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The Specter of Female Masculinity: How Women Shaped the Ex-gay Movement in the 1970s and 1980s

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Starting in the 1970s, the “ex-gay movement,” a loose collection of conservative Christian counselors and therapists, experienced sizable growth in the United States. Importantly, women played a prominent role in the expansion of the ex-gay movement in the ensuing decades, both as counselors and as counselees. This article highlights the tension that arose between the patriarchal gender norms and the role women counselors played in the ex-gay movement. When read “along the grain,” ex-gay texts demonstrate the production of a gendered hierarchy that not only valued “female femininity” over “female masculinity” but also reified patriarchal authority in the US. Female pastoral counselors, such as Leanne Payne and Elizabeth Moberly, advocated for the conservative gendered vision of the religious right. But as women, these counselors—and their books—could not transcend the patriarchal order of the religiously conservative ex-gay movement.

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, Veronica traveled from Toronto to the San Francisco Bay Area to undergo spiritual and sexual renewal. The registered nurse had struggled for years with her same-sex desires. She hoped that Love in Action, a new Christian ministry for men and women who wanted out of the “gay lifestyle,” could help.¹ *The Third Sex?*, a book by Kent Philpott, the minister who had helped found Love in Action,

¹There are countless semantic problems when writing about the topic of conversion therapy, currently called sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) by its most prominent practitioners. Throughout the article, I place the terminology used by conversion therapists in quotation marks when introducing verbiage from the ex-gay movement. This approach not only draws attention to the language used by conversion therapists. It also prevents the excessive—and distracting—use of quotation marks given that the American Psychological Association (APA) recognizes SOCE as a dangerous form of “therapy.” For the APA’s most recent reports and resolutions on conversion therapy, see American Psychological Association, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington, DC, 2009); and American Psychological Association, “APA Resolution on Sexual Orientation Change Efforts” (February 2021), at www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-sexual-orientation-change-efforts.pdf.

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inspired her. After learning about Love in Action's burgeoning fellowship, Veronica knew she needed to travel to San Rafael, a small city north of San Francisco, to "get rid of this dark cloud that was hanging over me." She bought an airplane ticket and met Philpott for a series of counseling sessions. Even though she had not developed sexual attractions to men, Veronica attested that her counseling sessions "got rid of all the depression and feelings of guilt" she had accumulated from years of lesbianism.² Religious salvation, rather than full sexual conversion, made Veronica's trip to Love in Action worth the time and cost of traveling from Canada to California.

Veronica's sojourn in the Bay Area proved to be a christening into the nascent "ex-gay movement," a loose network of socially conservative religious organizations and psychological professionals who believed that they could change someone's sexual desires.³ In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, opening opportunities for a range of religious figures to counsel gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals.⁴ Initially, conservative Christian men offered the kind of therapeutic interventions that promised sexual reorientation. By the early 1980s, however, female pastoral counselors wrote books, mailed newsletters, and offered therapy sessions for clients. Despite being a prominent part of the ex-gay movement in the 1970s and 1980s, women's experiences, religious beliefs, and therapeutic approaches have not received extensive scholarly review.⁵

What emerges from a focus on women in the ex-gay movement is a tension between patriarchal gender norms and the rise of women counselors to "cure" lesbianism through the modeling of traditional femininity. This article argues that women in the burgeoning ex-gay movement constructed a gender hierarchy that valued female femininity over female masculinity. As conservative women confronting second-wave feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment, reinforcing gender norms was both a religious conviction and a political necessity. The production of the gender hierarchy valuing female femininity over female masculinity was apparent in women's testimonies and in the therapeutic approaches advertised by female pastoral counselors. Conversion therapists interpreted female masculinity as a problem that had to be overcome. Sources from the first fifteen years of the ex-gay movement thus reveal the discursive creation of the masculine woman who entered ex-gay counseling. Women seeking to leave the lesbian lifestyle had to stop dressing like men and working in traditionally masculine jobs if they hoped to halt their same-sex desires. These were themes that emerged—and warranted repetition—in books by conversion therapists. Through repetition, these books produced an interpretation of female masculinity that the ex-gay movement consumed and propagandized into the twenty-first century. The work of pastoral

²Veronica is quoted in Kent Philpott, *The Gay Theology* (Plainfield, NJ, 1977), 51.

³See E. Mansell Pattison and Myrna Loy Pattison, "'Ex-gays': Religiously Mediated Change in Homosexuals," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 137 (1980), 1553–1562, for the first professional use of "ex-gay."

⁴Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton, 1987).

⁵The majority of scholarship on the ex-gay movement has examined men's masculinities. See Christine M. Robinson and Sue E. Spivey, "The Politics of Masculinity and the Ex-gay Movement," *Gender & Society* 21/5 (2007), 650–75; and Lynne Gerber, "Grit, Guts, and Vanilla Beans: Godly Masculinity in the Ex-gay Movement," *Gender & Society* 29/1 (2015), 26–50.

counselors like Leanne Payne and Elizabeth Moberly was crucial for the longevity of female masculinity as a threat to womanhood and heterosexuality in ex-gay discourse. Payne and Moberly were able to reinforce normative conceptions of society while offering political dividends for the ex-gay movement. As conventionally feminine women, Payne and Moberly offered—and refined—therapy for lesbians and gay men. But, as women, they could not transcend the patriarchal gendered order of the religious right.

This article examines the concept of female masculinity as it existed in the formative years of the ex-gay movement by first analyzing the printed testimonies of five women who received counseling at Love in Action in the 1970s. When these sources are read “along the grain,” as Ann Laura Stoler proposed for interrogating and excavating the colonial archive, the ex-gay movement’s efforts to delegitimize female masculinity—and, in turn, lesbianism—come into full view.⁶ Although the available source base cannot be interpreted as the factual lived experiences of the women interviewed, particularly since Kent Philpott was an engaged interviewer who asked leading questions of the women he talked to, the testimonies in Philpott’s books produced the masculine female as an object of therapeutic and religious intervention. Even if fiction, these testimonies constructed a form of gendered knowledge that religious and political conservatives consumed as facts. Philpott’s books introduced a generation of ex-gay counselors to ideas that affixed female masculinity to lesbianism.

Beginning in the late 1970s, female pastoral counselors like Payne and Moberly made inroads into the business of ex-gay counseling. In *The Broken Image: Restoring Personal Wholeness through Healing Prayer*, Payne contended that conventional femininity, which included the traditional nurturing associated with motherhood, positioned women as successful conversion therapists.⁷ Moberly’s “gender-specific therapy,” on the other hand, outlined how homosexuals needed to form strong homosocial bonds with members of the same sex. According to Moberly, this kind of therapy provided supposedly masculine lesbians opportunities to bond with and learn from conventionally feminine—and presumably heterosexual—women. The femininity of the female pastoral counselor raised the status of women while also reifying a gender hierarchy within the ex-gay movement, where conventional femininity was still inferior to men’s masculinity. In the patriarchal world of the religious right, female femininity would never assume the kind of cultural and social authority that conventional masculinity had with patriarchy-obsessed conservatives.

By the 1990s, the gender identity of women who pursued conversion therapy became an accepted fact in conversion therapy discourse. Books, newsletters, and other forms of ex-gay propaganda took for granted the creation of the mannish lesbian. The production of female masculinity as *the* purported cause of lesbianism was, in short, a successful discursive project by the end of the twentieth century. Through their writings and travels, which were more extensive than those of

⁶Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 87–109, at 100.

⁷Leanne Payne, *The Broken Image: Restoring Personal Wholeness through Healing Prayer* (Wheaton, IL, 1981).

other ex-gay counselors in the 1980s, Payne and Moberly reinforced female masculinity and lesbianism as problems that could be solved through conversion therapy. The cultural creation of the lesbian as a possessor of female masculinity had dire real-world consequences. Women suffering from internalized homophobia continued to see conversion therapists into the twenty-first century, hoping that female counselors like Payne and Moberly would be able to help them realize the privileges afforded to white—and middle-class—heterosexual citizenship.

Female masculinity, sexual conversion, and Love in Action in the 1970s

When Veronica left Toronto for San Francisco, she had some idea of what awaited her. She had read Philpott's *The Third Sex?*. From this, she knew that Love in Action combined religious and psychological counseling. What she probably could not have been truly prepared for, however, was how intimate counseling sessions would be. For healing to take place, women in Love in Action had to discuss a range of topics, from experiences of childhood trauma to adult same-sex relationships. Significantly, female masculinity emerged as a dominant theme in interviews. In all but one example, the women featured in Philpott's books expressed problems identifying as feminine women. Since Philpott's *The Third Sex?* and *The Gay Theology* provided many social and political conservatives with their first glimpse into Christian-based sexual conversions, narratives of female masculinity became important for shaping the gender hierarchy of the ex-gay movement. These sources, though problematic, produced the image of the masculine woman as a prime candidate for conversion therapy.

Concerns over female masculinity as the primary cause of lesbianism have historical roots in the late nineteenth century. In the 1880s and 1890s, European sexologists proposed that gender inversion was the cause of same-sex desires. According to Jennifer Terry, "across the fields of endocrinology, cultural anthropology, and psychology, the subject of homosexuality had a spectral presence and functioned as a means for positing what constituted proper manhood and womanhood in advanced societies" by the 1930s. Terry argues that US-based scientists generally contended that homosexuals combined elements of both sexes. In probing the gendered dimensions of same-sex desire, Terry states, these scientists delineated "what would count as proper femininity in women and proper masculinity in men."⁸ George Chauncey, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Madeline D. Davis, and Julio Capó Jr have revealed how gender presentation and gender expression served as social, cultural, and medical explanations for the development of same-sex desires in the early to mid-twentieth century.⁹

Historical scholarship has explored the construction and the lived experiences of American lesbians in the post-World War II period. Yvonne Keller, for instance,

⁸Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago, 1999), 159.

⁹For historical explorations of gender presentation, gender expression, and lesbian and gay subjecthood see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York, 1993); and Julio Capó Jr, *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940* (Chapel Hill, 2017).

highlights how cheap paperback novels about lesbianism proliferated in the 1950s and early 1960s. Keller contends that these pulp fictions provided a generation of women with a genre in which they could form a lesbian identity. Other research has sought to understand the social history of lesbians in Cold War America. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, Kennedy and Davis document the gender dynamics of lesbians in Buffalo in the middle of the twentieth century. Importantly, Kennedy and Davis spotlight how working-class lesbians in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s adopted butch–femme roles when they pursued lovers. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* also uncovers the sexual practices of the “stone cold butch,” a lesbian who presented herself as masculine and who received sexual gratification by only pleasuring conventionally feminine women. Through pulp fiction novels like Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* and newspaper reports about lesbian hangouts, portrayals of lesbianism’s gender dynamics were available for Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰

Like the narrators in Kennedy and Davis’s book, the women interviewed for *The Third Sex?* and *The Gay Theology* spoke about the development of female masculinity and its relation to lesbian desires. The scholarship of cultural and queer theorists helps us comprehend the role of the masculine lesbian in the twentieth-century US. In 1998, Jack Halberstam provided a thorough explanation of female masculinity when they wrote about “women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine.”¹¹ Halberstam’s book, *Female Masculinity*, identified a host of behaviors as masculine, including dressing like men, desiring women, being recognized as men, engaging in traditionally male occupations, and protecting female sexual and emotional partners. The lesbians that Kennedy and Davis interviewed for *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* communicated the importance of female masculinity in the middle of the twentieth century. Literature produced by the ex-gay movement in the 1970s and 1980s, on the other hand, highlights how female masculinity became a crucial discursive device to construct a pathological understanding of lesbianism.

Female masculinity is a useful concept for analyzing conservative religious movements that seek to reify gender hierarchies. When used to evaluate the portrayal of women in the ex-gay movement, the concept of female masculinity is applicable for three reasons. First, the ex-gay movement has relied on the patriarchal, phallogocentric, and sexist assumptions of Freudian psychoanalysis to theorize female masculinity and lesbian desire, as this article’s sections on Payne and Moberly emphasize. These assumptions about gender and sexuality provide female masculinity with an “I-know-it-when-I-see-it” quality. There was no robust theoretical construction of the masculine woman in ex-gay discourse. But through repetition, ex-gay counselors defined the mannish woman as a threat to traditional gender norms. Second, the female masculinity of women in the ex-gay movement in the 1970s and 1980s was often interpreted as a natural part of a lesbian’s gender identity. Women at Love in Action participated in traditionally masculine activities

¹⁰Yvonne Keller, “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?’ Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950–1965,” *American Quarterly* 57/2 (2005), 385–410; and Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.

¹¹Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC, 1998), xi.

as children. Even if women had conventionally feminine girlhoods, though, the trauma of childhood abandonment or sexual assault affected their supposedly natural gender development. In response, *Love in Action* focused on many of the qualities that Halberstam identified as criteria for female masculinity. And last, the focus on female masculinity highlights gender hierarchies. The testimonies of ex-gay women and their pastoral counselors constructed female masculinity as an inferior gender identity, positing that female femininity was the only authentic gender identity for women. The production of the masculine woman as a lesbian, in other words, tried to make masculinity the sole possession of biological males.

Male counselors in the ex-gay movement not only laid the intellectual groundwork for female conversion therapists. Men also stressed the importance of traditional gender roles for combating same-sex desires. Although Kent Philpott offered the most compelling testimonies of religious and sexual transformations, other male counselors fused lay understandings of psychology and Christianity to help the ex-gay movement grow. Michael Bussee and Jim Kaspar, for instance, founded the Ex-Gay Intervention Team (EXIT) in Orange County, California, in the early 1970s. Bussee and Kaspar recalled responding to over 250 calls and letters per month from men and women who wanted out of the gay lifestyle. By the mid-1970s, Bussee and Kaspar located twelve other ex-gay ministries across the United States, leading the way to form Exodus International, a parachurch organization that had grown to hundreds of member ministries by the 1990s.¹² They also distributed informational literature about conversion therapy.¹³ Philpott's books, along with Bussee and Kaspar's literature, were the most influential works on conversion therapy in the ex-gay movement before Leanne Payne and Elizabeth Moberly published their respective titles. Despite their importance for shaping ex-gay discourse, Philpott, Bussee, and Kaspar offered scant detail on how to conduct conversion therapy, particularly with female clients.

Freudian and neo-Freudian psychiatry helped construct the female masculinity of ex-gay lesbian subjecthood as pathological, and the roots of female masculinity in *Love in Action* testimonies could often be traced to the entwined nature of child and gender development. Susan, a masculine fifty-seven-year-old woman with short hair, remembered having a wonderful time growing up with her father, but she shared that there was one problem—he raised her as a boy. “He taught me fishing, roller-skating, sports,” Susan told Philpott in *The Third Sex?* She was the youngest of six children, and, as the baby of the family, Susan's father wanted someone he could share masculine interests with. Despite efforts by her mother to raise a traditionally feminine girl, Susan continued to spend a great deal of her time with her father. Her masculine gender identity was not something she initially fretted over, and although she participated in activities deemed more suitable for boys, Susan remembered having a beautiful childhood. When she was fifteen, though, she recognized that she was not as feminine as other girls her age. Susan mused

¹²Marie-Amélie George, “Expressive Ends: Understanding Conversion Therapy Bans,” *Alabama Law Review* 68/3 (2017), 811–53, at 811.

¹³See Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-gay Movement* (Berkeley, 2006); and Chris Babits, “Demons in San Francisco Bay: How One Street Preacher Helped Launch Modern-Day Conversion Therapy,” *Pacific Historical Review* 93/1 (2024), 63–96, for additional information on Philpott, Bussee, and Kaspar's roles in the ex-gay movement.

that her female masculinity had become an issue. Because her loving and devoted father had not fostered her femininity when she was a girl, Susan believed she developed same-sex desires later in life.¹⁴

The portrayal of Susan's father-daughter relationship contrasts sharply with the ideal paternal role that cultural sources depicted in the postwar period. Rachel Devlin's *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* analyzes how the father-daughter relationship changed as the US transformed into a consumer's republic. Devlin argues that prior to World War II, cultural sources like advertisements depicted daughters consulting their mothers when purchasing clothing and makeup. After World War II, though, racial differences emerged in these cultural sources. Popular African American magazines, such as *Ebony* and *Jet*, textually conjoined but physically separated black fathers and daughters in articles and advertisements. This was not the case for white fathers and daughters. As Devlin notes, sources like "plays, advertising, advice columns, movies, and fiction featured [white] fathers and daughters engaged in the process of teen consumerism together." Devlin contends that unlike African American fathers, white dads ended up being intimately involved "in the procurement of clothes and cosmetics" that "both allowed for and neutralized the sexual meaning of a range of colors and styles, from bright red lipstick to cocktail dresses." It was therefore natural for white fathers from the late 1940s into the early 1960s to teach their daughters traditional femininity. Not doing so, a range of postwar sources indicated, might lead daughters like Susan to a life of lesbianism.¹⁵

Susan's recollections of her childhood were by far the most positive among the early members of Love in Action. Others reported a range of traumatic memories from their youth that they connected to the intertwined development of female masculinity and lesbian desire. Eve, unfortunately, experienced two of the most common of these traumas: abandonment and sexual abuse. She discussed how her parents had been unable to care for her from an early age. Because of this, Eve's grandparents sent her off to an all-girls Catholic school. There, Eve learned little about sex. This made her unprepared for the dangers of sexual assault. When she was sixteen, two teenage boys raped Eve after a school dance. In her interview with Philpott, she remembered being in the back of a car, where one boy held her down while another penetrated her.

Recalling this horrific experience years later, Eve believed that being raped made it difficult for her to be emotionally and physically attracted to men. Other events also decreased her interest in men. She witnessed her friends marry alcoholic men and bear "children by the dozen." "In the back of my mind," she informed Philpott, "I told myself that I would never get married and have children." For these reasons, Eve was uninterested in pursuing a heterosexual relationship for much of her life. She contended that this was why she put little effort into developing the female femininity that presumably attracted men.¹⁶ In *The Third Sex?*, Eve presented her female masculinity as a natural response to male-inflicted violence. This

¹⁴Susan is quoted in Philpott, *The Third Sex?*, 32.

¹⁵Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 12, 81–4, 135.

¹⁶Eve is quoted in Philpott, *The Third Sex?*, 137–42.

Freudian discernment of sexual trauma as the cause of Eve's same-sex desires became a core feature of ex-gay discourse in the 1970s.

Dressing like men, desiring women, and employment in traditionally masculine occupations were some of the primary ways in which the women at Love in Action discussed the female masculinity that hypothetically resulted from traumatic or unconventional girlhoods. Dress and desire represented the most obvious criteria of female masculinity, at least as they emerged in ex-gay discourse in the 1970s. Wearing slacks instead of dresses, for example, was a prominent theme in many women's life histories.

Desire, however, was more complex, with female masculinity influencing sexual attractions. Susan, for instance, confirmed that she assumed "the male role" in relationships, and, according to her, she was comfortable as a butch who pursued feminine lovers.¹⁷ Polly, a forty-six-year-old divorcee from a small midwestern town, admitted to playing "the female part" in her relationships with women. Her narrative provided insight into how she viewed the gendered nature of lesbian relationships. She said that almost all her girlfriends were butches. Since she had been previously (and unhappily) married to a man, though, Polly felt more comfortable expressing the conventional femininity expected of the female part in a relationship.¹⁸ These examples show how ex-gay narratives stressed that a form of gender complementarity guided the selection of sexual and emotional partners. Rather than men's masculinity and women's femininity forming a complementary whole, however, women within the lesbian lifestyle seemed drawn together through the magnetic forces of female femininity and female masculinity. This was not unique to the testimonies of ex-gay women. According to Kennedy and Davis, "The obvious similarity between butch-fem and male-female eroticism was that they were both based on gender polarity: In lesbian culture, masculine and feminine imagery identified the objects of desire; aggressiveness and passivity were crucial to the erotic dynamic."¹⁹ Like the lesbians interviewed for Kennedy and Davis's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Susan and Polly talked about gender identity and sexuality as inexorably linked in post-World War II lesbian communities.

The women Philpott interviewed also reflected on their histories of employment in traditionally masculine occupations. Manufacturing and enlisting in the military were two lines of work that Love in Action's female clients saw as integral to the development of their masculinity. Polly, for example, worked at a lamp manufacturing plant with three hundred other women. She noted that everyone wore slacks to work, including the women she had sexual relationships with.²⁰ After a stint at an aircraft plant in Seattle, Polly continued to pursue traditionally masculine work. She joined the Air Force at the age of twenty-six. Polly completed basic and technical training. Upon being transferred to England, she not only entered a lesbian relationship but also increasingly adopted masculine mannerisms. Polly remembered that despite playing the female role in relationships, her female masculinity became an obvious part of how she identified. She indicated that she "had a very

¹⁷Susan is quoted in *ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸Polly is quoted in *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 192.

²⁰Polly is quoted in Philpott, *The Third Sex?*, 94.

dominating attitude myself, and I never allowed myself to be really dominated.”²¹ Polly tied the development of her traditionally masculine affectations to the jobs she had. Even though she could play the female part, she noted that her female masculinity was an underlining feature of her homosexual attractions, making crucial connections between dress, work, gender identity, and sexual desires.

Some of the women interviewed for *The Third Sex?* and *The Gay Theology* mentioned that the homosocial living quarters of the military served as initial sites for female masculinity and lesbian desire to thrive. Eve enlisted in the Women’s Army Corps, where she trained as a teletype operator in World War II. During basic training, she observed “that a lot of the women instructors were very masculine-looking” and that they “acted like they were men.” At first, since she was not as masculine as these women, Eve thought she was in trouble. But she remembered going through basic “with flying colors.” In time, she entered into a relationship with another woman because she liked “the thrill” of sex.²² This put her in a precarious situation. As historians have shown, the US military persecuted lesbians and gay men near the end of World War II.²³ Eve remembered how “[e]veryone from the first sergeant on down was gay,” but once a new commanding officer took charge, lesbianism was no longer tolerated. “One girl turned in my name,” Eve told Philpott. This was toward the end of her tour of duty in Europe. Coincidentally, her grandmother died around this time. “I pretended that she was like a mother to me,” Eve recalled. “I cried, and said I had to get back to the funeral.” She was able to fly home, where she evaded additional accusations of lesbianism and was subsequently discharged from the Army.²⁴ Thousands of other women were not as lucky.

Two other features of these women’s testimonies stand out: first, the newness of their religious conversions, and second, the incomplete nature of their sexual conversions. Several of the women at Love in Action confessed how they had only recently learned that homosexuality was considered by some to be a sin. Susan’s religious conversion happened quickly after learning about this conservative interpretation of the Bible. In her interview for *The Third Sex?*, she said, “I just recently discovered, through a friend, that homosexuality is a sin. One night, when we were discussing the Bible, this girl happened to mention something in the Bible about homosexuality.” “Wow, there it was,” in Chapter 1 in Romans, she remembered. After a lesbian friend committed suicide, Susan’s religious conversion took a more serious tone. She “wondered if [the friend] went to heaven or to hell.” “The more I thought about it—that homosexuality was wrong—it really blew my mind,” she said.²⁵ Polly, on the other hand, found herself in Philpott’s Christian bookstore, a business he started in the early 1970s, to learn as much as she could about the supposed sinfulness of lesbianism. In her interview, Polly confided that she had lived for four years as a Christian, but she had once “slipped” back into

²¹Polly is quoted in *ibid.*, 101

²²Eve is quoted in *ibid.*, 143–4.

²³Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York, 1990); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, 2004); and Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2009).

²⁴Eve is quoted in Philpott, *The Third Sex?*, 147.

²⁵Susan is quoted in *ibid.*, 39.

homosexuality. As Polly's experience demonstrated, religious conversions were not enough to stave off same-sex desires.²⁶

By the end of the 1970s, the ex-gay movement had grown, with the newly formed Exodus International serving as an umbrella organization for dozens of ministries across the United States and Canada. Yet ex-gay ministries' claims of sexual transformation were incomplete. Polly was not the only woman who expressed ambivalence about her sexual identity. Veronica said that she was able to relate to men "on a spiritual and emotional level where I couldn't before."²⁷ Susan still saw herself as a homosexual. In fact, she compared homosexuality to alcoholism, saying, "you're hooked into it." She thought she was going to live every day thinking how she "got by this one without failing" and succumbing to her lesbian desires.²⁸ Even the most positive assessments of sexual conversion were qualified successes. Anne claimed that she was a heterosexual "because I have lost so much of the attraction I had for women and I desire to be free from the emotional problems I have with men."²⁹ There was little empirical evidence that strong shifts in sexual attractions had occurred. At most, these women could claim that through religious salvation they had been able to adopt conventionally feminine mannerisms and dress.

The women interviewed in Philpott's two books highlighted the importance of gender identity to the ex-gay movement of the 1970s. Although their testimonies cannot be read as factual lived experiences, *Love in Action's* female clients emphasized the role that female masculinity played in their lives. Even Polly, the most conventionally feminine of the five women interviewed, mentioned how she adopted masculine mannerisms when she was in the military. Narratives from women at *Love in Action* offer an important snapshot of conversion therapy in the mid- to late 1970s, right before female pastoral counselors like Leanne Payne and Elizabeth Moberly became prominent in the ex-gay movement.

Throughout the 1980s, Payne and Moberly were crucial for the intellectual, therapeutic, and religious views of the ex-gay movement, placing female masculinity at the core of their beliefs about lesbianism. Their books went through multiple editions, spreading the ex-gay movement's message about gender and sexuality. Because they became so important for the ex-gay movement, the next two sections of the article examine how Payne and Moberly interpreted the concept of female masculinity, attacked feminism, and proposed gender-specific therapeutic interventions for homosexuality. Payne and Moberly not only declared that the masculine lesbian was a threat to the American nation. They also made strident defenses of fostering female femininity to ensure successful conversion therapy with women.

Payne, feminism, and "gendered cannibalism" in the early to mid-1980s

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, Leanne Payne laid the groundwork for her career as a pastoral counselor. After divorcing her husband, she moved to Wheaton, Illinois, to become a dorm mother at Wheaton Academy. In 1965, while working

²⁶Polly's story of "slipping" back into homosexuality can be found in *ibid.*, 103.

²⁷Veronica is quoted in Philpott, *The Gay Theology*, 54.

²⁸Susan is quoted in Philpott, *The Third Sex?*, 42–3.

²⁹Polly is quoted in *ibid.*, 104.

for Wheaton, Payne enrolled as a student and earned multiple college degrees, including a bachelor's and a master's from Wheaton College. Her research focused on the writings of C. S. Lewis, which culminated in her first book, *Real Presence: The Christian Worldview of C. S. Lewis as Incarnational Reality*. In 1973, she learned about the potential of Agnes Sanford's healing-prayer ministry. By 1976, Payne ministered full-time. She moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1978, at which point she devoted herself to counseling lesbians and gay men. In a newsletter from 21 May 1979, she divulged that she was writing a book on healing homosexuals. She wrote that this was a "sorely needed" subject.³⁰ Starting in the early 1980s, Payne traveled throughout the United States, Europe, and Australia to deliver week-long seminars on counseling sexual minorities, making her one of the most active conversion therapists of the era.

Payne must have found not only Philpott's *The Third Sex?* and *The Gay Theology* wanting but also other books by members of the ascendent religious right. In 1977, Anita Bryant, the former beauty queen and country music star, published *The Anita Bryant Story*, a book that lambasted gay people and promised that homosexuals could change.³¹ As Emily Suzanne Johnson notes in *This Is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right*, women like Anita Bryant "helped to ensure that gender and sexuality would be central issues around which [the Christian right] revolved."³² In 1978, Tim LaHaye offered his own overview of conversion therapy in *The Unhappy Gays: What Everyone Should Know about Homosexuality*.³³ Neither Bryant nor LaHaye provided much detail about conversion therapy in their respective books, though. Bryant devoted several paragraphs to testimonies from lesbians and gay men who contacted her about ex-gay counseling. Bryant interpreted these letters as evidence that homosexuality was spiritual bondage. But she said little in the way of what conversion therapy might look, sound, and feel like. Instead, as Johnson writes, "Bryant variously emphasized themes of marriage, family, and Christian witness, drawing on the evangelical tradition of personal testimony to present her life experiences both as models for emulation and as sources of cautionary example."³⁴ Since Bryant never entered a lesbian relationship, she had little to say on ex-gay counseling in her book. The market for a religious approach to counseling lesbians and gay men must have seemed like a ripe opportunity for Payne.

In 1981, Payne published *The Broken Image*, the first of several books on healing homosexuals. *The Broken Image* went through at least two editions. *Crisis in Masculinity*, which further refined Payne's approach to counseling homosexuals, followed the success of *The Broken Image* in 1985. In both books, Payne not

³⁰Leanne Payne newsletter, 21 May 1979, Leanne Payne Papers, 1975–2003, Box 2, Buswell Library, Wheaton College Special Collections, Wheaton, IL. For an overview of Payne's life see Leanne Payne, *Heaven's Calling: A Memoir of One Soul's Steep Ascent* (Grand Rapid, MI, 2008).

³¹Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Old Tappan, NJ, 1977).

³²Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This Is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right* (New York, 2019), 1.

³³Tim LaHaye, *The Unhappy Gays: What Everyone Should Know about Homosexuality* (Carol Stream, IL, 1978).

³⁴Johnson, *This Is Our Message*, 45.

only identified second-wave feminists as a threat to men's masculinity but also discussed the importance of traditional gender roles for American society. She argued that female masculinity was an important determinant of lesbianism. She specifically contended that masculine lesbians "cannibalized" the femininity of their lovers. Payne's ideas about sexual conversion relied on the patriarchal assumptions of Freudian psychology. She claimed, for instance, that lesbianism was an immature sexual orientation, and in doing so she connected female masculinity to the supposed sin of homosexuality. Payne's monthly newsletters, which she sent to followers from the late 1970s until her death in 2015, demonstrate the pastoral counselor's devotion to conversion therapy.

Payne's prominent place within the ex-gay movement was apparent in the early 1980s. After publishing *The Broken Image*, Payne traveled to Vancouver, British Columbia for the annual meeting of Exodus International. Payne knew relatively little about Exodus at the time, but it was an important meeting for her career as an ex-gay counselor. She connected with laypersons, clergy, and counselors interested in homosexual ministry.³⁵ Many ex-gay ministries had already adopted some understandings of child and gender development as underlining reasons for homosexual desires. Payne's book, however, highlighted a number of approaches that pushed the limits of Freudian-inspired psychoanalysis. Interested in spreading her approach far and wide, Payne's monthly newsletters reported her excursions. From the time she published *The Broken Image* in 1981 until the release of *Crisis in Masculinity* four years later, she traveled to share her methods for healing homosexuals. Unlike Philpott, Bussee, and Kaspar, who had each abandoned the ex-gay cause by the early to mid-1980s, Payne remained committed to counseling lesbians and gay men. Payne advertised her seminars through Pastoral Care Ministries, a Christian nonprofit she formed in 1982. For thirty-three years, Payne's newsletters from Pastoral Care Ministries stressed how conversion therapy worked.

Through her writings and ministry work, Payne outlined a therapeutic method that combined psychological and religious counseling for homosexuals. As she attempted to carve out a space for her brand of therapy, she castigated the world of professional medicine for not understanding the moral and spiritual dimensions of homosexuality. In 1981, Payne noted a difference between viewing homosexuality as a sexual neurosis and seeing it as an opportunity for God to exhibit His healing powers. She claimed that homosexuality was a "remarkably simple" condition for "God to heal."³⁶ Payne repudiated the American Psychiatric Association for removing homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, declaring that psychiatrists had "laid aside and later denied altogether" the belief that homosexuality was a problem that needed treatment.³⁷ Payne's criticisms of professional psychiatry ignored the fact that the third edition of the *DSM*, published in 1980, included ego-dystonic homosexuality, which sanctioned conversion therapy. Medically trained psychiatrists, in other words, still operated within their profession's ethics guidelines by offering sexual reorientation therapies well into the

³⁵Leanne Payne newsletter, 19 Dec. 1981, Leanne Payne Papers, 1975–2003, Box 2.

³⁶Payne, *The Broken Image*, 13.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 38.

1980s.³⁸ Ego-dystonic homosexuality, however, acknowledged that lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals could embrace and enjoy their same-sex desires. For religious conservatives like Payne, this acknowledgment went too far. In *The Broken Image* and *Crisis in Masculinity*, she stated her belief that homosexuality—caused by an inverted gender identity—was unnatural, sinful, and immature.

Payne connected the supposed unnaturalness of homosexuality to the twin—and seemingly related—themes of sin and sexual immaturity as she tried to bridge understandings of conservative religion and psychology. On sinfulness, Payne wrote that homosexuality resulted from “the lameness of the human spirit,” and she insisted that it could be “healed through confession and absolution of personal sin.”³⁹ Payne used ableist language as she blamed individuals for developing lame souls, which certain religious practices could apparently fight against. Regarding sexual immaturity, she contended that homosexuality was a form of stunted psychosexual growth. Here Payne borrowed from decades of psychoanalytic thought on sexual development. Sexual maturity for women, according to medical professionals in the pre- and post-World War II eras, culminated in a vaginal orgasm. Although sexologists William Masters and Virginia Johnson and radical feminist Anne Koedt had exposed the myth of the vaginal orgasm in the late 1960s, the procreative possibilities of penetrative sex continued to signal sexual maturity in conservative religious circles.⁴⁰ This line of reasoning helped Payne interpret same-sex acts as immature, especially since she believed that a butch–femme dyad dictated sexual attractions for lesbians. Payne’s focus on the dynamics of butch–femme relations highlights the deep irony that the ex-gay movement was in many ways parroting the norms of the queer community. Yet, for Payne, the queer rationale for female masculinity to thrive in lesbian relationships was what was wrong with lesbianism. Butches defied the patriarchal understanding of sexual pleasure that Payne proffered in her work. The pastoral counselor believed, however, that spiritual renewal could be made possible through confession and absolution. Religious methods of cleansing the soul would, according to Payne, “set [the homosexual] straight so that both spirit and soul can grow into freedom.”⁴¹

Payne’s proposed path to sexual freedom relied on several methods that pushed the boundaries of memory and psychoanalytic thought. Interestingly, her counseling approach displayed the importance of traditional femininity for fostering sexual reorientation. By the late 1970s, counselors in the ex-gay movement routinely

³⁸Over the course of the 1980s, professional mental health and medical organizations continued to support conversion therapy for unwanted same-sex attractions. In 1981, for instance, the American Medical Association issued a report that emphasized the changeability of homosexuality. It was not until 1987 that the American Psychiatric Association removed ego-dystonic homosexuality from the *DSM*. At the end of the twentieth century, however, mental health and medical organizations in the US repudiated conversion therapy. “By 2009,” reports Marie-Amélie George, “all of the major professional associations of mental health professionals had issued statements opposing conversion therapy, identifying it as both unethical and unscientific.” For a strong overview of this diagnostic history, see George, “Expressive Ends,” 801–9.

³⁹Payne, *The Broken Image*, 38.

⁴⁰For more on how the Protestant religious right has emphasized the importance of sex for procreation see Amy DeRogatis, “What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the Present,” *Church History* 74/1 (2005), 97–137.

⁴¹Payne, *The Broken Image*, 35–6.

explored childhood memories for the roots of same-sex desire. For those who could remember no traumatic childhood memories, Payne stressed the importance of an unorthodox practice: recalling the labors of being born. Counseling vignettes from Payne's books demonstrate how the pastoral counselor's healing efforts positioned women for therapeutic prominence within the ex-gay movement.

In her work with Matthew, Payne challenged the young man to think back as far as he could. Although he struggled at first, with a simple prayer for help, Payne had Matthew enter what she called a "trauma-of-birth" healing. Matthew recalled how, in the process of being born, he was "engulfed by a dread-filled loneliness."⁴² Pioneered by Payne, the trauma-of-birth approach called on the pastoral counselor to guide the client through the birthing process, much as a midwife might for a real birth. Male counselors would have trouble understanding the intricacies of difficult births. Women like Payne, though, had birthed children, and as such they were in better position to counsel lesbians and gay men about the supposedly suppressed memories and experiences that had shaped their gender and sexual development.

Payne remembered another client's tortuous time in his mother's womb. During prayer, she claimed that this young man "began to see ... a small circle of light." After a second, he figured out what this was. "I am being born," he declared. Things had been normal in the birth to that point, but the situation soon turned dire. "His shoulders worked desperately to push his head through to the light," Payne wrote. "Then he was choking, face down, the [umbilical] cord around his neck, while at the same time his chest was being crushed." The suffering was overpowering. Payne ministered to him "as if the birth was actually occurring."⁴³ As a conventionally feminine woman, she believed she possessed the skill set for this kind of therapy.

Payne continued to pray for God's mercy and for the infant to pass through the birth canal. She asked "for relief and release as he choked on the cord, and for healing and cessation of the pain in his chest." Payne believed that this memory, which the man had suppressed, remained an unconscious part of his psyche. Then, after reliving his last moments in the womb, the man emerged into the world. Payne wanted "the Lord to wrap the little one in the blanket of His love, and this the man experienced as the healing of all those memories began." In this moment, the man cried, imitating the sounds of a newborn. "That he could make such sounds astonished me," Payne recalled. Despite being surprised, Payne recognized this as a development in extinguishing the man's same-sex desires. He was, in spiritual and therapeutic terms, reborn.⁴⁴ Payne ushered the young man into a new world, telling him that understanding the trauma of his birth was the first step out of the homosexual lifestyle. Left unsaid was how Payne's own identity as a feminine woman gave her insight into the sexual conversion process. Unlike male conversion therapists, Payne could help clients who suffered from the birth trauma they allegedly experienced in their mothers' wombs. She used her feminine connection to the childbirth process to her cultural and therapeutic advantage.

⁴²Ibid., 61.

⁴³Ibid., 79–80.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Payne's methods took the Freudian-inspired approach of reflecting on childhood experiences and familial relationships to a new level. With the healing power of Jesus Christ, Payne claimed to help men and women remember things that would have been impossible otherwise. In cases where no clear childhood trauma existed, Payne proposed that her clients needed to look back further for the pain and suffering that created same-sex desires. This was an unorthodox counseling approach. It was also a method that a female pastoral counselor could implement. Having given birth to two children, Payne understood the challenges of labor in ways that male counselors never could. She was able to draw from her own experiences as a conventionally feminine mother as she envisioned new therapeutic and counseling approaches for the ex-gay movement. If she could convince others of her approach, Payne would carve a crucial corner of the ex-gay therapy market for herself and other female conversion therapists.

Payne's conservative worldview shaped her thoughts on counseling, female masculinity, and lesbianism. Because Payne never defied traditional gender norms, she could be active in the religious right. "For women in particular," writes Emily Suzanne Johnson, "the expansion of evangelical women's ministries on a new scale and in new media brought expanded opportunities to claim leadership roles in their communities without overstepping the bounds of conservative Christian womanhood."⁴⁵ Payne, as a conservative religious woman, reflected the patriarchal beliefs of the religious right, and in turn, her writings appealed to Christians who held similar thoughts on family, gender, and sexuality.

Along with most people involved in the early ex-gay movement, Payne believed in a natural gender order with complementary roles for men and women. Unlike the women interviewed in Philpott's books, Payne had a clear vision of the supposedly natural abilities of men and women, linking these to God's plan for the two sexes. Men occupied a precious place at the head of the patriarchal order. Payne wrote that "intellectually, the polarity of the sexes corresponds to a polarity in the human ways of knowing—that of the masculine discursive reason and of the feminine intuitive mind."⁴⁶ Men, according to Payne, were passionless and objective. Women, though, could harness their intuitive mind, a reference to their feelings and emotions. This was especially true for female conversion therapists. Payne advertised her services as best for individuals in need of the feminine intuitive mind. This was one way she stressed the importance of female femininity for the growth and potential success of the ex-gay movement.

Payne also believed that she could harness seemingly firm biological evidence to support the gender hierarchy of the religious right. In *Crisis in Masculinity*, for example, she explained how the act of procreation showed God's design for men and women. Sex, Payne argued, highlights how God created men to be aggressive leaders and women to be submissive. "The sex organs and the sex cells manifest ... polarity and complementarity in morphology and in function," she wrote. "In the act of sexual union the male organ is convex and penetrating and the female organ is concave and receptive." If this sexual imagery was not explicit enough, Payne added that sperm is "torpedo-shaped" and "attacks," whereas the ovum is passive

⁴⁵Johnson, *This Is Our Message*, 8.

⁴⁶Payne, *Crisis in Masculinity*, 102.

and awaits penetration.⁴⁷ Payne contended that sperm's strenuous quest to create life, which required the phallus to penetrate the vagina, was evidence that God wanted men in control. She asserted that it was important that these biological aspects of life "not be confined to the physical but also be reflected in the character of man and woman." Payne opined that this was a view "as old as history" and that efforts to overturn these long-standing gender norms had led to disastrous consequences.⁴⁸ Gender, as she viewed it, was not historically contingent. Rather, Payne avowed that gender was the same from the time of Creation, a point that she believed human biology proved. This explanation of human history and biology emphasized the subservience that women needed to show men. Payne professed that aggressive and masculine women were thus a fundamental threat to social order and cohesion.

For religious conservatives like Payne, second-wave feminism and gay liberation were threatening because these social-justice movements sought to overturn timeless gender norms. Second-wave feminism, as Payne interpreted it, also created the conditions for female masculinity to thrive. A political movement aimed at complete equality between men and women perverted God's plan for the sexes, she thought. There were, however, some easy ways to confront the female masculinity that second-wave feminism supposedly created. In *The Broken Image*, Payne proposed simplistic behaviorist remedies for combating female masculinity. These remedies sought to counter the experiences of women who felt that their femininity had never been affirmed. When discussing women who came to her about same-sex attractions, Payne was clear what these women had to do. In Payne's words, these women needed to "put on" their feminine selves "by dressing in an entirely different and feminine manner, as well as by deliberately adopting new and feminine mannerisms."⁴⁹ She wrote that women with same-sex desires had to replace their feminist-inspired wardrobe of jeans and T-shirts with flowing dresses and pretty blouses.⁵⁰ The pastoral counselor, who wore these conventionally feminine styles herself, proposed that by dressing in a traditionally feminine way, the female masculinity underlying lesbianism would disappear. Female femininity would also reestablish the traditional gender norms so crucial to Payne's worldview. This was one way in which Payne tried to rescue an idealized image of white womanhood—conventionally and ideally feminine, family-oriented, and heterosexual—from being perverted by homosexuals and feminists.

Starting in the 1970s, Payne viewed popular culture as a breeding ground for gender subversion. The pastoral counselor stressed how crucial it was for women to wear dresses and to forgo the increasingly popular styles being worn by American youth. In *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s*, Betty Luther Hillman argues that pants and miniskirts influenced the politics of the baby boom generation. For social conservatives like Payne, the abandonment of modest feminine dress was an existential threat to American culture. Sexualized styles, such as the miniskirt, left little to the imagination and were an affront to female modesty. But for Payne, a greater danger

⁴⁷Ibid., 104.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Payne, *The Broken Image*, 111.

⁵⁰Ibid.

lay with pants, pantsuits, and other so-called masculine clothing. Indeed, as Luther Hillman documents, conservative women, including anti-Equal Rights Amendment activist Phyllis Schlafly, saw intimate connections between clothing, feminist politics, and lesbianism.⁵¹ The female masculinity of the feminist movement, Schlafly and other white conservative women contended, threatened gender norms, heterosexuality, and the American family. Fostering female femininity was one way to counter the gender-defying styles of second-wave feminism.⁵²

To help clients comprehend the complexities of female masculinity and same-sex desire, Payne employed eye-opening analogies that depicted masculine women or effeminate men in unflattering ways. One of Payne's favorite comparisons, which she used during counseling sessions, juxtaposed homosexuals and cannibals. "Do you know why cannibals eat people?" she often queried. "Cannibals eat only those they admire," she shared, "and they eat them to get their traits." Her claim was that a supposed deficit in gender identity had a cannibalistic quality when it came to homosexual object choice. Payne posited that gay men and lesbians look for "their own unaffirmed characteristics [and] those from which they are separated" in sexual partners.⁵³ Like the cannibal who ate a fierce foe, masculine lesbians consumed the female femininity of their lovers. The thought process behind Payne's analogy addressed the gender complementarity noted in interviews with butches and femmes. The butch, Payne asserted, needed to devour the femme's femininity. She maintained that this was the fastest way for masculine lesbians to gain access to the female femininity that women allegedly desire.

Payne's understanding of gendered cannibalism borrowed from a rich psychoanalytic tradition that depicted cannibals as savage, uncivilized, and other. In making this analogy, she echoed the psychoanalytic thought of Sigmund Freud. In "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," Freud wrote about the cannibalistic incorporation of others in the sexual identification process.⁵⁴ By the middle of the twentieth century, psychic, sexual, and gendered cannibalism became culturally associated with male homosexuality and pedophilia, particularly in social-guidance films.⁵⁵ The most homophobic of these accusations insisted that gay men acted like vampires, sucking the emerging masculinity from innocent pubescent boys. Payne drew from this popular conception of gendered cannibalism as she continued to produce the image of homosexuality as immature and sinful. Asking about cannibals was unorthodox, to be sure, but it was another way to deploy the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis. It was also a discursive tool to discredit female masculinity and lesbianism.

⁵¹Betty Luther Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s* (Lincoln, NE, 2015).

⁵²The anti-ERA battle invigorated conservative women, many of whom viewed the Equal Rights Amendment as a threat to the "special privileges" they held as white women of (at least) the middle class. On Schlafly's role in rallying white women to oppose the ERA see Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, 2005). For the political debate between second-wave feminists and conservative women see Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York, 2017).

⁵³Payne, *Crisis in Masculinity*, 28.

⁵⁴Sigmund Freud, "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," in Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. Peter Gay (New York, 1990), 71–100.

⁵⁵The most infamous of these social guidance films remains *Boys Beware*, a 1961 dramatic rendering of a gay man "recruiting" a teenage boy into a life of homosexuality.

Understanding the intellectual, religious, and cultural influences of someone as complicated as Payne is a tall task. When thinking through her ideas about female masculinity, though, it is crucial to at least mention the gendered dynamic that Payne noted as key to the client–counselor relationship. Although other pastoral counselors and clinical psychologists would go into this point in greater detail, Payne stressed the important role that conversion therapists played as they tried to change their clients. When she counseled lesbians, Payne stated that these clients had a “basic psychology need” that had to be fulfilled. Some clients had not come from loving families, and, as a result, Payne suggested that they had to build a loving relationship with their mothers. If this was not possible, clients had to find a mother substitute. As the next section details, this idea became central to efforts to change sexual orientation in the 1980s. Payne, however, was an early supporter of the belief that lesbians needed to form strong homosocial bonds with a mother-like figure. Doing so, Payne argued, helped lesbians confront their female masculinity. She believed that once masculine lesbians accepted this as a core part of their spiritual and counseling journey, they would begin to heal.⁵⁶

Payne’s importance to the ex-gay movement was apparent in the early 1980s. In her Christmas newsletter for 1982, she reflected on her accomplishments. She had completed a research fellowship at Yale Divinity School, and *The Broken Image* was selling well. To capitalize on her success, Payne mailed copies of her book to Episcopal, Anglican, and Roman Catholic bishops throughout North America. Letters also poured in from students and ministers. Some came from faraway places, like Great Britain, Australia, and South Africa. According to Payne, nearly all of these letters discussed how *The Broken Image* helped people “find their way.” She decided to write another book, *Crisis in Masculinity*, to expand on the ideas in *The Broken Image*. Her work seemed to be having the impact she wanted.⁵⁷ People from across the world found female masculinity and lesbianism troublesome nuisances that threatened heterosexuality, traditional gender roles, and social stability.

Payne’s belief in the applicability of a psychoanalytically informed approach to spiritual counseling received crucial support in the early 1980s when another female pastoral counselor entered the ex-gay scene. Dr Elizabeth Moberly, a British theologian with a degree from Cambridge University, published *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* in 1983. Moberly’s book proved influential in the United States. Whereas Payne railed against feminist politics, Moberly largely stuck to the psychodynamic healing potential of gender-specific therapy, and in doing so she established a model of faith-based counseling that grew to dominate the ex-gay movement by the 1990s. Importantly, the so-called dangers of female masculinity were also apparent in Moberly’s work.

Moberly, female masculinity, and gender-specific therapy in the mid- to late 1980s

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Elizabeth Moberly found herself engrossed in the work of Dr Charles Socarides, a psychoanalyst who fought to keep homosexuality

⁵⁶Payne, *The Broken Image*, 19–20.

⁵⁷Leanne Payne newsletter, Christmas 1982, Leanne Payne Papers, Box 2.

in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.⁵⁸ From Socarides, Moberly learned about the purported connections between gender identity and sexual desires. But she forged her own path as a conversion therapist. On the one hand, she was much more explicit about the connections between religion and psychology than Socarides had been. As she wrote in *Homosexuality*, she sought “to correlate the insights of psychology and of theology, in order to suggest what healing can mean for the homosexual and how it may be achieved.”⁵⁹ On the other hand, she outlined the contours of gender-specific therapy, contending that the gendered dynamics of therapy were essential for therapeutic success. She proposed two things: first, that female and male homosexuality could develop when a child had a poor relationship with the parent of the same sex, and second, that lesbian clients had to erase their female masculinity and male clients had to eliminate their effeminate masculinity so that they could develop heterosexual attractions. According to Moberly, gender-specific therapy was most effectively accomplished by working with a counselor of the same sex. By incorporating prominent psychiatric and psychological ideas, Moberly’s work appeared scientifically and medically legitimate to religious conservatives, many of whom hoped for a cure for homosexuality.

Freudian psychoanalysis formed the intellectual and theoretical foundation of Moberly’s counseling. Her gender-specific approach for counseling lesbians and gay men focused on the need for children to bond with their same-sex parent. This redirection of therapy snubbed ego psychology’s emphasis on overprotective and domineering mothers and instead emphasized how mothers had to serve as an important “love-source” for their daughters. (Fathers had to play the same role for their sons.)⁶⁰ Moberly proposed that if homosocial bonding failed to occur between mothers and daughters, this caused “an abiding defect in the child’s relational capacity.” Daughters would have trouble bonding with women—they might have difficulties talking to, and playing with, other girls during recess, for example. For Moberly, this was where the threat of female masculinity arose. If the desire for female affection was not addressed during childhood, it turned into what she called the “reparative urge” of the “homosexual impulse.” With this in mind, Moberly theorized that same-sex attractions stemmed from a desire to meet these earlier psychological needs, which all children required from their parents. Put differently, Moberly still put the onus on parents for homosexual development, but instead of the “momism” that had been blamed for male homosexuality in the middle of the twentieth century, Moberly contended that mothers were responsible for the female masculinity that purportedly underlined their daughters’ lesbianism.⁶¹

Moberly proposed that these intrapsychic wounds became material through gender identity. For women seeking ex-gay counseling, she noted that they had formed a defensive attachment that distanced themselves from conventional femininity. She also argued that these dynamics affected how lesbians chose lovers. Moberly further

⁵⁸Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry*.

⁵⁹Moberly, *Homosexuality*, n.p.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 4.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 6.

contended that there was a psychosexual need for lesbians to complete the gender identification process that should have occurred before adulthood. Relying on some of Socarides's research to make this point, she wrote that masculine lesbians looked for the attention that a good mother should have provided, much like Payne stated in her analogy of gendered cannibalism.⁶²

The importance of Moberly's gender-specific counseling, one that has remained a prominent feature of conversion therapy into the twenty-first century, dealt with the need for homosocial bonding.⁶³ Moberly's theory of the reparative drive shunned earlier therapeutic approaches that eroticized homosocial bonding. In an intriguing move, she suggested that the path to heterosexuality depended on forming close, non-sexual bonds with members of the same sex. She insisted that these bonds needed to be more than masculine lesbians finding mother-like substitutes, asserting that the path from the lesbian lifestyle also involved building strong, homosocial bonds with non-homosexual friends of the same sex. Psychoanalysts, including Socarides, implored homosexuals to avoid close relationships with members of the same sex, fearing the sexualization of these bonds. Instead of continuing this line of reasoning, Moberly believed that there were therapeutic opportunities in her clients' same-sex attractions. She claimed that previous approaches had missed an important point about gender development, namely that there was a need to repair powerful and unmet emotional needs. This reparative urge, Moberly claimed, would continue until lesbians learned to enact the same kind of female femininity that mature women possessed.⁶⁴

Moberly offered little in the way of what effective homosocial bonding looked like for individuals entering treatment for homosexuality, but the gender-specific element of her therapeutic approach meant that she would be more effective than male therapists when working with female clients. As a feminine woman, she could form strong relationships with lesbians, healing the reparative urge at the center of her theoretical understanding of homosexuality. Moberly, along with other female counselors, was in a strong position to combat female masculinity by pointing out supposedly unladylike dress and behavior and offering suggestions for masculine women to conform with traditional femininity. Female counselors might take on a mother-like substitute role. Or they could develop a close friendship with someone trying to abandon the lesbian lifestyle, knowing that they were not tempted by same-sex sex.

Yet female pastoral counselors could not assume the father-like role that male clients supposedly needed as they sought sexual reorientation. Moberly acknowledged that she could not model the type of masculinity that gay men purportedly

⁶²Ibid., 48.

⁶³There is a modern outlier to the kind of reparative therapy Moberly proposed. In *The Heart of Female Same-Sex Attraction* (Downers Grove, IL, 2008), published by Intervarsity Press, Janelle Hallman posited that excessive emotional connection between women could lead to homosexuality. According to sociologist Waidzunus, "The idea that women's sexuality is more 'emotionally based' than men's is widely shared among the ex-gay movement." With this said, most female conversion therapists still employ some form of reparative therapy that needs them to model conventional femininity for their clients. See Tom Waidzunus, *The Straight Line: How the Fringe Science of Ex-gay Therapy Reoriented Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 2015), 138–9, for a discussion of Hallman's approach to religious and sexual salvation.

⁶⁴Moberly, *Homosexuality*, 6.

lacked. For masculine gender identification to take place, which would then hypothetically lead to diminished same-sex desires, men required the help of a male therapist. The efficacy of gender-specific therapy, then, relied on matching masculine lesbians with feminine female counselors and effeminate gay men with masculine, straight male therapists.

In the 1980s, the ex-gay movement experimented with several approaches to sexual conversion, which made it important for counselors to stake out their ground. In *Homosexuality*, Moberly acknowledged this, relaying that a range of options, from traditional psychotherapy to spiritual guidance, existed for the twin goals of ex-gay counseling: achieving a traditional gender identity and eliminating same-sex desires. Like Payne, Moberly wrote about the importance of a syncretic approach, going so far as to warn readers that they could not simply pray the gay away. Moberly thought that prayer might let God into one's heart. She also contended that "the healing process may well be somewhat accelerated through prayer,"⁶⁵ maintaining that the Holy Spirit could bring someone awareness of the stress and pain that emanated from unwanted same-sex desires. Prayer, however, was not enough on its own. Gender-specific therapy was necessary, in Moberly's view, to teach masculine lesbians how to be conventionally feminine.

Moberly, though admitting that prayer "is at the heart of healing," thought that appeals to God had their limits for one reason. God, she wrote, was not in the business of curing stunted gender and sexual development.⁶⁶ According to Moberly, this was the job of psychological professionals. Echoing Freudian psychoanalytic thought, she asserted that heterosexual men and women had gone through the process that gay men and lesbians were "stuck" in. At the start of the twentieth century, Freud proposed that everyone went through six stages of psychosexual development, progressing from the oral to the genital stage. Using this Freudian rationale, Moberly's gender-specific therapy centered on helping homosexuals heal their defensive detachment and mature into what she interpreted as sex-appropriate gender identification. Gender-specific therapy, like all long-lasting psychological and spiritual remedies, could take years. But she claimed that gender-specific therapy was the most effective way for lesbians to tackle the issue of female masculinity and for gay men to eliminate their emasculated gender identity.⁶⁷

Moberly's fusion of psychology and theology, as well as her intense focus on gender identity, crossed national borders, finding enthusiastic adherents in the United States. Her approach was so popular, in fact, that she settled in Pennsylvania in 1987. Moberly's move to the United States demonstrates the crucial role that white women played in the conservative ascendance of the last third of the twentieth century. Like other conservative evangelical women, such as Marabel Morgan, Anita Bryant, Beverly LaHaye, and Tammy Faye Bakker, Moberly carved out her own separate sphere of political influence.⁶⁸ She uprooted her life to fulfill a

⁶⁵Ibid., 49.

⁶⁶Ibid., 41.

⁶⁷In the postwar United States, psychiatrists and pastoral counselors often proposed different timelines to cure homosexuality. See Tanya Erzen's *Straight to Jesus* and Lynne Gerber's *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago, 2011).

⁶⁸See Johnson's *This Is Our Message* for more on the religious and political influence of Morgan, Bryant, LaHaye, and Bakker. For historical context on the political organizing of conservative women in the

religious and therapeutic mission in Reagan's America. Other conservative women, including Catholic Phyllis Schlafly, had proven that the religious right was receptive to conventionally feminine women exercising political power. Unlike Schlafly, Morgan, Bryant, LaHaye, and Bakker, though, Moberly traversed the Atlantic, finding a much more enthusiastic audience for conversion therapy in the United States than she had in Great Britain. Moberly's experience foregrounds the kind of conservative movement that attracted white women in the 1970s and 1980s.

Conservative women like Moberly exercised political influence through their writings and in pastoral counseling ministries. In *Homosexuality*, Moberly wrote that prayer could serve a powerful role in sexual conversion therapies. More important were the Freudian-influenced theories she emphasized in gender-specific therapy. Moberly contended that women developed same-sex desires after receiving inadequate love and attention from their mothers. In order to eliminate not only homosexual attractions but also female masculinity, she proposed a different approach than many male therapists had previously suggested. The solution, she insisted, was for lesbians to form homo-intimate but nonsexual relationships with traditionally feminine women. This allowed female pastoral counselors to teach and model traditional femininity for clients while also addressing the reparative urge that supposedly undergirded the entangled relationship between female masculinity and lesbianism. Moberly's therapeutic approach, like Payne's, proposed female masculinity as the root cause of same-sex desire within her female clients, thus reinforcing a matrix of religious belief, gender identity, and sexual desire in the burgeoning ex-gay movement.

The legacy of female masculinity in the early ex-gay movement

In the 1970s, the concept of female masculinity emerged within the ex-gay movement as a dominant explanation for lesbianism. Women at Love in Action not only shared stories of sex with other women but also noted how childhood traumas, working in traditionally masculine occupations, and adopting manly dress and mannerisms led them into the lesbian lifestyle. By the 1980s, female pastoral counselors like Leanne Payne and Elizabeth Moberly refined therapeutic approaches meant to tackle the female masculinity of their lesbian clients. Payne and Moberly wrote books that professed the existence of a natural gender order and offered Freudian-inspired counseling aimed at addressing the entwined relationship between female masculinity and lesbianism. Both Payne and Moberly offered seminars about healing homosexuals, even joining up on several occasions to share their respective methods. Because of their efforts, gender-specific therapy (also known as reparative therapy) spread throughout the US, Australia, Canada, and Great Britain. But Payne and Moberly were hindered by the patriarchal politics of the religious right.

In the 1990s, Payne and Moberly became less prominent in ex-gay ministries as white men solidified their position as the leaders of the pro-conversion therapy

post-World War II period see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); and Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, 2014).

movement. Dr Joseph Nicolosi, a licensed psychologist, published *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality* in 1991.⁶⁹ In the ensuing decade, Nicolosi became a conservative star. His identity as a white man appealed to the patriarchal and racial politics of the religious right. He could play the role of the white male savior that a host of American conservatives so desperately desired in the 1980s and 1990s. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Nicolosi and other members of the religious right spotlighted a core concern of American conservatism—the strength of traditional masculinity in the United States. Many of the books written by the men of the religious right, including James Dobson’s *Bringing Up Boys* and Robert Lewis’s *Raising a Modern-Day Knight*, borrowed heavily from the reparative-therapy approaches established by Payne and Moberly.⁷⁰ For the white patriarchs of the religious right, though, mannish lesbians did not pose the same social and cultural threat as effeminate gay men.

As Nicolosi became the driving figure behind reparative therapy, female pastoral counselors like Payne and Moberly became marginal figures, not only in the ex-gay movement but also in scholarship about sexual-reorientation efforts. In the 1980s, Payne and Moberly offered more nuanced explanations of the gender hierarchy in ex-gay therapy. Female masculinity remained a core heuristic of gender relations in their books. According to Payne and Moberly, female masculinity was essential for the development of lesbian desire. For these two female pastoral counselors, the cure for lesbianism involved helping masculine women develop traditionally feminine mannerisms and affectations in their quest to leave the homosexual lifestyle. Unlike other female members of the religious right, including Anita Bryant and Phyllis Schlafly, Payne and Moberly established counseling approaches that spread throughout the ex-gay movement. Bryant and Schlafly were, no doubt, more influential for the growth and development of the New Right. Yet Payne and Moberly offered religious conservatives a solution for the supposed threat of homosexuality.

The impact that women had on the ex-gay movement in the 1970s and 1980s can still be felt in the twenty-first century. Self-described ex-gay women, such as Anne Paulk, declare that they developed heterosexual desire through the process of fostering their feminine selves.⁷¹ In addition, pro-conversion-therapy conference goers still stress how lesbians are masculine and gay men are effeminate. Contemporary counseling methods for lesbianism continue to emphasize how women with unwanted same-sex attractions must work on becoming more feminine.

The role that female conversion therapists played in constructing the lesbian as masculine must be recognized as vital to understanding the development of the religious right and its anti-queer politics. It is more than likely that tales of conversions

⁶⁹Moberly accused Nicolosi of stealing reparative therapy from her. See Elizabeth Moberly, “Letter to the Editor,” *California Psychologist* 13/6 (1990), 16. For Nicolosi’s most detailed explanation of reparative therapy see Joseph J. Nicolosi, *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality: A New Clinical Approach* (Northvale, NJ, 1991).

⁷⁰James Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys: Shaping the Next Generation of Men* (Carol Stream, IL, 2001); and Robert Lewis, *Raising a Modern-Day Knight: A Father’s Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood* (Carol Stream, IL, 1997).

⁷¹John Paulk and Anne Paulk, *Love Won Out: How God’s Love Helped Two People Leave Homosexuality and Find Each Other* (Carol Stream, IL, 1999).

at Love in Action, birth trauma therapy, and gender-specific counseling successes were fictions. But these stories played an integral role in convincing thousands of women that it was possible to abandon the lesbian lifestyle by becoming more conventionally feminine. The specter of female masculinity, constructed and refined in the 1970s and 1980s, hangs over contemporary sexual orientation change efforts. Within the ex-gay movement itself, Payne and Moberly were critical for publicizing and spreading the belief that female masculinity was a key cause of lesbianism. The profound and lasting psychological harm that the women of the ex-gay movement did to the people they treated, not only in the 1970s and 1980s but also in subsequent decades, is both unfortunate and immeasurable.

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