

The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe

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Kenneth Borris

George Rousseau

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Hal Gladfelder

In Thomas Cannon's 1749 pamphlet *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify'd*, the author recounts a chance meeting with a 'too polish'd Pederast' who, 'attack'd upon the Head, that his Desire was unnatural, thus wrestled in Argument; Unnatural Desire is a Contradiction in Terms; downright Nonsense. Desire is an amatory Impulse of the inmost human Parts: Are not they, however constructed, and consequently impelling, Nature?' The claim that same-sex desire should be understood not as an unnatural perversion but rather as an impulse dictated by the natural 'construction' of 'the inmost human Parts' of the desiring subject affiliates Cannon's Pederast to the scientific commentators whose work is explored in Kenneth Borris and George Rousseau's wide-ranging collection of essays on *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe*. Though the individual essays approach this topic in different ways, many provide evidence to substantiate Borris's assertion that early modern writers on the sciences (from medicine to astrology, alchemy to palm-reading) conceived of sodomitical acts as 'manifestations of corresponding constitutions, temperaments, interiorities, morphologies, and sexual identities' (p. 139). In this respect, such scientific authors, however orthodox they may have been in their condemnation of same-sex sexual behaviour, posed a challenge both to their contemporaries and to ours. As Borris writes in the collection's 'Introduction',

Whereas theology and law typically engaged same-sexual relations only as a topic of condemnation and restricted the parameters of discussion accordingly, the sciences, though influenced by those views, nonetheless provided alternate modes of thought, inquiry, and

explanation that promoted curiosity about the causes, purposes, analysis, and classification of natural phenomena (p. 6).

Such curiosity, and the deterministic implications of such disciplines as physiognomy and astrology, worked against – or at least sat uneasily with – the moralistic stance of theological and legal discourse. But they also, Borris argues, challenge the current orthodoxy of what he calls the ‘acts paradigm’ among historians of sexuality (most prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s but still often taken for granted): the notion, that is, that before a certain threshold in, say, the late nineteenth century, there were no same-sexual or deviant identities, only acts.

Not all the essays in *The Sciences of Homosexuality* engage in the debate on identities and acts, and in this review I hope to reflect the diversity of concerns of the different writers whose work is included here. But taken as a whole the volume does make a polemical case that historians of sexuality have focused too exclusively on theology and law – that is, on sins and crimes: *acts* for which an offender could be punished. Early modern scientific writing offers a different, corrective emphasis on etiologies, innate constitutions and physical types. In advancing this case, Borris and Rousseau’s collection makes an important contribution to the history of sexuality – as much for the questions the essays raise as for the conclusions they reach.

Borris’s ‘Introduction: the prehistory of homosexuality in the early modern sciences’ frames the collection in relation to the two contentions I’ve identified: first, that an accurate understanding of early modern conceptions of same-sex sexuality requires that we pay greater attention to the scientific discourses of the period, in which a variety of theoretical perspectives and case studies were put forward; and second, that such attention will provide further evidence to challenge the validity of the ‘acts paradigm’ in favour of a ‘minoritizing’ view (Borris adopts the term from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) by which deviant or dissident sexual acts are linked to ‘distinctive sexual natures and hence identities’ (p. 4). In making this double-stranded argument Borris draws on his own earlier presentation of these ideas in *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance: a Sourcebook of Texts, 1470–1650* (New York and London, 2004), which contains English translations of many of the texts referred to here. He shows that the early modern sciences were grounded in a ‘complexional physiology’ (p. 17) derived primarily from Hippocratic and Galenic understandings of the body, according to which each human being has a distinctive ‘complexion’ based on the endlessly variable combination of hot, cold, wet and dry elements. Because the complexion is innate (though not immutable), this model tends towards ‘constitutional determinism’ (p. 17) and offers an essentialising theory of sexual types by which such deviant figures as the virago, the cinaedus (a ‘passive’ or sexually receptive male), and the tribade (a clitorally ‘excessive’ female) can be explained in terms of complexional excess or imbalance.

The complexional model prevailed not just in medicine but in the affiliated sciences of physiognomy and chiromancy (palmistry) in which bodily features are interpreted as signs of an innate constitution or nature; and also, perhaps less expectedly, in astrology, in which planets and stars were understood to determine or at least powerfully influence each person’s complexional makeup. Borris here underlines a point made by P. G. Maxwell-Stuart in his contribution to the volume: that if ‘particular predilections for each one of the range of sexual behaviors’ are astrally inscribed, this ‘implicitly challenged notions of sexual “sins against nature” such as sodomy, for which individuals were theologically and legally responsible on account of human free will’ (p. 167).

As this citation from Maxwell-Stuart suggests, while Borris has his own argument to make in his ‘Introduction’, he draws much of his material from his fellow contributors’ work and provides an overview of their diverse approaches. The collection ranges from mid fifteenth-century France to eighteenth-century England, although nearly half the essays focus on sixteenth-century Italy, perhaps because a ‘relatively relaxed’ view of sexuality allowed for greater freedom of scientific inquiry. The essays are divided into three groups: the first five concern medicine, the next five address ‘divinatory, speculative and other sciences’ such as physiognomy and astrology, and the last two deal with ‘science and sapphisms’ – the gender imbalance here a reflection, Borris writes, of the androcentrism of the premodern sciences.

The section on medicine begins with Derek Neal’s compelling discussion of Jacques Despars’s 1453 (pub.

1498) commentary on Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*. Although only 1,200 words of this 2,667 page work deal with same-sex desire and sex between men, Neal convincingly argues that these two passages complicate and enrich 'our understanding of premodern belief about sexuality' (p. 43) even as they reveal how intractably alien that system of belief remains. What Despars, Latinising Avicenna, called *alubuati* is, unlike *sodomy*, 'a medical condition ... rather than a category of sin' (p. 46), and originates in a state of psychic 'insufficiency' which compels the man concerned to seek out and watch others like himself; he becomes aroused through identification. Neal wrestles with the obscurity of the passages in which Despars describes this process of arousal through voyeuristic identification, and is necessarily speculative in his reconstruction of Despars's psychogenic model of same-sex desire, but he provides enough evidence to show that the *alubuati* was, for Despars as for Avicenna, 'a discrete sexual type' whose sexual identity was 'defined by what the subject wants, by desire' (pp. 52–3). *Alubuati* in Despars's account is neither the result of bodily anomaly (such as deformity or complexional imbalance) nor an act of wilful perversity (as in sin) but a state of imaginative or psychic difference. Despars also moves away in his accounts of actual cases from simple binarisms – such as active/passive, male/female, insertive/receptive – instead showing that premodern same-sexual behaviours were more varied and less rigidly codified than many other accounts have claimed.

Faith Wallis next contributes an annotated translation of Giulio Guastavini's moralistic commentary (pub. 1608) on one section of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, in which the original Greek author offered an explanatory theory of why 'some men enjoy sexual intercourse when they play an active part and some when they do not' (p. 62; *Problemata*, 4.26). Pseudo-Aristotle briefly suggests three reasons for those who willingly take the 'passive' role: an anatomical deformity that leads the semen to gather in the 'fundament', so that 'that part desires friction' (p. 62); an unnatural or effeminate constitution, so that although 'they are male this part of them has become maimed' and they 'desire to be passive' (p. 63); or, finally, habit – so that if the young man's earliest experiences of sexual pleasure are based on sexual receptivity to other males, this will tend to become ingrained. The pseudo-Aristotelian model, by providing a congenital explanation (or, in the third case, a proto-psychological account of early 'imprinting') broke too openly, Wallis suggests, with 'medieval and early modern sexual orthodoxy' and so Guastavini in his commentary responded 'defensively by insisting that those who engage in such sexual relations retain free will, and hence full moral responsibility' (p. 57). Wallis draws attention in her own commentary to the contortions Guastavini puts himself through to bring the earlier text into conformity with theological condemnations of same-sexual behaviour.

The following chapter, by George Rousseau, concerns the forensic medical writings of Paolo Zacchia, whose *Quaestiones Medico-Legales* was first published in 1630 and appeared in various editions thereafter. As a forensic scientist and frequent expert witness in legal cases – including cases of sodomy involving *stuprum* or anal penetration – Zacchia differs from most of the other figures studied in this collection in working at the intersection of legal and scientific modes of thought. In the cases Rousseau examines, Zacchia is concerned to explain how medical practitioners can establish, by examining the body of the victim or receptive partner, whether *stuprum* has occurred. In some cases the penis of the alleged *stuprator* also needed to be examined, to determine if he could have produced the injuries found on the other body; but the bulk of Zacchia's attention is focused on the evidence of penetration on the victim's body – hence Rousseau's title, 'Policing the anus'. I'm not certain from the evidence here that 'policing' in the usual sense of regulating or monitoring (that is, subjecting to social control) was really at issue in Zacchia's work; rather, his forensic investigations were a form of medical detective work to determine whether a crime had been committed. Similarly, though Rousseau writes that Zacchia devised a 'system ... to detect offenders' (p. 87), his examples show that Zacchia's forensic investigations aimed only to establish that an offence had occurred – not that the accused was the offender responsible. In any case, Rousseau establishes that Zacchia was a crucial figure in the intertwined histories of medicine and law who reined in the potentially tyrannical power of the law by encouraging judges 'to examine the medical evidence first before delivering guilty verdicts' (p. 87). Cri

stian Berco follows with an excellent essay on the Spanish doctor Juan Calvo's 1580 treatise on syphilis (the *morbo gálico*

or French disease), which seeks to account for Calvo's silence on the possibility of male-male sexual transmission, even when such silence 'defies logic and even the daily realities of medical practice at the time' (p. 108). Calvo subscribed to the increasingly widely-held theory of an American etiology to the disease, but even though many of his sources among historians of the Indies had indicated that sodomy was 'the greatest sin of the Hispaniolan natives' (p. 96) – and even though same-sex sexual transmission was the most obvious way of accounting for the appearance of the disease among European sailors – Calvo substituted cannibalism for sodomy. For Calvo, the natives' cannibalism was the sign of their moral depravity, and syphilis not a physical effect but a divine punishment. Even so, he had to account for the passage of the disease from America to Europe; and because he could not permit himself, for complex social-historical reasons that Berco lucidly presents in his essay's final section, to propose either same-sexual transmission or transmission from native men to European women, Calvo devised a non-sexual pathway between native and European men, writing that 'the Indian men ... slept with [that is, shared the same quarters with] some soldiers, gave them the same buboes, and the latter did the same with others' (p. 102). The disease that began as a divine scourge of the Indians' depravity thus passed into the European population without tainting the latter with the same sins. But as Berco points out, this non-sexual mode of transmission still is 'suggestive of what [Calvo] silenced' (p. 103): even with sex kept rigorously from view, the intimacy of shared beds, bedclothes and breath metonymically alludes to it. This is a rich and well-argued essay which grounds its textual analysis in a detailed, finely drawn social landscape.

In the last of the five essays on medicine, 'The strange medical silence on same-sex transmission of the pox', Kevin Siena addresses the same problem as Berco, focusing now on English treatises on venereal disease (including but not limited to syphilis) between 1660 and 1760. Even though medical discourse 'performed clear policing roles' in the period, contributing to anti-prostitution and anti-masturbation campaigns among others, these treatises 'rarely give any hint, still less any warnings, that men could contract it from each other' (p. 115). One reason was decorum: one surgeon who did address the issue explicitly, John Marten, was denounced by rivals on grounds of obscenity. More important, Siena argues, were 'the reticence and deceptions of patients' (p. 119), who had every reason to leave out self-incriminating material from the stories they told their doctors. Beyond this, most doctors subscribed to a 'two-sex theory of the pox's production' (p. 124), in which the womb played a crucial pathogenic role. Siena devotes several interesting pages to a 1736 treatise by Jean Astruc, who departs from the prevailing model by analysing instances of same-sex transmission and who offers a relatively non-moralistic theory of the 'catamite' as a distinct medical category, 'on equal footing with the sexually penetrative male and the vaginally receptive female' (p. 126). As Siena notes, Astruc soon reverts to moral denunciation; but his work confirms an understanding of the sodomite as a distinct kind of person.

The book's second part, on divinatory and other sciences, begins with Kenneth Borris on the 'physiognomer and prototypical sexologist' Bartolommeo della Rocca, or Cocles, writing at the turn of the sixteenth century. In 'Sodomizing science', Borris makes basically the same claim as in his 'Introduction': that same-sexual acts are, for early modern scientists, 'signifiers of corresponding intrinsic constitutions indicated also by other identifiable bodily signs' (p. 143). Cocles presents a typology of 'cinaedi' and 'pedicators' (receptive and insertive partners respectively), and evinces some admiration of the cinaedi's 'interplay of feminine and masculine traits' (p. 147). He holds pedicators, whose maturity and more 'masculine' demeanour should enable them to restrain their transgressive impulses, to a different moral standard; but Borris uses one of Cocles's case studies to demonstrate that Cocles conceived of pedicators, too, as a 'deviant sexual species' with a distinctive 'constitutional morphology' (p. 153). In the last part of his essay Borris examines the antagonistic commentary of a Dominican, Patricio Tricasso, which was appended to Cocles's text in subsequent editions. Tricasso's critique was not subtle: he called Cocles a 'filthy beast' who pretends to abominate the vice of sodomy but really 'praises, and glorifies it' (p. 155). Although with the resurgence of the Inquisition Cocles's brand of open-minded scientific inquiry was largely suppressed, his work continued to exert a semi-underground influence for long after. While there is some repetition in this essay of points already made, the details Borris provides of Cocles's case studies and theoretical formulations effectively complement the more general presentation of the same themes in his 'Introduction'.

P. G. Maxwell-Stuart's essay on 'Representations of same-sex love in early modern astrology' ranges widely

over periods and countries, and acts as an introduction to topics taken up in the following two chapters. I have already quoted his statement of the theme that astrology posed a challenge to notions of sexual 'sins against nature' because of its tendency to conceive of sexual dispositions as both innate and governed by extra-human agencies. Various commentators advanced different views on the extent to which the stars determined or merely influenced human characters and actions, and the degree to which their positions might account for the generation of cinaedi, hermaphrodites, and the like. Grounded as it was in the originary work of Ptolemy, and more generally in Greco-Roman scientific and sexual assumptions, early modern astrology, Maxwell-Stuart concludes, 'varied from and hence unsettled the standard legal and theological accounts of same-sexual love' (p. 178). H

. Darrel Rutkin follows with a piece on the sixteenth-century astrologer Girolamo Cardano (also cited by Maxwell-Stuart), who achieved success with an early modern version of the celebrity horoscope. Cardano worked within a broadly Aristotelian-Galenic sex and gender framework, integrating this into a gendered cosmic system according to which Mars and the sun, for example, are masculine (and so both hot and dry) while Venus and the moon are feminine (and so moist and cold). The planets and their positions at the time of birth are decisive in defining the individual's gender makeup. If 'the normative nature for a man is a moderate masculinity and for a woman a moderate femininity' (p. 192), astrological influences may lead to excessively masculine men or excessively feminine women (which Cardano calls 'illegitimate') or to masculine women and feminine men (for whom Cardano reserves the term 'unnatural' as their status involves a reversal of gender polarities). Rutkin examines two of Cardano's celebrity genitures as complementary case studies of broadly sodomitical figures: the first, referred to only as Effeminatus, is an instance of unnatural sexual reversal; the second, the poet and courtier Francesco Filelfo, who (allegedly) not only had sex with boys but also raped women, is an example of illegitimate sexual excess. In both cases, as Rutkin shows, Cardano's astrological practice, in which he presents the person's sexual nature as wholly determined by the stars, is at odds with his theoretical statements in other texts, where he contends that astrologers need to take into account not only geniture but also cultural and personal circumstances that affect the ways in which innate dispositions may be expressed.

Guido Giglioni brings the run of three essays featuring Cardano to a conclusion with an appealing biographical study of Cardano's intriguingly conflicted representations of male same-sex love and the pains and pleasures of masculine sociability. Although he repeatedly denounced pederastic or sodomitical conduct, he 'brought up' numerous boys in his own household, including boy musicians; and while he openly professed his passion for music, he regarded it as a moral danger, in large part because of its association with male youth and sensual pleasure. Love and desire for Cardano were forms of madness; and astrology as well as physiognomy confirmed that same-sex desire in particular is an innate form of moral depravity; yet he continually surrounded himself with dissolute boy musicians and was plagued by innuendoes and accusations of sodomy. Although Giglioni's essay does not have much to say about science as such, it offers a fascinating portrait of an early modern subject in the grips of a profound ambivalence. T

he second part of the book concludes with Allison Kavey's essay on popular English alchemical texts in the seventeenth century, which represent, she argues, an alternative tradition to the dominant Aristotelian model of the natural world. Instead of a system of binaries, as in most early modern medical and other scientific works, Paracelsian alchemical discourse was based on 'systems of sympathy' exemplified in the metaphor of the 'chemical marriage' (p. 223); and if that metaphor seems simply to reinforce Aristotelian principles of balance or tension between opposites, Kavey suggests that in alchemical writing the element mercury – often associated with Ganymede – 'hermaphroditically confounds these divisions' (p. 223) and in effect dissolves the apparent difference between male and female elements into a unitary or 'shared, fluid essence' (p. 228). Kavey does not actually discuss human same-sex desire or love; rather, she focuses on the use writers on alchemy made of figures of gender instability and metamorphosis, including (albeit rarely) images of male-male coupling, to illustrate the otherwise occult process of chemical transformation.

The collection's last two essays reflect in different ways on female same-sex relations. In the first, Winfried Schleiner offers a largely descriptive account of three narratives of the 'Intrigues of hermaphrodites and masculine females' from the English-language (in all but title) *De Hermaphroditis*, published by Edmund

Curll in 1718. Schleiner passes over the first and third parts of this anthology, in which are found a typology of hermaphrodites and speculation as to their origins (derived from French and Italian sources), to focus on the three Italian-set tales of erotic adventure. The first concerns two friends, Diana and Isabella, who when discovered to possess 'the Members of both Sexes' have their 'masculine Instruments' cut off, so that they live on as 'harmless old Women' (p. 249). The second tells of two female lovers, Margureta and Barbarissa, the first of whom is found (by a male voyeur) to be a tribade; the two appear to get on quite happily with the aid of some birchen rods. The third story features two women, Theodora and Amaryllis, who are neither hermaphrodites nor tribades but simply disappointed with men; they make use of a large and elaborate dildo to 'facilitate Pleasure' (p. 251), though in time they both find men who suit them and end up happily married. Schleiner contends that all three tales are examples of 'xenohomophobia' (p. 247), which seems right, but I would have liked more detailed analysis of each, as they don't seem to offer a straightforward condemnation of sexual deviance or dissidence, but something (perhaps) slyer and more unsettled. In the book's final essay, Harriette Andreadis does not address the early modern sciences of homosexuality but issues a call to arms for cultural historians, arguing that by losing sight of the difference between the 'sexual' and the 'erotic', and by collapsing the latter into the former, we 'postmodern' scholars and critics have misconstrued or simply missed much of what was distinctive about romantic or affective relations between women in the early modern era. Andreadis makes use of the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Philips, about whom she has written extensively elsewhere, to highlight this distinction between the erotic – here, the 'intense affectional relations of women with each other throughout history' (p. 257) – and the sexual, which she limits to behaviours 'culminating in genital activity' (p. 265, n. 10). Andreadis's objection to the use of 'sexual' in contemporary scholarship is predicated, then, on her own conflation of the sexual with the genital. I would agree that we should look in early modern texts (and indeed texts of all periods) 'for non-genital expressions of desire as markers of same-sex eroticism' (p. 261), but I'm not sure it's important whether we label such expressions of desire 'erotic' or 'sexual' as long as we recognise their variability. Moreover, when the essay ends with the claim that a greater 'understanding of the fluidity of eroticisms' may allow for 'more precise historical reconstructions than we have so far been able to accomplish' (p. 264), I was left wondering what Andreadis thinks is imprecise or wanting in the work of (to name a few scholars almost at random, from a range of critical orientations) Valerie Traub, Terry Castle, Sally O'Driscoll, George Haggerty, Emma Donoghue, Susan Lanser and others, who along with Andreadis herself have done much to reconstruct the affectional, erotic and sexual currents of early modern literature and life. I found this a thought-provoking and sometimes frustrating essay, but I was pleased that it ended the collection on a polemical note, with an eye to new formulations and keener debates.

The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe makes an important contribution to the history of sexuality and affiliated fields. It is a model of interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship, and the essays will be of interest to students and scholars in a wide range of areas. No matter how arcane the topic, the essays are all accessible in style. I have only one real fault to find with the volume: while Borris is surely right to note that the androcentrism of early modern science means that greater attention was paid to male than female same-sex sex and desire, there was much more scientific interest in the latter than this book would lead one to think. Of course no text can cover all bases; but it would have made for a stronger collection to have included new work on the science of female same-sex desire, building on (or challenging) the work of scholars like Traub and Thomas Laqueur (a forgotten man in this volume, cited only by Siena). But to lament this absence is to take nothing away from what Borris and Rousseau and their collaborators have produced here, which stands as a very significant addition to the history of sexuality and gender, and a work that opens up new directions for research and debate in the future.

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