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# GENDER, POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

JESSICA MUNNS AND PENNY RICHARDS



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the defence of Paris. Regarded by contemporaries opposed to the Catholic League as desperate, wicked, inevitably whorish, their activities again remind us that a high-born lady did not merely pass her time in domesticity and leisure but as part of the collaborative entity – the great family – which played a vital and active part in that entity's deployment of privilege and its move into direct conflict with the French monarchy.

Post-Counter Reformation Spain is examined in Joan Curbet's chapter on the treatment meted out to the *Alumbrados* – women who claimed special enlightenment from God – and whose vibrant articulations and very physical experiences of Grace conflicted with the orthodoxy of the Post-Tridentine church. Curbet contrasts their treatment (flagellation and sometimes death) to that experienced by St Teresa. The *Alumbrados* were severely punished, but St Teresa, Curbet argues, through submission to her confessors lived to reform the Discalced Carmelite order. Unlike Elizabeth I, however, whose transgressive position as woman and a ruler was, McLaren argues, integrated into a new concept of the monarch and the realm, St Teresa, Curbet shows, could only be absorbed into the mainstream of Catholic orthodoxy through a type of spiritual regendering, as a contemporary commentator put it:

this woman ceased to be a woman, restoring herself to the virile state, to greater glory than if she had been a man from the beginning. For she rectified nature's error with her virtue, transforming herself through virtue

The overall title of this series, 'Women and Men in History', is a sign of the changes in the nature of historical investigation in the past three decades. The essays collected here are part of this ongoing process of rethinking the past and demonstrate that looking at history through the lens of gender opens up a wide variety of avenues and sets us a new series of challenges. That the essays challenge traditional orthodoxies with regard to the dominant role played by men alone in the events of nations and daily lives is obvious. However, they also challenge attempts to generalize from one country or period to another. The solution found by Spanish clerics to a remarkable woman was different to that found by English ideologues. The degree to which activities that conflicted with the desires of dominant groups were punished or tolerated varied and were differently tabulated. Some women surely did weave tapestries and listen to madrigals, but many also led lives more laborious on the one hand, and more dangerously privileged on the other. Patriarchal systems of governance and order were widespread and normative, but masculinity itself was not taken for granted, easily configured or was any less unproblematic than femininity.

## CHAPTER ONE

## Gender and sexuality in early modern England

FRANCES E. DOLAN

Gender and sexuality have proved highly productive categories of analysis in interdisciplinary studies of early modern England and continue to inspire work that challenges the most fundamental paradigms of historical and cultural understanding, such as progress and decline, inclusion and exclusion, centre and margin, top and bottom. This chapter offers an introduction to terms, debates and directions.

### How has gender been defined?

Joan Kelly's highly influential essay 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' made the question of periodization a foundational concern in women's history.<sup>1</sup> Could women be included in the existing periods and narratives or would their inclusion require revision of our very structures for organizing historical knowledge? While Kelly's question has been rephrased and her conclusion that 'there was no renaissance for women – at least, not during the Renaissance' has been challenged, periodization remains a challenge for scholars of women and gender. 'Early modern' can seem Whiggish and anticipatory, claiming significance for the period only as preparing the way for the 'modern'. Yet the term is also practical because it is so broad, allowing attention to continuity and change across a longer span of time. This is especially helpful when attending to the experience of women and of non-elite men, which often changes more slowly and less dramatically than that of the most privileged men.

In studies of early modern England, gender emerged first as a question focused on women. What about women? What were their experiences,

perspectives, values, contributions? At first, the operative assumption was that there were two basic groups of historical actors, men and women; men acted considerably more than women, and therefore dominated accounts of the past. Women simply needed to be included, in whatever limited ways were possible, given how little they had accomplished. This first initiative to discover and include women was often accompanied by the assumption that women in the past were invariably oppressed, excluded and marginalized. If they were not, then they were exceptions who proved the rule of victimization. While it is undeniably true that women suffered from various disadvantages and constraints particular to their gender, it is also important to stress that women found many ways to exercise authority, enact resistance, express themselves and pursue their desires, control money and property, exploit or defend the status quo, or effect change. Some students of the early modern period still think that a feminist approach or an emphasis on gender equals a hunt for victims. As I hope this essay will show, this is not the case. Gender can open many doors on the past. Employing gender as a category of analysis has never determined what one would then see or find.

Investigations of gender soon began to complicate a project of inclusion or addition by destabilizing the narratives and categories of analysis themselves. In the past, how did gender shape who got to do what, and what counted as action? what counted as history? what could be recognized as significant? How might our own ideas about gender inflect what we ourselves can recognize or value? Such questions lead in several different directions: the recognition that gender is not naturally given and constant from one place and time to another, but rather busily inculcated and constantly changing, the discovery that there are many differences (of race, class or status; of religion, region, age or marital status) within that category 'woman' or 'women' that should be attended to, and the awareness that 'man' is also a constructed and internally divided category. If men were not invariably at the centre of early culture and women at the margins, then not only were some women powerful, authoritative figures, but many men were servants and dependants.

Most histories of women and gender in the period start by mapping how it operates as a 'notion', a language, an idea or an ideology.<sup>2</sup> In such an approach, gender does not describe whatever sexual difference can be ascribed to bodies, but rather a complex process of social construction by which an identity is created, conferred, and enacted rather than recognized and named. This does not mean that the social is mapped onto or layered over the biological, but rather that the biological is given cultural meaning through the performance of gender in clothing, grooming, speech and conduct. The performance of gender is understood, then, not as an expression of a gender that is prior and stable, but as constitutive of gender. Gender is

the effect of the performance rather than its origin. This process of gender performance changes over time and is uneven, flawed and contradictory.<sup>3</sup>

Given the transvestite stage of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in England, at a time when France, Spain and Italy allowed women to take speaking parts in the theatre, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century people themselves might well have understood gender as a performance. In the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, the Lord explains how Bartholomew the page should play a wife convincingly: proffering duty 'with soft low tongue and lowly courtesy' and enacting affection with 'kind embracements, tempting kisses,/And with declining head into his bosom', as well as tears of joy. If these do not come readily – the 'woman's gift' – 'an onion will do well for such a shift,/Which in a napkin being close conveyed/ Shall in despite enforce a watery eye' (Induction 1, 110, 114–15, 122–4). Here Bartholomew learns to impersonate not only a woman but a gentlewoman and a wife. The Lord expresses his confidence that the page 'will well usurp the grace,/Voice, gait, and action of a gentlewoman' (Induction 1, 127–8).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, when Bartholomew returns 'in Woman's attire' he has become a Lady, and is referred to as one in the speech prefixes.<sup>5</sup> Then, in the play proper, we watch two boys playing two young women, Katharine and Bianca, who also learn how to play *gentlewomen* and wives.

Cross-dressing on the stage was both the dominant theatrical practice and the source of some controversy. Opposition to theatricality often focused on transvestism and pamphlets attacked the practice on stage and off. When the theatres reopened at the restoration of Charles II, having been closed in 1642 and remaining so during the civil war and interregnum, they employed female actors, offering new sources of scandal and titillation. Controversy now surrounds what we are to make of the early modern transvestite stage: Was it merely a convention that everyone took for granted? Was it deeply disturbing to more people than a few anti-theatrical cranks? How widespread was cross-dressing off the stage? Was the process by which a boy became a woman one not of switching genders but of complexly layering visual signals for gender? How are we to understand the relationship between cross-dressing and status impersonation – on which the stage, in constant and flagrant transgression of sumptuary laws, relied? Were boys who played men as much in drag as those who played women?<sup>6</sup> Few, however, dispute that most who attended the theatre accepted the idea that gender, status and age were identified by attributes that were imitable and transferable.

To say that something is a performance is not to say that it is not real or does not have consequences. If gender was fabricated and reiterated through continuous performance, it still powerfully shaped experience; it also mediated between intentions that are often inaccessible to us now and outcomes that may often have been unintended. Thus, while gender constructions

imposed limits on the conceptual and practical options available to early modern people, they did not wholly determine them; reconstructing the parameters set by these prescriptions does not exhaust the possibilities that may have been available. Recent scholarship emphasizes the agency of women as well as men, choices as well as constraints, practices as well as prescriptions, and the ways in which persons strategized around and within even the most intractable limits. The contradictions within and among these constructions, as well as how they intersect with or interrupt other categories of social identity, created arenas for agency. Since viewing gender as socially constructed can suggest that some malign and conspiratorial agency – call it ‘the patriarchy’ perhaps – is inventing gender and imposing it on the unsuspecting and unresisting, theoretical and historical approaches that emphasize the possibilities for agency complicate our understanding of the processes and performances that are gender.

As various theorists have argued, subjects are always simultaneously subjected and active; the process of coming into being as a gendered subject is one of being informed, disciplined and also, in a limited way, enabled.<sup>7</sup> There is no one location of ‘power’. As a consequence, no ‘one’ is doing the constructing. Rather, everyone in a culture participates in the processes by which gender is produced.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, attention is turning to the locations and technologies of dissemination (the pulpit, the printing press, the court, the school, reading, listening, watching). More than the audiences or consumers, silently absorbing lessons in how to ‘be and seem’, women also participated actively at all of these sites of production.<sup>9</sup> They were preachers in the dissenting Protestant sects; they were actively involved in printing and publishing and selling print materials; they were queens and ladies in waiting at court; they were teachers, nurses and mothers. Even as consumers, women were actively interpreting what they read or heard. Sometimes they left records of their resistant, critical, or amused responses; often they did not. But various kinds of evidence, such as women’s angry critiques to misogynist sermons or texts, suggest that women had a range of reactions to and interactions with attempts to subject them to overly stringent, gendered standards of conduct.

Our best evidence about women’s active roles in the production of culture comes from their own writings. Barely available and rarely considered just a few decades ago, these are now readily accessible, and widely taught and studied. Research on women’s writings is moving beyond the discovery that women were writers to sustained engagement with women’s texts. Women’s words do not offer us direct and unmediated access to women’s experience any more than men’s do. Instead, these texts reveal the complex ways in which women participated in, rather than simply submitted to, the construction, inculcation, interrogation and transformation of gender norms.

Women did not all challenge the status quo. Many of the privileged women who wrote and published benefited from and defended the existing social order; it is these women who, according to Paula McDowell, most often articulate a recognizably modern self, ‘gendered, autonomous and unique’. For those women actively involved in various forms of protest and activism, who tended to be of the middling or underclass, ‘gender was not necessarily the first category of identity’. Instead, such women ‘tended to find empowerment in more dispersed modes of being based in religio-political allegiances, trades or occupations, and other collective social identifications’ and ‘to envision the self in more traditional ways as social, collective and essentially unsexed’. For McDowell, it was only in the course of the eighteenth century that women ‘increasingly came to understand themselves as a group with shared interests and, potentially, shared strengths’.<sup>10</sup> McDowell’s fascinating arguments suggest just one of the ways in which women’s writings provide a rich, rewarding, unpredictable and heterogeneous body of material of which to ask the questions of how, why, when and to whom gender matters. As always, one answer does not fit all cases and none of the answers is determined by the questions themselves.<sup>11</sup>

If gender was not a fact of life, but rather a practice, then it not only affected the experience of identity, but also provided resources for thinking about and describing the world. David Underdown, for instance, has referred to ‘the gendered habit of mind’. As Kim Hall explains this pervasive phenomenon, gender works in many descriptions of difference, verbal and visual, to represent ‘the destructive potential of strangeness, disorder, and variety’ through ‘the familiar, and familiarly threatening, unruliness of gender’. The familiar figure for disorder or inversion is often the ‘woman on top’, as Natalie Davis argued in a highly influential essay.<sup>12</sup> As Englishness gradually came to be defined through association with masculinity, Protestantism and whiteness, it was also positioned against ‘definitional others’ who were often allied to the feminine, disorderly women and gender inversion. Gender thus served the complex formation of collective as well as individual identities.<sup>13</sup>

Gender in the early modern period has been described as the focus for ‘crisis’ or ‘panic’ by scholars, most notably Susan Amussen and Underdown, who argue that there was widespread anxiety about the gender order from about 1560 to 1660.<sup>14</sup> Others, however, have been challenging this argument as too sweeping or premature. According to David Cressy, for instance: ‘Of course there were strains in early modern society, and questions about gender roles and identity, but it is hard to argue that they were more acute than at other times. Nor can it be claimed with confidence that gender mattered more than other social, economic, religious and political problems.’ Martin Ingram, too, challenges Underdown’s claim that there

was a surge in prosecutions of scolds between 1560 and 1640 and questions what this could mean even if there were. Ingram does, however, concede that punishments became more severe in the period. In his view, what singled women out for comment and punishment was not that they were women but that they disturbed the peace; men who spoke or acted in a disorderly way were also disciplined.<sup>15</sup> Cressy and Ingram do not question that scolding and cross-dressing might be found transgressive, but rather question whether it was gender that made them so. They also argue that gender, to a certain extent, is usually in crisis.

Other scholars have also asked whether gender conflicts were really about gender, suggesting that, in a homosocial world, relations between men might have been seen as more valuable, more at risk, and more dangerous than relations between men and women. Thus concerns about conflict, competition or intimacy between men, which were actually more pressing problems, were displaced onto concerns about disorderly women.<sup>16</sup> But how can we be sure which is the real anxiety or the real problem? Gender-as-scapegoat arguments threaten to dismiss gender as a diversionary tactic. They also threaten to redraw the line between the real and the representational, the cause or experience of disorder and the language used to describe it, in too tidy a way. Finally, they sometimes shrink and confine gender into a fixed, separable category and place issues of gender and sexuality into competition. Perhaps, instead, early modern culture was afraid both of secret transactions between men and of those between men and women. Perhaps the threat was intimacy and secrecy as much as anything else.

What's most valuable in the work that argues for a 'gender crisis' is the fact that it does not understand gender as discrete. Attending to analogies between family and commonwealth, the imbrication of private and public, the complicities of gender and class, and the complex social processes by which some women, but not others, became vulnerable to prosecution, Amussen and Underdown argue that gender conflicts were inseparable from other conflicts. They were part of the fabric of social life, as well as a focus of contestation.

### Gender and the body

We may experience our own bodies as what is outside of history and of interpretation, the great equalizers, the flatteners of social and historical difference: everyone shits, pisses, bleeds, dies. But work in the last twenty years has made it possible to begin to think about the early modern body as historically constructed, just like the gender identities it wears. We experience

our bodies through cultural expectations, vocabularies and practices, which are, in turn, inflected by and constitutive of, not only gender, but also class, status, age, sexuality and race/ethnicity. For instance, Will Fisher argues that, in the Renaissance, beards not only distinguished men from women but men from boys; crucial rather than 'secondary' markers of sexual difference, beards were also disturbingly prosthetic, as the use of false beards on the stage suggests.<sup>17</sup> The body is not then 'nature' as distinct from 'culture', nor is it the raw material of sexual difference that cultural process moulds into 'gender'. Rather, the two - nature and culture, the sexed body and gender identities - are mutually constitutive.

The early modern body was a 'humoral' body. An elaborate analogy between the body and the elements described the body as governed by four 'humours': yellow and black bile, blood and phlegm. Health and happiness depended on maintaining the proper balance of these humours. Thus bleeding and purges were crucial to medical practice. The fluids in the body were also fungible or interchangeable; breast milk, for instance, was viewed as redirected and purified menstrual blood. In addition, the organs might achieve agency, having 'minds of their own' so to speak. In the humoral body, the body and the mind, physical and emotional wellness, were connected. As Gail Paster explains, under a humoral view of the body, 'every subject grew up with a common understanding of his or her body as a semi-permeable, irrigated container in which humors moved sluggishly. People imagined that health consisted of a state of internal solubility to be perilously maintained, often through a variety of evacuations, either self-administered or in consultation with a healer.' For men as well as women, the challenge was to keep the body in balance and, increasingly, to police its boundaries so as to appear 'civilized'. The 'fluidity, openness, porous boundaries' of the humoral body were especially associated with the feminine body. Paster argues that a full understanding of the humoral body works to correct 'a blinkered preoccupation with genitalia' in recent discussions by emphasizing the gendering of other organs, such as the heart, and of body temperature, 'a form of difference thoroughly saturating female flesh and the subject within it'.<sup>18</sup>

Although bodies were not only gendered with regard to genitals, much influential work has focused on reproductive anatomy and function. Thomas Laqueur energized discussion of the early modern body by drawing attention to the persistence of a 'one-sex' (or Aristotelian) model of the body, in which penis and vagina are related homologically, and the clitoris is a morphological penis on the outside of the body. On this model, male and female bodies are only slightly different from one another; they are on a continuum, which begins with the internal genitalia of women and then progresses, through greater warmth and dryness, to the external genitalia of

men. Here biological sexual difference is a matter of degree rather than kind. What would the cultural consequences of such a view be? Laqueur himself argues that so subtle a sex difference could not ground a system of gender difference; the burden fell on culture to create and maintain a gender system. Thus sex and gender were not distinct. Some join Laqueur in emphasizing the similarities inherent in this system. Others emphasize that women were viewed as inchoate or failed men, half-baked, in a state of arrested development.<sup>19</sup> The continuum might also make the hermaphrodite – the figure stranded in the middle, the both rather than the either/or – especially disturbing.<sup>20</sup> Still others emphasize that, if the feminine was inferior and unformed, it was also prior. As Laura Levine puts it, femininity was ‘the default position, the thing one were always in danger of slipping into’.<sup>21</sup> Such theories push the idea of gender as a constitutive performance, in which behaving or dressing in a certain way can transform who one is, to its logical conclusion; conduct and biology come together. What is overstated here is the idea that everyone in early modern England had a self-consciously unstable sense of gender identity. Whether ideas about the body that were articulated and debated in medical discourses were broadly disseminated outside them is currently much contested. Yet the two-way traffic between the elite and the popular in this period was so brisk as to cast doubt on the integrity of a boundary between the two.<sup>22</sup>

The one-sex or Aristotelian model was not the only one available. A two-sex or Galenic model became more common after 1600, and eventually so successfully supplanted the earlier one that it was long forgotten. In this view, men and women have distinct anatomies, each perfect in itself, and the two a perfect complement. The two models had rather different consequences for desire and sexual relations. Both assumed cross-sex coupling. Yet the Galenic model fixed sexual difference and provided an anatomical underpinning for cross-sex desire: no continuum here, just the ‘natural’ symmetry of opposites attracting.

There were two theories of generation as well. In the two-seed (Galenic) model, both parents contributed seeds for conception, yet the father remained the more important because his seed was warmer and more active. In the one-seed (Aristotelian) model, only males contributed seed, so women contributed matter and a location, not spirit, form or intellect. There were arguments about whether the egg or the sperm contained a tiny preformed human; either view emphasized the contribution of one sex over the other. To see the egg as the homunculus was to view the sperm as an animator but not a co-creator; to view the sperm as the homunculus was to reduce the female contribution to incubation. Dispute also surrounded the significance of female orgasm to conception, some arguing that the female’s emission of seed through orgasm was essential to conception (hence the argument

that a woman who had conceived must have taken pleasure in intercourse and therefore could not have been raped). Mary Fissell argues that the language used to describe reproduction became more freighted by gender in the course of the seventeenth century, as women’s bodies were increasingly described as created for men’s pleasure and as the ground for men’s creativity.<sup>23</sup> Here, too, it is worth wondering how much such disputes might have influenced the experience of embodiment. While this influence must have been indirect and erratic, recent work on the evidence given in prosecutions for infanticide, rape and witchcraft, and on proverbs about fertility and generation, suggest that certain gendered ways of construing the body cut across social and discursive registers.<sup>24</sup> Later, science became the privileged language for articulating sexual difference, but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this was not yet the case.

### Complicating the picture: men, class and sexuality

If crisis attached to or was displaced onto gender, that crisis revolved not only around controlling women, but being men. Challenging the assumption that men are confident, autonomous and self-determining, recent work argues that masculinity in early modern England was not only divided by differences such as religion, status and age, but was also ‘anxious’: men have ‘dilemmas’; masculinity is ‘always in question’.<sup>25</sup> As this work reveals, concern focused on controlling women precisely because being able to do so was one of the conditions of ‘being a man’. Thus shaming rituals, for instance, focused on men who were unable to control bossy, abusive wives.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, not all men had female dependants they needed to govern. Only some heads of households had wives, daughters and servants to keep in line. Many men would have lived as dependants themselves, rather than as household governors.

How did patriarchies vary and change? How was a patriarchal social, religious and political structure challenged or compromised by having a woman as its ruler? How did the vicissitudes of life limit fathers’ power? Some fathers died, leaving their position of authority to be filled by a mother, guardian or oldest son; in the chaotic circumstances of the period, men went into exile because of their political allegiance or their religious beliefs, leaving their families and estates behind them. Taking the disability, death or absence of fathers into account forces us to recognize the vulnerability and adaptability of a patriarchal system.

Manhood was determined not only by patriarchal authority at home, but by the exercise of public duties. In Jaques' famous, highly conventional speech about the 'seven ages of man' in *As You Like It*, manhood emerges in public life. This speech defines adulthood not in terms of marriage or parenthood, but in terms of office. In infancy, the subject of Jaques' speech is undifferentiated by gender: he mewls and pukes in his nurse's arms much as a female baby would do. Yet, for all of Jaques' claim to universalism, his 'man' moves into gender and class as he moves from his nurse's arms and into the world outside the household. Just as 'breeching' distinguished boys from girls by their dress, so this 'schoolboy' distinguishes himself from girls and from less privileged boys when he moves into a series of public spaces and roles. He is a 'whining schoolboy', then a lover, then a soldier, then a justice. Having reached a pinnacle of achievement and influence, sagacity and corpulence, he then begins the decline back into infant dependency, a decline which is explicitly depicted as a loss of manhood: the body shrinks, the 'big, manly voice' turns again 'toward childish treble', and the senses all decline, shutting him off from the world.<sup>27</sup> The speech does not imagine a life course for women; nor does it grant men's relations to women much significance. Women appear here as a nurse, then as the object of youthful adoration, then disappear. In this speech, manhood is both hard earned and short lived.

Of course, not all men became soldiers and justices, or married, property holders. In early modern culture, manhood depended not on having a penis, but on owning property. According to Susan Amussen, 'married, property-owning men' – a very small percentage of the total – were the only ones who were recognized as "real" men.<sup>28</sup> Were those who did not achieve marriage and property not men? What kinds of masculinity were available to apprentices, servants, students, vagrants, priests? What were the perceived differences between boys and men, and how did one achieve manhood or the recognition of it? While some scholars have shown that men could be 'feminized' by sharing qualities or characteristics, physical or otherwise, usually attributed to women, Richard Rambuss has pointed out that penetrability and leakiness might be viewed as qualities of male as well as female bodies.<sup>29</sup> Other discussions associate 'feminization' not with bodily fluids and functions but with social positions and possibilities. 'Effeminacy' had a different meaning in the early modern period than it does now: it meant not liking men, but being like women – desiring them so much that one came to resemble them, being excessively vain and extravagant in one's dress, choosing or accepting or being forced into a 'feminine' position of dependency or submission. Stephen Orgel argues that 'everyone in this culture is a woman, feminized in relation to someone'.<sup>30</sup> But if at least temporary subordination was so widespread, how meaningful is it to claim

that this status was 'feminized' and thereby denigrated? Was one's manhood necessarily at risk in desiring a boy, being ravished by spectacles, finding one's self leaky and penetrable? Or were these part of early modern manhood, but effaced in later constructions?

The law treated sodomy as the most transgressive crime against normative masculinity (if there was such a thing). Sodomy seems to have emerged into scrutiny and regulation depending on who committed it, since there was no clear understanding of the act in itself. This is not to argue that accusations of sodomy were not in any way about sex, but rather that sex became transgressive in association with other concerns. Jonathan Goldberg describes sodomy as a capacious and manipulable category, empty and therefore receptive to multiple, shifting meanings. The confusion and adaptability of the category lies 'precisely in failing to distinguish nonprocreative homo- and heterosexual intercourse'.<sup>31</sup> To be blunt: is it anal sex between men? is it anal sex between men and women? Is it any sexual act other than intercourse between a married man and woman? Is it any sexual act between members of the same sex? According to Goldberg, demonizing this category serves to define and protect both the licensed congress between spouses, and the many interactions between men in a homosocial world. Just as religious intolerance often focused on 'proximate others', whose beliefs and practices were closely related and highly similar to one's own, so anxiety about sexual conduct often focused on behaviours that were 'too close for comfort' to the supposed norm of procreative, cross-sex intercourse, revealing the contradictions and uncertainties that made themselves at home in English culture.<sup>32</sup>

David Halperin's work on ancient Greece has been extremely influential in early modern studies of sexuality because it has helped to give us a vocabulary for understanding how social status and age, as well as gender, figure in evaluations of sexual conduct. For instance, following Halperin, Bruce R. Smith argues that opprobrium attached particularly to the 'passive' partner in homosexual acts, i.e. the one placed in the 'inferior' position associated with women, boys and servants: 'Renaissance Englishmen, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, eroticized the power distinctions that set one male above another in their society.'<sup>33</sup> As has been widely and influentially argued, a sexual act did not translate into an identity in the early modern period, nor did the gender of one's partner in a sex act define a recognizable social identity. Instead, people engaged in a spectrum of practices – autoerotic, homoerotic, heteroerotic.

Not until later were same-sex activities marked off as transgressive; not until later was penetrative intercourse between a man and a woman defined and privileged as the norm.<sup>34</sup> Some claim, however, that the fall into categorization began in this period. For instance, Alan Stewart argues that,



when the suppression of the monasteries forced priests out of their all-male communities, sodomy ceased to be seen as synonymous with the clergy, and came to be suspected in all relations between men, especially those relations that were central to humanism involving cohabitation and collaboration.<sup>35</sup> Whenever this process of disarticulation began, hetero- and homosexualities, like masculinities and femininities, were defined in relation and opposition to one another.

Women's sexual transgressions could also become notorious and fatal. I think immediately of the purported sexual transgressions of queens: the charges of adultery and incest against Anne Boleyn; the charge of sexual incontinence against Catherine Howard; the rumours surrounding Mary Stuart's attachment to David Rizzio, a court musician, complicity in the murder of her husband and elopement with (or rape by) the Earl of Bothwell. In all of these cases, sexual charges or rumours had significant consequences. But the charges are all about women's relationships to men. Under what circumstances were women's relations to other women marked out as transgressive? Very rarely. Especially on the continent, when sex between women was criminalized it was imagined as penetration – with the enlarged clitoris of the 'tribade' or with a dildo.<sup>36</sup> But female homoeroticism was rarely construed in this way in England. Some popular texts offer interesting insights into how early modern culture imagined attachment between women, but also failed or refused to visualize its physical expression. In a ballad called 'The Scornful Damsel's Overthrow' (c. 1685), for instance, the damsel of the title spurns every suitor, thinking herself better than they and preferring 'a maiden-life'. As a 'pleasant Frolick', a pretty maid decides to dress as a young man and woo her. They marry; their wedding bed is prepared; then the groom reveals herself to be a woman. As a consequence, 'in this life no comfort could [the scornful damsel] find' and so, disappointed of penetration by her beloved, she instead 'with a Dagger pierc'd her gentle heart'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in *As You Like It*, the scornful shepherdess Phebe must settle for Silvius when she learns that Ganymede, the man she prefers, is really a woman (Rosalind). Just as Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is punished for her pride and disdain by falling for an ass, so these women are disciplined by falling for an equally inappropriate and hopeless love object – another woman. In these texts, the comic plot requires that we join in the assumption that, of course, two women cannot consummate their love, cannot marry, cannot live happily ever after.

In John Lyly's remarkable play *Gallathea* (c. 1585), two girls, Gallathea and Phyllida, separately enter a forest, disguised as boys, for reasons too complicated to go into here. Once there, they fall in love, each thinking the attraction is cross-sex. When it is revealed that they are both girls, they are bitterly disappointed.

NEPTUNE: Do you both, being maidens, love one another?

GALLATHEA: I had thought the habit agreeable with the sex, and so burned in the fire of mine own fancies.

PHYLLIDA: I had thought that in the attire of a boy there could not have lodged the body of a virgin, and so was inflamed with a sweet desire which now I find a sour deceit.

DIANA: Now, things falling out as they do, you must leave these fond, fond affections. Nature will have it so, necessity must.

(V, iii, 141–50)

It seems as if that will be that. Yet even in this exchange, the two heroines' confession that they checked their desires against the outward manifestations of gender 'and so' licensed themselves suggests that the operations of desire are not understood as natural or necessary. Furthermore, neither maiden is able to give up her beloved or promise to move on to a more acceptable attachment. Neptune is cross with them: 'an idle choice, strange and foolish, for one virgin to dote on another and to imagine a constant faith where there can be no cause of affection' (V, iii, 155–7). But Diana sympathizes with them: 'I like well and allow it' (159). Since this is a magical, Ovidian world, Diana offers to transform one of the girls into a boy, providing the penis necessary for a happy ending. Gallathea and Phyllida announce that they do not care who gets transgendered, as long as they will be able to 'embrace' and 'enjoy' one another – which, the play suggests, would not be possible otherwise. Only their fathers care, because of the danger of disinheritance their sons. As the play ends, the characters agree to leave the choice to Diana and head off for the 'church door'.<sup>38</sup>

The inability to imagine or depict what could happen between women might have offered female homoeroticism a survival advantage, since naming, categorizing and regulating sexualities tends to restrict rather than foster them. Valerie Traub argues that when early modern women's relationships with one another coexisted with, rather than replaced, marriage, they were ignored, even tolerated. Yet they were also, through this neglect, eclipsed. They are hard for us to see, document and discuss. Since 'the discourse of law has stood as arbiter of social fact', as Traub points out, it has prevented us from at least speculating about what the law could not see or declined to regulate.<sup>39</sup> Even as we now try to imagine possibilities for intimacy and alliance between women that surviving evidence often only hints at or skirts, we have also been confronting the troubling evidence that women's relations to one another could be antagonistic – when they accused one another of witchcraft or slander, for instance, or when neighbourhood women searched the body or room of a single woman for evidence of childbirth.<sup>40</sup> Like men, women were divided by age, social and economic status, religion and marital status. New research has shown that more women remained

single than married in early modern England, and that some women even served as the heads of their own households.<sup>11</sup> Thus marital status – as virgin, wife, widow or spinster – was one of the most important aspects of women's identities and determinants of their options.

Discussions of sexuality in early modern England seem, at last, to be shifting the focus from marriage, challenging the presumption of heterosexuality, rethinking the complexities of household membership and taking into consideration the many persons who lived outside marriage. They are also moving away from thinking in terms of authorized cross-sex conduct (marriage), disorderly cross-sex conduct (adultery and fornication), and disorderly same-sex conduct (sodomy) to explore non-transgressive, non-deviant eroticisms in play. If, briefly, those focusing on marriage and the family squared off against those attempting to 'queer the Renaissance', the map of critical positions is now considerably more complicated, and the resulting articulations more supple, less embattled, more mutually informed. Discussions of sexuality are not only both re-evaluating the household and moving outside it. They are also extending to unremarkable behaviours that were both more pervasive and much more difficult to document, such as the erotic investment in the material world and the erotics of religious devotions.

Attention to gender is particularly vulnerable to the charge of presentism, or projecting our own preoccupations onto the past. Certainly, we can foreclose possibilities for fresh insight when we approach the past so heavily armed with preconceptions that we cannot see what is different or unfamiliar or unpredictable. The greater danger is a disregard for the past as altogether irrelevant, unusable or uninteresting. Present preoccupations can motivate and invigorate an approach to the past that sees it not as an undistorted mirror of our own concerns but as a vital repository of knowledge, a shifting, fissured, but inescapable foundation of whatever futures we hope to build.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Gender and early emancipation in the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages and early modern period

MARC BOONE, THÉRÈSE DE HEMPTINNE  
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### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the role and impact of gender in the public and private life of the Low Countries, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The issues under review include social mobility and equality, the economy, violence, emancipation, after emancipation, gender discrimination and segregation. We shall consider whether or not social advancement and social mobility could be considered as realistic goals in those days and, if so, what was the impact of public authorities, urban elites, extended families and parents on these processes? Was social advancement achieved through the institution of marriage, the control of family patrimonies and the regulation of matrimonial and succession legislation? This chapter will also investigate whether or not there were equal opportunities for men and women in economic life. Did education and marriage strategies have any effect on the professional careers of men and women? Were public authorities aware of the importance for economic welfare of a fair gender balance and of an open society?

When studying violence against women, challenges arise in decoding the discourses of lawmakers, lawyers and judges with regard to the prevention and punishment of rapes and abductions. How do we recognize the use of multiple truths in legal rhetoric, and the impact of gender bias in their judgments? There are also problems of interpretation with regard to those regulations designed to protect public morality and institute ethical norms. There may be specific motives that inform legislation aimed at controlling extramarital sexuality. We need also to consider issues of conformity and deviance in terms of religious or moral rules. Moreover, how gender specific

which their upbringing trained them, and which their gender made them supremely well-equipped to carry out. Noblewomen belonging to anti-League families were also engaged in the processes of materially and morally supporting their faction, and there can be little doubt but that lower down the social scale, the religious and political issues involved and invoked affected women – as well as cruelly disrupting their lives.

Women were always involved in warfare in early modern Europe. Sometimes they were direct participants, sometimes they were part of treaty negotiations. They were always part of the baggage train of any army, and were often victims of carnage. They provided material and psychological support for active combatants, and not least, as mothers they produced those combatants. Civil wars are, perhaps, wars that most directly involve women. In an era before aerial bombing, an international conflict might pass most women and indeed, most civilians, by. In civil wars, however, when region and town pit themselves against each other, and when the breakdown of order offers opportunities for ambitious families to rise, or the necessity for others to defend themselves, war takes on a strongly familial aspect and women become directly involved. They defended family domains, made alliances and provisioned forces. The women of the Guise, however, stand out in their active adherence to the ambitions of their widespread, militant and very powerful family. The wars that tore France apart in the latter half of the sixteenth century were wars of religion and magnate ambition and – for better or for worse – these competent and politically motivated women were an integral part of the war machine.

## NOTES

## Introduction

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## Chapter Two Gender and early emancipation in the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages and early modern period

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