

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34768-6 - 'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment

Edited by Robert Purks Maccubbin

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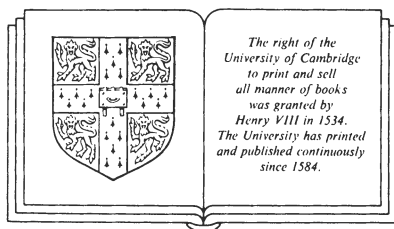
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*Unauthorized Sexuality
during the Enlightenment*

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ROBERT PURKS MACCUBBIN



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Introduction



In the last several years, and partly in the wake of Michel Foucault's argument that we need to abandon a categorical approach to human sexuality, a body of scholarship has, with increasing subtlety, investigated sexualities. The present volume addresses sexual phenomena that during the 18th century were for one reason or another outside the legal or sanctified systems of acceptability — most notably unwed heterosexual domesticity, masturbation, prostitution, libertinism, homosexuality, erotic literature (from the metaphorically indirect to the explicitly obscene). To place the unauthorized phenomena into a focusing context, the volume is prefaced by Roy Porter's exposition of *Aristotle's Master-piece*, a sexual primer for married couples that, whether a compilation of vernacular practice or medical wisdom, is an encomium to marriage and procreation. It contains nothing about the behaviors addressed by the other authors in this volume, and its exclusiveness is its importance.

The two essays which follow Porter's reveal tensions within the heterosexual domestic world. J. M. Goulemot finds in the abbé Thiers' *Traité* an earnest attempt to discriminate between orthodox sexual practices and those that were purely superstitious and magical, especially those concerned with overcoming impotence and infertility; and John Gillis, in investigating such phenomena as massive noncompliance with the 1753 Marriage Act, outlines an "historical anthropology of marriage that takes into account class and gender variation, and thereby calls into question the evolutionary perspective that has so dominated our thinking about the history of heterosexuality."

Théodore Tarczylo's analysis of the argument and rhetorical strategies of Diderot's *Suite de l'Entretien* reveals how mechanism and the laws of nature affect Enlightenment thinking and question orthodox bases of judgment about such actions as masturbation and homosexuality, issues further treated in the essays of Michel Delon and Robert Ellrich. Ellrich's essay also establishes the role of sexual discourse in helping to undermine the old order, an issue which is implicit in the essays by Robert Dawson and Armando Marchi on the diffusion of pornography and obscenity in France and Italy, and which is central to David Coward's psychological study of Restif de la Bretonne. Other essays on erotica, by P.-G. Boucé and Peter Sabor, help define the linguistic parameters of erotic discourse in fiction.

Prof. Coward's essay is one of three on libertinism. The other two are James Turner's overview, which shows the "instability and complexity" of the concept, but tries to establish the connections between illicit libertinism and the "religious and moral systems it purports to reject," and J. P. Guicciardi's examination of how the public image of the sexual excesses of Louis XV helped undermine the conception of the kingly role.

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The largest single group of essays concerns homosexuality, beginning with Randolph Trumbach's review of the recent historiography, an essay like Turner's in that he establishes a general background for the essays which succeed it. The essays on homosexuality discuss three different cultures — England, France, and Holland. Michel Delon, who focuses his remarks on Voltaire and Diderot, demonstrates how the Enlightenment "hesitated between secularization of traditional thinking and more radical rethinking" about homosexuality; Arend Huussen and Michel Rey, working with court records and police archives, develop insights into both changing attitudes toward homosexuality and the existence of homosexual subcultures. Finally, in a fully developed but explanatory statement that won the James L. Clifford Prize of ASECS for 1986, G. S. Rousseau's attention to the literary record shows us how rich and untapped are the annals of homosexuality. His opening endnote defines his reasons for choosing to use the admittedly anachronistic term "homosexuality," rather than "sodomy," to denote the entire complex of homo-erotic behaviors; and I direct your attention to his definitions because the lexical problem is complex and important.

In editing this volume I thought it desirable to normalize the use of terms referring to same-sex erotic feeling and action; and inasmuch as most of the authors in this volume had already used the term "homosexuality," and because I share G. S. Rousseau's reasons for his lexical choices, the umbrella term "homosexuality" is used throughout this volume except in Randolph Trumbach's review of the extensive recent historiography, an essay whose subject makes it a special case, and in which therefore I gladly accede to his wishes to avoid anachronism by using the term "sodomy." In the past, Michel Rey's choice has been to use "sodomy" as the umbrella term, so the different usage in the essay translated for this volume should be noted. The lexical issue is not trivial, and is complicated by the fact that this volume discusses four different national cultures, and includes essays in French and Italian that have been translated into English. With the permission of the individual authors, an essay originally written in French or Italian will be made available to anyone wishing to consult the original text. Without clarifying the semantic field, as editor I would have felt like the narrator of *A Tale of a Tub*: "What I am going to say is literally true this minute I am writing."

One final and most important point: I want to identify what I regard as the most conspicuous lacuna in this volume—a feminist perspective. All of our eighteen authors are Peter, Martin, or Jack. I would, therefore, like to encourage a feminist review of the present volume, as well as feminist essays on the same or related topics.

ROBERT P. MACCUBBIN

