

The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance

When the French invaded Italy in 1494, they were shocked by the frank sexuality expressed in Italian cities. By 1600, the French were widely considered to be the most highly sexualized nation in Christendom. What caused this transformation? This book examines how, as Renaissance textual practices and new forms of knowledge rippled outward from Italy, the sexual landscape and French notions of masculinity, sexual agency, and procreation were fundamentally changed. Exploring the use of astrology, the infusion of Neoplatonism, the critique of Petrarchan love poetry, and the monarchy's sexual reputation, the book reveals that the French encountered conflicting ideas from abroad and from antiquity about the meanings and implications of sexual behavior. Intensely interested in cultural self-definition, humanists, poets, and political figures all contributed to the rapid alteration of sexual ideas to suit French cultural needs. The result was the vibrant sexual reputation that marks French culture to this day.

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-76989-1 — The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance
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Katherine Crawford
Vanderbilt University



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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521769891

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First published 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-76989-1 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-74950-3 Paperback

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Preface and acknowledgments

In his essay “On Some Verses of Virgil,” Michel de Montaigne comments:

The gods, says Plato, have furnished us with a disobedient and tyrannical member, which, like a furious animal, undertakes by the violence of its appetite to subject everything to itself. To women likewise they have given a gluttonous and voracious animal which, if denied its food in due season, goes mad, impatient of delay, and, breathing its rage into their bodies, stops up the passages, arrests the breathing, causing a thousand kinds of ills, until it has sucked in the fruit of the common thirst and therewith plentifully irrigated and fertilized the depth of the womb.¹

Montaigne’s references to ancient conceptions of the body are familiar. Acknowledging male desire briefly, Montaigne zeroes in on women as voracious and out of control sexually. Their desire is physiological; their humoral balance and health depend on the physical necessity of irrigation. The ability to control desire rationally is implicitly absent in women, while some men – strong, rational, properly functional masculine men – will not allow themselves to be overcome by disobedient physicality. But Montaigne goes on to trouble this standard view: “The Indian women who see the men in the raw, have at least cooled their sense of sight . . . Moreover, Livia used to say that to a good woman a naked man is no more than a statue.” As is his practice, Montaigne multiplies his examples, drawing on ancient and contemporary sources. There are strategies, he says, for women to modify their sexual nature. The problem, in the end, Montaigne insists, is the men: “In short, we allure and flesh them by every means; we incessantly heat and excite their imagination; and then we bellyache.” Although not in so many words, Montaigne assures us that sex is about gender, and about the meanings we attach to both sex as biological difference and sex meaning sexual acts.

The loci of meaning for a French man in the Renaissance were his immediate world and the past he claimed as his own. Montaigne invokes antiquity repeatedly in laying out his comments about sex. France is perhaps less obvious, but the unsettled world in which Montaigne made his way had its peculiarities

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford University Press, 1965), III, 5, p. 654.

which were foundational for Montaigne's skeptical, self-exploratory essay project. Cultural encounters, especially with "Italy" (that is, the area we now call Italy) had revitalized French aesthetics. "On Some Verses of Virgil" draws on such encounters with Pietro Aretino and Giovanni Boccaccio, as well as Catullus, Horace, Augustine, a brief account of Priapic rituals among Roman matrons and references to Egyptian practices at Bacchanals.²

In Montaigne's immediate historical moment, religious schism and political crisis combined to unsettle Renaissance France. Analysis of the Wars of Religion has been extensive. I invoke here only a few important aspects of the period from 1562 to 1598 – the beginning of sectarian strife to the Edict of Nantes.³ Violence, usually small-scale as wars go, became endemic for several reasons. As James B. Wood has demonstrated, the inability of the monarchy to sustain a military position meant that armed encounters continued sporadically until exhaustion.⁴ The quality of the violence steadily escalated over successive encounters, and the intensification of sectarian hatred led to fantasies of annihilation. The most notorious of these was St. Bartholomew's Day (August 24, 1572).⁵ The "season" of killing that ensued did not eradicate the Protestants, but it did harden both Catholic and Protestant sentiments, and instantiate the hatred between them.⁶ The failure of leadership by the monarchy was quite spectacular. Effectively fronting the government for Charles IX, Catherine de' Medici did not comprehend the sectarian commitments of ardent Catholics and Protestants. When the monarchy offered edicts of toleration, religious affiliations at court created intractable factional struggles. The Catholic Guise family against Admiral Coligny, the Princes of Condé against the Montmorency family, and the conflicts within the royal family between Henri III and his younger brother, the duc d'Alençon, were just the most prominent of these alignments.

² Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, III, 5, 652–3.

³ Mack P. Holt, *The Wars of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) extends the period of conflict on the grounds that the monarchy did not control the situation reliably until it destroyed the independence of La Rochelle under Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu. For the intellectual context, see especially Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu: la violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525–vers 1610*, 2 vols. (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990) and *La Genèse de la Réforme française, 1520–1562* (Paris: SEDES, 1996).

⁴ James B. Wood, *The King's Army: Warfare, Soldiers, and Society during the Wars of Religion in France, 1562–1576* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ The literature is vast, but one of the recent controversies – about the responsibility of the monarchy in touching off the massacres – covers much of the ground. See Marc Venard, "Arrêtez le massacre," in *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 39 (1992): 645–61; Denis Crouzet, *La Nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy: un rêve perdu de la Renaissance* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); and Jean-Louis Bourgeon, *L'Assassinat de Coligny* (Geneva: Droz, 1992); *Charles IX devant la Saint-Barthélemy* (Geneva: Droz, 1995).

⁶ On the expansion of violence and its extensions throughout France, see Janine Garrisson Estèbe, *Tocsin pour un massacre: la saison de Saint-Barthélemy* (Paris: Centurion, 1968) and Nicole Vray, *La Guerre des Religions dans la France de l'ouest. Poitou–Aunis–Saintonge, 1534–1610* (La Crèche: Geste, 1997).

Montaigne refracts the double threat of religious and civil strife in his recurrent engagements with sexual issues. The political connection to the sexual was both personal and inescapable for Montaigne: he served as Mayor of Bordeaux, holding the city on behalf of Henri III, the most sexually controversial king in French history (about whom, see Chapter 5 below). Montaigne's recounting the variety of customs and beliefs about sex around the world and through time defuses the claims for absolute correctness that fueled such violence. Discussing sex was not an escape so much as part of a larger strategy to think through the changing, unpredictable, and violent world in which Montaigne explored his beloved texts and himself.

Montaigne was less interested in pinning down meaning than allowing that its proliferations had to be recognized. Making meaning, especially skeptical meaning, was an arduous business. Not only were there all those ancient texts now available, but also the world was opening up. Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" offers one encounter with New World difference, but other essays are peppered with brief moments of cultural difference around the world. Indians pardon the sun when battle goes badly; in Peru, beauty is a matter of who has the largest ears; the king of Mexico makes war to collect prisoners for his sacrifices; where the ancient Romans accustomed their populace to cruelty through animal sacrifice, the Turks established hospitals for animals.⁷ Examples could be multiplied.

But, you say, your book is supposed to be about sexual culture, not religious conflict or the opening up of knowledge of the world. Montaigne appears as my prologue because he embodied, articulated, and pondered so many of the currents, ideas, and changes of his day. He weighs in on all the areas I explore in this book. Ancient ideas about sex appear throughout, and even Orpheus, who figures centrally in Chapter 1, makes a fleeting appearance in the *Essays*.⁸ Montaigne evinces skepticism about astrology and its predictive propensities with respect to reproduction.⁹ "Of Friendship," his extended tribute to Etienne de La Boétie, includes a Neoplatonic parsing of desire between men, a vexed subject throughout the French Renaissance and no less so for Montaigne.¹⁰ Contemporary poetry, both asexual and otherwise, makes its way

⁷ Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, "We should meddle soberly with judging divine ordinances," I, 33, 160; "Apology for Raymond Sebond," II, 12, 355; "Of Moderation," I, 30, 149; "Of Cruelty," II, 11, 318.

⁸ Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," II, 12, 324.

⁹ Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, "Of Prognostications," I, 11, 27–30. See also "Of Vanity," III, 9, 734.

¹⁰ Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, "Of Friendship," I, 28, 135–44. For discussions of Montaigne and friendship, see for instance Marc D. Schachter, "'That Friendship Which Possesses the Soul': Montaigne Loves La Boétie," in *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibal (New York and London: Haworth, 2001), 5–21; and Danielle Clark, "'The Sovereign's Vice Begets the Subject's Error': The Duke of Buckingham,

into several essays.¹¹ Montaigne's veiled criticism of Henri III for immoderate behavior in his religious devotions was part of the sexualized critique of the monarchy extending back to François I.¹² Montaigne's engagements are typical of his place and time. Sex was a space in which evoking different customs was (and is) easy to do. In some ways, sex itself was easy. Procreation and pleasure were the basic goals. But the apparatus of belief around how to achieve positive ends, particularly around pleasure, was more complicated. The ancients and other populations around the globe could only offer their astounding array of beliefs, justifications, rituals, assertions, certainties, and falsehoods. People like Montaigne had to sort them out for self and society.

With all due thanks to Montaigne for the essay form, for allowing and encouraging the trying of ideas in writing, the project which follows is an essay about making and changing meanings of sex and sexuality in Renaissance France. Elements of this story will be familiar. France was part of the larger culture of Europe and a vital player in the conversations of the Renaissance. Other aspects will be less so. This essay is about intersecting, overlapping priorities, meanings, and understandings that came together to make a specifically French sexual history. At the same time, it reveals that the cultural choices of French readers, writers, poets, thinkers, astrologers, politicians, religious figures, peasants, jurists, and artists (to name just the more textually obvious contributors) can be understood to share ideas, ideals, and mechanisms with other sexual cultures. It is a book about France, albeit France in the world. The short version of the story is that the French were widely regarded as prudish and unsophisticated in matters of sex and sexuality in the late fifteenth century. Comments about French reactions to Italian and ancient customs encountered actually or textually make this reputation for sexual squeamishness plain. By the reign of Henri IV (1589–1610), the French were the randy bastards of Europe, known for their sexual style in language, art, and comportment. This book is an account – by no means the only one possible – of how that transformation came about.

All projects we choose to undertake, including book-sized ones, are always essays in another sense. They reveal (to readers, but also to authors) bits of what the author thinks important enough to spend countless hours researching, ruminating upon, writing, rewriting, and subjecting to others for comment, criticism, and the occasional pat on the head. I suspect by the end, my self will be apparent in my choices and my arguments. As is always the case, finding that self is in fact the work of many people over many years. This project has

'Sodomy,' and Narratives of Edward II, 1622–28," in *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Tom Betteridge (Manchester University Press, 2002), 46–64.

¹¹ See for instance Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, "On Some Verses of Virgil," III, 5, 678 (Mellin de Saint-Gelais); "Apology for Raymond Sebond," II, 12, 381 (Pierre de Ronsard).

¹² Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, "Of Moderation," I, 30, 146.

been long in the making and my debts are myriad. Years ago, the University of Chicago was the first home of this project. Friends, now colleagues, from graduate school intervened at various points, making suggestions, offering encouragement, and allowing me to test ideas. I am particularly grateful to Greta Rensenbrink, John Shovlin, Kate Hammerton, and Stephane Gerson. Sir Colin Lucas pushed me to think in expansive terms and to branch out in my interests. Jan Goldstein encouraged me to frame the recent historiography around sexuality in Early Modern Europe, an exercise that was both illuminating and intellectually crucial. Lauren Berlant urged me to consider the structural workings of power and gender, and in so doing, changed utterly my view of the world – past and present. At Vanderbilt, intellectual guidance came in many forms. I particularly thank Barbara Bowen, William Caferro, Dyan Elliott, Lynn Enterline, James Epstein, Mona Frederick, Joel Harrington, Sarah Igo, Jane Landers, Leah Marcus, Catherine Molineux, Ruth Rogaski, Holly Tucker, and David Wasserstein for their generosity. Jeffrey Merrick has helped me since I was an undergraduate, and I cannot thank him enough. In many ways, this book never would have happened without him. Mack Holt has more than once reeled me in when I was about to seriously misstep. William Beik remains an inspiration both as a scholar and a gentleman. Kathryn Norberg taught me that it was a good thing to focus on human foibles like sex. Lynn Hunt pointed me in the direction of the dirty bits. Megan Armstrong reminded me to take the human side of sexuality seriously. Joyce Chaplin, Ron Schechter, Gregory Brown, Sara Chapman, Tip Reagan, Matthew Gerber, Lisa Jane Graham, Sarah Hanley, Orest Ranum, Edna Yahil, Judith Miller, Sharon Strocchia, and Carole Levin nudged me in fruitful directions and away from blind alleys. René Marion let me, on too many occasions to count, bend her ear about the strange things I was finding. Rachel Donaldson, Olivia Grenvitz, and Jane Crawford read the entire draft manuscript, for which I am deeply grateful. They were heroic in helping me correct errors and clarify the dusty bits. Any and all errors that remain are mine alone.

Material and logistical support came from Marshall Eakin, Daniel Usner, Elizabeth Lunbeck, Richard McCarty, Carolyn Dever, Owen Williams, and my parents, George and Holly Crawford and Jane and Bernie Frischer. Fellowships at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, the Folger Shakespeare Library, from Vanderbilt University, and the Western Society for French History have been materially and intellectually invaluable. Copious thanks to Cari Winterich at Art Resource. Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press has been unfailingly enthusiastic, and the editorial team at the Press, especially Helen Waterhouse, Rebecca du Plessis, and Thomas O'Reilly, has been nothing less than outstanding. Parts of Chapter 3 appeared in a very different form in “Marsilio Ficino, Neoplatonism, and the Problem of Sex,” *Renaissance and Reformation; Renaissance et réforme* 28/2 (2004), 3–35. Different versions of

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978-0-521-76989-1 — The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance
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aspects of Chapter 5 were published in “Love, Sodomy, and Scandal: Controlling the Sexual Reputation of Henry III,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12/4 (2003) 513–42, and “The Politics of Promiscuity: Masculinity and Heroic Representation at the Court of Henry IV,” *French Historical Studies* 26/2 (2003), 225–52.

Last is never least in such a list. Zoey died while I was writing this book, and Kathryn Schwarz lived. Neither was a small thing, and this book is for them.

Note on citations

I have generally used the spelling conventions in the original texts, except that I have utilized “i” in place of “j” for French and “u” in place of “v” for Latin citations. Where a macron over a vowel indicated an absent “m” or “n,” I have supplied the letter. Where “g” was utilized instead of “e” (as in “ung”), I have modernized the spelling. Translations of French and post-classical Latin are my own unless otherwise indicated. I have consulted the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, ed. Alain Rey et al., 3 vols. (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1998) in order to translate according to sixteenth century habits of vocabulary and syntax, although my translations are utterly utilitarian.

List of abbreviations

AN	Archives nationales de France
BL	British Library
BN	Bibliothèque nationale de France
<i>FHS</i>	<i>French History Studies</i>
<i>HMES</i>	Lynn Thorndike, <i>A History of Magic and Experimental Science</i> , 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–1958).
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of History of Sexuality</i>
<i>JMEMS</i>	<i>The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies</i>
<i>JMRS</i>	<i>The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth-Century Journal</i>