fate, mixing some combination of illness, insanity, and death” (587). Although not meant as a description of sexological case histories, there are striking parallels between the narrative contours and internal reasonings of both. Sexological narratives also resonate with just such “elusive” personal testimonies that unfailingly confirm looming disaster for the masturbator.

One prominent element of the ecstatic-testimonial warnings shared by anti-masturbation literature, sexological case histories, and *The Well of Loneliness* is the presence of the corrupting servant. If pre-Freudian ideals about childhood sexual innocence required an initiation catalyst, the servant was believed to be the most likely teacher of harmful sexual practices (Hunt 592).¹⁰ Like sexologists, purity campaigners cited masturbation as a form of “bestiality” and often linked the issue to the influence of servants. In 1888, for example, writer Priscilla Barker warned that “Sometimes the enemy of souls uses a servant or a nurse to initiate the lispng child into *bestiality*” (6, my emphasis). Barker also cautions against erotic reading: “Self-abuse is related to a whole set of sinful corruptions...leading the way into *bestial* realms of impure literature” (7, my emphasis).¹¹ Indeed, the naughtier side of the masturbatory page shares a focus with sexologists and purity writers: as Victorian pornography shows, erotic literature often featured servants as agents of sexual corruption.¹²

In both the literature of warning and the literature of titillation, the servant was critical in conceptualizing youthful sexuality.

The housemaid, Collins, Stephen's childhood crush, establishes *The Well's* familiarity with the tempting servant, but the novel articulates the trope most fully through the groom, Williams, who models autoerotic practices through an intense attachment to horses and habitual, corrupting self-stimulations. Based on Williams's "habit" of rubbing his chin, self-rubbing progressively characterizes the childhood practices of Stephen: "Stephen would stand there rubbing her chin in an almost exact imitation of Williams. She could not produce the same scrabby sound, but in spite of this drawback the movement would sooth her" (39). Self-soothing increases as the narrative shifts away from the stable. When Stephen's father insists she concentrate on her education ("You've developed your body, now develop your mind"), Stephen accedes by clearing away the detritus of her schoolwork and souvenirs of her life with the beloved Raftery (61). Preparing the schoolroom is an act of will that Stephen thoughtfully considers while "rubbing her chin—a habit which by now had become automatic" (64). As if to emphasize the need for this new self-soothing, Stephen's exile from the stables is juxtaposed with Sir Philip's purchase of an automobile. This deposes Williams and limits his influence over Stephen, who learns to drive: "'And'er such a fine 'orse-woman and all' [Williams] would grumble, rubbing a disconsolate chin" (67).

When Alan Hunt describes the role of the servant in sexual initiations, he couches the dynamic of masturbatory activity in terms of addiction: "The message was explicit; those *addicted* to the solitary vice will probably have received their initiation from servants" (591, my emphasis). As Sedgwick has noted, ideas about compulsive autoerotic behavior are linked to later nineteenth-century concepts of compulsion and addiction, drawing powerfully upon formulations of will and self-control ("Jane Austen" 145–46). Critical work on the role of the autoerotic illustrates how the dynamics of addiction/will and compulsion/self-control that structure masturbatory pleasures are often related to acts of creativity, especially writing.¹³ In *The Well*, this link is forged as Stephen sublimates her erotic focus from stable to schoolroom—showing us exactly where autoerotic pleasures go once they depart from the stable. We move, in short, from friction to fiction.

The autoerotic world of horse riding re-emerges as authorship and a new (and most emphatically queer) experience of delight:

Stephen began to excel in composition; to her own deep amazement she found herself able to write many things that had long lain dormant

in her heart . . . Impressions of childhood . . . those rides home from hunting together with her father—bare furrows, the meaning of those bare furrows. And later, how many queer hopes and queer longings, queer joys and even more curious frustrations. Joy of strength . . . joy of Raftery leaping under the saddle, joy of wind racing backward as Raftery leapt forward . . . (70–71)

Deftly, and with relish, the narrative moves the pleasures of the autoerotic from the somatic to the psychic realm. As the sensual self-pleasuring of writing both replicates and replaces “the joy of Raftery leaping under the saddle,” it is Stephen’s life as a compulsive writer that continues the narrative’s autoerotic trajectory.

Stephen’s authorial life *is* her erotic life, and the narrative describes that life in the *fin de siècle* jargon of masturbation: its addictions, its compulsions, and the physical and mental toll it takes on those in thrall to its delights. Writing is a delight that propels its pursuer, leaving Stephen exhausted, dim-eyed, and unstoppable: “She had worked through the night, a deplorable habit and one of which Puddle quite rightly disapproved, but when the spirit of work was on her it was useless to argue with Stephen” (209). Stephen’s compulsive activities produce “a fine first novel,” and pleasure turns into addiction, just as hunting generated compulsions to ride astride: “Stephen’s life in London had been one long endeavour, for work to her had become a narcotic” (210). Everything is abandoned in favor of writing, except Raftery: “Only one duty apart from her work had Stephen never for a moment neglected, and that was the care and the welfare of Raftery” (211). Only Raftery can distract her from the pleasures of writing because he is, in many ways, the source of writing’s pleasures.

Although Stephen’s first work as an author is popularly successful, it is also, as she confides to Puddle, substantively incomplete: “[I]t’s about my work, there’s something wrong with it. I mean that my work could be much more vital . . . There’s a great chunk of life that I’ve never known, and I want to know it, I ought to know it if I’m to become a really fine writer” (217). Stephen believes a shared erotic life will complete her authorial powers. We should not be surprised then that her second novel has “something disappointing about it” (218). In an echo of Colonel Antrim’s ideas about girls riding astride (“I never think girl children get the grip astride, they aren’t built for it”), one reviewer describes her writerly flaws as a “lack of grip” (218). Yet it is important to note that *The Well* does not place the autoerotic on a progressive scale against shared sex, with the former giving way to latter. While sexologists might understand this

movement as optimal, autoerotic authorship remains central to *The Well's* ongoing erotic plot.

Although Stephen's authorial/sexual "grip" is reinvigorated when she and Mary Llewellyn become lovers, their domestic relations are dominated by Stephen's solitary activities: "[o]bsessed by a longing to finish her book, she would tolerate neither let nor hindrance... Stephen was working like someone possessed, entirely rewriting her pre-war novel" (340, 342). *The Well's* portrayal of femme discontent not only emphasizes the social difficulties of loving an invert, but also the frustration of having one's sex life supplanted by a novel in progress. Stephen's constant writing is done for Mary's long-term good—"If only Stephen had confided in her, had said 'I'm trying to build you a refuge; remember what I told you in Orotava!'" (342). Yet *The Well* is equally explicit regarding how Stephen's writing quite literally supplants their bedroom activities:

[Stephen] would steal like a thief past Mary's bedroom, although Mary would nearly always hear her.

"Is that you, Stephen?"

"Yes. Why aren't you asleep? Do you realize that it's three in the morning?"

"Is it? You're not angry, are you, darling? I kept thinking of you alone in the study. Come here and say you're not angry with me, even if it is three o'clock in the morning!"

Then Stephen would slip off her old tweed coat and would fling herself down on the bed beside Mary, too exhausted to do more than take the girl in her arms, and let her lie there with her head on her shoulder.

But Mary would be thinking of all those things which she found so deeply appealing about Stephen... And as they lay there, Stephen might sleep, worn out by the strain of those long hours of writing. But Mary would not sleep. (343)

For Stephen, compulsive writing wins out over the pleasures of sex with a lover; Mary is left with her fantasies, a failed seductress whose lover is exhausted from other pleasures.

III. TAINTED LOVE

The Well of Loneliness articulates the development and expression of inversion through textual autoerotics while simultaneously constructing an axial narrative of human/animal pleasures. Yet, the novel

additionally mobilizes the equine figure in terms of familial taint and race difference, concepts through which inversion theory also structures inversion. Sexological discourses of heredity and race have wide implications for the articulation of pleasure in *The Well*, particularly as ideas about Celtic racial identity intersect with the novel's most powerful narrative of mutual desire and love, the Stephen/Raftery relationship.

As Krafft-Ebing's work on masturbation illustrates, the animal operated as a key figure of sexological comparison, as a complex marker on intertwined scales of the in/human and the un/civilized. But the "animal" was complexly *relative*—a term through which I invoke both the definitional work that the animal had long performed *relative to* defining the human and also a newer, Darwinian formulation of animals as familial, that is, as *relatives of* human beings. In the context of a well-established tradition of human/animal relativity and inversion theory's reliance on newer relative distinctions to articulate sexuality, Hall's mobilization of the animal as a primary affective figure taps into a powerful turn-of-the-century representative juncture.

In examining the interlocked identity-elements of species, sexuality, and race, I want to focus specifically on ideas about the human-animal divide *as Hall embraced and used them*, that is, on the historicized, sexological/racial frameworks with which *The Well* is most clearly engaged. As Margot Backus's excellent work on Celticism in *The Well* has shown, there is a powerful link between "inversion theory, as it was adapted and promoted by Hall, and unsavory aspects of Havelock Ellis's thinking concerning race and nation" (255). Additionally, the novel's splicing of Ellis's theories about inversion and race with "the Celtic" powerfully highlights links between perversion and species identity. In *The Well*, as race and inversion intersect via the equine figure, the collision shifts sexological formulas for civilized love and desire. As a result, the Stephen/Raftery relationship mimics both heterosexuality/homosexuality *and* frameworks for colonizer/colonized; it also simultaneously enables and sexualizes intraspecies connection.

As Harriet Ritvo has shown, animals helped systematize British articulations of the "natural order" long before Darwin. "Darwin's theory of evolution," claims Ritvo, "did not prescribe any real break in the tradition of descriptive natural history" and in "some ways, the theory of evolution was a natural extension of the work of mastering the natural world [already] earnestly begun" (277). Pre-Darwinian, human-animal comparisons had long been deployed in the service of racial and national hierarchies, and "the animal kingdom, with

humans in the divinely ordained position at its apex, represented, explained, and justified the hierarchical human social order” (Ritvo 248).

Evolutionary concepts both merged with and shifted this dynamic. On one hand, Darwinian thought employed familiar racial/national hierarchies, mobilizing Eurocentrist distinctions across a human-animal spectrum. The “cultivated man” and “the savage” stand at different places on Darwin’s evolutionary spectrum, their relationship organized by the idea of the animal. Thus, for example, the mental abilities of Darwin’s “cultivated man” relative to savages and dogs: “The savage and the dog have often found water at a low level. . . . A cultivated man would perhaps make some general proposition on the subject; but from all that we know of the savage, it is extremely doubtful whether they would do so, and a dog certainly would not. But a savage, as well as a dog, would search in the same way” (185). In their adherence to racist hierarchies in terms of human-animal sameness/difference, Darwinian ideas were consistent with much of the thinking that preceded them.

On the other hand, evolutionary concepts diverged from earlier organizations of human-animal distinctions in the sense that the distance between animals and humans *diminished*. Close proximity between the human and the animal revamped public discourses already invested in national/racial organizations of the human-animal binary. Darwinian ideas blurred the human/animal line, rupturing definitional clarity and creating massive anxieties about the nature of both the human and the beast. Historian John Turner notes how Darwinian ideas inspired frantic cultural projects, amongst them a need to elevate animals and control new questions about group distinctions. From these projects emerged arguments for animal powers of reason (“still flourishing after 1900”) that credited animals with advanced forms of rational intelligence (64).

Evolution’s insistence on the close relation of people to animals resulted in the elevation of animals as more worthy relatives—producing a new genre: “Storytelling . . . propagating the most generous assessment of the animal mind, enjoyed extraordinary popularity in both England and America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Its detritus remains [in] countless dog and horse stories” (Turner 65). This genre is perhaps most powerfully embodied in Anna Sewall’s influential 1887 novel, *Black Beauty*, a text with a mission remarkably like *The Well’s*: to generate readerly empathy and compassion for inferior beings that are unjustly oppressed. The “horse story” grapples with evolution by investing animals with “human” qualities and, simultaneously, pleads for justice for oppressed classes of people through the experiences of horses—a

tradition *The Well* exploits by binding invert anguish to horse higher-consciousness, goodness, loyalty, exile, suffering, and death.¹⁴

Fin de siècle renegotiations of the human-animal binary are powerfully and directly in conversation with sexuality. More than ever, sexual desire was established as “the beast inside,” the worst link between the human and the animal (Turner 68). Linked to the twin concepts of the uncivilized and the bestial, sexual desires were animal forces that could only be contained by the civilizing, humanizing institution of marriage. In this context, it is possible to view the movement to classify kinds of sexual drives and identities (i.e., sexology itself) as an attempt to (re)fashion the human-animal distinctions that needed realignment after the emergence of Darwinian thought. Sexology explicitly employed historically familiar, human-animal taxonomies with a heightened urgency relative to evolutionary concerns. Hence, the question of what counts as *human* sexual behavior—as opposed to, or relative to, *animalistic* behavior—registers with tremendous power in inversion theory. Entrenched concern for a British subject’s place in the “natural order”—in all its nationalist, ethnocentric, and profoundly racist traditions—remains central, but human-animal distinctions mark newly critical differences between “kinds” of humans—especially relative to sexuality.

For early sexologists, the concept of degeneracy was critical for conceptualizing human, racial, and sexual identity. Degeneration was, like inversion itself, a tenuous formulation which (despite decades of attention) was “never given complete expression because of its very amorphousness” (Kershner 420). Theories of trait “transmission” created the nebulous idea of degeneration as an explanatory force for pathology in general and sexual perversion in particular. Varied theories of heredity (such as Morel’s “retrograde evolution”) blended to create “the degenerate.” Of course, Darwinian theories of evolution played a central role, too, leading many thinkers to eagerly address the “degradation” of the human species, especially in terms of urban poverty, population control, and various late-century social problems.¹⁵

As Sander Gilman summarizes, “History, sexuality, and degeneracy are inexorably linked within the thought of the late nineteenth century” (87). Because a perverted subject’s ancestors testified to degeneracy, personal history became a crucial element for thinking about sexuality. Krafft-Ebing’s case histories, therefore, provide “evidence” of the dubious breeding behind sexual inversion; S.’s family tree in Case 166 is a fine example:

A sister of the maternal grandmother was hysterical, a somnambulist, and lay seventeen years in bed, on account of fancied paralysis. A

second great-aunt spent seven years in bed, on account of a fancied fatal illness, and at the same time gave balls. A third had the whim that a certain table in her *salon* was bewitched. When anything was laid on this table, she would become greatly excited and cry, "Bewitched! bewitched!" (284)

Krafft-Ebing's interest in "taint" made familial ties important for understanding perversity well into the twentieth century.

Links between sexuality and heredity are also closely connected to racial identity, an intersection that mobilizes issues of civilization and social hierarchy already put in play by the idea of breeding. "Race," of course, was (and is) a flexible category that invoked a variety of "groupings based variously on geography, religion, class or color" (Somerville 249). Siobahn Somerville's work on Ellis, sexology, and race "relativity" traces the fundamental links between sexological and race theories, revealing how critical it is that discourses surrounding sexual identity and racial identity be "brought together in ways that illuminate both" (246). Racial differences and inversion theory intertwine with particular resonance for Havelock Ellis, whose work on inversion extensively mobilizes evolutionary differences, simultaneously articulating both race and inversion theories.¹⁶ Ellis explicitly connected frequency and type of same sex behaviors to the levels of evolutionary advancement achieved by any "race," using the human/animal binary to manage the relationship between perversion and evolution. With the work of Ellis, the species binary is added to the dynamic intersection of gender, breeding, and sexuality.

The Well's construction of sexuality is quite clearly linked to race theory, the most obvious examples of this sexuality/species/race triad being Lincoln and Henry Jones, the African-American brothers who entertain at Valerie Seymour's. Lincoln is "paler in colour" and "his eyes have the patient, questioning expression common to the eye of most animals and to those of all slowly evolving races" (362). With African Americans firmly in the evolutionary backseat, the narrative differentiates within that racial category, mobilizing both animality and the color scale by juxtaposing Lincoln against Henry: "Henry was tall and as black as coal; a fine, upstanding, but coarse-lipped young Negro, with a roving glance" (362). The darker brother occupies the lower rungs of the sexuality/animality/race triad and is more explicitly driven by animal pleasures: "A crude animal Henry could be at times, with a taste for liquor and a lust for women—just a primitive force rendered dangerous by drink, rendered offensive by civilization" (363). Henry encapsulates sexological logics of

evolutionary and racial difference, animality, and uncontrolled sexuality: (less) evolution, (lower) race, and (animal) passions go together, distinct from evolutionary progress and from heterosexual, fully human love.¹⁷

In "Sexual Inversion" (1897), Ellis locates inversion on a race/evolution scale in terms of a human-animal continuum. His study begins with animals, paying serious attention to (for example) "inverted" ducks: "Among ducks . . . the female [sometimes] assumes at the same time both male livery and male sexual tendencies. It is probable that . . . sexual inversion in the true sense will be found commoner among animals than at present it appears to be" (8). From here, Ellis moves seamlessly to humans, where different races (specified by geographical or national origin) are examined for occurrences of same sex activity. He concludes that (evolved) sexuality and (evolved) humanity move in a relatively amalgamate fashion along an axis of difference where degrees are marked by the slippery concept of racial affiliation.

According to Ellis, homosexual activities run unchecked among the "lower races" while the invert is a less obvious (and less likely) entity: "among lower races [of humans] homosexual practices are regarded with considerable indifference, and the real invert, if he exists among them, as doubtless he does exist, generally passes unperceived" (21). In order to reproduce these same logics for the "more evolved" people of Europe, Ellis mobilizes class as a racial factor, reasserting a parallel developmental hierarchy: "in Europe today a considerable lack of repugnance to homosexual practices may be found among the lower classes. In this matter . . . the uncultured man of civilization is linked to the savage" (21). The European lower class performs the race work that geographical and national differences do in a non-European context. Movement from "savage" to "lower classes" is seamless, and homosexual acts are the stuff of less evolved people. Real inversion, Ellis claims, flourishes amongst the upper classes: "As we descend the [social] scale the phenomena [of inverts] are doubtless less common" (64).

What emerges at this point is a conundrum embedded within inversion's relation to race: some same sex desires indicate muddled breeding and racial inferiority, others signal evolutionary and racial development. On the one hand, "sexual relations outside of the heterosexual institution of marriage . . . represented not only a degeneration to an earlier, lower state of civilization, but threatened civilization itself" (Chauncey 133). On the other hand, degeneracy was not only seen as a causal factor for individual perversion, but as a broader mark of a society's advancement. As Oosterhuis notes,

degeneration marked “the savage condition to which civilization could revert” but also signified “modern society,” the by-product of a morally dubious progress which *was* progress, nonetheless (55). Degeneration theory classified homosexuality as *regression*, yet the invert’s precise differentiation indicated evolutionary *development*, her intelligibility reflecting the progress of the society that produced her.¹⁸

It is this moment of simultaneous forwards and backwards motion in which Stephen is fashioned as both the summary achievement of family and as the product of dubious heredity and suspect racial affiliations. As the novel revels in Stephen’s British, landed masculinity, it also tirelessly points to the production of the invert relative to her family and racial affiliations. Morton is undermined by its own bad harvest, a breeding failure embodied by Stephen, “the fruit of [her parent’s] oneness” (86):

[She] would always belong [to Morton] by right of those past generations of Gordons . . . whose bodies had gone to the making of Stephen. Yes, she was of them, those bygone people; they might spurn her—the lusty breeders of sons that they had been—they might even look down from Heaven with raised eyebrows, and say: “We utterly refuse to acknowledge this curious creature called Stephen.” But for all that they could not drain her of blood, and her blood was theirs. . . . (108)

The Well insists on the connection of the invert to her bloodline, demanding that she be acknowledged by her family and holding that family accountable for producing her.

Central to this Krafft-Ebing-like adherence to the totalizing family bond is *The Well*’s interest in racialized, Anglo-Celtic reproductive dynamics. It is this racial configuration that complicates Stephen’s seeming genetic perfection, supporting and undercutting it. Both Stephen’s literal and literary beginnings are Anglo-Irish: born to an English father and an Irish mother, her narrative begins with a similarly generative juxtaposition of the Anglo and the Celtic. *The Well* opens with a famously idyllic account of the Gordon’s British estate, Morton, invoking Celticism directly thereafter, conjoining the novel’s inception with Stephen’s own conception, splicing the Anglo-Irish binary together in mutual, productive determinacy. Anna Gordon literally embodies Irishness, and her Celticism is indelibly written upon the corporeal self: “[Anna] was lovely as only an Irish woman can be, having that in her bearing that betokened quiet pride, having that in her eyes that betokened great longing, having that in her body that

betokened happy promise—the archetype of the very perfect woman” (11). Despite being “very perfect,” Anna Gordon is not an exemplary mother; she is at first guiltily cold and later explicitly hostile to her invert daughter. Anna’s Irishness, fetishized as both sensual and beautiful, performs “British political narratives concerning the Irish . . . which would have been in especially vigorous circulation during the years of *The Well of Loneliness*’s writing,” and she embodies traits likely to be linked with Irish identity such as “irrational ingratitude, treachery and factiousness” (Backus 261). Pure-hearted and treacherous, bountiful and selfish, sweetly natural yet cruelly inflexible, Anna is a seductive but dangerous “native” in an Anglo-colonial fantasy of desire and trepidation.¹⁹

As we further examine the novel’s use of Celticism in light of sexological concerns about race and perversion, even darker hints of trouble lurk behind Stephen’s mother. Anna Malloy’s origins are suspicious—she apparently has no family in the traditional sense, only a “guardian” who displays a spectacular lack of sense by disliking the faultless Sir Philip (12). She is a parthenogenic product of Ireland, with origins both hyper-exact and strangely imprecise. Looking at Stephen’s breeding, it becomes clear that she reflects a mobilization of Celticism that not only invokes intertwined hierarchies of gender and nation, but articulates the invert racially: Stephen is concurrently too purely bred and too much a hybrid, a product of too much and too little good breeding.

This indeterminacy places her in a complex relation to the human and the animal. British *fin de siècle* public discourse about the species status of Irish people reflected late-imperial Britain’s interests in clearly articulating a British-Celtic hierarchy. Decades of debate and rancor about the “Irish situation” were organized around the species status of the Irish. As is well-documented, British co-optations of evolutionary discourse were often destructively directed towards the Irish—numerous *Punch* cartoons featuring unmistakably simian Irishmen come to mind (Curtis). The persistent *fin de siècle* depiction of the Irish as apes and other animals is legendary, as are the ways in which British anxieties about waning empire and Anglo-Celtic differences were worked through by modulating Irish identity in racialized, evolutionary terms (Curtis). Related associations concerning British-Celtic evolutionary hierarchies and Celtic racial differences permeate *The Well*.

In the context of breeding and race, the function of the Celtic is fascinatingly reminiscent of the contradiction of inversion. Just as the invert pointed both backward to animality and forward to evolutionary differentiation, so “Celtic blood” was understood to carry

both the regressive tendencies of a wilder race and a healthy naturalness free from the evolved malaise of Britishness. Hence, the cultural discourse of Irishness that informs Stephen Gordon reflects both regressive “animalistic” traits and the “new blood” that halts species degeneration. As Whitlock notes, *The Well* is clearly part of a “tradition well established in the English novel by the end of the nineteenth century,” where, “degeneracy of the aristocracy and the national heritage, its inability to create a thriving authentic lineage, and its need to seek rejuvenation from outside stock reflect a broader concern with degeneration and pathology which became a central preoccupation of the sexologists” (563). The “Irish race” was seen as useful in terms of this perceived need. As Seamus Deane notes, despite a history of being caricatured as “barbarous or uncivilized,”

in Renan, in Arnold, in Havelock Ellis, in the career of George Bernard Shaw—it was quite suddenly revealed that the English national character was defective and in need of the Irish, or Celtic, character in order to supplement it and enable it to survive. All the theorists of racial degeneration . . . [shared] the conviction that the decline of the West must be halted by some infusion or transfusion of energy from an “unspoiled” source. The Irish seemed to qualify for English purposes. . . . (12)

Unlike the Jones brothers, who are assigned permanent racial distance and inferiority, the Celtic is an intermediate racial location which is retrograde but valuable for racial progression. This mix of evolutionary disdain for and fetishization of the Celtic shifts the concept of “good breeding,” opening a new dimension on the role of Irishness in articulating Stephen Gordon. Stephen is at an intersective point between racial trajectories, wrongly and optimally bred, endowed with both evolutionary handicaps and healthy racial hybridity. Through an insistence on Stephen as the essence of British civilization, and an equally powerful focus on her dubious breeding and Celtic origins the novel places her on the fault line where inversion theory and theories of degeneration meet. Holding racial paradoxes together and simultaneously caught by those paradoxes herself, Stephen Gordon occupies an unclear position on the human-animal spectrum.

But while *The Well* embodies the contradictions of sexology, it also pressures them to create a radical textual space of pleasure. The evolutionary paradox which Stephen, the invert, embodies is opened up to the erotic by the novel’s passionate attention to the figure of the

Celtic animal. It is Raftery's role in the narrative—the extraordinary level of sentience granted him and the exceptional, intimate, and unvarying interest that Stephen shows in him—that mobilizes an erotic trajectory of affectational bestiality, both mirroring human desires (heterosexual and inverted) and creating something new. Raftery, like Stephen, occupies a shifty spot on the human-animal divide, and their relationship echoes the Anglo-Irish perfection of Stephen's parents and prefigures her Celtic partner, Mary Llewellyn. Raftery's role in the Anglo-Irish racial dyad is especially significant because it highlights that it is this racial binary, *as much as gender*, that fundamentally structures mutual desire and love in *The Well*.

The overlay of desirability with Celtic racial identity is especially clear as the arrival of the Irish horse powerfully echoes the narrative entrance of Stephen's mother: "[Raftery's] eyes were as soft as an Irish morning, and his courage was as bright as an Irish sunrise, and his heart was as young as the wild heart of Ireland" (59). When the beloved animal enters the novel, he emerges into Stephen's life in a manner that mirrors the emergence of Anna Malloy into the world of Morton, the productive entrance of Celticism into the British universe. Again just like Anna, Raftery is an imprecise but nonetheless "real, thorough-bred," acquired by Sir Philip from Ireland (59).

Stephen and Raftery go on to construct a successful version of the gender-conservative, colonialist romance of Sir Philip and Anna, mirroring that relationship's idyllic chivalry, loyalty, and hierarchy:

It was love at first sight, and they talked to each other for hours in his loose box—not in Irish or English, but in a quiet language having very few words but many small sounds . . . And Raftery said: "I will carry you bravely, I will serve you all the days of my life." And she answered: "I will care for you night and day, Raftery—all the days of your life." Thus Stephen and Raftery pledged their devotion, alone in his fragrant, hay-scented stable. (59)

Stephen and Raftery's nuptial language has been read as a type of "bed conversation" or as connotating "satisfactory lovemaking" (Hennegan xxi; Whitlock 571). As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that for the human-animal couple, as with the married and invert couple, love and desire flourish best within a framework of gendered, colonized hierarchical complementarity.

Raftery's Celtic roots match those of Mary Llewellyn, whose affiliations are also race specific and genealogically vague. Parentless

yet pure, she is yet another spontaneous product of the Celtic world, an “orphan from the days of her earliest childhood . . . in the wilds of Wales” (284). While Mary represents the complex role of the femme in the gender-desire drama of inversion, she is also central to another, equally important dynamic—the race-desire drama of the Anglo-Celtic binary:

For the Celtic soul is the stronghold of dreams, of longings come down the dim paths of the ages; and within it there dwells a vague discontent, so that it must for ever go questing. And now as though drawn by some hidden attraction, as though stirred by some irresistible impulse, quite beyond the realms of her own understanding, Mary turned in all faith and all innocence to Stephen. (284)

The desire that Mary feels is not only predicated on Stephen’s dashing masculinity, but also on Stephen’s Britishness. It is not only a femme gender affiliation but “the Celtic soul of Mary,” her status as a correct *racial* match for Stephen, that organizes and explains their erotic connection (284). Parallels between Raftery and Anna, and Raftery and Mary, reveal the centrality of the Anglo-Celtic dyad as a pre-condition to desire, mobilizing that racial binary concurrent to the masculine-feminine dyad and, within the Stephen-Raftery relationship, the human-animal binary, as well.²⁰

Raftery is much more than a reflection of Anna and a prefigure of Mary. Through his relationship with Stephen, Raftery is (in and of himself) a uniquely beloved figure. As such, he has qualities essential to any object of desire in *The Well*: vague Celtic origins, links to nature, and a tireless, subordinate devotion to British masculinity. The human/animal binary thus articulates narrative pleasure within a structure worthy of the most hierarchical versions of gender and/or colonial relations; Raftery’s devotion and dependence are always humble and absolute: “‘I have discovered a wonderful thing,’ [Raftery] told her. ‘I have discovered that for me you are God. It’s like that sometimes *with us humbler people*, we may only know God through His human image’” (168–69; my emphasis). What this approach finally does is mobilize the Celtic animal not simply as an object of autoerotic lust or emotional obsession (although it is those things, too), but as a uniquely gray area within the human-animal divide that specifically reflects and exploits inversion theory’s ideas about racial and species positionings vis-à-vis sexual identity. Stephen is a person very close to animality; Raftery is an animal dangerously close to humanity.²¹

It is also useful to recognize that Raftery exists *as a kind of person for some kinds of people*, that is, his human qualities are most readily accessible to borderline figures, such as Celts, servants, and inverts. Raftery's ambiguous ontological status is accessible to those whom sexologists like Ellis place lower on the evolutionary scale and closer to "the animal." Anna, for example, cannot "resist" indulging in "the feel" of Raftery: "And when [Stephen and Raftery] got home, there was Anna waiting to pat Raftery, because she could not resist him. Because, being Irish, her hands loved the feel of fine horseflesh under their delicate fingers" (60). The groom, Williams, whom I have argued plays the traditional role of corrupting servant in the narrative of autoerotic horse-riding, also shares a significant attachment to the horse:

"E do be a wonder—more nor fifty odd years 'ave I worked in the stables, and never no beast 'ave I loved like Raftery. But 'e's no common horse, 'e be some sort of Christian, and a better one too than a good few I knows on—"

And Stephen answered: "Perhaps he's a poet like his namesake; I think if he could write he'd write verses. They say all the Irish are poets at heart, so perhaps they pass on the gift to their horses." (104)

That the Irish are so closely linked to the bestial world they may "pass on" their primitive gifts to animals echoes the kinds of fantasies about Celticism, breeding, and the human/animal continuum that I have illustrated. If Raftery has qualities usually reserved for humans (rationality, creativity, gallantry), it is because his racial identity echoes ideas about Celtic near-animality. Yet these human qualities have the coincident effect of structuring an animal's near-personhood.

Reproducing but also radically co-opting sexological theories about inversion, race, and animality, *The Well* presents a holographic image of the invert as connected to both British civilization and Celtic animality. As inversion theory sways beneath paradoxes of its own making, *The Well* pressures those paradoxes, wedging open possibilities at the conceptual juncture of the Celtic and the animal, creating a textual momentum that destabilizes the narrative's relation to inversion theory, and producing a narrative space where bestial romantic pleasures represent both perversion and an optimal version of love.

IV. CONCLUSION

However human-animal connections in *The Well* are understood, there is no doubt that the relationship of Stephen Gordon to her

horses profoundly affects the text. For some readers (like Cook), the role of animals seems simple. For others (like Whitlock), simply bizarre. For still others, there is immense pleasure in reading about Stephen and her horses. Virginia Woolf (herself frankly contemptuous of the novel) records the response of Leonard Woolf's mother to *The Well*: "There is the old horse—that is wonderful—when she has to shoot the old horse. . . . It is too old for them to do anything. And so she shoots the horse herself. That is beautiful. . . . All that about the old horse and the old groom is very beautiful" (526). That we have so little attended to such responses speaks to my larger point about the need to think past "invert sexuality" as solely a matter of gender performance and examine other narrative erotics as they manifest themselves within their historical context. *The Well*'s self-proclaimed task is to sympathetically express Stephen Gordon and stabilize the sexual identity of "invert"—yet the structures of inversion are so laden with multiplicities of desire that even as inversion creates Stephen Gordon it spins other erotic trajectories of desire by the same means. Inversion theory thus resonates at multiple frequencies, making the "first lesbian novel" a cacophony of erotic simultaneities.

In *The Well*'s history of admiration and denunciation, rejection and reclamation, we have focused on gender not only because it is central to shaping the narrative, but also because it resonates best with our current conceptual structures for homoerotic desire. Yet, if we focus exclusively on gender, even to gleefully proclaim its disintegration and collapse, we reinforce its primacy as the best lens through which to examine queer narrative—a temptation that is especially strong for texts that are explicitly linked to gender through inversion theory. However, as this look at *The Well of Loneliness* shows, historically informed, careful attention to textual pleasures can reveal that narrative erotics are organized in manifold (and sometimes quite unexpected) ways. I would further contend that in many narratives queer readings and new delights continue to await us in unexpected multiplicities.

NOTES

1. Hall's lover, Una Troubridge, makes it clear that Hall specifically intended to write a book directly in conversation with inversion theory, "a novel that would be accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises" (81).
2. Lillian Faderman and Ann Williams opined that the novel taught lesbians they "need not expect joy or fulfillment in this world"

(40). Blanche Wiesen Cook asserted that *The Well* “denied joy in the positive choice to live with and love women” (719). Catherine Stimpson regarded it as “adopting the narrative of damnation” (247).

3. Several recent studies are especially notable: Judith Halberstam has argued for the recognition of historical differences around female masculinity and attempted to break the identificatory limits sometimes read onto the figure of Stephen Gordon (95–108, *passim*). Lisa Walker reads the novel’s abjection of femininity “not as a sign of [Stephen’s] victimization or her misogyny, but as a critique of gender categories implied by her inability to occupy either the masculine or feminine subject position” (42). Jay Prosser sees *The Well* as preceding the category of transgender/transsexual. Heather Love addresses *The Well* as a narrative of negative affect, arguing that the novel’s loneliness connects us with the queer past and the effects of homophobia. For a very thorough overview of *The Well*’s critical history, see Laura Doan and Jay Prosser’s “Introduction: Critical Perspectives Past and Present.”
4. Some queer-positive interrogations of the intersections of sexuality, sexual identity, and species status can be found in the work of Terry and Roughgarden.
5. In this arena there are some memorable recent examples, such as former Senator Rick Santorum’s (R-PA) 2003 fear that the repeal of sodomy laws would lead to “man-on-dog” (Blumenthal) and 2006 Colorado Republican vice-gubernatorial nominee Janet Rowland’s remark that the legalization of gay marriage would force legalization of bestial relationships: “For some people the alternative lifestyle is bestiality. Do we allow a man to marry a sheep?” (Elliott).
6. This formulation draws on Sedgwick’s work on the “privilege of unknowing” (“Unknowing” 104).
7. Case 166 of Krafft-Ebing’s study relates the story of the Countess Sarolta V., or “S.” [cf. Stephen]. S. is the product of an “ancient, noble and highly respected family,” and her father “brought her up as a boy, called her Sandor, allowed her to ride, drive and hunt, admiring her muscular energy” (284–85). S., like Stephen, “had a passion for masculine sports,” “was a very skillful fencer,” and “a passionate smoker” (285–86). After failed affairs with other women, S. fell in love with Marie [cf. Mary Llewellyn], a woman of “incredible simplicity and innocence” (287). Krafft-Ebing (whose enthusiasm for S. is notable) includes excerpts from S.’s writings: “Gentlemen, you learned in the law, psychologists and pathologists, do me justice; Love led me to the step I took;

all my deeds were conditioned by it. God put it in my heart. If he created me so, and not otherwise, am I then guilty[?]" (288). Case 166 is a miniature version of *The Well of Loneliness*, right down to S.'s melodramatic pleas for institutional clemency and a justifying theologies of existence. The extraordinary overlaps between Case 166 and the story of Stephen Gordon are too many and too exactly matched to be coincidental, and they testify to the direct influence of Krafft-Ebing on both the conceptual structure and plot of *The Well*.

8. It is interesting and somewhat amusing to note that S. from Case 166 seems to Krafft-Ebing to be free of habits of sexual self-stimulation: "She knew nothing of solitary or mutual onanism" (289). Yet S. has an interestingly eroticized relation with her horse, a relation that may have escaped Krafft-Ebing's notice, but clearly did not escape Hall's (289). Krafft-Ebing notes that S. "occasionally remarked that she was obliged to wear a suspensory bandage while riding. The fact is, S. wore a bandage around the body possibly as a means of retaining a priapus [dildo]" (286). While Krafft-Ebing only speculates on whether S. wore a dildo while riding her horse, the presence of her "suspensory bandage" indicates a genital focus for S. when on horseback. Indeed, it seems likely that is it Krafft-Ebing, rather than S., who "knows nothing of onanism."
9. Historian Lesley Hall confirms this time frame, pointing out that "the era of greatest masturbation anxiety was not (as is usually thought) the mid-Victorian period but the late Victorian to Edwardian era" (371).
10. The Victorian tendency to articulate childhood sexual development in terms of servants was deeply ingrained—so much so that the sexual drama of servant influence is central in no less a Freudian narrative than Freud's own. His accounts of the influence of his childhood nurse on his own sexuality are well known. See Bruce Robbins, 194–96.
11. Again, as in the case of Krafft-Ebing, Barker's use of the term "bestiality" connotes any corrupt sexual practice, confirming that *any* sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is linked to the animal realm.
12. In a plethora of references, Stephen Marcus has clearly illustrated that in Victorian pornography scenes of "childhood seduction and masturbation" organized around the presence of a servant are "familiar and typical" (168).
13. In the introduction to their influential collection on discourses of the autoerotic, Bennett and Rosario note the ongoing historical

connections between ideas surrounding masturbation and creative acts, especially writing. They point out the “rich network of connections between solitary, non-procreative eroticism and autonomous, imaginative production” and how for “many creative artists, masturbation became a trope for the trauma and delights of imaginative rêverie, self-cultivation, and auto-representation” (10).

14. The limits of this essay do not allow sufficient space for exploring the eroticized sentimental reading experience that clearly informs the “horse story” genre. One place to begin this exploration, however, might be the work of Peter Stoneley, who opens up intersections between the erotics of the horse story and how the dynamics of that genre may effect our readings of other texts. It is also impossible to fully explore *The Well's* arguments on behalf of inverts in relation to the “horse story” genre’s links to the extremely important animal rights movement in Britain. Coral Lansbury’s seminal work on *Black Beauty* vis-à-vis the women’s and worker’s movements would certainly be a rich starting point for such an exploration.
15. See Pick, 176–203 *passim*. Pick notes that evolutionary ideas helped mobilize a vast and ongoing late-century social debate concerning the causes and effects of human degeneration. Darwin himself expressed concern about degeneration, but was concerned about how the burgeoning eugenics movement (lead by his cousin, Francis Galton) employed the concepts in his work. The tenacity of the concept of degeneracy can also be partly attributed to disciplinary history. As Oosterhuis has argued, in the late nineteenth century, the burgeoning field of psychiatry needed a clear causal paradigm for mental disorders as the question of disciplinary validity became more pressing; there was considerable pressure to produce a diagnostic model that paralleled the experimental physiology that defined other kinds of medical research (Oosterhuis 103–04).
16. Like Krafft-Ebing, Ellis is not consistent. He believed that inversion/homosexuality could come from a number of sources, and when “he had to choose between stating that homosexuality was inborn or acquired, he said there was truth in both views” (Bullough 80). Like other sexologists, Ellis’s theoretical approach closely resembles a patchwork of ideas, bits and pieces of theories of causality and evidence, and a loose approach to both data collection and case analysis.
17. These attributes have, in many ways, remained attached to racist, Western ideas about the sexualities of non-white peoples, where

“degenerate” racial differences, the failure of the civilized, and the link to animalistic, hyper-sexuality still cluster together, clinging powerfully to racialized stereotypes.

18. I am again indebted to Margot Backus here. In a long note to her work on Celticism in *The Well*, she (via Stephen Jay Gould) notes that conceptual paradoxes emerge “whenever two different criteria for advancement collided, as they frequently did in the hierarchy and binary-obsessed world of nineteenth-century European science” (Backus, 265, n.18). This paradox extended to the human-animal binary, where species status was commonly mobilized across other “criteria for advancement” such as race and sexuality. See Gould.
19. These contradictory qualities are two sides of the Anglo-Irish colonialist coin, an imperialist fantasy of the colonized as a figure of both desire and danger in which the position of Englishness relative to Irishness is remarkable for its “flexible positional superiority” (Said 7).
20. Mary Llewellyn is part of another cross-species link with David the dog, who lives with Mary and Stephen in Paris. The mental life of David is considerable—he ponders being a Celtic dog in France and recalls advice from his mother on how to handle French arrogance. Found by Mary, David is (no surprise here) a Celtic dog, an Irish water-spaniel, another stray in a seemingly endless line of humbly devoted Celtic strays:

“Oh, look!” exclaimed Mary, reading [an illustrated dog book] over [Stephen’s] shoulder, “He’s not Irish at all, he’s really a Welshman: ‘We find in the Welsh laws of Howell Dda the first reference to this intelligent spaniel. The Iberians brought the breed to Ireland. . .’ Of course, that’s why he followed me home; he knew I was Welsh the moment he saw me.”

Stephen laughed: “Yes, his hair grows up from a peak like yours—it must be a national failing.” (333)

The suggestion that Celtic animals and Celtic people are so closely linked that they actually share physical and mental traits recalls Stephen’s earlier musing that perhaps Irish people “pass on” their poetic tendencies to their animals (105).

21. Raftery’s ambiguity resonates in his “namesake,” the Irish Gaelic poet Antoine OReachtaire (c. 1784–1835). OReachtaire is situated on the dividing line between the end of Gaelic poetry and the beginning of the Anglo-Irish literary school; he is a crucial figure for British understandings of Celtic culture,

signaling (like Raftery the horse) a space of fraught indeterminacy. The poet is prominent in the work of Lady Gregory (1852–1922), the indefatigable British collector and champion of “primitive” arts. As part of the *fin de siècle* interest in what James Knapp calls the “exotic familiar,” Lady Gregory’s efforts to recover the artistic work of non-Anglo people resulted in numerous collections, some of which focused on O’Reachtaire, whose “value is specifically understood to consist in his difference from the traditional canons of civilized art and learning” (Knapp 293–94). The cultural liminality that O’Reachtaire performed in British co-optations of Irish culture dovetails with Raftery’s ambiguous positioning on the human-animal divide—a gap managed through similar colonialist mobilizations of Celticism.

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