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Introduction

A history of sexuality?

JAMES GRANTHAM TURNER

If we put the sex back in history, where does this leave the Renaissance? In an essay frequently cited below, Joan Kelly asks whether women had a Renaissance at all: their material position weakened despite their idealization, and the apparently "feminine" aspects of court culture largely belonged to men.[1] The next generation is revising Kelly in two ways, either by reconstructing women's own self-definitions, including but not confined to their own sexual self-presentation – examples would be Rosenthal's work on Veronica Franco, and Gaines and Roberts on women's fiction – or by emphasizing those aspects of male sexual behavior that prompt us to ask whether *men* had a Renaissance. What if we seek our typical image of "Renaissance man" not in the Sistine Chapel, but in the Sack of Rome? What if we define as constitutive texts not Pico's oration on the dignity of man, but Aretino's almost unreadable descriptions of orgies and gang-rapes; not Gargantua's education or the Abbey of Thélème, where men and women participate in equal numbers, but the tricks of Panurge, who smears women (literally) with the crudest sexual material? Or rather – since a "historical" project requires the most comprehensive reading possible – could our starting point be the manifest connection *between* these abject and sublime moments?

Aretino's scenes of sexual violence reveal themselves to be densely historical in two senses. Firstly, they turn out to have a basis in fact; gang-rapes masquerading as vigilantism against prostitutes have been widely documented among the bachelries and "abbeys of misrule" of early modern Europe (see pp. 17–18). And secondly, they proclaim their own historicity, their own affinity with epochal events: "her eyes blood red, her cheeks swollen, her hair disheveled, her lips dry and cracked, her clothes torn to shreds, she looked like one of those nuns cursed by both mother and father who were trampled under the Germans' feet as

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they marched into Rome."[2] The "public" realm of the Sack and the "private" realm of sexuality encode one another. The violated woman became a figure for the devastation of the city, while the Sack itself was conceived in sexual terms; before and after the event, Rome was represented as a new Sodom destroyed on account of the pope's affairs with men, as a violated virgin, and as the Whore of Babylon – an image made all too literal when the Lutheran troops raped nuns and sold off aristocratic women in rituals of public humiliation. (They also made sure to abscond with the Holy Foreskin.) Later accounts turn the violation of the nuns into gloating pornography, reversing Aretino while confirming the same association. In one case Aretino's whore-dialogue and a description of the Sack were combined in a single publication.[3]

How then should we read such passages and such authors? Ruggiero reads Aretino both for the content and the tone, using him as both a documentary source for the "culture of illicit sexuality" revealed in the archives, and an indignant satirist on behalf of women (pp. 13–17). Historians should weigh two further possibilities, however. Renaissance sexual discourse may be conventional rather than realistic, self-consciously emulating the stylized obscenities of Petronius and Martial or imitating the "lower bodily stratum" in an artificially gross and incontinent style. And this performative or gestural meaning may undermine the text's apparent moral concern. Aretino's speakers condemn the violence and pity the victim, but the description itself revels in its bawdy vocabulary and lingers over the erotic details of the body exposed to blows. The text effectively assaults the female reader and incites the male reader to share the rapists' sadistic pleasure, complicit in the "dirty joke."

The essays in this volume converge, from several different disciplines and cultural perspectives, on related questions: the historicity of sex and gender, the conflict of violence and idealization, the connection between the punitive and the normative. They seek to transform the bodily realm (reproductive or seductive) into figures of larger significance for the practice of art (Pardo, Maus), for the maintenance of masculine identity at court (Kuchta), or for the institutional treatment of women. All explore what Ruggiero calls "the nexus of discourse and organization" (p. 11), what we might term – recognizing the contribution of art history – the reciprocal constitution of institutions and representations, whether image or text. Are we then engaged in a single project of historicization, an "histoire de la sexualité" along Foucaultian lines, or

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do disciplinary and cultural divisions intervene, divisions as concrete and specific as the historical forces we wish to uncover? Does the art historian privilege the image and the gaze in such a way as to detach them from the temporal, to de-historicize them? Does literary history likewise fetishize the individual text, abandoning the sort of large-scale verification that would count as real history? Do French and Anglo-American literary histories follow a separate path, embodying the differences between the two intellectual cultures, and if so, does this rift extend to feminist theory, which yields widely differing results according to whether a French, American, or British model is adopted?

Though this collection describes itself as *multi-* rather than *inter*disciplinary, it often claims common ground by interchanging the methods and materials of several disciplines. Ruggiero, a historian whose practice is rooted in archival research and whose theory derives from a sociology of boundaries and subcultures, calls for a "rereading" of Renaissance sexuality that includes close attention to literature, and illustrates his thesis from Aretino (who reappears as a perceptive art critic in Pardo's essay on the erotics of painting). Rosenthal, a literary scholar influenced by Ruggiero's work on Venice, uses the writings of two prominent Venetian women to show how each relates to the ideology of the city and the institution of marriage, and how each negotiates the divide between "public" and "private" realms – a distinction clearly more complex for women than for men. Jordan, a literary scholar who models her enterprise on intellectual history, extends this analysis of women's position to include male-authored treatises on women; she looks at the conceptual structures used to establish sexual difference, and finds that economic and sociopolitical considerations permeated ideologies of gender even when these were ostensibly based upon "natural" sexual biology. Baskins, an art historian with strong allegiances to cultural history and semiotic theory, proposes that her chosen genre (*cassone* and *spaliere* painting) should be revalued because it "reveal[s] the strategic linkage of narrative, gender ideology, and sexuality in the production of Renaissance culture" (p. 37). A promising situation has developed: professional critics proclaim the supremacy of historicity, and historians call for the renovation of the discipline through a new mode of reading.

Most of the literary studies in this volume – whether based on close analysis of a few privileged texts, or a synthesis of broad reading – support their claim for historicity by citing recent historians' work on the material conditions of women's lives, the poverty that forced them into prostitution, the restrictions on their speech, the tensions provoked by female monarchy. Rosenthal and Jordan place idealizing defenses of

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women in a context of economic hardship and sexual exploitation. Maus correlates sixteenth-century notions of reproductive physiology with male expropriations of "a womb of his own" as an image of poetic creativity. Stanton moves from male fantasies of the birth-feast to the actual practice of midwifery, and then interprets these gynaecological satires as inverted comments on high politics – the rising *noblesse de robe* and the regency of Marie de Médicis. Similarly, Fleming suggests that ostensibly complimentary gestures toward the female reader in Elizabethan fiction actually express the hostilities and anxieties inspired by a female monarch at a particularly indecisive moment in the colonial subjugation of Ireland, a conjunction of anxieties that prompted many men to declare that English culture itself was becoming feminized. (The psychological mechanism of the "dirty joke" takes on specific historical meaning in Fleming's analysis.) Gaines and Roberts relate the differences in two women writers to their differing social situation, one isolated in a rigid English court, the other leading an emergent *salon* in France. Quilligan musters evidence for the punitive silencing of women to show the contemporary relevance and realism of the female-authored *Tragedy of Mariam*, set in biblical times; here, in another variation on the debates documented by Rosenthal, the public language of the heroine draws her into scandal and destruction despite her impeccably virtuous avoidance of the role of "public" woman. Even Mueller – who discovers a profound difference between text and context, between Donne's positive depiction of lesbianism and all previous scholarly and literary treatments of Sappho – weighs the utopian fantasy of female self-sufficiency against economic reality. Interestingly enough only Kuchta, the other professional historian in the group, dissociates his textual synthesis from what actually happened. By assembling dicta on masculine dress, Kuchta reveals the dominant "episteme" or "semiotic regime," a combination of gender ideology, sumptuary prescriptions, and theories of the sign. Gaines and Roberts likewise use the early-Foucaultian notion of the episteme (p. 290), but for Kuchta it shows only how "ideals of masculinity were constructed and contested," and provides no evidence of "the reality of sartorical practices" (p. 234).

The task of the literary historian, then, seems to involve a balancing act between empirical history and a discourse-centered rereading of the past. She appeals to demonstrable historical reality when it proves real violence and injustice, when it supports a suspicious reading of masculine writing and a realistic or transparent reading of the female-authored text. But such documentation must not undermine the fundamental belief that discourse and language play a supremely important role.

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Consequently, the appeal to context normally involves not archival evidence, but prescriptive treatises, a form of discourse midway between traditionally "literary" and "historical" realms and presumably accessible to both. Yavneh compares Tasso's depiction of the temptress Armida with treatises on ideal female beauty, themselves synthesized from common sources in Dante and Petrarch. Familiar courtesy-books like Castiglione's *Cortegiano* and Guazzo's *Civil conversatione* provide the frame for several "rereadings" of literary dialogue (including Fleming's study of hostile manipulation in Guazzo's English translator). Schoenfeldt discovers in *Paradise Lost* the practice as well as the theory of Italian Renaissance courtliness – a practice here interpreted as a Machiavellian dance in which the powerful and the powerless maneuver for supremacy. Quilligan's section on *The Taming of the Shrew* uses the same conduct literature to prove the plasticity of social roles and the power of "conversation" to transform ostensibly natural human realities; though Shakespeare grants this facility to both partners during the rough courtship of Kate and Petruchio, the closing scene, by suppressing the metatheatrical framework that reveals the artificiality of all gender-roles, reinstates the ideology of fixed identity. Even this history of suppression, however, is based on a faith in the importance of discourse; patriarchy is assumed to invest more in controlling women's speech than in defining their sexuality.

Art history likewise draws upon historiography and discursive theory, though with different results. Pardo synthesizes cinquecento treatises and dialogues on art, and recent interpretations of Renaissance literature, to elucidate Titian's *Urbino Venus* and its visual analogues; Yavneh, conversely, uses an art-historical study of Venetian "sensuous half-length" paintings to explain the appearance and effect of Armida. Pardo evokes the historian Carlo Ginzburg's thesis of a shift in the perceived significance of the visual, though she finds this promotion of sight beneficial rather than dangerous, having selected art treatises rather than confession-manuals as her source. Baskins interprets painted images of Esther according to new theories of typology and semiology, and draws on the work of the historian Diane Hughes to suggest an analogy between the marks on the wood or plaster and the "badges" and ornaments designed to mark off alien races and professions (a topic also touched upon by Ruggiero). Baskins and Pardo both take traditional sources of documentation for art history (aesthetic treatises, patristics, typology) and push them towards new conclusions. Pardo turns from the erotics of Titian's content to the manner of depiction, the seduction of the artist's touch and the sensuousness of

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paint itself; her textual sources elucidate *how*, not *what*, paintings signify. Also breaking away from iconography, which assumed "a seamless correspondence between text and image" (p. 51), Baskins finds a conflict between the official meaning assigned to Esther (a mere foreshadowing of the Virgin), and her physical and sexual representation, her irreducible "bodily presence" (p. 38). (Presumably this refers to the illusion of corporeality created by pigment, though the placing of the figure in relation to architectural space also contributes to the sexualized effect.) Visual embodiment wins the day, breaking out of the typological framework and scattering its claim to control meaning. Thus, despite their interest in literary sources and literary theories that declare the body to be a text and the visual mark a form of oppression, these two (very different) art historians remain loyal to the substantive and integrative power of visual representation, their chosen object of professional study.

It is interesting, in this disciplinary light, to compare contributors' assumptions about the gaze and the blazon.[4] For a historian of texts such as Yavneh, the eroticized gaze intrudes menacingly, threatening rape, and the itemized pictorial description effectively "dismembers" its subject; Yavneh simultaneously expresses a suspicion of the visual and a faith in the power of language – understandable in those of us paid to teach texts rather than images. (Aretino's pornography reminds us, however, how close could be the link between textual and physical violence.) For a visual historian like Pardo (drawing on the same sources, such as Nancy Vickers' interpretation of Petrarch), the gaze and the portrait reintegrate the body into a coherent image by means of an ineffable "touch" that cannot be conveyed in language (pp. 58–65, 69, 81). Yavneh chooses texts that portray the construction of ideal beauty as aggressive (necessitating the absence of real women) and neurotic to the extent that it is sexual: her writers fear that their *pennelli* might prostitute the mistresses they create through writing (pp. 138–40). In the texts favored by Pardo, the work of "love's stylus" (in the gaze) is both mutual and beneficient, a transformation-into-art without loss of identity (p. 57). For Stanton, again, the gaze is sinister and Foucaultian, "titillated" rather than seductive – the panoptic gaze of the narrator, who spies on women during childbirth and steals their language, disarming it by reducing it to female "chatter" or *caquet*. We might assume, then, that for the art historian sight is always potentially delightful, whereas for the literary historian language is always potentially heroic while sight leads to the foul practices of the voyeur and the overseer. For Stanton the "recuperative" power of

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language works for good as well as bad, as seen in her move from male simulations of "chatter" to the apparently authentic voice of Mathurine, female jester to a female court; this obscene, rebuking figure becomes a model of the oppositional critic, confronting sexual ideology and gender-blindness in twentieth-century theorist and seventeenth-century satirist alike.[5]

Though disciplinary loyalty to the medium helps to explain the diversity among "historians of sexuality," scholars remain profoundly divided between recuperative and suspicious modes of reading, between integrative and destructive visions of Eros, between a history of empowerment and a history of victimization.[6] Schoenfeldt, for example, ascribes far more power to Milton's Eve than most feminist critics allow, decoding her verbal declarations of submission as performative gestures that declare her social initiative; here a "suspicious" approach to the discourse of courtesy (inspired by Kelly's rereading of Castiglione) combines with a "recuperative" model of female agency. Fleming does the reverse: her authors explicitly address women, announce a special devotion to women's interests, and identify their narratives as a woman's genre, but Fleming reveals an increasingly violent sexual charge which compromises the female reader rather than complimenting her. Maus remains critical of the male poet's cross-gender identification with the female, even in the complicated case of Milton. Mueller, on the other hand, seeks to rescue Donne from the imputation of abusing the "masculine persuasive force" of his verse. Drawing on the thinking of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, Mueller suggests that male personation of female sexuality need not involve colonization and degradation. The "utopian" reconstruction of lesbianism in "Sapho to Philaenis" allowed Donne to express a new appreciation both of marriage and of single-sex friendship – removing their potential conflict by combining them into a single female couple – without diminishing erotic passion. This optimistic reading brings Mueller closer to Pardo's appreciation of Titian and Speroni than to most of her fellow professors of literature.

"Rereading the Renaissance," then, must involve a transformation in modes of reading as well as a quantitative increase in data. "Historical"/documentary and "literary"/discursive approaches should both be carefully weighed against the circumstances and consequences of the individual text. We should attend to the limits as well as the powers of words and images, especially to those features of representation that might make it unrepresentative. Renaissance discourses on sexuality and gender cultivated a dissociation between ostensible meaning and

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performative occasion. What kind of evidence, for example, can be derived from the prescriptive treatise; does it express deeply internalized norms, or does it erect a wishful reversal of the existing world? Or from the paradoxical encomium, which aims to destroy by ridicule, rather than to promote, beliefs that include the right of women to govern and the perfection of lesbian sexuality? Rereading means decoding. Paradoxical praise appears to exalt its subject while undermining it; in Fleming's phrase, such texts are "marked as being beside the point" (p. 158). Its reverse is *sprezzatura*, the promotion of one's own value by well-contrived false modesty and self-deprecation. But can we always be sure which model operates, whose bluff is being called? The masculine desire to expropriate female procreativity certainly justifies Maus' suspicion, and certainly reveals its absurdity in the *Caquet* pamphlets studied by Stanton. But we should recall that Montaigne referred to his own essay "Sur des vers de Virgile," perhaps the most profound meditation on sexuality in the Renaissance, as itself "un flux de caquet" (III.v).

Notes

1 See, for example, Kuchta's revision of Kelly on male apparel (p. 233).

2 Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate*, ed. G. D. Bonino (Turin, 1975), pp. 256–7, trans. Raymond Rosenthal as *Dialogues* (New York, 1972), p. 267; Nanna recounts the treatment of the kindly and attractive courtesan "madonna nol-vo'-dire," in a sequence of half-indignant and half-pornographic descriptions of men's brutality to prostitutes. The *trentuno* or rape by thirty-one men also provided a bawdy poem (*c.*1535) and an episode in the pseudo-Aretinan *Puttana errante* (1660?).

3 Antonio Rodriguez Villa, *Memorias para la historia del asalto y saqueo de Roma* (Madrid, 1875), p. 141 (Brandano of Siena calling the pope "Sodomita bastardo" and predicting the destruction of Rome because "he has robbed the Mother of God to adorn his harlot, or rather his friend"); Judith Hook, *The Sack of Rome, 1527* (London, 1972), pp. 156, 172; André Chastel, *The Sack of Rome, 1527*, trans. Beth Archer (Princeton, 1983), pp. 22–4, 36, 38, 103, 244; Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Ludovic Lalanne, vol. I (Paris, 1864), pp. 274–6 (speculations on the pleasure the rape victims felt, comparison of nun's flesh to that of the partridge); Caspar Barthius rewrites Aretino's third dialogue and combines it with the Sack in *Pornodidascalus, sive colloquium muliebre Petri Aretini ... addita expugnato urbis Romae* (Frankfurt, 1623). The sexual meaning of the Holy Foreskin is questioned by Arnold Davidson (citing Chastel on the Sack), but the context sketched above surely undermines Davidson's contention that the concept of "sexuality" is wholly anachronistic when applied to the Renaissance; "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1987), 26.

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4 In addition to the examples discussed here, see Pardo's (and her sources') very positive interpretation of the Narcissus myth (p. 81), and Ruggiero's use of the early-Foucaultian concept of the "disciplinary" gaze (p. 26).
5 Stanton leaves it open whether the texts ascribed to Mathurine are themselves male fabrications.
6 This hermeneutic dilemma applies to cultures and societies as well as to texts and images, as can be seen in Kelly's essay; her negative reading of women's position in the Renaissance depends on a correspondingly euphoric interpretation of the Middle Ages.

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Chapter One

Marriage, love, sex, and Renaissance civic morality

GUIDO RUGGIERO

That major shifts occurred in the Italian Renaissance at the turn of the sixteenth century, shifts that would continue to be worked out across the rest of the early modern period, and not just in Italy but across Europe, is a truism of Renaissance scholarship. But now new questions arise about those shifts, as the historical canon, based on politics, war, and high culture, with an underpinning of social detail, begins to dissolve before the onslaught of a series of "other" histories, such as the "new" social history, women's history and the history of gender, and the history of mentalities. We have to rethink the Renaissance – a pleasure that grows out of the pain of sacrificing earlier givens. Perhaps the issues involved were best faced early on by Joan Kelly when she asked in "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" whether the old periodization of the Renaissance had any meaning for the history of women, if the period and the vision of the period were constructed in terms of a history that focused on the high culture of élite males. Was that periodization useful for conceptualizing the much more complex past she and others were investigating?[1]

I would like to propose in this essay a project for rereading the Renaissance that, to be successful, will need a cooperative effort between those who study the texts of literature and those who read the texts of history, especially in the archives – an interdisciplinary effort in terms of the boundaries currently drawn perhaps, but one that shares an interest in the close analysis of texts in their historical perspective common to much of the new social history and the new cultural poetics of criticism. This rereading would center upon marriage, family, society, and the disciplining of the body. For Renaissance historians the issues involved have garnered attention over the last few decades largely because of the new initiatives in social history that stressed the importance of the family, first from a sociological perspective, and then from a more

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