

## Introduction: “practicing impossibilities”

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I will make their pains my pastimes, and so confound their loves in their own sex that they shall dote in their desires, delight in their affections, and practice only impossibilities.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine the scene. A man, thwarted in his desires and desperate for access to the woman he loves, disguises himself as a woman and follows her to a pastoral glade. His beloved, blissfully ignorant of his tormented passion, wiles the time away in the company of women. Her friends, mischievous and full of fun, decide to “practice” the art of kissing among themselves. To heighten their enjoyment, they declare a “kissing war.” Having judged the shepherdess’s mouth to be the fairest, they give her the role of judging whose kisses most please. The women begin to kiss. Enter the man, who takes his place in line.

The story is famous, the scene oft illustrated. A moment in the late sixteenth-century pastoral tragicomedy, *Il Pastor Fido* by Giovanni Battista Guarini, the story was the subject of multiple translations in many different languages, and over fifty artistic renditions before the end of the seventeenth century, including Dutch, Flemish, French, and Italian paintings, prints, tapestries, and wall panels.<sup>2</sup> *Mirtillo Crowning Amarillis*, painted by Anthony Van Dyck between 1631 and 1632, is one of the most celebrated visual interpretations of what is typically called the “crowning scene.” (See frontispiece and figure 1.) It focuses on the moment when the disguised shepherd Mirtillo, having won the war and been crowned the victor, chivalrously places his floral crown on the head of his beloved, the shepherdess Amarillis.<sup>3</sup> Although in Guarini’s play, as well as in the 1647 English translation by Sir Richard Fanshaw (*The Faithful Shepherd*), Mirtillo’s gender identity is not revealed in this scene – indeed, Mirtillo languishes in unrequited love for much of the play – in Van Dyck’s painting the reassertion of masculinity is superimposed on an implied declaration of heterosexual love. As a synchronic snapshot of a longer narrative, the moment of chivalrous crowning is presented visually as a consummation of both the story and Mirtillo’s desire.

The fact that Mirtillo wins the “war” would seem to confirm the status of men as superior lovers, a status reinforced by the visual hierarchy of Van Dyck’s

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Figure 1 Anthony Van Dyck, *Mirtillo Crowning Amarillis* (1631–32).

composition: not only is the male–female couple positioned centrally in the group and their faces and pastoral crown located at the vanishing point of the canvas, but the postures of the nymphs and putti direct the viewer’s gaze toward that focal point. The centralization of male–female eroticism is supported, too, by the manipulation of a racialized aesthetic, whereby the gesture of the one black nymph cuts laterally across the field of vision. Her dark, muscular arm, similar in color and shape to the limbs of the tree above, contrasts warmly yet decisively against all the pale, circular, connective activity conveyed by the postures of the other nymphs. Her left hand, grasping the palm of a nymph still engaged in kissing, links her to the circuit of female erotic contact even as she points to the reason for its interruption.

The painting’s affirmation of the superiority of heteroeroticism, however, is destabilized by the narrative predicate of the story, as well as by the fact that Mirtillo’s victory has not, apparently, stopped the war. What are we to make of an all-female kissing war? Is this standard sport among female rustics? And what exactly is a kissing *war*, anyway? Once we begin to ask these questions,

the pairs of kissing nymphs come into sharper focus. Insofar as the sensual poses of the partially clad nymphs provide contrast and added *frisson* to the embrace of shepherd and shepherdess, heteroeroticism and its attendant pleasures seem to depend on the performance of a prior and idyllic homoeroticism, safely ensconced in a canopied bower. Furthermore, the degree to which Amarillis and Mirtillo embody stable gender positions is called into question by the use of crossdressing as the vehicle for Mirtillo’s erotic access. How *hetero* is Amarillis’s desire if, in the prehistory of the painting and more explicitly in the play, she has believed this fabulous kisser to be a woman?<sup>4</sup>

Other treatments of the story offer an array of interpretative possibilities. Bartholomeus Breenbergh’s *Amarillis Crowning Mirtillo* (1635), for instance, enacts a strict spatial division between the crowning of Mirtillo and the nymphs engaged in kissing (figure 2). As two nymphs continue their amorous play off in a corner, an expanse of terrain quarantines them from the ritual festivities of a resumed heteroeroticism. In Jacob Van Loo’s more domestic scene (1645–50), the expressions of Amarillis’s companions are ambiguously rendered (figure 3). Do their looks of surprise indicate alarm over the fact that Mirtillo, still in the dress of a Dutch matron, has not yet revealed his masculinity? Or do they convey concern that he has so successfully crossdressed?<sup>5</sup>

Such representations and the questions they raise give us a means to contravene the standard critical orthodoxy, both gay and straight, regarding the invisibility of lesbianism in Western Europe prior to modernity. Representative statements from *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, a 1995 reference work edited by Claude Summers and notable for its thorough and scholarly treatment of a vast range of topics, provide a convenient illustration of the historical vacuum into which women’s erotic desires for one another so often continue to fall. Here are statements from three separate historical entries: “Lesbianism is a theme rarely treated in Latin literature . . . [T]hough Ovid regards the love of boys as commonplace, love between females is *unthinkable* in his world.” “[F]emale homosexual issues do not appear explicitly in medieval English literature . . . For lesbians attempting to understand why they have been silenced for much of the English tradition, it is with the *silence* of medieval English texts that they should begin.” “Lesbianism is almost *invisible* in the [English Renaissance].”<sup>6</sup> Such pronouncements, as mistaken as they are commonplace, have been proffered by some of the most esteemed scholars of early modern (male) homoeroticism. Literary critics and historians of contiguous periods largely have concurred. According to the authors of an influential study of female transvestism: “Until the end of the eighteenth century love affairs between women were not taken seriously, and perhaps not often even noticed at all . . . [I]n the past lesbian love was inconceivable.”<sup>7</sup> To many responsible, even ground-breaking scholars, female homoeroticism prior to the Enlightenment has seemed silent and invisible. Impossible.



Figure 2 Bartholomeus Breenbergh, *Amarillis Crowning Mirtillo* (1610)



Figure 3 Jacob Van Loo, *Amarillis Crowning Mirtillo* (1645–50).

Having pursued the silence, invisibility, and impossibility of early modern lesbianism for the last decade, I now want to propose a different way of engaging with the historical and interpretative problems it poses. I take my cue from the courtier-dramatist John Lyly’s late sixteenth-century stageplay, *Gallathea*, performed by an all-boy troupe of actors in the private theaters. In this play, an impish Cupid titillates an audience of aristocratic ladies with a mischievous scheme he has devised. Referring to a group of Diana’s virgin nymphs, he says, “I will make their pains my pastimes, and so confound their loves in their own sex that they shall dote in their desires, delight in their affections, and practice only impossibilities.” Cupid’s oxymoronic representation of what it means for women mutually to “dote in their desires” and “delight in their affections” extends to the love that develops between Gallathea and Phyllida, two girls crossdressed by their fathers to escape an annual ritual sacrifice of pretty virgins. This being a Renaissance romantic comedy, of course, disguise

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enables desire: Gallathea and Phyllida fall in love, and although each suspects the other to be female, they spend as much time as possible exploring and, as they put it, “mak[ing] much one of another” (3.2.56). Drawing on a long heritage of female–female relations as an *amor impossibilis*,<sup>8</sup> Lyly’s play reproduces social orthodoxy: the prospect of women pursuing a loving and erotic life together simply cannot be. At the same time, by gesturing toward the enactment of erotic passion for one’s own sex, by mining a tension between what can and cannot be practiced, *Gallathea* helps to make the impossible intelligible and the unintelligible possible.

I will return to Lyly’s play in my final two chapters to explore the specific forms his representation of impossibilities take. For now, I want to propose that the notion of practicing impossibilities thematized by *Gallathea* neatly encapsulates the dilemma of lesbian representation in the early modern period. On the one hand, women’s erotic desires for other women were considered improbable, implausible, insignificant, subject to all the force of negativity condensed within the early modern definitions of impossibility: that which cannot be, inability, and impotence. On the other hand, such desires were culturally practiced and represented in a variety of ways, although often according to a governing logic that attempted to reinscribe their impossibility. Adopting the paradox of practicing impossibilities as my framework for analysis, I attempt in this book not only to demonstrate the existence of a cultural awareness of women who desired other women in the early modern period, but to detail the complex and often contradictory modes of representation through which such desire was articulated. My guiding questions are these: How was same-gender female desire rendered intelligible? What tropes, what images, figured such desire? What strategies were employed to maintain the status of such desire as impossible? Were those strategies successful? And did those strategies change over time – specifically, over the course of the seventeenth century – as the emergence of new epistemologies and social practices generated unprecedented understandings of the body and the self? In addition to situating the representation of female homoeroticism in relation to other historical narratives, my book attempts to clarify the complicated intellectual and psychological investments of contemporary lesbians in the early modern representations we discover; it thus explores the ways that scholars harness history to concerns of the present. The puzzle of an impossibility that *can* be practiced functions not only as a useful metaphor for the way female–female desires gained intelligibility, but as an accurate measure of the scholarly task of rearticulating this occluded history. Practicing impossibilities thus is not so much a matter of how to make love to another woman, as Lyly’s meddling Cupid would have it, but a description of the problem, both in the past and in the present, of how to represent women who would make such love.

My pursuit of impossibilities has emboldened me to argue that early modern England witnessed a *renaissance* of representations of female homoerotic desire. By this I mean three things. First, references to female–female desire in English texts increased dramatically over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, widespread social, intellectual, and economic changes fostered the production and dissemination of a variety of discourses alluding to the physical and emotional investments of women in one another. The circulation of classical texts in the vernacular, the rise of popular public and private theaters, the development of the secular visual arts, the emergence of illustrated anatomy books, travel narratives, and obscene texts, and the increase in female literacy all affected the number and kind of representations of women’s desire for other women in English society. If these phenomena were not, strictly speaking, new, their interaction and the results of that interaction were unprecedented. Within the context of a pervasive belief in women’s erotic intemperance – the insatiable lust that was woman’s inheritance from Eve – these varied cultural developments generated an extensive array of detail about what it means for women to passionately love, and have sex with, other women.

Here is a partial list, in addition to Lyly, of English authors who contributed to such representations, both celebratory and condemnatory, from the mid-sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century – or, to invoke the two female monarchs whose reigns mark the temporal boundaries of my study, between Queen Elizabeth and Queen Anne: Thomas Heywood, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, William Warner, Robert Burton, John Fletcher, James Shirley, George Sandys, John Crowne, Edmund Waller, Andrew Marvell, Margaret Cavendish, Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, and several anonymous, possibly female poets. Add to their literary texts the medical works of anatomists and midwives who diagnose the medical problem of clitoral hypertrophy in terms of women’s illicit “abuse” of their clitorises with other women; the many travel writers who claim to have witnessed illicit sexual contact among Muslim women in Turkey and North Africa; the lexicographers and lawyers who grappled with the meanings of the notoriously fraught terms “sodomy” and “buggery” and their applicability to women; the visual artists who depicted women in a variety of amorous poses, particularly when portraying pastoral and mythological themes; and the many continental writers whose own treatments of female–female love and erotic contact in romances, plays, poems, medical texts, and moral treatises were translated into English during this period, and you can begin to see why *renaissance* might be the appropriate word to describe this discursive proliferation.

Although some of the phenomena I will discuss were aspects of a manuscript culture (particularly the exchange of letters and the circulation of poetry

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among friends), it was the technology of print that fostered this proliferation of representations. I thus am making no quantitative claims regarding an increase in portrayals of female–female love and lust that are not true for countless other phenomena. Nor do I mean to elide classical or medieval discussions, whether they be in the form of allusions to female acts *contra naturam* in theology, penitential manuals, or convent rules, in references to tribadism in medical and astrological treatises, and in the desiring stances taken by women in their letters and poems.<sup>9</sup> Nor do I argue for a quantifiable increase in female–female sex, a “renaissance” of female erotic pleasure – indeed, I would not know how to measure it. I do contend that the increased availability of textual references to female intimacies, the graphic explicitness of some of these depictions, and the range of themes and tones expressed therein all initiate a profusion and variety of representations unique to the early modern era.

My use of “renaissance” also is meant to suggest that representations of female–female desire during this period depend heavily on classical antecedents for their modes of comprehension. It is through, quite literally, a rebirth of classical idioms, rhetorics, tropes, and illustrative examples that female homoeroticism gained intelligibility in early modern England. By renovating the discourses of the ancients, writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attempted to legitimize their own formulations, drawing on authoritative precedents such as Ovid, Martial, and Soranus for *risqué* or troubling ideas. To the extent that desire among women was a discursive phenomenon, then, it was fashioned primarily out of two rhetorics, both of which were revived from the ancient past: a medico-satiric discourse of the tribade, and a literary-philosophical discourse of idealized friendship. The classical discourse of tribadism tended to vilify female erotic transgression, while the classical discourse of *amicitia* – translated in early modern English as *amity* – celebrated ties among men. Both of these classical discourses were revised and reworked by early modern authors as they translated old stories into new contexts. I will say more about how these rhetorics were reborn and transformed later in this Introduction. For the moment what is important is that, in appropriating the term “renaissance” to describe both the amplified presence of, and the classical antecedents to, lesbian representation, I want to draw attention to the fact that portrayals of female homoeroticism in the early modern era are less a simple and inevitable precursor to distinctively modern erotic arrangements than an effect of the combination of classical terms and understandings with new knowledges and social formations. Arising in relationship to such different forces as the institutionalization of the “new science” and the ideology of companionate marriage, discourses about female–female desire make use of the classical past in order to create a specifically Renaissance mode of representation.

My use of the term “renaissance”, finally, is meant to reclaim, ironize, and redeploy the meaning of the Renaissance itself. Since its nineteenth-century



definition by Jacob Burckhardt in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* and its later formulation by Erwin Panofsky in *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, the Renaissance has alluded to a rebirth that, in looking backward in time for its models, affiliations, and interests, synthesizes tradition and innovation, old forms and new social realities.<sup>10</sup> The Renaissance thus represents a revival of antiquity and a cultural efflorescence that is both an intellectual movement and a historical period. Burckhardt and Panofsky’s understanding of a temporal period such as the Renaissance depended on their assumption of a culture’s organic coherence and cohesion, made apparent through its intellectual and aesthetic achievements. With a single paradigm-breaking question, “Did women have a Renaissance?” Joan Kelly upset the picture of the Renaissance as a Burckhardian epiphany of individual accomplishment, transforming it into a period of social and political retrenchment.<sup>11</sup> Since the publication of Kelly’s essay in 1977, other commentators have argued that the Renaissance has stood for an implicitly masculine, humanist, elite culture that excluded most of the female and laboring population. The implications of Kelly’s question have been debated with increasing sophistication and precision by feminist and social historians, yet the answer regarding European women as a whole, and English women in particular, still is a qualified “No.” Whereas some elite, usually urban, women benefited from the expansion of humanist education and mercantilism, a variety of forms of social unrest, including Protestant reforms and the reaction they engendered, spurred a tightening of patriarchal controls.<sup>12</sup> If freedom for early modern women was defined as access to the public sphere, it was precisely in this sphere that women were losing traditional roles in professional and commercial life due to increased legal restrictions. Within the English context of recurrent inflation, land shortages, high population growth, widespread migration and poverty, there appears to have been, in the words of David Underdown, a “crisis of order,” during which, if “patriarchy could no longer be taken for granted,” it nonetheless developed new, and in some cases quite subtle, tactics for enforcing gender subordination.<sup>13</sup> Such tactics can be seen in the Crown’s introduction of state-authored homilies, including sermons on marriage and adultery, which attempted to exert ideological control over an unruly populace, and the proliferation of conduct books, authored by men and women, that targeted the “middling sort” in their effort to inculcate patriarchal norms (in a manner seemingly congenial to many women).<sup>14</sup> Although the Protestant belief in the spiritual equality of men and women, as well as the active role women took in radical religious movements, accorded some women greater spiritual dignity and power, these gains did not translate seamlessly into economic, political, or social equality. Within the household and state, whether Protestant or Catholic, English or continental, the overall effect seems to have been, in the words of Lyndal Roper, a “resurgent patriarchalism” in education, religion, politics, and the family.<sup>15</sup>

Even as they demonstrate the complex strategies by which patriarchal authority re-exerted itself, feminist scholars increasingly have sought to resist the allure of a critical model of ideological containment, which tends to reinscribe patriarchy as monolithic and early modern women as powerless. Challenging the putative mastery of early modern ideology, ferreting out diverse instances of female agency and power, they have shown the manifold ways that women resisted the ideology of domestic confinement and the constraints of legal coverture, as well as their educational and political disenfranchisement. Scholars have turned our attention, for instance, to women's narrative strategies as religious poets and translators of others' works; to women's finesse in negotiating the perils of pamphlet debates about their rights; to the radical import of women's scaffold speeches, orated while awaiting execution for crimes committed against household and state authority; and to the freedoms that they may have experienced as consumers of theatrical entertainments.<sup>16</sup>

Few scholars, however, have granted female erotic desire (whether directed toward women or men) the same degree of power accorded to, for instance, female poets' articulation of a gendered voice, female dramatists' appropriation of strategies of male authorship, or female characters' disruption of the authority of fathers and husbands on the stage. Taking its place alongside two recent monographs, Elizabeth Wahl's *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* and Harriette Andreadis's *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics, 1550–1714*,<sup>17</sup> as well as a recent stream of articles and book chapters on seventeenth-century authors such as Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* investigates the role women played as both subjects and objects of emerging erotic knowledges, from the anatomical "rediscovery" of the clitoris in 1559 to the explosion of "sapphic" narratives (literary, medical, and obscene) in the early years of the eighteenth century. In appropriating the term "renaissance" to refer to women's status as both subjects and objects of homoerotic representations, I do not mean to imply that women were the privileged recipients of intellectual, social, or economic favor, nor that they participated in a golden age of female intimacy. Rather than intimating the presence of cultural support, my use of "renaissance" is meant to convey the dynamic interactions of a range of knowledges about the anatomical and physiological body, about licit and illicit desires, and about prescribed and proscribed erotic practices. The renaissance of lesbianism arose when new discourses made certain interests in the body salient and innovative modes of investigation possible. During this period of discursive cross-fertilization, there also emerged a discourse of homoerotic desire articulated by women themselves. Although women did not originate the terms used to describe their desires, they did appropriate and revise prevailing tropes and rhetorics, participating in a cultural dialogue that put the meanings of same-gender love and eroticism under increasing scrutiny and pressure.