Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England

Literary Representations in Historical Context

Edited by
Claude J. Summers

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Claude J. Summers, PhD
Editor

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Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Claude J. Summers, PhD, is William E. Stirton Professor in the Humanities and Professor of English at the University of Michigan at Dearborn. The co-editor of collections of essays on a variety of subjects in seventeenth-century English literature, Dr. Summers is the author of book-length critical studies of Christopher Marlowe, Christopher Isherwood, and E.M. Forster, and of numerous essays on Renaissance and twentieth-century literature. His most recent books include *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Homosexual Literary Tradition* and *E.M. Forster: A Guide to Research*. Dr. Summers is a recipient of the Crompton-Noll Award in gay studies and is former chair of the Modern Language Association's Division on Gay Studies in Language and Literature.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, gay studies has emerged as a distinct, though somewhat amorphous and necessarily interdisciplinary, field of intellectual inquiry, characterized by a particular subject matter—the study of gay male and lesbian experience, broadly defined—and by a sympathetic and supportive attitude toward that subject matter. That is, the term *gay studies* signifies not merely the study of an issue associated with homosexuality, but also a positive attitude toward homosexuality, an appreciation of the complexity and variety of gay and lesbian experience, and an awareness of the difficulties involved in approaching homosexuality historically and transculturally. As a field gay studies embraces an extraordinarily wide range of issues and methodologies, welcoming—often demanding—historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, biological, medical, legal, political, philosophical, aesthetic, cultural, and literary perspectives, among others. The very breadth of the topic means, of course, not only that gay studies is perforce interdisciplinary, but also that in practice it is always pursued partially and narrowly, roughly aligning along familiar disciplinary divisions, such as gay studies in history or gay studies in sociology. Perhaps because literary studies have traditionally adapted the paradigms and insights of other disciplines, especially those of the behavioral and social sciences, the practice of gay studies in literature has been especially amenable to a multidisciplinary approach.

The present volume focuses on the literature of Renaissance and Enlightenment England, but as a contribution to gay studies it is multidisciplinary in both practice and theory. It aims to illuminate particular works of literature in which homosexuality is represented or encoded and, by means of exploring that literature, also to elucidate the status and shape of same-sex desire in a circumscribed era, roughly the period from Marlowe to Gray. These two goals are not only naturally complementary, they are also reflexive and recipro-

cal, for literature is at once a reflection and an expression of social attitudes. Insofar as literature documents (or challenges) its period's sexual beliefs and prohibitions, it is an extraordinarily valuable resource for concretizing and charting the outlines of sexual ideology at any particular time. More than any other kind of discourse, literature expresses desire and gives us access to the subjectivity and complexity of sexuality, depicting the nuances and ambivalences of desire from the inside. Conversely, the interpretive constructs of reality that constitute our notion of history provide indispensable contexts in which to locate and probe texts, as well as important new lenses through which to view and anatomize both neglected and overly familiar works.

Homosexuality, and even homosexual subjectivity, is writ large in the literature of the English Renaissance and Enlightenment, but its inscription in this varied discourse is only rarely direct and unambiguous. In studying the literary representations of homosexuality in the English Renaissance and Enlightenment, the essays collected here are engaged in a vital and necessary process of rehistoricizing and re-contextualizing literature. Utilizing a variety of critical methods and proceeding from several different theoretical and ideological presuppositions, these essays raise important questions about the methodology of gay studies, about the conception of same-sex desire, about the depiction of homoerotics, and about the relationship of sexuality and textuality in a demarcated period, even as they also bring to new light or reconsider the homosexual import of a number of significant works of literature. Some of the texts considered here are quite familiar and expected, part of the small, generally accepted canon of gay literature in English; while others are more surprising, either because they are obscure or because they are not usually discussed in the sexual contexts provided here. In establishing new contexts for this literature, these essays ask fresh questions and elicit striking—and sometimes unanticipated—answers.

What is perhaps most noticeable about the essays as a group is their authors' consciousness of the problems of discerning and defining homosexuality in texts of earlier ages. The difficulty arises in the first instance from the historical pressures against writing openly about same-sex emotions and relationships, and it is com-

pounded by an entrenched scholarly tradition that has denied and obfuscated the homosexual presence in English literature. But discerning homosexuality in the literature of the Renaissance and Enlightenment is also rendered problematic as a result of our sometimes paralyzing awareness that while homosexual behavior and feelings are universal, homosexual identity and roles are culturally and historically specific. Hence, the essayists here, like most gay studies practitioners, are sensitive to the dangers of anachronism and feel compelled to locate their texts in carefully delineated cultural and historical milieux. Yet they by no means agree as to the precise nature of homosexuality as a historical construct, nor are they unduly constrained by the tyranny of theory or the anxieties of anachronism. For most of the contributors to this collection, theories of sexuality are still in process, subject to the empirical evidence to be gained from literature and other documents of the past. That is, rather than proceeding from hidebound or fashionably current ideologies, they sift the texts they study for the concrete—if not always obvious—evidence from which theories might be constructed or modified.

The historical conception of same-sex attraction is at issue in Joseph Cady's lead essay on Renaissance language. Forcefully challenging the idea that homosexuality is a new historical "invention," it disputes the currently prevalent notion that the Renaissance had no definite awareness of or language for homosexuality as a distinct category of experience or person. Cady focuses on the term "masculine love" as used in such different works as Bacon's *New Atlantis* and Heywood's *Pleasant Dialogues and Dramas*, and concludes that it was but one of several public languages that acknowledged homosexuality as a distinct category in the Renaissance. Cady's essay is important not only for its close analysis and thoughtful interpretation of primary texts, but also for its trenchant critique of the methodology of gay studies in Renaissance history, especially the excessive reliance on ecclesiastical and civil laws and police and trial records and the concomitant neglect of other sources, including literary ones.

Gay studies methodology is also at the fore in Gregory Bredbeck's densely argued but fascinating study of the sonnet sequences of Barnfield and Shakespeare. A meditation on critical theory,

Bredbeck's essay explores the relationship of textual and social subjectivity, particularly in reference to the difficulties of finding within the discursive practices of Renaissance literature a place for those whose subjectivity is defined by their male-male sexual preferences. In the process, the essay offers carefully modulated readings of poetic sequences whose homoeroticism inscribes the sodomite for different rhetorical purposes.

In contrast to Cady and Bredbeck, Gregory Woods is less interested in theoretical issues than in practical criticism. Exploring the depiction of homoerotic desire in the poetry and plays of Christopher Marlowe, Woods concentrates on such motifs as clothing and the body and offers valuable insights into a number of works, including *Dr. Faustus* as well as *Edward II*. In his lively and accessible essay, Woods reveals the Marlovian world as one in which most desirers are mature men in the prime of manhood while most of the desired are adolescent boys or very young men. He concludes that in Marlowe's arena of the erotic every embrace involves an assertion or adjustment of power relations.

If Marlowe, Barnfield, and Shakespeare are authors whom one might anticipate as the subjects of essays on the literary representation of homosexuality in the English Renaissance, John Donne emphatically is not. The witty and passionate, alternately cynical and idealistic, author of *Songs and Sonets* and the love elegies is widely recognized as the late Renaissance's supreme poet of heterosexual love in all its variety. Yet, as the two essays devoted to him in this collection attest, Donne is also a powerful—if hitherto unrecognized—poet of homosexual love and experience. The surprising example of Donne is yet another reminder of the fluidity of sexual and emotional response, in literature as well as in life.

In the first sustained and serious consideration of four verse letters that the youthful Donne addressed to a younger male friend, probably Thomas Woodward, George Klawitter finds in them a highly charged homoeroticism. Placing the individual poems (including Woodward's response) in their correct order and analyzing their patterns of imagery and allusions, Klawitter demonstrates that the poems constitute a sequence that records, first, Donne's infatuation for his friend and, then, his disappointment with the friend's failure to respond with a like ardor. Klawitter's work is important

not merely—or even primarily—for its biographical implications, but also for focusing fresh attention on these neglected verse letters, which deserve recognition as significant documents in the Renaissance literature of homoeroticism.

In a notably erudite essay, Janel Mueller turns her attention to another neglected work by Donne, the extraordinary dramatic monologue entitled "Sapho to Philaenis." Placing the poem within a rich context of humanist scholarship about Sappho, and comparing it both with other Renaissance poetic representations of lesbianism and with the discourse of modern lesbian feminism, Mueller finds "Sapho to Philaenis" a remarkable achievement. Unlike his contemporary poets and scholars, Donne portrays lesbianism positively. More than that, his sympathetic depiction of lesbianism questions the conventions of heterosexuality that dominated his age's literature and society. Not only does Donne make lesbianism a master trope for utopian sexuality, but, Mueller argues, he also configures lesbian self-sufficiency onto the economic plane as well. Although "Sapho to Philaenis" has until recently been largely ignored by Donne scholars and critics, it is here rehabilitated as a visionary poem that projects lesbianism "into a fully utopian moment for human possibility."

The subject of Ellis Hanson's essay is the relationship of sodomy to the Jacobean conception of monarchy, especially as illustrated by Lady Mary Wroth's prose romance *Urania* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, both of which may refer to King James's infatuation with his favorite Robert Carr. The age's widespread anxiety about the King's "erotic doubleness" is reflected in Wroth's disguised account of James's relationship to Carr in *Urania*, as well as in the comments of a number of Puritan memoirists who treat the King and his favorites much less sympathetically. In contrast, Shakespeare, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, reproduces the conventional sexual narrative favored by the Puritans, but complicates it by evincing and eliciting sympathy for the illicit sexuality of the title pair. Hanson suggests that in the polarities of *Antony and Cleopatra*, especially its contrast between duty and pleasure, Shakespeare may obliquely represent the division in James's own life, torn as he was between duty to his wife and pleasure in his favorites.

Protesting against a tradition that denies the sexual content of

lesbian literature, Arlene Stiebel examines masking techniques in the poetry of Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn. Both poets employ traditional literary conventions—including the courtly love address to the beloved and her response, the idealized pattern of Platonic same-sex friendship, and the hermaphroditic perfection of the beloved who incorporates the best of both sexes—but the voice of the lover is not disguised as a male. The reliance on familiar conventions helps make the representation of a woman's desire for a female lover seem as innocuous as literary exercises, but even as the poems mask the reality of sexual desire, they simultaneously reveal it as well. As Stiebel demonstrates, the apparent "innocence" of lesbian love in Renaissance poetry is itself an ironic mask.

Two essays are devoted to Cleland's *Fanny Hill*. Kevin Kopelson analyzes the famous scene in which Fanny spies on two young men making love. This scene, Kopelson argues, disturbs the representational framework of the novel, and, in its erotic transgression, transcends significance. The sodomitical passage is also crucial to Donald Mengay's essay on the rhetoric of cross-dressing in *Fanny Hill*, which views Fanny as a female drag persona for a decidedly male implied narrator. In Mengay's reading, the sodomitical scene is structurally and thematically central to a pervasive homoerotic subtext. Emphasizing the phallocentrism of the text, its homoerotic classical allusions, Fanny's self-referential phallic rhetoric, and the work's anxiety over anal penetration, Mengay interprets *Fanny Hill* as subversive of the code of bourgeois heterosexuality that it ostensibly celebrates.

In his contribution, George E. Haggerty deals not with the explicit depictions of sexual activity characteristic of *Fanny Hill* but with the indirect and subtle effects of Thomas Gray's sexual frustration and internalized homophobia in his masterpiece, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Examining as well Gray's moving sonnet on the death of his beloved friend Richard West, Haggerty draws particular attention to the poet's hardwon recovery discernible in the differences between the original and revised versions of the "Elegy." Especially in its treatment of the personified figure of Death, the original version expresses Gray's fear of his own sexuality. In the revision, however, the poet confronts more directly his

tormented sensibility and finally embraces the possibility of intimacy in the world.

These thoughtful essays are shaped as responses to narrowly defined and specific literary and cultural topics. Each significantly illuminates the subject that it carves out as its own. But the collection as a whole is valuable for more than the sum of its parts. In addition to the numerous local insights provided by each essay, the collection illustrates the vitality and variety of gay studies in literature, especially as applied to works of earlier ages. Some of the essays are self-conscious in their theoretical approaches, while others are primarily interested in practical criticism; some use the texts they discuss as evidence for formulating broad statements about homosexuality in the period, while others apply cultural generalizations to particular texts; some discover homoeroticism in hitherto unknown places, while others meditate on the significance of works that are obviously but problematically homoerotic; some of the essays proceed from biographical knowledge to textual illumination, while others reverse the process. For all their diversity of method and goal, however, taken together these essays achieve coherence by virtue of their focus on a single period and their shared commitment to a historical understanding of the gay and lesbian experience in literature. The collection attests both the current intellectual ferment of gay studies and the richness of English Renaissance and eighteenth-century literary representations of homosexuality.

Claude J. Summers, PhD

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"Masculine Love," Renaissance Writing, and the "New Invention" of Homosexuality

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SUMMARY. Contrary to the dominant claim in gay studies now that homosexuality is a relatively new historical "invention," the Renaissance had a definite recognition of a distinct homosexuality, acknowledged at least by those who were willing to face and discuss the subject frankly. A key example of that awareness is the earlier term "masculine love," which seems to have been particularly prominent in the Renaissance as a language for a male homosexual orientation. Significant differences have clearly occurred in the homosexual situation over time, and homosexuality can never be discussed totally independent of historical and social conditions, but the "new-inventionism" currently prevailing in gay studies has serious problems of concept and method and needs careful examining.

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Research on this article was begun while on a fellowship from the American Council for Learned Societies. The author would like to thank the ACLS for its invaluable assistance and for its willingness to support a gay-identified project when it was largely unheard of to do so. A partial version of this article was delivered as a paper at the 1990 annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America.

For their special help and encouragement with this project, the author would like to thank Annette Kolodny, Judith Lowder Newton, the late Richard Newton, John Richetti, James M. Saslow, Paul Strohm, and Claude J. Summers. This article is dedicated to the late Richard Newton.

1.

The notion that homosexuality is a relatively new historical "invention," which I shall refer to here as "new-inventionism," has become, at least in tone, the vanguard position among academics and intellectuals interested in gay studies now. Before that "invention," this outlook implies, sexuality took, or was understood to take, one of two forms of what was in effect a kind of bisexuality (although without any such label of course being applied then). To commentators like Alan Bray and Jeffrey Weeks, what might be called the "pre-homosexuality" era was marked by an "undivided sexuality" (Bray 25), or a generalized "flux of sexualities" (Weeks, "Havelock Ellis" 33), in which a person's erotic attractedness followed no predominating or predictable pattern, including direction toward one sex or the other. To others like Randolph Trumbach, there prevailed then a more regularized and differentiated bisexuality, whose homosexual component was always age-asymmetrical, an "older pattern [in which] the debauchee or libertine who denied the relegation of sexuality to marriage [could] find . . . women and boys with whom he might indifferently . . . enact his desires" ("Sodomitical" 118). In any case, both groups agree that in that earlier era sexuality was understood only as discrete "acts" or "behavior" that people performed and not, for example, as the expression of any inner inclination or directionality (see, especially, the introductory sections in Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*).

There is disagreement among new-inventionists about exactly when "the invention of homosexuality" took place. Most favor the late nineteenth century, when laws directed specifically against homosexuality (instead of against a more broadly defined "sodomy") appeared in the West for the first time and when our contemporary terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" first came into being and were later promulgated by the new medical and social sciences.[1] This position owes much to the pioneering work of Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks, and spokespersons for it maintain, for example, that "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; . . . the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, . . . a species" (Foucault 43), "From

the mid nineteenth century . . . homosexuality gradually emerges as a separate category" (Weeks, *Coming Out* 25), and "[Before the time of Oscar Wilde there was an] *absence of* any felt specificity of male homosexual desire in the culture at large" (Sedgwick, "Comments" 108).[2] Other commentators shift "the invention of homosexuality" back to the start of the eighteenth century, with what they see as the first appearance of identifiable male homosexual subcultures in major Western European cities at that time. Advocates of this date hold, for example, that "A distinct, separate . . . 'homosexual' emerged in England at the end of the seventeenth century" (McIntosh 188) and that "[In the] late seventeenth century . . . homosexuality began to be conceived of as a characteristic of certain individuals only and not of others" (Bray 108).[3] In addition, it is not always clear what new-inventionism means by "the invention of homosexuality." As reflected in the quotations above and to follow, commentators sometimes seem to be discussing de facto homosexuality/homosexuals, sometimes broad cultural awareness of the subject, sometimes individual homosexual self-consciousness, and sometimes organized homosexual subcultures.

However, at least two clear points emerge in new-inventionism, despite these differences and fluctuations. One is that, whenever "the invention of homosexuality" occurred, it had not yet happened by the time of the Renaissance. This view is clearly implied by the comments above and explicitly stated in remarks like Alan Bray's that "Homosexuality . . . was not a sexuality in its own right" in the age (25). The second is that, whatever other dimensions of the subject may or may not have "existed" at that time, before "the invention of homosexuality" there existed no significant conception of, nor language for, homosexuality as a distinct, categorical, sexual orientation (i.e., as an ongoing, predominant or exclusive, erotic attraction, in someone or some persons, to the broad category of their own sex, especially an attraction chiefly toward adult age-peers). This perspective is reflected in such various remarks as Foucault's comment that "The sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex [was] hardly noticed in the past" (38-39) and Jonathan Goldberg's assertion that "There were no discrete terms for homosexual behavior in the [Renaissance]" (371).

My main purpose in this essay is to propose a markedly different

view of the Renaissance as an era in which a definite awareness and language for a distinct homosexuality existed, at least among those who were willing to face and discuss the subject frankly. My example is the phrase "masculine love," a term that seems to have been particularly prominent as a language for a male homosexual orientation in the Renaissance but that has never been the subject of study before.[4] "Masculine love" was by no means the Renaissance's only language for male homosexuality, but it is a particularly revealing one since it exists totally outside the disputed and occasionally ambiguous terminology of "sodomy."[5] I shall discuss it here through a detailed analysis of two English Renaissance texts in which the phrase appears, followed by a shorter mention of some continental Renaissance materials that also use the term and reflect the same recognition. To be sure, "masculine love" is a term for male homosexuality only, but I believe the point I draw from it can apply to homosexuality as a whole, since it does not seem likely that a culture would be aware of one kind of homosexuality without a corresponding broader recognition that such a thing as same-sex attraction in general also existed.

My other purpose is to call for a substantial examination of new-inventionism through my discussion here. Some scholars associated with new-inventionism, like Jonathan Katz, John D'Emilio, and Judith Brown, have done crucial work in uncovering new primary sources about pre-contemporary homosexuality. Furthermore, significant differences have clearly occurred in the homosexual situation over time, and homosexuality can never be discussed totally independent of historical and social conditions. In addition, I do not even mean to object in principle to the ultimate new-inventionist idea that a de facto homosexual orientation might itself be a historical "invention." However, as presently practiced new-inventionism is a problem-ridden enterprise lacking in careful attention to its methods and concepts.

Two clarifications need to be established before turning to my specific materials. The first is an explicit definition of what a distinct language or term for homosexuality would be, in any time or place. Such language would clearly be a crucial, though not indispensable, index of earlier awareness of homosexuality, but the scholarship on this subject has not yet provided a clear guideline for

identifying it. I would propose that a "language" about homosexuality (either as a sexual orientation or as a universal occasional feeling) is any kind of verbal construct that, according to the particular modes of denoting reality that were characteristic of the age or culture in question, sufficiently differentiates same-sex attraction (again, either as an orientation or as an occasional feeling) as a distinct category of experience; this same formulation could of course also apply to the denotation of homosexuals as individuals or as a group. As my words "any kind" stress, no arbitrary restrictions of texture or length should be placed on what could be called a "language for homosexuality"—i.e., it could include a spectrum of designations, ranging from focused categorical terms (either literal or figurative), to terms that have different technical meanings but that are effectively used to denote only homosexuality, to extended descriptive or generic phrases that amount to de facto recognitions of the subject.[6] This purposely broad range gives us the widest possible net within which to catch designations of same-sex eroticism in any one period. In addition, by accounting for the fact that different eras can denote reality quite differently (a point that under other circumstances would, I know, be a truism not needing mention), it also gives us a way to chart this subject across periods, to identify, for example, terms that might seem totally foreign to us, or totally unrelated to each other, as equivalent languages for homosexuality within the frameworks of their times.

Secondly, I should explain my particular critical vocabulary in this essay. Most readers in this field would probably identify the position I am questioning here by the more familiar label of "social constructionism." However, there is often an obscurity about what advocates actually mean when they refer to "social constructionism" and its opposite term "essentialism" in discussions of homosexuality (just as there frequently is to the phrase "invention of homosexuality").[7] In addition, the language of the "social constructionism" label could create the mistaken impression that anyone questioning it is also critical of the idea that social conditions can have a profound influence on homosexuality. For these reasons, I prefer my term "new-inventionism" here instead. Though, as I have mentioned, it is often unclear what proponents mean by "the invention of homosexuality," "new-inventionism" at least has the