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BEFORE IDENTITY

The Ancient World Through the 19th Century

This chapter focuses on same-sex relationships, gender bending, and other aspects of what we today call “queerness” from antiquity to the 19th century, focusing specifically on elucidating the complex pre-identity history of queerness that either helped shape or stood in opposition to later, more formal claims to **queer** identity.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- 1.1 Review how some of the earliest documents of human culture contain references to same-sex desires and gender variant identities and behaviors.
- 1.2 Examine how gender variance emerges in a variety of cultures in pre-Columbian America, India, and the rich cultures of Africa and the African Diaspora.
- 1.3 Describe how same-sex relationships existed in early Judeo-Christian cultures before the modern period.
- 1.4 List the various pressures that emerge to move peoples toward identifying in terms of gender and desire.
- 1.5 Explain how “romantic friendships” between members of the same sex are possible forerunners of contemporary gay and lesbian relationships.
- 1.6 Describe how molly houses functioned as early forms of community building for those interested in gender variance and same-sex erotic practices.

EARLIEST DOCUMENTS OF HUMAN SEXUALITY AND GENDER VARIANT IDENTITIES

Homosexuality has been conceived of as an innate or acquired identity only in the past century and a half, but same-sex practices, desires, and intimacies, as well as gender variance, can be found in nearly every culture in recorded history. Until the “invention” of

homosexual identity, these practices and desires were typically not described in written records; instead, their existence is revealed in words in national lexicons (such as *skesana*, or boy-wife, in South Africa, or *kojobesia* in Ghana) or in laws against same-sex sexual practices (such as the “ignorance” forbidden in Qur’an 27:55). In some communities, including many in the pre–Columbian Americas and in India, males who adopted female gender had special shamanic or ceremonial places in cultural practice. In ancient Egypt, two men who served as manicurists to the king were buried together, pictured in the same stylized embrace that characterized the depiction of husband–wife pairs in formal funerary art (see Figure 1.1).

In Greece, the social and sexual relationship between an older man and a youth represented the ideal form of love. A 2,000-year-old rock painting in Zimbabwe shows male–male sex. This chapter presents a brief glimpse into historical records that imply the existence of same-sex intimacies in various cultures prior to the 19th-century conceptualization of homosexual identity.

We do not claim that these historical records attest to the presence of gay identity across cultures and time. Contemporary scholars debate whether such is the case. Some thinkers—Charley Shively and Blanche Wiesen Cook, to name two—have operated on the assumption that the sexual categories observable in the Global North today are “universal, static, and permanent, suitable for the analysis of all human beings and all societies” (Padgug 56). Others argue that sexuality has a history and has evolved over time. Robert Padgug, for instance, observes that “[s]exuality is relational” (58)—in other words, how any given social group or culture thinks of sexuality relates to historical time and place. Historian Stephen Garton argues that “sexuality has emerged as a major field of historical inquiry” over the past half century; thus, “instead of being something natural, [sexuality] came to be seen by historians as subject to historical change” (28–29). One major consequence of this shift in our understanding about sexuality is that most historians are careful not to read historical records of same-sex desire as gay in the contemporary sense.

We should keep in mind that casting an eye to the past to find evidence of gay, lesbian, or trans identity is to assume that history can and should be read through contemporary lenses. It is also to assume that people and groups of the past understood their sexual intimacies in the same way we do. These are problematic assumptions. This is one moment when it might be useful to refer to the theory of perverse presentism discussed in the introduction to this book [**λ Introduction**]. It highlights the need to avoid imposing current ideas about and constructions of sexuality on the past while it acknowledges the historical expression of sexual intimacies and practices that seem connected to current LGBTQ identifications and practices. To understand past sexual practices—and to honor them—we, like many contemporary historians of sexuality, refrain from identifying historical representations of same-sex desires as specifically gay or lesbian. Likewise, regarding past instances of apparent gender variance, we avoid the terms *transgender* and *transsexual*.

At the same time, whereas the Egyptian manicurists who were buried together may not be gay in contemporary parlance, we acknowledge that it has been especially important and empowering for many contemporary LGBTQ people to discover and identify what looks like same-sex intimacy and gender variance in the annals of history. Such identification has been a crucial part of finding out about ourselves as contemporary queers and LGBTQ folk. It has at times provided a sense of history to those who have found themselves left out of world histories that stigmatize or simply ignore **gender** and sexual “out-laws” or nonconformists. Some contemporary gay men and lesbians often cite the ancient

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Court manicurists Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, from the Necropolis at Saqqara, Egypt.



Source: Court manicurists Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, from necropolis at Saqqara, Egypt. Illustration (c) Greg Reeder, 2008.

Greeks as their historical forbears—and for good reason. The ancient Greeks developed ways of recognizing and even honoring same-sex desires. Probably the principal source for ancient Greek *paiderastia* (or **pederasty**: love between a man and a boy) is Homer’s *Iliad*. In that epic, likely composed in the eighth or ninth century **BCE**, the Greek hero Achilles, feeling slighted by the king, withdraws from the fighting outside Troy. His lover Patroclus, fearing that Achilles is losing honor, puts on Achilles’s armor and goes out to fight in his place. The less powerful Patroclus is killed; his death spurs Achilles to return to the battlefield and defeat the Trojan Hector.

This model of heroic love was absorbed into Greek cultural life in the centuries following the *Iliad*. In Plato’s *Symposium*, written in 360 BCE, Phaedrus declares, “I know not any greater blessing to a young man who is beginning life than a virtuous lover or to the lover than a beloved youth” (5). A Greek same-sex pair included the *erastes*, or older man, and an *eromenos*, or youth. The *eromenos* was typically a post-adolescent between the ages of about 12 and 18; once a young man’s beard sprouted, he was considered past the age of *eromenos*. The Greeks did not favor same-sex relationships between men of similar age; the *erastes-eromenos* pairing was designed to provide pleasure and friendship for the older *erastes* in exchange for protection, training, and social advantage for the younger *eromenos*. Same-sex attachments did not preclude heterosexual marriage, but the pederastic

combination of spiritual and physical connection represented a higher kind of love, more conducive to the military, political, and educational responsibilities of the (male) citizen of the Greek state.

Nearly all literary production was accomplished by men, whereas women in the classical world were generally depicted as “goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves” (Pomeroy). Ancient Greek women were certainly not invisible in their lives, but they might as well have been if all we knew of them was what the literature contained. A notable exception was the poet Sappho, who lived in the seventh century BCE on the island of Lesbos (thus the word *lesbian*). Sappho was known in her day as an unparalleled lyric poet, meaning that her poems were written to be accompanied by a lyre. Her refinements upon common lyric meter led poets after her time to attempt writing in *Sapphic meter*. Little of Sappho’s work has survived, and that which has is mostly in fragments, yet she is still known for her sensuous and personal poetic voice. Many young, wealthy Greek women were sent to Lesbos to study the arts with Sappho. Much of Sappho’s surviving poetry is love lyrics to these young women.

Find Out More in the Sappho and the Abu Nuwas poems at the end of this chapter.

The Qur’an sends a mixed message concerning same-sex desires. On one hand, it specifically forbids same-sex intercourse on Earth; on the other, the virtuous man will be surrounded by beautiful boys in Paradise. Indeed, historically, a long tradition of man–boy love exists in the Arab world. The practice of *liwat* (pederasty) involved a relationship between a *luti* (a man with a predilection for beardless boys) and an *amrad* (unpaid beardless boy) or a *murd mu’ajirin* (paid boy). Abu Nuwas, well-known Iraqi poet of the eighth to ninth century CE, began his career as *amrad* to the older poet Walibah ibn al-Hubab. By the time of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (in present-day Afghanistan) around 1000 CE, *liwat* had come to represent a type of ideal love. Sultan Mahmud and his slave Ayaz were devoted partners (see Figure 1.2); Mahmud later appointed Ayaz ruler of Lahore (in present-day Pakistan). Like Greek pederasty, *liwat* signified passion and pleasure for the *luti* as well as affection and social advancement for the *amrad*.

In Japan, endorsed courtly same-sex desire was known as *wakashu-do*, or the way of the boy. It first appears in written records beginning in the Heian (Peace and Tranquility) period (794–1185 CE). Its rise in popularity in the 12th century seems to have coincided with that of the *No* and *Kabuki* theater traditions, which featured boy actors. *Wakashu-do*, like Greek and Islamic pederasty, was built around the pedagogic relationship between an adult man and a youth. Like the others, it also flourished in the upper classes of society; it was specifically valued among the samurai in the 16th and 17th centuries. Beginning around 1600, as Japan began to be influenced by Western Christianity, *wakashu-do* gradually lost favor; when the Americans arrived, armed and wealthy, in 1854, Japanese same-sex desires sank into invisibility.

Find Out More in the selection from “Bamboo Clappers Strike the Hateful Number” and the “Song of Beau Wang” at the end of this chapter.

In China, a powerful male-male culture surrounding opera performers lasted throughout the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Upper class opera patrons saw the attractive adolescents playing female roles as models of feminine beauty; these young men were also trained as *catamites*, or boys for hire.

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Sultan Mahmud and his slave Ayaz.



Source: Artist unknown, seventeenth century, Reza Abbasi Museum.

What is striking here is that ideal femininity was that performed by males; people assigned female at birth were simply invisible. In postimperial 20th-century China, the opera (and, by extension, its connection with male–male love) was scorned as a throwback to the time of feudal excesses.

GENDER VARIANCE GLOBALLY

In many Native American tribes, before first contact with white missionaries or settlers, a person who possessed characteristics of all genders was thought of as a *two-spirit*, one who understands male and female. This border knowledge carried with it spiritual and physical power; thus, two-spirit individuals were particularly suited to functioning as shamans or

healers and were valued in some tribal groups accordingly. In the centuries before contact with Europeans, tribal languages developed various words for the two-spirit person: *nadle* (Navajo), *lhamana* (Zuni), *winkte* (Lakota), and so on. European explorers brought with them the term *berdache*, now often used to describe Native American postcontact gender nonconformists. A berdache typically switched gender entirely. We-wha (c. 1849–1896), a Zuni, dressed as a woman and did women’s work exclusively (see Figure 1.3). We-wha was highly skilled in weaving and pottery making and was also a central figure in the pueblo’s spiritual life. In 1886, she accompanied her white friend, anthropologist Matilda Coxe Stevenson, to Washington, D.C.; no one, including Stevenson, knew at the time that We-wha was born male. Whereas some recorded instances exist of females appropriating male roles as berdaches, this seems to have been rare and less demarcated (Roscoe).

Like berdaches, *hijras* in India and Pakistan are biological males who live as women. Hijras trace their existence to the **eunuchs** who served as guards to nobility during the

FIGURE 1.3 ■ We-Wha, circa 1886.



Source: Appeared in *The Zuñi Man-Woman*, Albuquerque: Univ of NMP, 1991

Mughal Empire (1526–1858). Some hijras are intersexed, some are transsexual, and some are castrated; many have been rejected by their families of origin and form communities with other hijras, earning their livings by prostitution. They often live in communal settings in households comprising several *chelas* (disciples) and are supervised by a *guru*. Hijras play a cultural role in the larger community, frequently appearing uninvited to dance and sing at weddings and births of male children. Their role is to entreat the deities to bestow fertility on the husband or male child (Thadani).

To situate the conversation of gender identity and gender variance in historical Africa, it is necessary to note that concepts of gender in the African tradition can be corporal, psychological, relational and even spiritual. In addition, the terms used may not neatly fit into our Western conception and lexicon of gender identity and gender expression

Regarding the pre-Christian African diaspora, Western concepts of gender identity or expression and sexual orientation do not apply as some African cultures believed that every human embodies both the masculine and feminine. In the book *Transgender History and Geography: Crossdressing in Context*, G. G. Bolich argues that for cultures such as the Dagara people “gender has very little to do with anatomy” but is rather often talked about as “purely energetic” (245). This suggests that gender is less an aspect of biology or anatomy and instead an exhibition of energy and spirit. Gender diversity in other African contexts includes nonheteronormative societal and familial roles (the “male wives” of the Azande of Sudan or the “female husbands” of Nigeria), nongender-specific clothing and expression (Dagara people), and matriarchal control in the choosing of marriage partners (Yoruba of Guinea Bissau) (246).

These early African cultures often situated gender as a liminal space between the mind and body. This flexibility within the framework of gender allowed some individuals to occupy a space of “intermediate, mixed or ‘third gender’ expression” (246). The Amhara of Ethiopia, the Igbo of Nigeria, and the Otoro of Sudan each allowed space for both non-binary as well as more rigid binary gender identity. The Nuer people of Ethiopia had some male-bodied individuals who wore feminine clothing, took up feminine societal roles, and were even regarded as women although no physical change of sex took place. In this way, the role served by individuals and the clothing they wore determined the gender category (245–246).

The Dogon people of Mali believed that all humans were born with the duality of male and female spirits within one body. They assumed that humans were created in the likeness of the twin deities, Nummo and Nommo, representing the divine masculine and the divine feminine, so humans too can embody the (male/female) spirit. This dual embodiment further explains the Dogon people’s belief that certain body parts within the same person are male, while others are female—for instance, the clitoris is male while the foreskin is female (256).

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS AND DESIRES IN JUDEO-CHRISTIAN CULTURES

The Torah includes 613 laws (365 prohibitions and 248 positive commandments), which are known as the Mosaic code. Two of these, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, prohibit a man from lying “with mankind as with womankind,” calling this practice “abomination” and stating the penalty as death. In addition, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19)

is often read as describing God's punishment of Sodom for homosexuality (thus gay men have been called *sodomites*), although some commentators, notably John Boswell, have pointed out that the men of Sodom appear to sin more through failure of hospitality than sexual depravity. In the New Testament, Jesus is silent on the subject, but Paul in his epistles (Romans 1:25–27, I Corinthians 6:9) castigates both men and women who engage in same-sex sexual acts. Some scholars cast doubt on Paul's intention, saying that the Greek words he uses for those engaging in same-sex sexual behaviors (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* rather than the more common term *paidieraste*) are ambiguous in meaning. Moreover, some biblical stories seem to honor same-sex affection and intimacy. The friendship between David and Jonathan, as well as the close relationship between Ruth and Naomi, frequently have been cited by lesbian and gay people as instances of same-sex intimacy that are depicted in the Bible as idealized and worthy of respect. Still, Judeo-Christian tradition generally forbids same-sex sexual practices for both men and women.

During the first centuries of the Roman Empire, the Lex Scantinia (or Scantinian Law) governed sexual practices. It seems to have stipulated that most forms of same-sex sexual activity were illegal and punishable by a fine. After the *Constantinian change*, whereby the emperor Constantine christianized the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, the punishment for same-sex sexual behavior (then classified as a “crime against nature” following Paul's charge in Romans 1:26) was upgraded to death. In the Middle Ages, such behavior, particularly **sodomy**, was reclassified as heresy, and during the 15th century, a number of men were beheaded or burned at the stake for having committed the “crime of Sodom.” This period also saw sodomy referred to as the *peccatum mutum*, or silent sin, that is, a transgression that could not be spoken of. Most of what was written on this subject focused on men exclusively, although as early as the fifth century, St. Augustine warned his sister not to indulge in carnal or immodest love in the convent where she was a nun (Betteridge). In general, female–female sexuality was regarded as a lesser offense than male–male sexuality for various reasons: lacking a penis, a woman could not commit the sin of “spilling the seed.” Lesbian sex was widely considered to be merely a preliminary activity preparing a woman for marriage; a sexually aggressive woman was thought to be emulating men—in other words, aspiring to a more perfect state of nature. Still, protolesbian sexuality was not condoned, especially when it appeared to function as a throwback to pre-Christian Wiccan or pagan religions. For example, early Church fathers (third and fourth centuries CE) disapproved of and ridiculed “binding spells” used by Upper Egyptian women to attract other women:

Fundament of the gloomy darkness, jagged-tooth dog, covered with coiling snakes, turning three heads, traveler in the recesses of the underworld, come, spirit-driver, with the Erinyes, savage with their stinging whips; holy serpents, maenads, frightful maidens, come to my wroth incantations...By means of this corpse-dæmon inflame the heart, the liver, the spirit of Gorgonia, whom Nilogenia bore, with love and affection for Sophia, whom Isara bore. Constrain Gorgonia, whom Nilogenia bore, to cast herself into the bath-house for the sake of Sophia, whom Isara bore. (Brooten)

Later, a woman could be severely punished for **cross-dressing**, and it is now believed that during the so-called burning times (the prosecution and killing of witches in Europe between the 14th and 18th centuries CE), many of the female victims were women who violated accepted gender practice.

FIGURE 1.4 ■ Icon of Sts. Serge and Bacchus, seventh century CE.



Source: Originally from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, now in Kiev Museum of Eastern and Western Art.

At the same time as the Church excoriated same-sex “heresy” and executed some of its practitioners, certain liturgical elements within it acknowledged, even celebrated, same-sex relationships. Saints Serge and Bacchus, Roman soldiers of the third century CE, and also Christian converts and martyrs, are said to have been “joined in life” (see Figure 1.4). A document from the 10th century describes Serge as the “sweet companion and lover” of Bacchus; their image is depicted on an icon found in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, with Jesus appearing as *pronubus* or best man between them.

Find Out More in the “Order for Solemnization of Same-Sex Union” at the end of this chapter.

In fact, a number of Offices of Same-Sex Union exist, dating from the seventh to the 16th centuries CE; most of these were written in Greek or Serbian Slavonic (and thus originate in Eastern Orthodox Christianity), although a very few are in Latin. It is not clear exactly what kind of partnership was envisioned by the authors of these rituals, but certainly they indicate an ecclesiastical acceptance of binding same-sex relationships as part of Church history (*Same-Sex Unions*).

DESIRES FOR IDENTITY

In the year 1101 CE, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, issued a decree against clerical marriage. Commentators immediately observed an increase in sodomy among priests; offenders were excommunicated, and their crimes and sentences were published weekly in churches throughout England. Instead of eliminating sodomy by shaming the perpetrators, publishing the crimes seems to have caused heightened interest among male parishioners, who spent considerable time discussing who did what to whom. As a result, the publication ceased but not before revealing the existence of a subculture of men who would be glad for an excuse to gather (Betteridge).

Most intriguing about this story is the persistence of the unspoken community, even in an atmosphere of condemnation and harsh punishment. Extremely severe consequences were the norm in cases of sodomy. The 1598 case of Ludwig Boudin serves as a dramatic

example. Boudin, a married pastry baker from Frankfurt, Germany, was accused of sodomy by a jealous competitor. The witnesses mostly recalled events from years in the past, speaking of Boudin as propositioning them when he was drunk; none of them described any activity more serious than an unwelcome advance on Boudin's part. Unable to prove the charge but inclined to find the defendant guilty, the city council subjected Boudin to extensive torture, hoping to force a confession. Repeated applications of the leg screw and the rack failed to achieve the desired result, although they did weaken Boudin to the point where the council decided that further torture would be counterproductive. Boudin was ultimately sentenced to time in the pillory, followed by banishment for life from Frankfurt (Hergemöller).

The Italian Renaissance (15th century) led to a somewhat more open attitude toward male–male sexuality as the revival of classical standards for art and literature rekindled ancient Greek and Roman ideas about, for instance, male beauty and pederasty. Despite the Inquisition breathing down his neck, the Franciscan friar Antonio Rocco wrote *Alcibiades the Schoolboy* in about 1631. This book is the story of the attempted (and finally successful) seduction of a youth by his teacher Filotimo; it is a type of extended Socratic argument in which the two parties engage in prolonged intellectual and flirtatious give-and-take before the teacher's inevitable victory. Alcibiades of Rocco's novel is named after Socrates's young lover in Plato's *Symposium*, and Filotimo argues for a return to socially sanctioned pederasty as practiced by the Greeks. Various modern writers have called *Alcibiades the Schoolboy* the first gay novel because Filotimo describes himself as a man who loves other men rather than women. Filotimo, then, does more than perform homosexual acts; he identifies himself as a homosexual, an early example of a man whom we in the contemporary world might understand as gay.

In the Middle Ages—and through the 19th century, in fact—women had little access to either schools or public establishments, and their general disenfranchisement from church or government tended to isolate them in their homes. Church doctrine pictured women as sexually insatiable and accordingly created rules confining them to the “natural” purpose of sex—that is, procreation. A woman who wished to move freely in the world and initiate sexual activity with another woman would of necessity have to pass as a man, and indeed passing women were most frequently punished for the sin of *mulier cum muliere fornicatio* (woman-with-woman fornication). For example, in 1477, a German woman named Katherina Hetzeldorfer was drowned in the Rhine River after being convicted of an unnamed crime, which involved dressing as a man and “abducting” and seducing at least two women using a leather **dildo**. So skillful was Hetzeldorfer in the use of this device that both her female partners testified in court that they believed her to be a man; of course, had they admitted they knew she was female, they might have shared her fate (Puff). Hetzeldorfer was an early example of a passing woman unlucky enough to get caught; her case and others like it illustrate the difficulties facing women who sought either freedom of movement or sex with other women. Though they could operate in the world as men, they lacked a community of women with similar desires.

If Professor Filotimo in Antonio Rocco's *Alcibiades the Schoolboy* represented the first modern (i.e., self-conscious) gay man, then Anne Lister (1791–1840) was the first modern lesbian. Lister was a wealthy Yorkshire landowner whose social class provided her with the freedom to dress as she pleased and to court women and with the education she needed to write down her exploits in elaborate, coded journals. Like Filotimo, Lister describes her

predilection for same-sex desire as part of her nature: “I love and only love the fairer sex and thus beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any love but theirs” (145).

ROMANTIC FRIENDSHIPS AND BOSTON MARRIAGES

Contemporary historians of sexuality have recorded and discussed a variety of same-sex sexual and romantic arrangements between women. Whereas a passing working-class **Tommy** or a wealthy Anne Lister possessed the ability to move around freely in the world, most women before the 20th century did not. Yet middle- and upper class women had long participated in socially sanctioned romantic friendships characterized by love letters and poetry, emotional intimacy, and even physical affection. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman gives examples of both French and British women of the 17th century—Mme. de La Fayette, Katherine Philips, and others—who openly expressed their love for other women. She also cites Michel de Montaigne as an example of a man who declared that his romantic love for his friend Étienne de la Boétie constituted a “sacred bond” between them. By the 18th century, such romantic friendships had become fashionable, especially among women. Probably the most well-known pair was Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, Irish gentlewomen who eloped to Wales in 1778 and lived there together for 53 years (see Figure 1.5). Their cozy, idyllic retreat became a fashionable destination for travelers who were anxious to meet the Ladies of Llangollen. Although the ladies themselves wrote that their relationship had nothing to do with sex (which they euphemistically called *Vulgar Eros*), it is nevertheless true that literary proto-lesbians such as Anna Seward and Anne Lister visited them and wrote admiringly of their Welsh ménage, and the writer Hester Thrale Piozzi called them “damned sapphists” (Stanley 163). Ponsonby and Butler represent a success story for early female romantic couples in contrast to, for instance, Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie, Scottish schoolmistresses whose livelihood was entirely undermined when they were accused by a student of having engaged in “improper and criminal conduct” with each other. They went to court in 1811 to claim the charge was libelous and won, but their school for girls nonetheless closed because of the scandal.

Woods and Pirie won their libel case in part because Lord Gillies, the judge, believed that “the crime here alleged has no existence” (*Scotch Verdict* 282). In the 19th century, romantic friendship was seen as benign, even salutary. In contrast to the Middle Ages, people regarded middle- and upper class women as asexual, and even if they were not, without a penis present, sex “has no existence.” Given this view of privileged women, it is not surprising that Queen Victoria, when asked if she thought the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act outlawing same-sex acts between men should also apply to women, expressed her disbelief that such acts between women were physically possible (Castle). This attitude allowed some women to express their love for other women without being suspected of sexual deviance. The poet Emily Dickinson, for example, wrote to her friend and future sister-in-law Sue Gilbert, “If you were here—and Oh that you were, my Susie, we need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and your hand fast in mine, we would not ask for language” (*Surpassing* 175). Interestingly, Dickinson’s niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi cut this passage from her 1924 edition of Emily Dickinson’s letters; by that time, the popularization of Freud had put an end to the assumption of female innocence.

FIGURE 1.5 ■ Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, *The Ladies of Llangollen*.



Source: Lithograph by James Henry Lynch after Lady Leighton, 1887. (National Portrait Gallery, London).

In the second half of the 19th century, as a few fortunate (white, upper class) women gained the opportunity to attend college and embark on careers outside the home, a new phenomenon arose: the Boston marriage. Lillian Faderman defines a Boston marriage as “a long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women” (*Surpassing* 190). The reference to Boston resulted from the many women’s colleges in that area. At a time when marriage to a man always meant retirement from the public sphere and exclusive focus on home and family, many educated professional women chose to remain unmarried. They formed intense, loving relationships with other women, often combining their work and home lives. Katharine Lee Bates, professor of English at Wellesley College and author of “America the Beautiful,” lived with economics professor Katharine Coman for 25 years. Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago, lived with coworker Mary Rozet Smith for more than 30 years. These women and others in similar circumstances could form same-sex “marriages” precisely because they lived during the romantic friendship era, when such relationships were assumed to be beneficial and asexual.

MOLLY HOUSES: EARLY HOMOEROTIC SUBCULTURE IN ENGLAND

The first **Buggery** Act outlawing male sodomy was passed in England in 1533, and during the 16th century, some prosecutions took place. Popular sentiment held, however, that Rome, not London, was the “cistern full of sodomy,” and there was little evidence of a cohesive subculture. Rictor Norton claims that in the early 17th century, the court of James I was “very nearly a gay subculture unto itself” for the first 15 years of his reign (21). James’s most notorious favorite was George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. So marked were his attentions to Buckingham that the Privy Council held an acrimonious debate in 1617 concerning the moral nature of James’s affections. James responded openly, “I love the Earl of Buckingham more than anyone else” and compared their relationship to that of Jesus and St. John. “Christ had his son John,” wrote the king, “and I have my George” (qtd. in Norton 21). At the same time, we should remember that James I was married and had very cordial relations with his wife with whom he fathered children.

The open male–male intimacy at court waned in the last years of James’s reign, and during the Puritan years, there is little evidence of the growth of urban subcultures. By the turn of the 18th century, however, much had changed. In 1700, the Royal Exchange was the prime cruising ground in London, where so-called Swarthy Buggers oiled handsome young men. By 1720, the negative publicity against same-sex behavior originating from the Society for Reformation of Manners had sent some men to trial but also advertised places and practices for others. In 1726, the police raided an establishment known as Mother Clap’s Molly House and took 40 men to Newgate prison. The resulting trial led to three executions, one death in prison, one acquittal, one reprieve, and many gone into hiding. More than this, the British press was full of the subject for months, and enterprising reporters located and revealed dozens of molly houses and cruising areas. As the Reformation Society became increasingly accused of officious meddling in the years that followed the Mother Clap raid, cruising for sex and meeting in particular public houses became safer and relatively routine (Norton Ch. 3). An active molly subculture developed in England during the 18th century, whereby effeminate men (*mollies*) engaged in transgressive gender play. Male–male sexuality was thought to run rampant in boys’ schools and universities as well. In *The Construction of Homosexuality*, David Greenberg mentions that this phenomenon occurred throughout Europe at that time: there were **transvestite** balls in Portugal, men in ribbons and powder in France, men with female nicknames in Holland, and cross-dressers in Italy.

Find Out More in the Wadham limericks at the end of this chapter.

Lest it seem that these men gained meaningful acceptance in London in the 1700s, it is important to consider that homophobia grew along with awareness of homoeroticism. Public hangings, confinement to the pillory, imprisonment, and heavy fines were common. Men were convicted and punished for sodomy at a far higher rate than for other crimes. For example, in 1811, the first-year criminal statistics were compiled by the Home Office, 80% of convicted sodomists were executed, as compared with 13% of other capital offenders (Norton 132). Mob violence against pilloried *sods* (sodomites) was common.

The gradual urbanizing trend of the 19th century led to sufficient growth of many cities in Europe and the United States to provide the anonymity needed for more modern homosexual cultures to develop. Cabarets and clubs in Berlin, specialized houses of prostitution in Amsterdam, molly taverns in New York and London—these and many other places catered to men looking for contact with others. By the last decades of the 1800s, nearly every big city in the Western world had its cruising areas and entertainment houses, and the word *gay* had slipped from its mid-century meaning of prostitute to include men interested in sex with other men and *gay girls*, or lesbians. Mollies developed elaborate codes to signal their availability to other men. Tommies, that is, boyish or passing women, might also be found in gay establishments. In many ways, what we would recognize as a gay subculture was coming into being. Contemporary historians interpret such cultures as signaling the beginning of a recognizably modern gay culture or identity. How such identities solidified into the forms we recognize today—both in the eyes of those invested in homoerotic love and in the eyes of larger societies—is the subject of the next chapter.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Thinking about the theory of perverse presentism, recall some of the conversations you have had with friends about the issue of homosexuality in history. What historical figures have you heard are homosexual? What are their birth and death dates? Knowing what you know after reading this chapter, how accurate do you think it is to claim these historical figures as homosexual? Do some internet research about these figures, and then try to come up with ways of talking about their sexual orientations or performances that are more historically accurate.
2. Throughout this chapter, we have mentioned several historical figures who have become important in tracing the history of same-sex desires and nonnormative gender identities and performances. Pick one figure who interests you and find out more about that individual's biography. Pay particular attention to that person's importance in the history of same-sex sexuality. As you browse through a variety of biographical and critical materials—on the web, in histories, in journal articles—keep track of how the individual is labeled. Are *they* or *ze* referred to as *gay*? *Homosexual*? *Queer*? What do the labels suggest not only about the individual in question but about the assumptions of the author of the biographical or critical materials you are reading?
3. We have tried to acknowledge the different terms used at different points in history and in distinct cultures to refer to people practicing same-sex desires or engaging in gender-variant performances. What are *contemporary* terms for such desires, identities, and performances? Research some of the historical and contemporary terms to find out more about the contexts in which they were—and are—used.

READINGS

Sappho

(c. Seventh Century BCE), Ancient Greece

“To a Maiden”

Peer of gods he seemeth to me, the blissful
 Man who sits and gazes at thee before him,
 Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee
 Silverly speaking,
 Laughing love's low laughter. Oh this, this only
 Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble!
 For should I but see thee a little moment,
 Straight is my voice hushed;
 Yea, my tongue is broken, and through and through me
 'Neath the flesh impalpable fire runs tingling;
 Nothing see mine eyes, and a noise of roaring
 Waves in my ear sounds;
 Sweat runs down in rivers, a tremor seizes
 All my limbs, and paler than grass in autumn,
 Caught by pains of menacing death, I falter,
 Lost in the love-trance.

Translated by John Addington Symonds (1840–1893), 1885. Rictor Norton, "The John Addington Symonds Pages" © 1997, <http://rictornorton.co.uk/symonds/translat.htm>.

Abu Nuwas

(756–c. 815 CE), **Persia**

"In the Bath-house"

In the bath-house, the mysteries hidden by trousers
 Are revealed to you.
 All becomes radiantly manifest.
 Feast your eyes without restraint!
 You see handsome buttocks, shapely trim torsos,
 You hear the guys whispering pious formulas to one another
 ("God is Great!" "Praise be to God!")
 Ah, what a palace of pleasure is the bath-house!
 Even when the towel-bearers come in
 And spoil the fun a bit.

Abu Nuwas, *Carousing with Gazelles: Homoerotic Songs of Old Baghdad*. Trans. Jaafar Abu Tarab, iUniverse, Inc., 2005.

“My Lover Has Started to Shave”

Jealous people and slanderers overwhelm me with sarcasm
because my lover has started to shave.

I answer them: friends, how wrong you are!

Since when has fuzz been a flaw?

It enhances the splendor of his lips and his teeth,
like silk cloth which is brightened by pearls.

And I consider myself fortunate that his sprouting beard
preserves his beauty from indiscreet glances:

it gives his kisses a different flavor

and makes a reflection glisten on the silver of his cheeks.

Quoted in Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (174). Greenberg's source: Daniel, Marc. "Arab Civilization and Male Love." Trans. Winston Leyland, *Gay Sunshine*, vol. 32, 1977, pp. 1–11, 27.

Zulali Khwansari

(d. 1615 CE), Iran

From the Epic Poem “Masnavi”

Mahmud, Sultan of Ghazna, has purchased young Ayaz as a slave.

Mahmud set a cup beside him and a decanter before him

Full of burgundy wine, as if distilled from his own heart

He filled the cup with wine like his love's ruby lips

Entangled in the curls of Ayaz, Mahmud began to lose control

He filled the cup with wine from the clouds of forgetfulness

The glow of Ayaz set the glass aflame with scintillating colors

He lifted the cup to Ayaz and bade him drink

His heart melted as he held the cup to his lips

Mahmud urged him to drink wine from his own hand

Yet a complaint showed in the eyes of Ayaz, a fear of intoxication

But as a servant, Ayaz drank from the cup

As a ruby droplet rolled from his lip to his shirt

His words lay in jumbles as the drop rolled to his foot

And the wine sent him spinning in drunkenness

Hard of breath, Mahmud said, “In this intimacy one can pursue desire

But I can only utter sighs while watching you delicately drink!
Tonight, I'm in the mood to finally reach you
How long has my only wish from God been delayed
Your lips have become ruby red, as intense as the wine
Such a ruby spells the death of better discretion
Your mouth is a wine bottle overflowing
Since the color of wine flows over your lips
Those are not black curls nestled against your cheeks
Since your glance is aflame they must be wisps of smoke
Gazing at you, they seem not like musk-scented curls
For where there is burning desire there must be smoke
Come to me now, bare all, that I may kiss your lips
Those very rose petals that make a beard tender and soft
Your lip is a single drop of wine distilled
My heart's desire is only to taste it unconstrained
Against the black lashes, how bright are your eyes
Am I fated to glimpse them only from a distance?
You never look at me directly in the eye
Though with one glance you will rob me of my heart
This is the last breath I will release from my soul
Without your beauty open before me, I will surely die
If you let me embrace your full form
From my grave stately box-trees will grow tall like you
That idol of Kashmir, like a rose blooming in a graceful cypress
From head to toe your elegant form has set me boiling!"
Ayaz's sweet mouth drawing close, closer
His smile fully prepared, his lip set for the charge
Then from his smile, sweetness boiled over
He took the wine-cup from the Sultan's hand
From that moment, Ayaz was the cupbearer of Mahmud
Whose whole world became drunk with his playful grace.

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Ihara Saikaku

(1642–1693), Japan

“Bamboo Clappers Strike the Hateful Number”

A monk's hermitage papered with love letters.

Boy actors hide their age.

A pushy samurai loses his whiskers.

When being entertained by a kabuki boy actor, one must be careful never to ask his age.

It was late in autumn, and rain just light enough not to be unpleasant had been falling since early morning. It now lifted and the afternoon sun appeared below the clouds in the west, forming a rainbow over Higashiyama. Just then a group of boy actors appeared wearing wide-striped rainbow robes of satin. The most handsome among them was an actor in the Murayama theater troupe, a jewel that sparkled without need of polishing, named Tamamura Kichiya.¹ He was in the full flower of youth, and every person in the capital was in love with him.

On that particular day, a well-known lover of boys called Ko-romo-notana Shiroku had invited him to go mushroom picking at Mt. Shiroyama in Fushimi, so a large group of actors and their spirited companions left Shijo-gawara and soon arrived at Hitsu-kawa. Leaves of the birch cherries, the subject of a long-ago poem,² had turned bright red, a sight more beautiful even than spring blossoms. After spending some time gazing at the scene, the group continued past the woods at Fuji-no-mori, where the tips of the leaves were just beginning to turn brown, and moved south up the mountain.

They parked their palanquins at the base and alighted, heads covered with colorful purple kerchiefs. Since pine trees were their only observers, they removed their sedge hats and revealed their lovely faces. Parting the tangled pampas grass, they walked on with sighs of admiration. The scene was reminiscent of the poem, “My sleeves grow damp since first entering the mountain of your love,”³ for these were boys at the peak of physical beauty. An outsider looking at them could not but have felt envious of their gentleman companions. A certain man well acquainted with the ways of love once said, “In general, courtesans are a pleasure once in bed; with boys, the pleasure begins on the way there.”

It was already close to dusk by the time they began hunting for mushrooms. They found only a few, which they carried like treasures back to an isolated thatched hut far from any village. Inside, the walls were papered at the base with letters from actors. Their signatures had been torn off and discarded. Curious, the boys looked more closely and discovered that each letter concerned matters of love. Each was written in a different hand, the parting messages of kabuki boy actors. The monk who lived there must once have been a man of some means, they thought. He apparently belonged to the Shingon sect, for when they opened the Buddhist altar they found a figure of Kaba Daishi adorned with chrysanthemums

and bush clover, and next to it a picture of a lovely young actor, the object no doubt of this monk's fervent devotion.

When they questioned him, the monk told them about his past. As they suspected, he was devoted body and soul to the way of boy love.

"I was unhappy with my strict father and decided to seclude myself in this mountain hermitage. More than two years have passed, but I have not been able to forget about boy love even in my dreams." The tears of grief he wept were enough to fade the black dye of his priestly robes. Those who heard it were filled with pity for him.

"How old are you?" someone asked.

"I am no longer a child," he said. "I just turned 22."

"Why then, you are still in the flower of youth!" they exclaimed.

All of the actors in the room dutifully wrung the tears from their sleeves, but their expressions seemed strangely reticent. Not one of them was under 22 years of age! Among them was one boy actor who, judging from the time he worked the streets, must have been quite old. In the course of the conversation, someone asked him his age.

"I don't remember," he said, causing quite some amusement among the men. Then, the monk who lived in the cottage spoke up.

"By good fortune, I have here a bamboo clapper that has the ability to tell exactly how old you are."

He gave the clapper to the boy actor and had him stand there while the monk himself gravely folded his hands in prayer. Shortly, the bamboo clappers began to sound. Everyone counted aloud with each strike.

At first, the actor stood there innocently as it struck seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, but beyond that he started to feel embarrassed. He tried with all his strength to separate his right hand from his left and stop the clappers from striking, but, strangely, they kept right on going. Only after striking 38 did the bamboo clappers separate. The boy actor's face was red with embarrassment.

"These bamboo clappers lie!" he said, throwing them down.

The monk was outraged.

"The Buddhas will attest that there is no deceit in them. If you still have doubts, try it again as many times as you like."

The other actors in the room were all afraid of being exposed, so no one was willing to try them out. They were beginning to lose their party mood.

When sake had been brought out and the mushrooms toasted and salted, they all lay back and began to entertain their patrons. One of the boy actors took the opportunity to request a new jacket, another was promised a house with an entrance six ken wide, and still another was presented right there with a short sword. (It was amusing to see how nimbly he took the sword and put it away!)

Into the midst of this merry-making came a rough samurai of the type rarely seen in the capital. He announced his arrival with the words, "Part, clouds, for here I am!" as if to boast of his bad reputation. He forced his way through the twig fence and into the garden, handed his long sword to an attendant, and went up to the bamboo veranda.

"Bring me the sake cup that Tamamura Kichiya is using," he demanded.

Kichiya at first pretended he had not heard, but finally he said, “There is already a gentleman here to share my cup.”

The samurai would not tolerate such an answer.

“I will have it at once,” he said angrily, “and you will be my snack!”

He took up his long sword mentioned earlier and waved it menacingly at the boy’s companion. The poor man was terrified and apologized profusely, but the samurai refused to listen.

“What an awful fellow,” Kichiya laughed.

“I won’t let him get away with this.”

“Leave him to me,” he told the others and sent them back home.

When they had gone, Kichiya snuggled up to the foolish samurai.

“Today was so uninteresting,” he said.

“I was just having a drink with those boring merchants because I had to. It would be a real pleasure to drink with a lord like yourself.”

Kichiya poured cup after cup of sake for the man and flattered and charmed him expertly. Soon, the fool was in a state of waking sleep, unaware of anything but the boy. The man was ready to make love, but Kichiya told him: “I can’t go any further because of your scratchy whiskers. It hurts when you kiss me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of keeping anything on my face not to your liking, boy. Call my servant and have him shave it off,” the samurai said.

“If you don’t mind, please allow me to improve my lord’s good looks with my own hands.” Kichiya picked up a razor and quickly shaved off the whiskers on the left side of the samurai’s face, leaving the mustache intact on his upper lip. He also left the right side as it was. The samurai just snored loudly, completely oblivious to what was going on.

Kichiya saw his opportunity and escaped from the place as quickly as possible. He took the man’s whiskers with him as a memento. Everyone laughed uproariously when he showed them the hair.

“How in the world did you get hold of that! This deserves a celebration!” they said. Akita Hikosabura⁴ invented an impromptu “whisker dance” and had the men holding their sides with laughter.

Later, when the samurai awoke, he was furious at the loss of his whiskers. Without his beard he had no choice but to quit living by intimidation. Rather than seek revenge, he decided to act as if the whole thing had never happened.

When they saw him some time later, he was making his living as a marksman with his bow. Recalling how he had lost his beard, they could not help but laugh at the man.

From *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, Ihara Saikaku, trans. Paul Gordon Schalow. Copyright © 1990 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University.

Wu Meicun

(1609–1671 CE), China

“Song of Beau Wang”⁵

Beau Wang reappears on the capital’s stage in his thirties,

He has grown up and sings sentimental tunes for the former dynasty.

Oh, his face is even more endearing than in the old days,
 Dark pupils darting from his white jade eyes.
 All the young dandies from the great families of Wuling
 Vie to give their life for Beau Wang.
 Calmly missing appointments with the imperial ministers,
 How they suffer over missing Beau Wang.
 Unhurried by the approach of evening curfews,
 How they all rush to be on time for Beau Wang.
 None before succeeded in calming an audience's cheers and waves,
 But just a peep from Beau Wang brings the whole theatre to a hush.
 Everybody jostles and leans to gaze upon Beau Wang
 Like looking over someone never seen before.
 The old capital was fascinated with Little Song
 Who entertained in the household of Duke Tian.
 Hearing once more the strains of Beau Wang's song,
 We no longer grieve for the emperor of yore.

Wu Meicun, "Song of Beau Wang," trans. Wu Cuncun. *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

Order for Solemnization of Same-Sex Union

(13th Century CE), Medieval Europe (Greek) Translation

i.

Those intending to be united shall come before the priest, who shall place the Gospel on the center of the altar, and the first of them that are to be joined together shall place his hand on the Gospel, and the second on the hand of the first. And thus sealing them, the priest sayeth the litany.

ii.

In peace we beseech Thee, O Lord.

For heavenly peace we beseech Thee, O Lord.

For the peace of all the world, [we beseech Thee, O Lord].

For these servants of God, N. and N., and their love in Christ, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That they be granted love in the spirit and honor each other, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That the Lord our God grant them blameless life and pleasing conduct.

That they and we be saved from all [danger, need, and tribulation].

iii.

Receive us. Save us. Have mercy upon us.

Mindful of our lady, the all-holy, undefiled, most blessed and glorious ever-virgin Mary, mother of God, and all the saints, we commend ourselves and one another and all that liveth unto Christ our God.

iv.

Let us pray.

Lord our God and ruler, who madest humankind after thine image and likeness and didst bestow upon us power of life eternal, whom it pleased that thine holy apostles Philip and Bartholomew be joined together, not bound by the law of nature, but in the mode of faith, who didst commend the union of thy holy martyrs Serge and Bacchus, not bound by the law of nature, but in a holy spirit and the mode of faith, do Thou vouchsafe unto these thy servants grace to love one another and to abide unhated and not a cause of scandal all the days of their lives, with the help of the Holy Mother of God and all thy saints. Forasmuch as Thou art our unity and certainty and the bond of peace, and thine is endless glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

v.

Peace be with you.

<Bow> your heads.

O Lord our God, who hast favored us with all those things necessary for salvation and hast commanded us to love one another and to forgive one another our failings, [bless], kind Lord and lover of good, these thy servants who love each other and are come unto this thy holy church to receive thy benediction. Grant unto them unashamed faithfulness, true love, and as Thou didst bestow upon thy holy disciples and apostles thy peace and love, grant also unto these, O Christ our God, all those things necessary for salvation and eternal life.

For Thou art the light, the truth, and life eternal, and thine is the glory.

vi.

O Lord our God, who in thine ineffable providence didst deem it fit to call brothers the holy apostles and heirs of thy kingdom, accept now these thy servants, N. and N., to be united in spirit and faith, and find them meet to abide unscathed by the wiles of the devil and of his evil spirits, to prosper in virtue and justice and sincere love, that through them and through us may be glorified thine all-holy name, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

vii.

Lord our God, magnified in the congregation of the saints, great and awesome ruler over all that is round about Thee, bless these thy servants N. and N., grant unto them knowledge of thy Holy Spirit. Guide them in thy holy fear, bestow upon them joy in thy power, that they be joined together more in spirit than in flesh. Forasmuch as it is Thou who dost bless and sanctify all things, and thine is the glory.

viii.

O Lord our God, who dwellest in the heavens and dost look down upon those things below, who for the salvation of the human race didst send thine only-begotten son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, and didst choose Peter and Paul (Peter from

Caesarea of Philippi, Paul from Tarsus of Cilicia), joining them together in holy spirit, make these thy servants like unto those two apostles. Keep them blameless all the days of their lives, for the sake of thy most venerable and honored name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is thus sanctified and glorified, now and forever.

ix.

And they shall kiss the holy Gospel and each other, and it shall be concluded.

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Wadham Limericks

There once was a warden of Wadham
 Who approved of the folkways of Sodom,
 For a man might, he said,
 Have a very poor head
 But be a fine fellow, at bottom.
 When they said to a Fellow of Wadham
 Who had asked for a ticket to Sodom,
 “Oh, sir, we don’t care
 To send people there,”
 He said, “Don’t call me Sir, call me Modom.”
 Well did the amorous sons of Wadham
 Their house secure from future flame;
 They knew their crime, the crime of Sodom
 And judg’d their punishment the same.

Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England: 1700-1830*. Nonsuch Publishing, London, 1992.

Note These notes are actually part of the samuray story above, not composed by us. They should go directly beneath the Japanese story, not here.

- 1 Tamamura Kichiya was an actor of female roles from 1658 to 1660 in the Kyoto Ebisuya Theater, where he scored a great success as Yang Kuei Fei in the play *Hanaikusa* (Yang Kuei Fei: legendary beauty and consort of the Chinese T’ang emperor T’ai Tzung). In 1661, he moved to the Inishie Theater in Edo, but nothing is known of him after 1673.
- 2 Fubokusho poem 11307 by Fujiwara no leyoshi: “Fragrant on the banks of the Hitsukawa, the late-blooming birch cherries drop their petals, signaling the blossoms’ final end.”

- 3 Shinchokusen poem 657 by Minamoto no Tamenaka: “Since first parting the luxuriant growth of dew-covered grass on the mountain of your love, how damp my sleeves have grown.”
- 4 Founder of the Akita dynasty of actors, Hikosabura played jester roles in Kyoto and Osaka in the years 1661 to 1680. Yakusha hyaban gejigeji (1674) describes him as a master of mime, acrobatics, and humorous monologues.
- 5 Wang Zijia (c. 1622–54) was a famous boy actor during the late Ming dynasty, whom the poet met again in Beijing in 1651, the eighth year of the Qing dynasty.

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