

Introduction

In eighteenth-century Venice, an anonymous painter produced a seemingly innocuous image of a well-dressed man about to sip from a teacup. The man is seated in a large, comfortable chair, while a woman, a bit too fancy in her multi-layered dress with ribbons on the wrists and wearing gold earrings, stands before him. Her arm is bent to hold a plate, and in the crook of her elbow rests the handle of a broom. She is looking down at the plate, which is angled slightly toward the floor. The man is looking at her, his eyes level with her breasts, although they are demurely hidden under the double layer of her dress.

It could be a domestic image, a couple going about their morning business. It probably was for domestic consumption, in all likelihood hung in someone's home. But this is a book about sexuality. Why a domestic image by way of a beginning? First, because domesticity includes a great deal of sex. Under its auspices, families are formed and continued by means of sex. One of the purposes of marriage is to provide a space for procreation, which is often a polite way of saying marriage is supposed to contain and control sexual expression. Second, the image is a highly sexual one, although in ways that are not necessarily obvious to the modern viewer. The man peering toward the woman's breasts is of course a clue to us, but so is the broom. The shaft was considered a sexual referent in the eighteenth century, and the hard, phallic shape exterior and parallel to the trajectory of the penis in intercourse is unmistakable. In early modern Europe, keys and the locks they penetrate, swords in scabbards, bolts in doors, pestles in mortars, leeks, parsnips, crosiers, apples, pears, figs, carrots, obelisks, and arrows were visual and verbal clues for sex.

The power imbalances that mark so much sexual behavior are apparent as well. Even if she is not a maid, the woman is depicted in an inferior position because she is serving and cleaning. The man is wealthy and commanding by virtue of his throne-like seat. Yet, as is often the case, the sexual hierarchy is as precarious as it is aggressive. The woman may be marked as a possession, but the image suggests some ambivalence about



Figure 1. Anon., *Woman with a Broom*. Eighteenth century, Venice.

the potency of her possessor. His foot is about to escape its expensive slipper. He is young, but his hair is artificially powdered white and he is slumped slightly toward his warming drink. He is not the conventional image of masculine comportment: the slipping foot is a metaphor for popping out during intercourse, and he appears enervated by his exertions (Figure 1).

So this is hardly an innocent image after all. Rather, it includes a range of sexual suggestions, and through them, synthesizes a number of the contradictions about sexuality that marked early modern thought and practice. The image displays both intimacy and hierarchy between the man and woman. It is visually pleasing and, because of its sexual implications, unsettling at the same time. It is also ambiguous: Is this domesticity, or a post-coital mercenary moment? In its time and place of composition, it is likely to have been all of these and more to its purchaser; the image figures in the history of representations of sex and the commodification of them. As a painting, this was a high-end item in an ever-expanding market of sexual images. Printing made scurrilous texts, sometimes illustrated quite graphically, widely available. For those for whom books were too dear or words too difficult, single images printed from engravings or woodcuts were also produced in large numbers and were often very cheap.

With its oblique references to pleasure and its more obvious suggestions of shame, our painting fits in a larger history of sexuality that is told as either a narrative of progress toward greater sexual freedom and individual fulfillment or as a tale of degeneration and decadence in which sexual license is constantly threatening the moral fiber of civilization. The latter version is the dominant story traditionally told about sex, although not usually by historians. Theologians, politicians, moralists, and memorialists typically took the view that sex was a disruptive force that must be controlled and regulated. Trans-historical claims about sex as sin and social disorder were embedded in such views and for many, such ideas remain compelling. The assumption that sex always meant the same (negative) things shapes discussions of sex and sexuality to the present day.

The argument that sex might have a history in which ideas and practices changed across time and place is relatively new. Historians since at least the Roman writer Suetonius (*c.* 69–after 122 AD) have recorded sexual behavior, particularly that of the famous and powerful. Of course everyone knows that sex acts happened in the past – we would not be here otherwise. But far fewer people understand how much sexuality – a term encompassing the activities and values associated with sexual acts and behaviors – has changed over time. At the present day, many consider sexual identity to be central to a person’s psychological make-up. Sexual identity worked rather differently before 1800. For early modern men and women, neighborhood, parish, village, and occupation primarily defined the self. When sexual identity was an issue, it was usually defined as a factor in one’s relationship to marriage. Whether one was actually married, eligible to be married, or committed to stay unmarried by virtue of a

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vow of chastity, marriage and the presumption of marital sexuality determined key aspects of a person's social status, legal position, and economic prospects. But this is not a psychological or interior understanding of subjectivity; it is instead contextual, material, and circumstantial. The idea that sex shaped personality in fundamental ways was largely the work of such sexologists as Richard Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After describing a huge range of sexual expression as pathological, they defined penetrative sex between a man and a woman as the only "normal" possibility. The shorthand identification labels we recognize, "homosexual" and "heterosexual," not surprisingly appeared in the same period. Refinements like bisexual and transsexual are more recent, and reflect some of the loosening of the good/bad binary fostered by sexologists as "normal" and "deviant."

Because so much attaches to the individual in our understanding of politics and society, personal identification is often presumed to be profoundly sexual. Anyone who describes himself or herself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or transsexual identifies in obviously sexual ways, but "straight" or heterosexual people identify as such to themselves and others so routinely and regularly that they usually do not even recognize that they are doing so. Indeed, the presumption of heterosexuality can protect sexual "others" from violence in a way that makes discrimination against sexual orientation quite different from racial or ethnic prejudice. But sexuality as the preeminent personal referential frame is quite new historically. This book is in part about how this happened.

How historians have approached sexuality has depended in large part on their intellectual priorities. Historians have argued over how much can be explained by specific circumstances (laws, customs, institutions) in particular places and moments. Some have asserted that, no matter how much is constructed by social circumstances, some essential, unchanging elements of sex remain.¹ While this acts as a brake on assuming that everything is relative, social constructionists preferred the idea that sex is organized and given meaning by its cultural context and the narratives that produce our understanding, rather than preceding these contextual elements as a biological given. On the one hand, essentialist thinking allowed that "deviance" would have to be accepted as innate. On the other hand, constructionists felt that even the most persistent sexual

¹ See for instance John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994) and feminist debates about essentialism in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (New York, 1996).

prejudices might be reconstructed.² Both positions have merit, and the arguments that follow in this book try to negotiate between them. Essentialists insist on the historical reality of lived bodily experience. Social constructionists maintain that experience, even of the body, is always mediated and understood in language and other modes of representation. In this book, lived experience and its representations both matter. Each of the topics – family, religion, science, crime, and deviance – are analyzed in terms of how individuals and social groups understood or articulated sexual behaviors.

Combining these approaches is largely possible because new methods have transformed the history of sexuality since in the 1970s. Social historians began by recovering sexualized aspects of the life cycle such as marriage and childbirth. Demographic studies, especially of the family, revealed much about patterns around marriage, childbirth, and sexual behavior. Often highly statistical, early social history did not analyze individuals and their immediate circumstances so much as provide a larger picture of living conditions and life cycles. In the wake of the women's movement, historians of women and gender, usually viewing the historical record from a feminist perspective, analyzed long-standing patterns of sexual socialization by focusing on such issues as coerced sex and arranged marriage in terms of patriarchal power. Social historians, feminist and otherwise, also began to recover evidence about the sexual practices, foibles, and transgressions of people in the past.

Still, studying sex was not entirely respectable.³ Some might argue that it still isn't, but sexuality gained much intellectual acceptance with Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978).⁴ Foucault argued that modern sexuality ought to be understood as discursively organized and marked by technologies of power. That is, patterns of language, such as confession and silencing around sexual acts, operate in complex ways within structures of power (such as the family, church, state, and science) to form sexual identity. In Foucault's account, seventeenth-century Europeans were playful and shameless about sex until Catholic confessional practices demanding self-scrutiny over sexual sin started to take hold and the state policed sexuality more effectively. Confession was

² On the debate, see for instance Edward Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* (London, 1992).

³ Vern L. Bullough, "Sex in History: A Redux," in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, 1996), 4.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978). Foucault planned a six-volume history of sexuality, but had completed only two volumes before his death. They are *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon, 1985); and *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1986).

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especially important because Europeans were exhorted to think critically about their sexual practices, to articulate them, and then to repress those deemed unproductive or “bad.” Confession required that every desire, every action got transformed into language so that it could be mastered by the self.

Foucault further argues that Enlightenment thinkers, concerned about birth patterns, death rates, and manpower capacity, made interest in sexual practices widespread. Bourgeois Victorians then made all sorts of rules about sex. Sexual prudery worked in such a way that Victorians had to talk about sex all the time under the guise of condemning and rejecting it. Confession, population concerns, and prudery came together in the idea that, to be “good,” one had to expel forms of sexuality that were unacceptable, often defined as unproductive in economic terms. Healthy, affluent married couples who produced children were economically beneficial; those who were healthy and affluent and did not reproduce or who were unhealthy (physically or mentally) and/or poor were increasingly regarded as not merely unproductive, but worse, as detrimental to civilized society. Sexual irregularity in these terms defined an individual’s identity within a social context. For Foucault, sex became a matter of identity, rather than merely a set of discrete and particular actions under convergent pressures in the nineteenth century.

Very much a social constructionist, Foucault emphasized the centrality of discourse – of language – in the construction of power. Confession was the mechanism that defined the self in language; population issues, expressed in treatises, tracts, newspapers, political speeches and sermons, were presented as language. Victorians demanded silence, but had to describe by means of language that which one had to be silent about. While the emphasis on power created by words, rather than such coercive structures as guns or prisons, might seem to make change more imaginable, Foucault was pessimistic about disaggregating the interlocking structures of discourse that made sex repressive.

Despite, or more precisely, because of, Foucault’s extreme constructionist approach, several of his propositions outlined above proved especially controversial – and ultimately productive – for historians. Within his radical rethinking of categories of knowledge, Foucault posited that, before the advent of sexology in the nineteenth century, individuals who committed sexual transgressions were condemned for what they did, rather than for who they were. That is, a person committed an act of sodomy; he or she was not a homosexual. Sexual “acts” rather than “identities” prevailed. Foucault maintained that, before science developed categories and pathologies around sex, there was no concept that the person who engaged in a particular sex act was fundamentally defined

by it. Historians (myself included – see the title of this book) maintained that this was not quite right. Scholars of premodern Europe contested Foucault’s assertion that sexual identity was a nineteenth-century invention. Some medievalists found assertions of sexual difference by sodomites, women, and non-Christian “others.” Several early modernists argued that ties between men created homoerotic identifications. Male friendship, urban areas for sexual liaisons, and homosocial environments all created habits of sexual identification outside of marriage or declared celibacy.⁵ “Sodomites” and “mollies” were recognized sexual types, as were prostitutes and celibates. Early modern people did at times identify people by their sexual practices. The aggregation of sodomites in urban environments in the Renaissance was made possible by, and facilitated, sexual identity.⁶

If the move from acts to identities needed a more nuanced approach, Foucault’s insistence on the body as completely culturally constructed was met with complaints that actual people did not figure in his account. Indeed, some studies following Foucault considered the body almost entirely from the perspective of learned texts. Bodily conditions such as pregnancy, sickness, and health were detached from everyday experience.⁷ As a correction to this abstraction, historians, including Peter Brown and Carolyn Walker Bynum, insisted on the material specificity of individual bodies in the past. Issues such as fertility, death, decay, biological functions, and sensual experiences were recuperated in a range of times and places.⁸ Recently, efforts have been made to fuse individual,

⁵ See for instance Glenn Burger and Stephen F. Kruger, eds., *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2001); Karma Lochrie, “Desiring Foucault,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 27, 1 (Winter 1996), 3–17; Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago and London, 2003); Joseph Cady, “‘Masculine Love,’ Renaissance Writing, and the ‘New Invention’ of Homosexuality,” in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, ed. Claude Summers (New York, 1992), 9–40; Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London, 1997).

⁶ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, 1982); Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London, 1992); Katherine O’Donnell and Michael O’Rourke, *Love, Sex, Intimacy and Friendship Between Men, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 2003).

⁷ This has been a criticism leveled at Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

⁸ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York, 1995) and “Bodily Miracles and the Resurrection of the Body in the High Middle Ages,” in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, ed. Thomas Kselman (South Bend, IN, 1991), 68–106; and for an overview, Roy Porter, “History of the Body,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, PA, 1991), 206–32.

gendered experience of the body and the ways in which it was formulated in language. As Laura Gowing put it, bodily experiences are “the products of popular ideas, social pressures, religious convictions and economic conditions.”⁹ Her reconstruction of how gender and sexual biology operated in the daily lives of everyday people is exemplary for its careful attention to both biographical specificity and cultural discourse.

As even this brief account suggests, whatever his faults, Foucault opened up space for empirical historians to examine sexuality with an eye to uncovering the ways in which it operated in the past. Foucault stimulated reformulated questions and approaches to the history of sexual behavior. Historians asked new questions of the demographic patterns uncovered around marriage, birth, death, and disease. Social historians increasingly described the sexual habits of common people in villages, towns, and cities across early modern Europe in textured terms. Individuals emerged from legal records, religious tracts, and scandal sheets. Historians reconstructed the habits of thought and peculiarities of early modern sexual ideologies by reexamining or unearthing literature in all genres that addressed sexual issues. Analyses explored how biological differences between men and women (sex) and the cultural meanings attached to those differences (gender) were organized in particular historical contexts. Historians sympathetic to viewing sexuality as a primary cultural formation elaborated on normative and non-normative practices within family, religious, and state structures. Foucault may not have been entirely correct about the details or the chronology, but he inspired whole new areas of inquiry that have transformed our understanding of early modern society and culture.

Because language does matter, a few words about usages in this book are in order. The language used in specific texts and by individual actors was highly variable. Different moments in time and different places assigned a wide variety of meanings to single terms (such as “sodomy”) or used multiple terms (“berdache,” “sodomite,” “buggerer,” “catamite,” “ingle”) to refer to the same behavior. Terms were used, and sometimes abused, for specific purposes. This is not to say that they have no meaning. Terms that have capacious, even capricious meanings, mask their politics. Power dynamics between and among individuals or groups are naturalized and disguised by the strategic use of a word like “marriage,” coupled to a word like “natural,” “domestic,” “heterosexual,” or “procreative.” While each usage in the chapters that follow tries

⁹ Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2003), 4.

to be as specific and precise as possible, I retain the multiplicity of usages in order to bring the politics of sexuality to the surface.

To be explicit about my politics (or some of them, at any rate), my presumption is that sexualities are multiple and created by human beings in social settings. There is “sex” meaning male and female biological *sexes*. “Sex” as in sexual acts or actions comes in a variety of forms, including intercourse (usually indicating vaginal penetration by a penis, a hand, or a sex toy), anal stimulation and penetration, oral sex, and masturbation. The meanings attached to these and other sexual acts vary widely even within a relatively narrow range of temporal and spatial contexts. I realized just how widely variable recently when I asked a classroom full of students if oral sex “counted” as sex. The class assured me that only vaginal penetration “really mattered.” A woman was still a virgin, both the men and women asserted, if she has “only” done “oral and anal.” This was quite different from my experience. When I went to college in the 1980s, all sexual contact that included arousal to the point of sexual release and/or the exchange of bodily fluids “counted” as sex. To be sure, kissing wasn’t the same as penetration, but anything that could lead reasonably directly to an orgasm was sex. Now, in what strikes me as a dangerously reductive formulation, only heterosexual coitus is “real” sex. Tell that to a gay man or a lesbian, or, indeed, to anyone who experiences a flexible and thus potentially non-normative range of desires. Any such person might laugh, but more likely he or she would recognize what I mean by dangerously reductive. Sexualities – the cultural overlays that impose meaning onto sex acts – are and have been historically far more fluid and elastic than this present-day view can allow. If only one form of sex “counts,” all others are reduced in validity or rejected as inferior. I am not suggesting that early modern Europeans were better for having more terminological range. I am saying the purpose of this project is not just to explore the range of meanings, but to tease out the logic behind shifting usages.

This book is organized topically, concentrating on the period from 1400 to 1800. The chapters concentrate on transformations in large structures: family and marriage, religion, science and medicine, crime, and deviance. Each chapter examines change over time, with reference to major findings and controversies that have marked historical research on early modern European sexuality. Some of the chapters have significant areas of overlap; witchcraft appears more than once, as does sodomy. The treatment of ideas or problems is specific to its relevance in a particular chapter. Witches, for instance, were both criminals and heretics in sexual ways. The actual chronological scope and focus depends on the topic. Religious attitudes toward sexuality, for instance, were formulated in

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many ways in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Given the range, I make no claim that this is a comprehensive account. Nor do I claim that the geographical coverage is evenly distributed. England has been studied more extensively by historians across much of the period, and some areas have special concentrations such as Reformation Germany, Counter-Reformation Spain, Renaissance Italy, and eighteenth-century France. Where possible, I have included other areas, but Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and more centrally located areas such as Scotland and Portugal are far less studied. This book reflects the unevenness in the literature, and one of my hopes is that some of those who read it will want to fill those gaps some day.

Another hope is that readers will understand that sexuality is a protean thing, changing by gender, class, status, place, and time, to name just a few of its variables. My aim is to offer narratives of change and the logics behind them. My small hope is that the men and women in “old” pictures might become legible in new and provocative ways; my larger hope is that understanding the history of sexuality will help produce a future in which sexuality is given space to be as protean, gratifying, and expressive as possible.