

Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History

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Michel Foucault famously asserted that sexual identity was a modern invention, remarking, ‘The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species’.⁽¹⁾ For Foucault, the vocabulary and specificity of modern sexual identity were largely formulated under the impetus of 19th-century sexology. Arguing that sexual interactions came in a wide array of forms and with a myriad of meanings attached, Kim Phillips and Barry Reay take Foucault’s claim and apply it to heterosexuality. The argument is essentially that heterosexuality did not exist in pre-modern Europe (1100–1800), and historical treatments of the past have erred in assuming its existence. In dissecting various realms of sexual encounters, Phillips and Reay maintain that the variety and variability of acts and their meanings indicate that heterosexuality as a matter of sexual identity is not applicable as an analytical descriptor. This is provocative and salutary as a claim, and it raises a number of questions about the theoretical frame of identity as an interpretive grid. If at times the authors press a bit too hard, in the end, they make it clear that the history of sexuality retains much that bears further reflection and debate.

While often held up as timeless and utterly natural, Phillips and Reay contend that heterosexuality as we now know it is a recent iteration. In order to make their case, the authors begin chapter one, ‘Sin’, by reconsidering early Christian ambivalence about sex. The authors do not attempt to defend Christianity against the abundant evidence of its hostility toward sex, but they do remind us that lechery – the central category of sexual sin – is only one of the seven deadly sins. Desire was a problem for early Christian theorists in that it interfered with proper devotion to God, but the earliest Christian sources, the Gospels, were only occasionally interested in sex. Even St. Paul had relatively little to say except that directing one’s attention to matters of salvation meant that lust should be controlled. Phillips and Reay focus on the notion

that the key development for Christianity was the use of sex as a mode of distinctiveness in the 4th and 5th centuries (p. 21). Debates over the value of marriage (Jerome advocated celibacy and virginity; Augustine allowed that marriage had positive value) and the sexual meaning of original sin instantiated desire as a problem at the centre of Christian ethics. Masculinity in Christian terms became sexual self-control and produced the impetus toward a (male) celibate hierarchy.

Although such developments distinguished Christianity from its potential rivals, even such life-shaping constructs as the commitment to celibacy, Phillips and Reay feel, did not amount to sexual identity. The Catholic Church settled on a hierarchy of sexual sins, with fornication generally considered the least grievous and sins against nature (any sex that could not possibly lead to procreation) as the most sinful. But the chronic resistance to Christian sexual strictures evident in the abundant remains of clerical marriage and bastardy, in the widespread lack of understanding of the theology or behavioral expectations around sex among the laity, and in the persistence of competing ethical and legal codes around sex indicate that Christian messages that associated sexual pleasure with sin were 'continually disrupted' (p. 37).

As a coherent and consistent notion, sexual identity might not apply, but as a fungible element, sexuality is not entirely to be discounted either. To be sure, lechery was only one kind of sin, but the evidence presented suggests ways that lechery could have been part of identity. In their discussion of masculinity, for instance, Phillips and Reay note that women's self-control was never as valuable as men's in matters of sex. Women were regarded as less able to control their desires, and yet their self-control was considered inferior. How could this kind of mixed message not be part of one's identity? The specificity of the sexual culture Phillips and Reay describe is both a product of and productive of how individuals locate themselves relative to the norms, expectations, and practices around them.

Among those expectations and practices Phillips and Reay identify, presumptive heterosexuality is the most significant. As they note, 'The power of heterosexuality resides in a strange combination of ubiquity and invisibility' (p. 40). Because historians of sexuality have failed to recognize the historicity of heterosexuality, it often seems ahistorical and constant in its meanings. In chapter two, 'Before heterosexuality', Phillips and Reay rightly point out that love, bodies, and desire – crucial components of heterosexuality in modern and postmodern society – were understood very differently in the past. Love applied to relationships both across and within the confines of biological sex, and a sexual component might or might not apply. While sex was only licit under the relatively rigid limits of marriage (or the prospect of it), desire could be found in an array of non-marital conditions. Other complications include chaste marriage, the celebration of adulterous love (consummated or not) in courtly love, and the abundant evidence of extra-marital, pre-marital, and non-marital sex in court records. Phillips and Reay understand this array of evidence as undermining any claim for heterosexuality before modernity, and in the sense that there is little evidence of sexual identity primarily in terms of object choice, this is certainly the case. At the same time, the dominance of sex within marriage as a norm produced heterosexual practice and supported its ideological centrality.

In chapter three, 'Between Men', Phillips and Reay deepen the rejection of sexual identity in the premodern past by emphasizing that homosexuality does not apply any more than heterosexuality. Male/male interactions were extensive and routine. Sodomy (and all its meanings), friendship, and effeminacy are among the possibilities that pre-modern men enjoyed. After a period of relative flexibility around the term, sodomy as specifically a male sexual practice came in for increased condemnation in the 12th century. As an accusation, sodomy referred primarily to sexual excess and loss of self-control, rather than object choice. In some places, such as Renaissance Florence and parts of early modern Spain, male-male sexual behavior was organized in hierarchical terms. Older men penetrated younger ones, masters penetrated servants, and in general, more powerful men penetrated less powerful ones in part as a display of masculine prowess. In this reading, the gender connotations of sodomy were more important than the sexual aspects.⁽²⁾

These reminders of the spectrum of activities and meanings are constructive, but the authors do not obviate the possibility that some sexual identity formation was happening. After rejecting the notion of the molly house as a locus of nascent sexual identity, the authors note that 'molly' was in fact a recognized type of

person (p. 83). The insistence that all that can be said about men who frequented molly houses was that they committed acts of ‘same-sex sexual behaviour’ (p. 85) denies that locating others who might be seeking and committing such acts – against social expectations – might have had psychological import for participants.

Situated next to the chapter on men, chapter four, ‘Between women’, implicitly denies the long-standing tendency to disregard sexual desire between women in early modernity among historians. Phillips and Reay note that the term ‘lesbian’ was used in pre-modern contexts, albeit rarely, but the larger issue was the persistent refusal to see female-female eroticism. As literary critic Valerie Traub has made clear, the material is abundant if one merely pays attention.⁽³⁾ For their part, Phillips and Reay accept that female-female eroticism deserves to be taken seriously while emphasizing the lack of consensus about what counts as ‘lesbian’. In their effort to clear the ground, Phillips and Reay ask, ‘Or should we begin by reminding ourselves that heterosexuality, far from being compulsory, did not exist?’ (p. 89). The reference to Adrienne Rich’s notion of a ‘lesbian continuum’ is provocative, but even if heterosexuality did not exist, forms of it did, and they were compulsory for most people. That is, marriage with the presumption of sexual relations between man and woman as husband and wife was expected of most people. A significant minority did not marry, but were marked (as celibate or virginal or unlucky) for their sexual status.

Having chosen to reject the category of ‘lesbian’ entirely, Phillips and Reay nonetheless point to cases at law, theological considerations of same-sex female love, and medical understandings from antiquity to early modernity. Using the sensational case of Benedetta Carlini ⁽⁴⁾, Phillips and Reay note the history of intense emotional (and sometimes physical) relationships between women in spaces such as convents. The evidence, as they see it, amounts to acts understood as vice, rather than notions of identity, despite the efforts of historical subjects to define themselves in terms of their sexual proclivities.

The question thus seems to be who gets to define the terms. This is apparent in the discussion in chapter five, ‘Before pornography’, which understands pornography as a modern invention because only recently has pornography been produced with the intention of arousal.⁽⁵⁾ While images and texts that might have erotic effects abound in the medieval and early modern periods, Phillips and Reay stress that there is little evidence that arousal was intended or the purpose of sexualized works. Modern pornography is certainly different, and the range of meanings and responses in the past is often unavailable to historians. But by their own methodology, how do Phillips and Reay know that the array of bawdy stories, obscene artifacts, and erotic remnants did not in part serve to arouse? The fact that sexual texts in the past were often part and parcel of other discursive regimes – one of Ian Frederick Moulton’s astute observations – suggests that the question might be reversed: What other discourses does modern pornography engage in that are submerged beneath our modern presumptions about its intentionality?

The epilogue on European encounters with the Oceanic peoples of the Pacific offers a reading back from presentist concerns and forward from the texts of encounter. The European reports of sexual freedom and carnal excess are abundant and predictably depressing. Questions of female agency, obvious exploitation, venereal disease, and mutual incomprehension recur in encounters across the Pacific. Phillips and Reay show that the sexual practices were not merely copious and outside European moral norms, but also widely variable in structure and meaning. In restoring these complexities, Phillips and Reay remind us that misunderstandings can be profound, abundant, and burdened with a long afterlife in history. That we can and should debate the fundamental premises of that history and the many iterations of sexual meaning it contains is not the least of the contributions of this volume.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY, 1976), p. 43.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, NY, 1995) is perhaps the model of this line of analysis.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1986).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Invention of Pornography, 1500-1800: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York, NY, 1996); Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005).[Back to \(5\)](#)

The authors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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