The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England

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Contents

Illustrations

1 Setting the stage behind the seen: performing *lesbian* history

> . . . Cupid's fiery shaft [was]
> Quench'd in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
> And the imperial vot'ress passed on,
> In maiden meditation, fancy-free.[1]

Several years ago in Nashville, Tennessee, director Barry Edelstein staged a theatrical production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* which comically highlighted the operatic dimensions of human passion. Although the performance closely followed Shakespeare's script, Olivia and Orsino, Aguecheek and Antonio all expressed their desires in over-the-top vocal performances that were observed, and wryly commented upon, by an earnest yet mischievous Viola/Cesario. My partner, at that time a theater critic for a local "alternative" newspaper, commended Tennessee Repertory Theater on its entertaining, witty, superbly acted production. She also praised the performance for its open exploration of the ways homoerotic attractions infused the interactions of Olivia and Viola, Orsino and Cesario, Antonio and Sebastian. Having sat through a number of plays in which closeted gay actors performed homophobic material, having spoken to actors anguished by their compromises with what some local directors deemed "the audience" – and aware that Tennessee at the time upheld a sodomy statute which criminalized consensual same-gender erotic acts – she considered this mainstreaming of homoerotic performance a momentous occasion.[2]

Momentous, indeed. The actress who had played Olivia with such passionate aplomb wrote a letter to the editor in horrified protest; the possibility of such an interpretation had never entered her mind. She did not play Olivia as "a homosexual"; nor did Shakespeare intend her to. Needless to say, her horror did not stem from a social constructivist view that the category of homosexual did not exist that far back in time. Vehemently, she declared she would never consent to play a part contrary to her personal ethics.[3] What about Medea or Salome? my partner wondered in response.

What happens when female–female desire is enacted today on the Shakespearean stage – in Nashville, New York, Stratford (England or Ontario)? Given that the trope of invisibility has governed discussions of *lesbianism* prior to 1800, what happens to Shakespeare (that icon of literary genius), to notions of the Renaissance (that icon of high culture), to actors and audiences in professional, community, and college theaters when women's homoerotic desires are granted a cultural presence? Insofar as theatrical and cinematic productions of Shakespearean drama are the primary medium through which most North Americans encounter "the Renaissance," how might directors, dramaturges, and actors intercede *now* in popular knowledge of what was possible, erotically speaking, *then*?[4]

Contemporary theatrical performance provides a point of departure for this chapter's consideration of how to recognize, interpret, and make manifest the cultural presence of *lesbianism* in the early modern period. Distinctively homoerotic representations of female desire in Shakespearean drama, and in Renaissance drama generally, can emerge from an awareness of the various historical discourses of female intimacy – from tribadism to female–female marriages to adolescent friendships. In order to set the stage for subsequent analyses, I first provide an overview of the theological, legal, and medical discourses that informed the social practices of female homoeroticism across Europe, and punctuate discussion of these discourses with examples drawn from selected literary texts. Using social and legal history to suggest new ways of reading representations, this chapter inverts the procedure of subsequent chapters, which will analyze representations to uncover the presence of social potentials heretofore unacknowledged by social history. My approach is deliberately schematic, synoptic, and synthetic, and unrestricted by the national, discursive, and temporal specificity that organizes the rest of the book. The second half of the chapter correlates these discourses, practices, and representations to a range of affective desires dramatized in one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed plays. My aim is not to provide a reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but to use its repeated, if tantalizingly brief, allusions to female intimacies to lift the curtain on occluded practices within early modern culture. Bringing together seemingly disparate phenomena, I argue that not only can history be brought to life through today's performances, but that theatrical companies could broaden their resources by attending to historical discourses of *lesbianism*.

The pun embedded in this chapter's title implies that visibility is a function of location: what is positioned *behind the scene* is denied visibility. Such a denial, my Introduction argued, has been the governing condition of early modern *lesbianism*. If we materialize the theatrical metaphor, however, we can recognize that what goes on behind the scene – the work, for instance, of stagehands, lighting technicians, directors, costumers, financiers – is also what makes the actors' performances possible. By appropriating this metaphor of constitutive but unacknowledged work, I propose that *lesbianism* has played a more important role in our cultural heritage than is commonly supposed.

I begin my investigation of cultural production through that canonical icon, "Shakespeare," because his name and the industry it now represents is a repository of cultural assumptions that I wish to vex and a site of cultural capital that I wish to employ.[5] As recent mainstream films of *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Titus Andronicus*, as well as films that allude to, cite, adapt, and revamp Shakespearean materials suggest, Shakespearean drama remains, even in a postmodern global economy, a privileged site of cultural production and interpretation. Despite its marginal status *vis-à-vis* other forms of television and cinema, Shakespearean performance, whether acted live or filmed, screened in an art house, the mall, or on TV, contributes in unique and pervasive ways to contemporary understanding of "high culture," "the arts," "human nature," and, perhaps most important for my purposes, "history." Even as contemporary production values update characters, clothes, and plots, making them "relevant" to today's viewers, "Shakespeare" remains one of the few cultural forms from which interpretations of the past are disseminated. Indeed, the cultural capital of the Shakespeare industry seems in direct proportion to its ability to proffer a fantasy of historical tradition and authority (or to contest it), whether through the means of period costume drama or postmodern pastiche. If, as the editors of *Shakespeare, The Movie* assert (after a spate of Shakespeare films in the 1990s), "just where the film industry will take Shakespeare seems quite up for grabs,"[6] the time seems right to grab what has been "behind" and to bring *lesbianism* onto center stage – not to enforce a politics of identity, but to destabilize some long-standing theatrical conventions and to activate the queer potential of today's global audience.

Theatrical and cinematic productions have many tools for dramatizing noncanonical interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, from the reinterpretation of character and reassignment of speeches to transpositions of time, place, and costume. But as progressive as the productions of some theatrical companies have been, not all the creative energies that can be brought to bear on Shakespearean performance stem from theatrical practitioners themselves. In this regard, contemporary performance has much to gain from the insights of feminist and queer criticism and theory. Often, however, the aims of feminist textual criticism and performance seem to be at odds. According to theater critic Lorraine Helms, "[p]erformance, like criticism, may either reproduce or reevaluate the ideology with which a dominant culture invests a play text. But if a production is to challenge the theatrical tradition . . . it must move from critique to revision." The problem with much feminist textual criticism of Shakespeare, Helms argues, is that it takes the form of critique rather than creative re-envisioning. Because the feminism of such criticism, she argues, often is "theatrically inert," "were it taken as the conceptual foundation for performance," it would unwittingly affirm rather than subvert "a misogynist interpretation."[7]

The aim of the present chapter is to begin to envision ways in which a *lesbian* analytic might make available to the stage (and cinema) new strategies for performing relations of gender and eroticism. By suggesting that a historical awareness of the range of female desires and bonds in the early modern period could profitably pressure how female characters are represented and erotic desire thematized, I do not mean to imply that contemporary Shakespearean production has totally avoided dramatizing homoerotic desire. Indeed, in response to contemporary politics – and sometimes in advance of academic theorizing – some theater companies have brought attention to, for instance, Antonio's love for Bassanio and the erotic relation between Salerio and Solanio, as in the New York Public Theater's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, or Orsino's attraction for Cesario, as in a recent Shakespeare Santa Cruz production.[8] Rather than invest certain characters with homoerotic desires in otherwise "straight" productions, other companies have queered the entire play by using male drag – as in Cheek by Jowl's all-male *As You Like It*, Theatre Rhinoceros's all-male *Twelfth Night*, Reginald Jackson's high camp *House of Lear*, and Shakespeare Santa Cruz's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[9]

The theatricalization of *lesbian* desire in Shakespearean drama occurs far less frequently. When it does occur, it tends to depend on cross-gender casting to parody or "modernize" Shakespeare. Cheek by Jowl's 1991 *As You Like It* portrayed Celia in love with Rosalind, but did so through the mediation of an all-male cast.[10] A 1996 Cornerstone Theater Company adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, committed to exploring the debate about "gays in the military," cast the love-sick Malvolio as a woman and set the action at a Southern California naval base.[11] Likewise, cross-gender casting animated Jill Dolan's 1991 University of Wisconsin production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the forest was transformed into a gay disco, Oberon was played as a "fashionable, sexy, butch lesbian," and Demetrius, upon waking, discovered he was transformed into a woman – thus altering both his and Helena's erotic orientations.[12]

Cross-gender casting, parody, and modernization have their attractions, of course, including audience accessibility and appeal, as well as the communal joy of celebrating gay identity. And, there are several good reasons for the reliance of companies on male drag: the historically vibrant presence of transvestism in gay male culture;[13] the Renaissance theatrical tradition of using boy actors to play female roles;[14] and the theoretical import of drag as a performative subversion of identity.[15] But the problem with such strategies, when employed to the exclusion of other possibilities, is that they tend to reinforce the all-too-prevalent assumption that issues of erotic diversity are distinctively *modern* concerns. According to Susan Bennett, the attempt to resist or revise the Shakespearean text in theatrical or cinematic performance typically has meant to dehistoricize it.[16] While the use of Shakespeare for the purposes of multiculturalism or gay community-building implicates Renaissance drama in queer genders and sexualities, it tends to do so by highlighting meta-theatricality at the expense of early modern history. If directors and actors wish to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Shakespeare's erotic plots, they need not feel limited to the strategy of modernization. Nor, if they wish to resurrect historical traditions, need they limit their approach to crossdressing and the use of boy actors. To what extent, for instance, do current productions employing drag register the actual tradition of passing women – women who crossdressed not only for economic advantage and/or freedom from patriarchal marriage, but to act on their erotic desires for other women, to cohabit with, and sometimes, to marry them? The goal in asking this question is not to forget the difference between stage representations and individual lives nor the absence of actual women from the Renaissance stage, but rather to investigate how theatrical drag registers – or fails to register – a specifically *lesbian* mode of representation. Such an investigation might ask which performance strategies beyond cross-gender casting and drag might make visible the full range of women's emotional and erotic attachments.[17] We do not need to laminate a *lesbian* presence *onto* Shakespeare's texts; once we begin to think historically about desires and practices, we can draw homoerotic meanings *out* of them. The point is not to deploy a discourse of authenticity to trump "trendy" postmodernism, nor to populate the Shakespearean stage with women whose desires are intelligible only in the idioms of the present.[18] To invoke if only to reconceptualize the title of the ground-breaking anthology, *Queering the Renaissance*: it is less a question of queering the past than of discovering the terms by which the past articulated its *own* queerness.[19]

If erotic desires and practices in the early modern period were not organized by an essential and exclusive division of homo- and heterosexual, how was eroticism organized? To begin with a critical commonplace: most aspects of women's lives were determined by their age, marital status, and position within the patriarchal household. Familial status relations (whether one was husband, wife, or child), along with hierarchies of social rank (whether one was master, mistress, servant, apprentice) established each person's opportunities and responsibilities. The legitimate social identities available to women – maid, wife, mother, and widow – were tied to marital status. Patriarchal authority and material necessity compelled most women to marry, and while daughters usually had the right to veto the recommendations of their fathers and advisors, in many espousals the hope was that women would come to love after, if not before, marriage. Noblewomen in particular were held accountable to considerable financial and political concerns, including the purity of genealogical lineage, inheritance of fortune and title, and consolidation of huge tracts of land. Daughters of the "middling sort" likewise were expected to make matches that helped the family's fortune by linking guildsmen and potential business partners, while daughters of the working poor may have had the least to lose or gain by the economic connections cemented by marriage.

The system of eroticism was organized in relation to patriarchal marriage, which was, as Isabel Hull argues,

the only framework for legitimate, socially approved sexual expression. This meant that marriage was a colossally overdetermined institution carrying an unsurpassed density of social meanings. Wealth, social standing, adulthood, independence, livelihood, communal responsibility, (for males) political representation, and sexual expression were all joined symbolically in this one estate, which meant that any one of these social meanings might stand for any other. The embeddedness of sex in this constellation, particularly its connection with property and marriage, constitutes its chief characteristic in the early modern period and also the main difficulty writers have had in interpreting it in its historical context.[20]

The dominance of marriage as a social and political institution does not negate the pervasiveness of illegitimate heteroerotic activity, including frequent adultery at the highest levels of society. The fact that England was ruled for almost half a century by a woman whose own legitimacy was contested suggests the extent to which the edicts of patriarchal marriage could be, and were, ignored. Nonetheless, the disproportionate conceptual weight accorded to marriage, combined with a phallic standard of sexuality and the absence of a concept of erotic identity, provided the conceptual and social framework for *lesbianism* across Europe. Within this framework, the treatment and semiotics of *lesbianism* were paradoxical. Authorities in all European societies were concerned about the threat posed by behaviors that crossed gender boundaries and/or the conjugal unit; thus, certain female–female erotic acts were met with harsh denunciation, punishment, and considerable publicity. Other behaviors that seem manifestly *lesbian* to twentieth-century minds, however, did not cause much social concern, and often were compatible with patriarchal marriage and alliance.

As Hull notes, the disciplining of illicit erotic acts was, in this time of nascent state formation, primarily a function of the church and community:

The church and the social nexus in which people lived – their family, neighbors, and fellow workers – exerted for a long time a stronger and more effective sexual discipline than the rudimentary state . . . The church set the basic framework within which the absolutist territorial state later exercised regulation. From the secular standpoint, the church's two most powerful contributions were the great significance it ascribed to sexual (mis)behavior and the paramount position it accorded to marriage as the only locus of accepted sexual expression. Following these principles (among others) the church carefully developed the hierarchy of sexual offenses that absolutist penal codes later adopted from canon law.[21]

Thus, even after secular statutes replaced ecclesiastical law, denunciation of non-reproductive erotic acts as "unnatural" was the universal aim of religious and secular authorities across Europe.[22] Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, in which he speaks of women who give up natural intercourse for unnatural, and of men who reject women and are consumed with passion for men, provided the primary biblical authority for condemning what was called the *crimen contra naturam*.[23] Although sodomy today is most often defined as anal penetration, in the early modern period sodomy functioned as a catch-all category for a range of erotic activities and positions: anal penetration (involving penis, finger, or other instrument, and engaged with men or women), masturbation, bestiality, rape, and child molestation.[24] Female–female eroticism was considered by medieval church fathers as one among a panoply of unnatural acts, included in penitentials and investigated in the confessional.[25] After 1550, legal statutes became more specific about the inclusion of female sodomy. By the sixteenth century in many European states, a woman's conviction for sodomy (whether enacted with women or men) resulted, like that of men, in the penalty of death.

Two essential paradoxes define the legal status of *lesbianism* throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: not all sodomy statutes explicitly mention female–female activities; and in those jurisdictions that criminalize female–female acts, prosecution is the exception rather than the norm. England is a prime example of the first paradox: in 1533 an Act of Parliament made buggery (the vernacular term for anal penetration) a secular rather than religious crime, and punishable by death; however, this statute, *25 Henry VIII, chapter 6*, did not mention women. In 1644, Sir Edward Coke, a prominent English interpreter of the law, proffered the opinion that if women committed buggery, it was by having sex with an animal.[26] Indeed, despite the fact that by the late seventeenth century vernacular dictionaries would include references to "woman with a woman" under the heading of "Buggerie," in reference to this crime Coke cites only an incident of "a great Lady [who] had committed Buggery with a Baboon, and conceived by it, etc."[27] In Scotland, however, Kirk Session records reveal one case of female sodomy in 1625, charged by the Glasgow Presbytery against two Egilshame parishioners, Elspeth Faulds and Margaret Armour; they were forced to separate from one another upon pain of excommunication.[28] The French seem to have more actively enforced their sodomy statute: the jurist Jean Papon documented the arrest and torture in 1533 of Françoise de l'Estage and Catherine de la Maniére in Toulouse (they were acquitted due to inadequate evidence);[29] Henri Estienne recounted the burning of a woman in 1535 for crossdressing and marrying a maid of Foy;[30] and in 1580 Michel de Montaigne recorded the execution of another crossdressed "female husband" who allegedly used "illicit devices" with her female partner in Montier-en-Der.[31]

In 1532, the Constitutions of the Holy Roman Empire made sex between women a capital crime.[32] Following suit, the city of Augsburg Discipline Ordinance of 1537 condemned "damned forbidden commingling" (referring to the provision of imperial law); however, no women seem to have been prosecuted under this ordinance.[33] Nonetheless, in Freiburg im Breisgau in 1547, Agatha Dietzsch was pilloried in an iron collar and banished for cross-dressing and marrying Anna Reulin.[34] Likewise, one Swiss woman was brought to trial and drowned in Geneva in 1568; and in 1647, Elsbeth Hertner was accused of both sodomy and witchcraft in Basel.[35]

No sodomy bill was passed in the province of Holland until 1730 – and even then it did not mention women. However, in Leiden in 1606, Maeyken Joosten married Bertelminia Wale while dressed as a man; soon thereafter she was exiled from the city for life. In Leiden in 1688, Cornelia Gerrits van Breugel and Elisabeth Boleyn, who had been living together for a year, were married after Cornelia began dressing as a man; they both stood trial after Cornelia reverted back to female dress, and were exiled from the city for twelve years.[36] In Spain, the thirteenth-century legal code known as *Las siete partidas* (the seven laws) made "sins against nature" a capital crime, but it was not until the mid-sixteenth century that a legal gloss proposed extending the death penalty to women, and two Spanish nuns accused of using genital "instruments" were burned at the stake. Two other cases of women using genital instruments were reported in Seville; one couple was exiled while the other was hanged (for "robberies, murders, and audacity").[37] Whereas sodomy often was called the "Florentine vice," and throughout Italy the punishment for sodomy was burning at the stake, no executions of Italian women are documented.[38] Nonetheless, a Pescian nun, Benedetta Carlini, was virtually imprisoned for thirty-five years for heresy, a charge that stemmed in part from her mystical and physical union with another nun.[39]

During the Moscovite period (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries), Russia was unique in Europe for failing to enact secular legislation prohibiting same-gender erotic activity (for men or women).[40] Of concern to Eastern Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities was the relative position of sexual partners: two women together (or two men) were no more sinful than a woman on top of a man. With homoeroticism considered a sin rather than a crime, the recommended penance was confession, prostrations, exclusion from communion, and dietary abstentions. When, in 1706, Russian laws penalized male sodomy, no mention was made of women.

In colonial North America, sodomy laws likewise differed by locale. A criminal code drawn up by John Cotton in 1636 for the Massachusetts General Court described sodomy as "carnal fellowship of man with man, or woman with woman," but the authoritative Body of Liberties omitted women from the final draft. Other New England colonies, with the exception of Rhode Island, took their cue from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, drafting codes without reference to female–female contact. New Haven included sex between women as a capital offense, its statute of 1656 being the most detailed and comprehensive in the colonies. The two known colonial cases in which women were charged with "unclean" behavior, however, invoked neither sodomy nor the draconian punishments typically associated with it: in 1642, "Elizabeth Johnson was whipped and fined by an Essex County quarterly court for 'unseemly and filthy practices betwixt hir and another maid, attempting To Do that which man and woman Doe,' and in 1648/49, Sara Norman and Mary Hammon of Plymouth Colony were publicly admonished for 'leude behavior each with other upon a bed.' "[41] In Virginia, an official inquiry into the anatomical sex of the crossdressing Thomas/Thomasine Hall may have been instigated by a rumor that Hall "did ly with a maid . . . called greate Besse," but the case was resolved without resort to capital punishment; Thomas(ine) was forced to adopt a hybrid form of dress and live a life devoid of erotic contact.[42]

This summary of patterns of legal prosecution reveals that, in contrast to the high incidence of prosecution of women for prostitution, adultery, bastardy, and witchcraft, comparatively few women in Europe and colonial North America were prosecuted for sodomy before the eighteenth century.[43] In fact, the official treatment of female–female erotic acts throughout the early modern era was somewhat incoherent, with the paucity of prosecutions at odds with the supposedly horrific nature of the crime. When read in the context of court testimony, the selective enforcement of sodomy laws suggests that the primary concern of authorities was women's appropriation of masculine prerogatives, whether in the form of crossdressing and passing as a man, the use of instruments of genital penetration (dildoes made of leather, wood, or glass), or other challenges to patriarchal authority. Some statutes specifically mandated harsher punishments for acts involving "material instruments" or devices for penetration.

When women were prosecuted for homoerotic acts, lawyers generally acted in concert with medical authorities, both physicians (exclusively men) and midwives (primarily women). Medical theorists and practitioners became involved in legal cases because, both in medicine and popular lore, women's erotic transgressions typically were read in relation to the dominant discourse of psycho-physiology, the humoral theory derived from the classical Roman physician, Galen. According to humoralism, the body is a dynamic, self-regulating process.[44] Each of the four humors (blood, choler, melancholy, phlegm) possesses two primary qualities: blood is hot and moist, choler is hot and dry, melancholy is cold and dry, and phlegm is cold and moist. Each has specific physiological functions: blood warms and moistens the body, choler incites the expulsion of various excrements, melancholy provokes the appetite, and phlegm nourishes the cold and moist organs such as the kidneys and the brain. The related doctrine of the four temperaments (also called complexion theory) diagnoses sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic temperaments as caused by the dominance of one of the humors. Temperament (and thus behavior) is a matter both somatic and psychic.

In humoral theory, physiological sex exists on a continuum: although typically men are hot and dry, some men are too moist; while most women are moist and cold, some women are too hot. Such variation in the humors explains the presence of manly women (dry and cold) and womanly men (moist and hot). Indeed, because medically (and theologically) women are considered imperfect versions of men, women occasionally – so it was said – turn into men. The spontaneous eruption of a penis from sudden motion or increased body heat is a logical extension of the belief that women's genital anatomy is merely an inverted (and imperfect) version of men's. Since nature always strives for perfection, virilization rather than effeminization is nature's preferred course.[45] Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, instances of miraculous sex change were narrated among villagers and used as evidence of the devil's ability to use natural causes to work his evil. In answering the question "Whether by Witchcraft and Devil's Work the Sexes can be Interchanged," Francesco Maria Guazzo, for instance, lists several examples of women in Spain, Portugal, and Naples who spontaneously metamorphosed into men; some did so after years of marriage, some upon the onset of menses, some on their wedding night. All of them thereafter adopted the clothing and manners of men, several of them married women, and some were rumored to have fathered children.[46] In his treatise, *Des Monstres et Prodiges,* the influential French surgeon Ambroise Paré likewise provides a list of "memorable stories about women who have degenerated into men." In sixteenth-century scientific usage "*degenerer*" does not necessarily entail debasement, but rather registers a change from one species to another; according to Paré, the woman who is transformed into a man elevates her condition.[47] In one case, reported to Paré by the King's receiver of rents, a certain man at Reimes "was taken for a woman untill the fourteenth yeere of his age; for then it happened as he played somewhat wantonly with a maid which lay in the same bed with him, his members (hitherto lying hid) started forth and unfolded them selves."[48]

Whereas such cases of sex transformation pepper the literature on witchcraft and marvels, physicians and anatomists began to voice skepticism as anatomical investigation challenged the traditional homology of male and female reproductive organs. Over the course of the seventeenth century, medical writers increasingly denied the possibility of metamorphosis, arguing that such phenomena were attributable either to hermaphroditism or to unusual genital anatomy. In the latter case, the problematic "member" that made a woman look (and act) like a man was either a prolapsed vagina or, more commonly, an enlarged clitoris. In the latter case, such women were likely tribades, women who gained erotic satisfaction from rubbing against or penetrating other women's genitals with their "female yards." Helkiah Crooke, author of the English vernacular anatomy, *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615), for instance, summarized reports of sex transformation from the classical age forward for the purpose of arguing against its probability. He termed all such stories "monstrous and some not credible": persons alleged to have changed sex are either hermaphrodites or women who are "so hot by nature that their *Clitoris* hangeth foorth in the fashion of a mans member."[49] During the mid-seventeenth century, English medical popularizer Nicholas Culpeper was inclined to agree; but he hedged his bets, taking cover under the traditional adage that the size of the genitals correlates with the capacity for desire:

> Some are of opinion, and I could almost afford to side with them, That such kind of Creatures they call *Hermaphrodites*, which they say bear the Genitals both of Men and Women, are nothing else but such women in whom the *Clytoris* hangs out externally, and so resemble the form of a yard; I leave the truth or falshood of it to be judged by such who have seen them anatomised; however, this is agreeable both to reason and Authority, that the bigger the *Clytoris* is in Women, the more lustful they are.[50]

Culpeper's maxim, which correlates quantity of lust with size of genitals, exposes a powerful incoherence within the humoral dispensation. According to Galenic theory (and Biblical doctrine), women, weaker and more inconstant than men, are more subject to lust. However, if women's lust becomes excessive, they perversely and paradoxically threaten to become like men. Female insatiability generally is linked not to the genitals, but to a weak will and susceptibility to temptation; if, however, a woman's body evinces bigger (more manlike) sexual equipment, she is less likely than men to be able to control it.

I will discuss medical debates about clitoral hypertrophy in chapter 5. For now I want to stress the tight associations forged between sex transformation, hermaphroditism, tribadism, and sodomy in most European legal and medical practices. These associations derive from conflicting medical models of the causality of hermaphroditism as well as the pervasive tendency to read the tribade in terms of her bodily morphology. Early moderns tended to view sex, gender, and eroticism always in terms of one another; thus, the boundary was continually blurred between hermaphroditism (which we tend to consider an anatomical category) and tribadism (which we tend to consider a behavioral category). The line between the hermaphrodite and the tribade, for instance, proves to be a fine one in the chronicle of the count Froben Christop von Zimmern, who reports the following case:

> There was also at that time a poor serving-girl at Mösskirch, who served here and there, and she was called Greta . . . She did not take any man or young apprentice, nor would she stand at the bench with any such [i.e. work with them as husband and wife and sell his goods], but loved the young daughters, went after them and bought them pedlars' goods, and she also used all bearing and manners, as if she had a masculine *affect*. She was often considered to be a hermaphrodite or androgyne, but this did not prove to be the case, for she was investigated by cunning, and was seen to be a true, proper woman.

> To note: she was said to be born under an inverted, unnatural constellation. But amongst the learned and well-read one finds that this sort of thing is often encountered among the Greeks and Romans, although this is to be ascribed rather to the evil customs of those corrupted nations, plagued by sins, than to the course of the heavens or stars.[51]

Because of her erotic behavior, Greta is considered by many to be a hermaphrodite; nonetheless, she is revealed as "a true, proper woman" after being "investigated by cunning." Such investigations into the truth of bodily morphology were serious, and sometimes highly public, occasions. Three separate medical commissions examined the case of Marie le Marcis, who in 1601 defended herself against charges of sodomy with her female lover, Jeane, on the grounds that she was a man. Pursued all the way to the Parlement of Rouen, this case of a chambermaid instigated a heated medico-legal debate between Jacques Duval, a provincial physician, and Jean Riolan, professor of anatomy and botany at the University of Paris. Their published disquisitions hinge on the ideological conflict between the Galenic/Hippocratic belief that hermaphrodites represent an intermediate sex (Duval's position), and the Aristotelian denial of true hermaphroditism and insistence that so-called hermaphrodites simply possess doubled or redundant genitalia (Riolan's position).[52] Whereas the Aristotelian model of reproductive anatomy tended to dominate, a mid-sixteenth-century resurgence of interest in Hippocratic theories redirected attention to the erotic possibilities posed by the hermaphrodite's gender ambiguity.[53] Within France, legal proceedings to determine the hermaphrodite's dominant sex increasingly focused on the possibility of sexual fraud and malfeasance; they thus depended more on the external testimony of medical experts than on the hermaphrodite's self-description or articulation of desires.

All of this is apparent in Marie's tale. Marie revealed to her lover, Jeane, that she was really a man. After consummating their vows, apparently to the mutual enjoyment of each, the couple sought public approval of their love. Marie changed her name to Marin, and began wearing masculine clothing. The two were subsequently arrested, tried, and condemned. The crime for which both were convicted was sodomy; despite Marin's claim that the terror of the trial had caused his penis to retract, the court maintained that Marie was a tribade. It was only upon Marin's appeal to the Parlement of Rouen, which appointed a panel of doctors, surgeons, and midwives to repeat a medical examination, that Duval applied pressure to Marin's organs, and found there "a male organ" which on second examination, "ejaculated" in a manner consistent not with woman's expulsion of seed, but a man's.

The difference between being judged a hermaphrodite or a tribade, then, was as crucial as it was uncertain. A further contribution to the confusion was the status of clothing as a signifier of identity. Discourses about hermaphrodites, tribades, female sodomites, and spontaneous transsexuals were also discourses about crossdressing. During this period of unprecedented geographical exploration, warfare, and colonization, many women took advantage of the rise in social status that a change in clothing could bring about. Under the cover of male dress, women's migration to urban centers, service as a soldier or shipmate, and immigration to the New World afforded them new opportunities for social advancement. Popular street ballads, broadsheets, and prose narratives extolled the exploits of female soldiers and sailors who accomplished heroic deeds while successfully passing as men – especially if they did so in order to accompany husbands or male lovers into battle.[54] However, despite avid interest in tales of passing women, in many continental countries crossdressing (legally considered a form of fraud) was a serious, even a capital, offense.[55] Although English sumptuary legislation regulated status boundaries rather than gender, and it is probably the case that very few women actually crossdressed, the anxiety that crossdressing would become a viable fashion was still evident: during the height of the pamphlet controversy about the nature of women in the early years of the seventeenth century, King James of England and Scotland instructed clergymen to preach against women wearing masculine accouterments such as doublets and swords.

Much of the social anxiety expressed about women's transvestism had more to do with concerns about their lewdness with men than with homoerotic transgressions. Most female crossdressers whose tales are recorded profess to have adopted masculine identities in order to pursue adventure, economic gain, or the men who had abandoned them. However, some of them were motivated by their own commitment to "female masculinity" and/or their attachments to other women.[56] Exposure was sometimes the result of a sexual liaison, as in an account published in *The Gentleman's Journal: Or the Monthly Miscellany* (April 1692), which speaks approvingly of an English soldier who

> served two years in the French Army in Piedmont as a volunteer, and was entertained for her merit by the Governor of Pignerol in the quality of his Gentlemen of the Horse; at last playing with another of her sex, she was discover'd; and the Governor having thought fit to inform the King his master of this, he hath sent him word that he would be glad to see the lady; which hath occasion'd her coming to Genoa, in order to embark for France: Nature has bestow'd no less beauty on her than courage; and her age is not above 26. The French envoy hath orders to cause her to be waited on to Marseille, and to furnish her with all necessaries.[57]

Other accounts from England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands document female crossdressers marrying women, and often attest to the wife's sexual satisfaction, as well as to her knowledge (whether before or after marriage) of her "husband's" sex. (Several such accounts will be analyzed in chapter 4.) The three "autobiographies" of Catalina de Erauso, a crossdressing Basque conquistador, as well as a play written about her, recount her amorous flirtations with Spanish ladies in the New World.[58] (Chapter 2 will begin with her story.) More prosaically, a London Consistory Court document details the annulment of a marriage contracted between Arabella Hunt and her "female husband," Amy Poulter (a.k.a. James Howard).[59] In her suit for annulment, apparently brought after six months of cohabitation, Hunt maintained that, when they married in 1680, Poulter had been legally married to a husband still living, that she alternated dressing as a woman and a man, and that she was "of a double gender." Although Poulter freely admitted the first two charges, and asserted that she had married Hunt on a lark, she flatly denied being a hermaphrodite – a denial supported by the five midwives who subsequently examined her. Because she was deemed "a perfect woman in all her parts" – that is, complete and without defect – she was not held liable for bigamy (two women could not contract a valid marriage) and neither she nor Hunt were charged with a crime. In fact, the court determined them free to remarry – as long as the husband was a man. Neither, however, did.[60]

Another English woman who crossdressed, allegedly in order to defraud young women of their dowries, was not so lucky; her story is briefly summarized by the Oxford antiquarian Anthony à Wood, who included the following anecdote in a letter to a friend in 1694:

> Appeared at the King's Bench in Westminster hall a young woman in man's apparel, or that personated a man, who was found guilty of marrying a young maid, whose portion he had obtained and was very nigh of being contracted to a second wife. Divers of her love letters were read in court, which occasioned much laughter. Upon the whole she was ordered to Bridewell to be well whipt and kept to hard labour till further order of the court.[61]

Even though Wood shifts pronouns in order to narrate this episode – reserving the masculine pronoun for the person who had defrauded the maid of her portion – this "young woman in man's apparel" apparently did not present a forensic problem. Her clothes, rather than her anatomy, provided the visual sign of her masculinity; her "personation" of a man was a failed one. But when less clarity attended the accusation of hermaphroditism, sex transformation, sodomy, or tribadism, women were compelled to undergo a forensic medical examination. If the probing of a midwife or physician revealed the anatomy of "a perfect woman" (or "a perfect man"), she (or he) was reinserted into the traditional gender hierarchy (and sometimes subjected to further prosecution for erotic misdeeds). If found to possess both a penis and vagina, the now-confirmed hermaphrodite usually (though, as Thomas(ine) Hall's case makes clear, not inevitably) was allowed to choose a gender identity. As long as s/he did not switch back and forth, and gender-appropriate clothing was worn, s/he was allowed to marry.[62] Within Judaic law, marriage was permitted between an *androgunos* (one who possessed both penis and vagina) and a woman, but marriage of an androgunos to a man was prohibited – two penises, apparently, were considered too many in one marriage.[63]

These documents and narratives of female masculinity, tribadism, hermaphroditism, and sex transformation tell us little about the subjective experience of women's erotic desires and practices. In *Hunt vs. Poulter*, for instance, the ecclesiastical court was concerned with the legal status of their marriage, not their personal motivations. These texts do tell us, however, about some of the conditions under which women's erotic activities with other women were construed as a social problem. Such a construal, it is important to note, was not inevitable. Female–female eroticism was not universally or uniformly scandalous, or even criminal.[64] An informal allegation lodged against Susannah Bell, for instance, occurs only in the context of a proceeding against her previous husband, Ralph Hollingsworth, who was sued by his later wife, Maria Seely, in 1694 for bigamy. In his defense documented in the London Consistory Court, Hollingsworth describes Susannah: "now as to Susannah Bell: she knowing her infirmity ought not to have married; her infirmity is such that no man can lie with her, and because it so she has ways with women as well, as with her old companions men, which is not fit to be named but most rank whorish they are."[65] Whatever "infirmity" Susannah had (a small vaginal opening? an enlarged clitoris?) that prompted her to have "ways with women," she was not prosecuted for her behavior; her bigamist husband was.

It usually took some extraordinary circumstance to motivate a community to involve local officials or for such officials to embark on a legal proceeding. As Hull remarks of criminal prosecution in general: "The prosecution of sexual crimes was at the mercy of the local populace: they provided the original information for indictment, the testimony at the trial, and the audience for public punishments. If the parties to a dispute arising from sexual behavior could solve the problem among themselves, then the authorities might never hear of it."[66] It appears that female–female intimacy did not, on its own, generally occasion sufficient concern to warrant the involvement of authorities. Several court cases were initiated, not because of community outrage, but because one of the women sought a legal annulment, generally after several months, or even years, of cohabitation. Those women who *were* accused of sodomy, tribadism, or hermaphroditism seem to have gained local notoriety prior to their prosecution, whether through flagrant crossdressing, prostitution, vagrancy, or dissenting religious beliefs. Often they were strangers, wayfarers from other locales. Among those unfortunate women, it generally was the woman who crossdressed or used penetrative devices who received harsher punishment than her ostensibly more "feminine" partner – a system of punishment that both derived from and enforced a prevalent assumption that illicit female liaisons were governed by a logic of gender imitation.

To recognize the contingencies of prosecution is not to deny the lethal energies exercised against women who came to the attention of authorities, but rather, to insist that the history of *lesbianism* is not one of unrelieved oppression. Homophobia itself is a historically specific and variable phenomenon, deployed intermittently and under certain social conditions.[67] Many female–female couples may have lived unremarked by their neighbors and therefore unmolested by the law. In regards to a sodomy trial of 1477, for instance, Helmut Puff maintains that the "female husband" Katherina Hetzeldorfer had "shared at least part of her secret with individual members of Speyer's urban community."[68] The cohabitation of female couples may have been spoken about as different or strange, but may not have been a particular community concern. Such couples may have been subject to good-natured or ill-favored gossip, or to community harassment short of legal action. Even when subjected to official scrutiny, however, women were not censured uniformly. Whereas Elspeth Faulds and Margaret Armour were excommunicated by the Glasgow Presbytery, the London Consistory Court acted with indifference to the marital crossdressing of Amy Poulter/James Howard. Several female transvestites in sixteenth-century France and Spain were executed, while Catalina de Erauso was awarded a military pension for her colonial services by Philip IV and special permission from Pope Urban XIII to continue dressing as a man. Such conceptual and material contradictions suggest that there is no one history of *lesbianism* in early modern Europe and the Americas. Rather, there are multiple histories, each of them dependent upon complex and sometimes competing ideologies of gender, social status, and authority – not to mention the different personalities involved. Variations in local standards of morality and tolerances of diversity, contending medical cultures and contradictory "truths" about anatomy and physiology, and the evolving contests between the church and the state all had an impact on the construction and treatment of early modern *lesbianism*. Traversed by different discourses and subject to a variety of cultural investments, women interested in other women pursued erotic adventure, pleasure, and satisfaction by seeking modes of accommodation within the patriarchal landscape they inhabited.

Few women were directly affected by allegations of transvestism, tribadism, hermaphroditism, or sex transformation. Another discourse, however, had a direct if equivocal impact on the bodies of all early modern women. The ideology of chastity, an element of Catholic doctrine that continued in secular form after the Reformation, provided the *sine qua non* of women's social status. As the humanist educator Juan Luis Vives put it, "chastity is the principal virtue of a woman, and counterpeiseth with all the rest. If she have that, no man will look for any other; and if she lack that, no man will regard other."[69] Despite doubts among anatomists about the hymen's existence and its reliability as a sign of virginity, the intact hymen popularly was considered the guarantor of female virtue.[70] Yet, because the discourse of chastity figured the threat of phallic penetration as the only socially intelligible form of erotic congress – as the only erotic practice that *mattered* – a range of other erotic behaviors, technically chaste, might be pursued by adolescents and adult women. Adolescent Russian and Italian girls, for instance, regularly played mock wedding games, physically enacting the erotic positions and actions of husband and wife; because none of them possessed a penis or wielded a dildo, their erotic play was considered a harmless preparation for adult marital roles.[71]

I explore the faultlines within the ideology of chastity in several subsequent chapters. For now, I simply want to note that the contradictory social functions of chastity dovetailed with the material conditions of the early modern English household. As Lena Cowen Orlin makes clear, most house chambers, including bedchambers, were "communal and multipurpose," while beds themselves (relatively expensive household furniture) were located "in nearly every conceivable space – halls, parlors, stair landings, outbuildings, and kitchens, as well as bedchambers." Orlin's larger point – that boundaries between the private and public had not yet settled into their modern binary configuration – is supported by surviving floorplans and household inventories, all of which suggest "that privacy was not an object of the architecture of the period."[72] Nor was it the object of individuals, for, as Hull notes, "no one expected 'privacy' in the modern sense, where solitude is simultaneously a sign that the sexual act is nobody's business, that it is not social. Early modern Europeans assumed just the reverse; transparency was therefore not just the product of limited spatial resources (few separate bedrooms), it was positively desirable."[73] The architectural constraints on privacy and social expectations of communal life, congruent as they were with the ideology of chastity, insured that throughout Europe and across social rank, adolescent girls as well as married and unmarried adult women regularly shared beds with kinswomen, female friends, and servants. What Margaret Hunt says of laboring singlewomen in the eighteenth century is true for the earlier period:

> Girls from poor and middling families generally began working very young . . . At some point between about age ten and fifteen many of them were put out to service or (less often) apprenticeships . . . The standard assumption was that they would save their money . . . so as to be able to marry some time in their mid- to late twenties. During this lengthy period, often fifteen or more years, they habitually slept in the same bed with a succession of other girls or women, other female servants if there were any, the daughters of other women of the household, or not uncommonly, the mistress of the house herself . . . Many female servants would have experienced the sleeping arrangements of half a dozen households before they turned thirty, and that during a period when they were lonely, often deprived of affection, and, at least part of the time, at a high libidinal pitch. The potential this system offered for risk-free, same-sex erotic activity was very great.[74]

With sharing beds a usual practice in households across the social spectrum, bodily intimacy conserved heat, fostered companionship, and enabled erotic contact.[75] We should not forget that the miraculous female-to-male sex transformation at Reimes reported to Paré supposedly occurred while the woman "played somewhat wantonly with a maid which lay in the same bed with him" – an activity that warrants no comment from Paré.[76]

The invitation to a woman to lie with her mistress or a noblewoman was considered a privileged sign of favor.[77] In a letter written in 1605 by Lady Anne Clifford to her mother, Anne apologizes for her inability to go "to Oxford, according to your Ladyship's desire with my Lady Arbella [Stuart], and to have slept in her chamber, which she much desired, for I am the more bound to her than can be, but my Lord would not have me go with the Court thither."[78] The sharing of beds with female intimates seems to have been an expected, yet nonetheless highly emotive, occurrence in Lady Anne's life. In her diary she records that, in punishment for having ridden horse alone with a man, her mother instructed that she should sleep alone in her room. This, Lady Anne writes, "I could not endure, but my Cozen Frances got the Key of my Chamber and lay with me which was the first time I loved hir so verie well."[79] "Loved hir so verie well" – Anne's affection for her kinswoman Lady Frances Bourchier, with whom she slept on other occasions, is expressed in the ambiguous, yet overlapping, terms of aristocratic kinship and passionate friendship.[80]

Further down the social scale – indeed, outside the household proper – the bedding down of two indigent women is briefly noted by Thomas Harman who, in his epistle dedication to the Countess of Shrewsbury in his *Caveat or Warening For Commen Cursetors*, describes the funeral of a gentleman:

> at his buryall there was such a number of beggers, besides poore housholders dwelling there abouts, that unneath [with difficulty] they mighte lye or stande aboute the House: then was there prepared for them a great and a large barne, and a great fat ox sod out in Furmenty [wheat boiled in milk] for them, with bread *and* drinke aboundantly to furnesh out the premisses; and every person had two pence, for such was the dole. When Night approched, *the* pore housholders repaired home to their houses: the other wayfaring bold beggers remained alnight in *the* barne; and the same barne being serched with light in the night by this old man (and then yonge), with others, they tolde seven score persons of men, every of them having his woma*n*, except it were two wemen that lay alone to gether for some especyall cause. Thus hauing their makes to make mery withall, the buriall was turned to bousing *and* belly chere, morning to myrth, fasting to feasting, prayer to pastyme *and* pressing of papes, and lamenting to Lechery.[81]

In his analysis of Harman's censure of these "wayfaring bold beggars," Daryl Palmer points out that for Harman, "When plebeians take hold of hospitality, they overturn all, reversing every positive value . . . in an alliterative welter of 'pastime and pressing.' Even sexual preference submits to revision."[82] Of interest here is that whereas Harman condemns the beggars in general, no special condemnation is reserved for the two women. Whatever the "especyall cause" for them to "lay alone to gether," it evidently is not one that much troubles Harman.

If, indeed, their motivation for "lay[ing] alone to gether" is mutual affection and desire (and not the need to sleep unmolested), Harman would not be alone in his indifference. Further up in the social scale and across the English Channel, Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme, urbane chronicler of the sixteenth-century French court, poses the question in response to a depiction by Martial: "if two ladies are amorous one of another, as one can find, for such pairs are today often seen sleeping together, in the fashion called in imitation of the learned Lesbian Sappho, *donna con donna*, can they be said to commit adultery and by their joint act make their husbands cuckolds?"[83] Whether one considers Brantôme's *Recuiel des dames* (*Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies*) fiction or fact, gossip or history, this courtly chronicle provides important insight into the ways in which antique models provided a lexicon, and chastity offered an imaginative license, for female homoeroticism. Dedicating an entire section of his First Essay to this question, Brantôme ambles through a number of instances drawn from Martial and Lucian, repeats rumors about "such women and many Lesbians too, in France, in Italy and in Spain, in Turkey, Greece, and other places," and alludes to his own knowledge of elite French women. Alternating his discourse with "I have known" and "I have heard," Brantôme suggests that "where the women are recluses, and do not enjoy complete freedom, the practice is most developed," and that "[i]n our own France too such women are quite common" – although he repeats the xenophobic commonplace that "the fashion" was imported from "Italy by a lady of quality."[84]

Brantôme's urbane indifference stems in part from his estimation of such female pleasures as "merely the apprenticeship to the great business with men."[85] However, several of his examples belie his attempt to minimize the import of these liaisons, instead illuminating the lifelong homoerotic attachments of some women, as well as the ability of these relationships to intervene in marital fortunes. One woman, he maintained, "was [financially] supporting the girl in question and reserving her for her personal consumption alone."[86] More striking, Brantôme suggests that women pursue erotic liaisons with women because such affairs do not incur the social scandal of a premarital or adulterous affair with a man or the dangers of abortion or infanticide. Calling himself neither "their censor nor . . . their husband," Brantôme maintains that "unmarried girls and widows may be excused for liking such frivolous, vain pleasures, and preferring to give themselves to each other thus and so get rid of their heat than to resort to men and be put in the family way and dishonoured by them, or have to get rid of their fruit." As for the homoerotic exploits of married women: "the men are not cuckolded by it."[87] Since women in lust are, in humoral psychophysiology, too hot, and thus in danger of upsetting their humoral balance, it makes sense to Brantôme that they relieve themselves of their excess heat in a manner that will not result in pregnancy.

Men are not cuckolded by *donna con donna* – despite the fact that Brantôme refers to Lucian's description of how such women "copulate like men, copulating with lascivious devices, far-fetched and monstrous, sterile things,"[88] and then describes how "these feminine love-makings are practised in two different ways": rubbing, which "does no harm," and using dildoes (or "godemichy"), which can cause loss of life by engendering unnatural growths in the womb. He includes an explicit description of two ladies of the court who were caught by a prince, "one with a big one between her legs, so neatly fastened on by little belts passing round the body that it looked like a natural member. She was so surprised that she did not have time to take it off, so much so, indeed, that the Prince persuaded her there and then to demonstrate how the two of them did it."[89] Brantôme concludes his chapter saying, "I could have gone on adding to endlessly, far more than I have done, for I have ample material and lengthy too."[90] The modern reader may resent Brantôme's attempt to reduce the significance of *donna con donna* even as he indulges in the titillation it offers. Nonetheless, his essay makes the case for the erotic potential of chastity quite dramatically. If erotic behaviors among women, including the use of dildoes, do not cuckold men, then it would seem that such pleasures fit within chastity's definitional embrace.

Brantôme's view, it must be said, was not widely articulated. Indeed, Montaigne, perhaps in reaction to the stories about tribades that he encountered during his travels, writes in a rather different vein. During a discussion of his delight in social intercourse with "beautiful and [B] honourable women," Montaigne remarks on the invidious deceptions of men in their quest of sex; he then glancingly refers to what women do in return: "Now from the regular routine treachery of men nowadays there necessarily results what experience already shows us: *to escape us, women turn in on themselves and have recourse to themselves or to other women*; or else they, on their side, follow the example we give them, play their part in the farce and join in the business without passion concern or love."[91]

The above discussion moves back and forth in time while traversing England, the European continent, and North America in order to present on a broad canvas the contours of female homoeroticism in the early modern period. Further archival research into local social conditions and controversies no doubt will nuance this synopsis, and enable more specific studies of temporal changes as well as comparative analyses of national, religious, political, and community differences. Wills, household itineraries, correspondence, and funeral monuments all need to be scrutinized with an eye looking for the many ways women lived and loved. But even with the expectation that our knowledge will change