

Introduction

When I graduated from high school fifty years ago, just weeks before the Stonewall riots, which changed the course of LGBT politics and history, I did not know that I would find my way to Greenwich Village more than a decade later. In 1969, I already expected to spend much of my life studying eighteenth-century France. I did not know that the explosion of social history during my years of academic apprenticeship would eventually lure me from textual exploration of the Enlightenment and political culture to archival investigation of suicide, spousal conflict, and same-sex relations—from Diderot and his canonical confederates to ordinary Parisians who had no knowledge of or interest in the philosophes, from ideals and arguments preserved in accessible publications to elusive evidence about the heads, hearts, and hands of obscure men and women buried in police reports written in more or less legible script.

Contributors to the encyclopedia edited by Diderot and d’Alembert recognized that everything from adultery to zealotry has a history. They explored differences in practices across cultures and changes in customs across centuries. In the same critical spirit, during the course of my career, several generations of diligent and creative historians of early modern Europe have examined new sources (parish registers, marriage contracts, wills, tax rolls, criminal and judicial records) and adopted new methods (from the social sciences and literary studies) to excavate and analyze many aspects of private and public life, including sexuality before, during, and outside of marriage. As Michel Foucault insisted in 1976 and many scholars have attested since, humans have not comprehended and experienced sexuality in the same ways throughout the past and around the globe.¹ Instead of assuming that modern Western categories and dichotomies, such as homo- versus heterosexuality, have universal validity, we must assemble and decipher evidence about sexual

conduct and concepts from any given time and place. It is my job as the author (of the introductions to the volume, parts, sections, and texts) and your job as a reader to track down, dig up, root out, and take in as much as we can about the operations and regulation of sexual desire and networks in eighteenth-century France and to locate the patterns and insights we extract from the sources in the contexts of the society that produced them and of larger issues in the history of sexuality.

In France, as in other countries, church and state regulated sexuality and criminalized nonprocreative activities—masturbation, oral and anal intercourse within marriage, same-sex relations, and bestiality, often combined under the umbrella of *sodomy* (see section F)—long before 1700. In eighteenth-century Paris, as in other cities, the police managed sexual disorder, including male solicitation and female prostitution, in public spaces and generally left private conduct to conscience, confession, and community. The records in part I display the common (from antiquity to modernity) pattern of sexual relations between older males of higher status in the active role and younger males of lower status in the passive role, for pleasure or profit. They contain exceptions—some inversions of traditional hierarchy and more examples involving males of more or less the same age and rank—as well as evidence that some men who desired men, a minority rather than the majority of them, had some sense that they were different from others who did not. With debates about immutable transhistorical identity behind us, we can study such awareness of difference in early modern Europe without misrepresenting it.² Eighteenth-century French men and women who desired their own sex resembled their own contemporaries more than they resembled homosexuals “medicalized” in the nineteenth century or gay men and lesbians liberated in the twentieth century. At the same time, it is enormously significant that sodomites created an urban subculture in Paris, as in London and Amsterdam, and that some of them invoked difference to make connections in their time, not with our time. They had no access to our categories, but we have some access to their mentalities, and we should not make them sound more modern than they were.

Anyone and everyone who explores sexual relations between men in eighteenth-century Paris walks in the footsteps and works in the shadow of Michel Rey (1953–1993), who conducted systematic research and published a series of articles on the subject before his tragic death. It is time, twenty-five years later, to expand his research and revise his judgments.³ We need to locate and digest hundreds of dossiers he did not find or use and revise his

conclusions about basic issues—such as age, rank, and role—as well as complex issues such as identity and community, through quantitative and qualitative analysis.⁴ Rey understated the importance of money and friendship in the subculture and overstated the resemblance in sexual consciousness between remote and recent times. We should not make claims about the minds and lives of men in the past based on a few literary sources, but we should—and indeed we must—track them through series in the archives; in public spaces and private places; with strangers and comrades; as individuals with relatives, neighbors, employers or employees; and with privileges, obligations, reputations, options, and limits. Rey emphasized the disjunction between his subjects and their fellow Parisians. I have underscored traditional distinctions among men who desired men and the contextual linkages between them and others in the time and place in which they all lived. Sodomites and pederasts not only exercised agency in ways that violated conventional morality but also operated within social structures that were more flexible and durable than critics then and since have assumed.

This volume includes more material about sodomites and pederasts than it does about tribades for the simple reason that women who desired women are underrepresented in police records as well as nonfictional treatments of same-sex relations. This fact does not mean that we should subject them to the same neglect or that their history can be fairly and safely collapsed into that of men who desired men. Readers will find females—mothers, aunts, sisters, wives, landlords, shopkeepers, employers, domestics, and prostitutes—but not tribades in part I, which contains some discussion and evidence regarding another important issue in the history of sexuality: gendered assumptions about the capacities, character, and conduct of males and females. Some men who have sex with men, especially in the passive role, have been considered unmanned and effeminate, and some women who have sex with women, especially in the active role, have been considered unfeminine and mannish in various times and places. Randolph Trumbach has identified effeminacy as a distinctive characteristic of the homosexual role that emerged in eighteenth-century England.⁵ French police records, as opposed to other types of sources, contain some direct evidence, from reports about assemblies of sodomites in the first half of the century, and more indirect evidence, for example about nicknames in the second half of the century. Even so, accusations and anxieties about deviations from gendered expectations about sexually differentiated behavior do not loom as large in archival documents about sodomy as, for instance, in archival documents about spousal conflict.⁶

Part II includes much more about women and gender, as well as food for thought about many other topics in early modern history, such as (institutional and intellectual) secularization, urbanization and integration/disintegration, mobility (through migration and connections), sites and styles of sociability, marketplaces (of commodities, ideas, and bodies), critiques of privilege and corruption, domestic and exotic “others,” the personal body, and the body politic.