

The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England

The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England is the eagerly awaited study by the feminist scholar who was among the first to address the issue of early modern female homoeroticism. Valerie Traub analyzes the representation of female–female love, desire, and eroticism in a range of early modern discourses, including poetry, drama, visual arts, pornography, and medicine. Contrary to the silence and invisibility typically ascribed to lesbianism in the Renaissance, Traub argues that the early modern period witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of representations of such desire. By means of sophisticated interpretations of a comprehensive set of texts, the book not only charts a crucial shift in representations of female homoeroticism over the course of the seventeenth century, but also offers a provocative genealogy of contemporary lesbianism. A contribution to the history of sexuality, and to feminist and queer theory, the book views current theoretical preoccupations through the lens of historical inquiry. The book contains pictures from important documents and illustrations of the period and will be of interest to scholars and students of early modern English literature, women’s studies and gay/lesbian studies, and English social history.

Valerie Traub is Professor of English and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, and author of numerous works on early modern, feminist, and lesbian/gay studies. Her book, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, appeared in 1992 and a co-edited collection, *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, appeared in 1996.

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Valerie Traub

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University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



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To Brenda K. Marshall

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Preface

The tension between history and theory evident throughout this book raises the question of its own placement within a historical narrative. I am aware, for instance, that many of the scholars whose work I most contest are themselves lesbian, and that many of them are of a generation whose scholarship made my own existence as a lesbian academic conceivable. A book dedicated primarily to the project of advancing lesbian theory or of historicizing contemporary lesbianism would articulate and analyze the social circumstances out of which such work arose.

This I have not done. Insofar as my focus is a genealogy of lesbianism, critics and theorists are employed as grist for my historical and analytical mill. I therefore wish to preface this book with an acknowledgment of the work of lesbian feminist scholars whose brilliance, courage, and grace made this book conceivable. When I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the novels of Jane Rule in 1980, the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Martha Vicinus, Adrienne Rich, and Lillian Faderman was my inspiration. But even then, in however nascent a way, I was trying to integrate their belief in the power and integrity of female love and eroticism with the genealogical project advanced by Michel Foucault.

As this book attests, I still am.

Acknowledgments

This book, written over a decade in two locales, has encumbered a large number of debts. Vanderbilt University and the University of Michigan underwrote this project with a variety of faculty research grants. A National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship at the Newberry Library allowed me the time to reconceive the project and begin to finish it. The Folger Library has been generous with short-term stipends, which made archival work possible.

Many more of my debts are intellectual and personal. A number of feminist scholars, whose work I esteem and whose friendship I treasure, have offered assistance and inspiration in amazing measure. Valerie Wayne unwittingly set the direction of my career by inviting me to contribute to her Shakespeare Association of America seminar; I have been the beneficiary of her care ever since. Susan Zimmerman likewise took a chance on an unknown scholar for her anthology, *Erotic Politics*, and the idea for this book was born; it could not have asked for a better midwife. Sue Lanser deserves special mention, not only for her thoughtful critique of a very rough typescript, but also for her ongoing intellectual engagement with my ideas and the friendship that has evolved out of our dialogue. In recognition of her brilliant advice and indefatigable support along the way, Jean Howard is herewith proclaimed my mentor. The friendship of Mary Beth Rose sustained me during my year in Chicago. Carol Batker remains an inspiration from afar. I look forward to many more years in the profession with the best possible peers, Dympna Callaghan, Fran Dolan, Lindsay Kaplan, Rick Rambuss, and Jyotsna Singh.

Although this book focuses on the unique pleasures implicit in connections among women, I am keenly aware that without certain men, it never would have been written. In negotiating academia with uncommon brilliance, humor, and generosity, Peter Stallybrass has been, and remains, my guiding light. Bruce Smith has sent to me so many archival treasures that I hesitate to leave his name off of the title page. Peter Erickson has pursued intellectual connections with an intensity and integrity I admire. The incisive reading of the typescript by the late, brilliant, and courageous Alan Bray, who evaluated my evidence with a charitable but rigorous historian's eye, made this book much better. Stephen Orgel's careful reading of the typescript and assurance of its import have been

no less crucial than his patience over the years it took to complete. Jonathan Goldberg has been an inspiring and challenging interlocutor. And Jeff Masten, whose own work on friendship has been a touchstone, has been a friend indeed, reading the typescript at an early stage with the analytical precision he brings to his own work.

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My colleagues at the University of Michigan have been delightfully intelligent interlocutors, and I am particularly grateful to the early modernists, Linda Gregerson, Bill Ingram, Ejner Jensen, John Knott, Steve Mullaney, and Mike Schoenfeldt, for accepting me so warmly into their fold. Mike deserves special mention for his intellectual companionship and consistent support for my work and me, and Bill deserves special thanks for his help in deciphering early modern texts. P. A. Skantze and Carla Mazziio have been extraordinary comrades, whose unique capacities and brave life choices help me to think courageously about myself. Liz Barnes, Anita Norich, Yopie Prins, Suzanne Raitt, and Patsy Yaeger have provided a rare and much appreciated combination of intellectual and personal camaraderie; I am particularly grateful to Suzanne for her help in framing the Introduction. Through the First Draft club, Tobin Siebers has fostered an ongoing sense of intellectual companionship. David Halperin was an influence long before becoming a colleague and friend. Jan Burgess and Donna Johnston have kept my professional life on the up-and-up.

I have been blessed with the opportunity to work with extraordinary students whose own intellectual vitality has fostered mine. Some of them have, at one time or other, brought their insight and diligence to bear on this project. Misty Anderson, Jen Shelton, Adriane Stewart, Will Fisher, Amanda Eubanks Winkler, Elise Frasier, Gina Bloom, Maureen MacDonnell, Pavitra Sundar, Jennie Evenson, Holly Dugan, and Shana Kimball, have all, in ways great and small, affected the production of this book. A special thanks to Gina Bloom and Flagg Miller for being my spies on the ground in England, as well as to Angela Balla for her amazing help at the last minute. Theresa Braunschneider deserves particularly emphatic thanks for reading the typescript with her usual perspicuity and intelligence; my respect for her own work is recorded throughout the latter pages of this book.

I am grateful to Pat Simons for her rigorous critiques offered during the middle stages of this project. Al Young provided enthusiastic support from

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the standpoint of his own work on colonial America. Several scholars read and commented helpfully on individual chapters, including Carolyn Dinshaw, Valeria Finucci, Diana Fuss, Elizabeth Hageman, and members of the Folger Library Eighteenth-Century Studies Group. Doug Bruster, Dick Burt, Karen Newman, and Helmut Puff each led me to exciting new material. At a crucial time Sonja Rose and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg helped me to think through the parameters of the book. Likewise, the responses of Eve Sedgwick and Barbara Johnson led to new ways of framing questions and re-conceiving possible directions of inquiry. The staffs at the Folger Library and the Newberry Library offered their expertise and support; I would particularly like to thank Georgianna Ziegler. The Shakespeare Association of America has provided an important institutional welcome from very early on. And Josie Dixon and Vicki Cooper of Cambridge University Press have brought to this project a high degree of professionalism for which I am very grateful.

Brenda Marshall suffered through my ideas at their most confused, my prose at its most turgid, and my emotions at their most stressed. Nonetheless, she found the personal and intellectual wherewithal to engage, critique, edit, and support in all the ways that matter – which is only one of the reasons why this book is dedicated to her, with all my love.

NOTE

Unless quoting from a modern edition, I have retained early modern spelling, capitalization, and emphasis. For ease of comprehension, however, I occasionally have silently modernized *u/v*, *i/j*, and *i/y*; long *s* has been revised to *s*; *y^e* has been altered to *the*; and where a macron over a vowel indicates the suspension of *m* or *n*, I have added the letter.