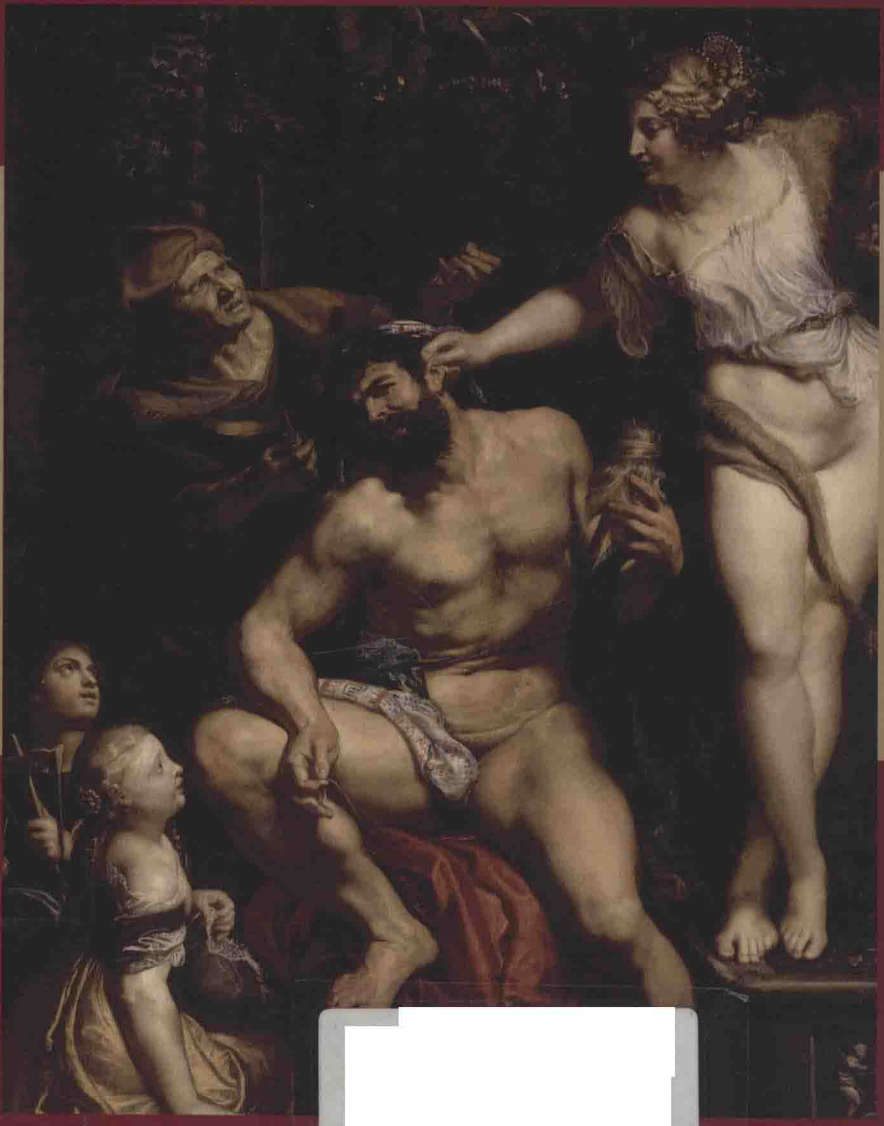
European Sexualities, 1400–1800

KATHERINE CRAWFORD



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European Sexualities, 1400–1800

This is a major new survey of the social and cultural history of sexuality in early modern Europe. Within a frame that includes the Renaissance, the Reformations, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment, it weaves together statistical findings, discussions of changing sexual ideology, and evidence of belief structures regarding family, religion, science, crime, and deviance. While broad in overall scope and coverage, the transformations are framed to highlight the narrative of change over time within each domain. By emphasizing the interrelationship between practices and ideological change – in family form, religious organization, medical logic, legal structures, and notions of deviancy – Katherine Crawford's accessible survey reveals how these changes produced the conditions in which our modern notions of sexuality were developed. This book will be essential reading for students of early modern European history and the history of sexuality.

KATHERINE CRAWFORD is Associate Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (2004).

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Acknowledgments

Writing a book that attempts to synthesize so much material necessarily is even more of a collaborative effort than a more specialized study. I have cited extensive bibliography in English, which reflects works that I have drawn on. There are of course studies in other languages I have omitted, but that have shaped the conclusions in this book. I wish to thank all of those authors for their unearthing of archives, renderings of past experience, and for helping all of us understand what the remainders of sex in the historical record might mean.

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Support of other kinds came from Jane and Bernard Frischer, who allowed me to reproduce their painting as the frontispiece, and along with my other parents, George and Holly Crawford, encouraged me along the way. The doctors and nurses at St. Vincent's Medical Center in New

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Introduction

In eighteenth-century Venice, an anonymous painter produced a seemingly innocuous image of a well-dressed man about to sip from a teacup. The man is seated in a large, comfortable chair, while a woman, a bit too fancy in her multi-layered dress with ribbons on the wrists and wearing gold earrings, stands before him. Her arm is bent to hold a plate, and in the crook of her elbow rests the handle of a broom. She is looking down at the plate, which is angled slightly toward the floor. The man is looking at her, his eyes level with her breasts, although they are demurely hidden under the double layer of her dress.

It could be a domestic image, a couple going about their morning business. It probably was for domestic consumption, in all likelihood hung in someone's home. But this is a book about sexuality. Why a domestic image by way of a beginning? First, because domesticity includes a great deal of sex. Under its auspices, families are formed and continued by means of sex. One of the purposes of marriage is to provide a space for procreation, which is often a polite way of saying marriage is supposed to contain and control sexual expression. Second, the image is a highly sexual one, although in ways that are not necessarily obvious to the modern viewer. The man peering toward the woman's breasts is of course a clue to us, but so is the broom. The shaft was considered a sexual referent in the eighteenth century, and the hard, phallic shape exterior and parallel to the trajectory of the penis in intercourse is unmistakable. In early modern Europe, keys and the locks they penetrate, swords in scabbards, bolts in doors, pestles in mortars, leeks, parsnips, crosiers, apples, pears, figs, carrots, obelisks, and arrows were visual and verbal clues for sex.

The power imbalances that mark so much sexual behavior are apparent as well. Even if she is not a maid, the woman is depicted in an inferior position because she is serving and cleaning. The man is wealthy and commanding by virtue of his throne-like seat. Yet, as is often the case, the sexual hierarchy is as precarious as it is aggressive. The woman may be marked as a possession, but the image suggests some ambivalence about

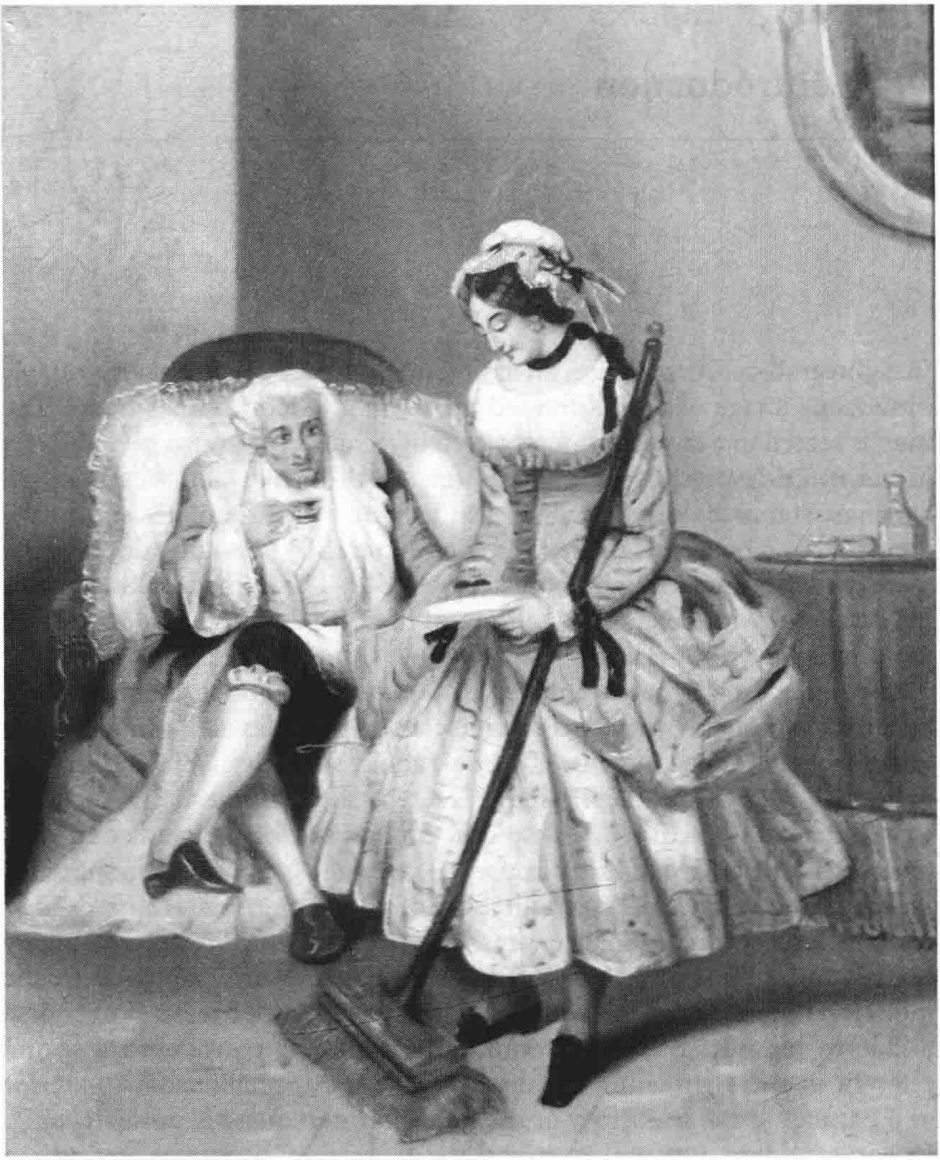

Figure 1. Anon., *Woman with a Broom*. Eighteenth century, Venice.

the potency of her possessor. His foot is about to escape its expensive slipper. He is young, but his hair is artificially powdered white and he is slumped slightly toward his warming drink. He is not the conventional image of masculine comportment: the slipping foot is a metaphor for popping out during intercourse, and he appears enervated by his exertions (Figure 1).

So this is hardly an innocent image after all. Rather, it includes a range of sexual suggestions, and through them, synthesizes a number of the contradictions about sexuality that marked early modern thought and practice. The image displays both intimacy and hierarchy between the man and woman. It is visually pleasing and, because of its sexual implications, unsettling at the same time. It is also ambiguous: Is this domesticity, or a post-coital mercenary moment? In its time and place of composition, it is likely to have been all of these and more to its purchaser; the image figures in the history of representations of sex and the commodification of them. As a painting, this was a high-end item in an ever-expanding market of sexual images. Printing made scurrilous texts, sometimes illustrated quite graphically, widely available. For those for whom books were too dear or words too difficult, single images printed from engravings or woodcuts were also produced in large numbers and were often very cheap.

With its oblique references to pleasure and its more obvious suggestions of shame, our painting fits in a larger history of sexuality that is told as either a narrative of progress toward greater sexual freedom and individual fulfillment or as a tale of degeneration and decadence in which sexual license is constantly threatening the moral fiber of civilization. The latter version is the dominant story traditionally told about sex, although not usually by historians. Theologians, politicians, moralists, and memorialists typically took the view that sex was a disruptive force that must be controlled and regulated. Trans-historical claims about sex as sin and social disorder were embedded in such views and for many, such ideas remain compelling. The assumption that sex always meant the same (negative) things shapes discussions of sex and sexuality to the present day.

The argument that sex might have a history in which ideas and practices changed across time and place is relatively new. Historians since at least the Roman writer Suetonius (*c.* 69–after 122 AD) have recorded sexual behavior, particularly that of the famous and powerful. Of course everyone knows that sex acts happened in the past – we would not be here otherwise. But far fewer people understand how much sexuality – a term encompassing the activities and values associated with sexual acts and behaviors – has changed over time. At the present day, many consider sexual identity to be central to a person's psychological make-up. Sexual identity worked rather differently before 1800. For early modern men and women, neighborhood, parish, village, and occupation primarily defined the self. When sexual identity was an issue, it was usually defined as a factor in one's relationship to marriage. Whether one was actually married, eligible to be married, or committed to stay unmarried by virtue of a

vow of chastity, marriage and the presumption of marital sexuality determined key aspects of a person's social status, legal position, and economic prospects. But this is not a psychological or interior understanding of subjectivity; it is instead contextual, material, and circumstantial. The idea that sex shaped personality in fundamental ways was largely the work of such sexologists as Richard Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After describing a huge range of sexual expression as pathological, they defined penetrative sex between a man and a woman as the only "normal" possibility. The shorthand identification labels we recognize, "homosexual" and "heterosexual," not surprisingly appeared in the same period. Refinements like bisexual and transsexual are more recent, and reflect some of the loosening of the good/bad binary fostered by sexologists as "normal" and "deviant."

Because so much attaches to the individual in our understanding of politics and society, personal identification is often presumed to be profoundly sexual. Anyone who describes himself or herself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or transsexual identifies in obviously sexual ways, but "straight" or heterosexual people identify as such to themselves and others so routinely and regularly that they usually do not even recognize that they are doing so. Indeed, the presumption of heterosexuality can protect sexual "others" from violence in a way that makes discrimination against sexual orientation quite different from racial or ethnic prejudice. But sexuality as the preeminent personal referential frame is quite new historically. This book is in part about how this happened.

How historians have approached sexuality has depended in large part on their intellectual priorities. Historians have argued over how much can be explained by specific circumstances (laws, customs, institutions) in particular places and moments. Some have asserted that, no matter how much is constructed by social circumstances, some essential, unchanging elements of sex remain.[1] While this acts as a brake on assuming that everything is relative, social constructionists preferred the idea that sex is organized and given meaning by its cultural context and the narratives that produce our understanding, rather than preceding these contextual elements as a biological given. On the one hand, essentialist thinking allowed that "deviance" would have to be accepted as innate. On the other hand, constructionists felt that even the most persistent sexual

[1] See for instance John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994) and feminist debates about essentialism in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (New York, 1996).

prejudices might be reconstructed.[2] Both positions have merit, and the arguments that follow in this book try to negotiate between them. Essentialists insist on the historical reality of lived bodily experience. Social constructionists maintain that experience, even of the body, is always mediated and understood in language and other modes of representation. In this book, lived experience and its representations both matter. Each of the topics – family, religion, science, crime, and deviance – are analyzed in terms of how individuals and social groups understood or articulated sexual behaviors.

Combining these approaches is largely possible because new methods have transformed the history of sexuality since in the 1970s. Social historians began by recovering sexualized aspects of the life cycle such as marriage and childbirth. Demographic studies, especially of the family, revealed much about patterns around marriage, childbirth, and sexual behavior. Often highly statistical, early social history did not analyze individuals and their immediate circumstances so much as provide a larger picture of living conditions and life cycles. In the wake of the women's movement, historians of women and gender, usually viewing the historical record from a feminist perspective, analyzed long-standing patterns of sexual socialization by focusing on such issues as coerced sex and arranged marriage in terms of patriarchal power. Social historians, feminist and otherwise, also began to recover evidence about the sexual practices, foibles, and transgressions of people in the past.

Still, studying sex was not entirely respectable.[3] Some might argue that it still isn't, but sexuality gained much intellectual acceptance with Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978).[4] Foucault argued that modern sexuality ought to be understood as discursively organized and marked by technologies of power. That is, patterns of language, such as confession and silencing around sexual acts, operate in complex ways within structures of power (such as the family, church, state, and science) to form sexual identity. In Foucault's account, seventeenth-century Europeans were playful and shameless about sex until Catholic confessional practices demanding self-scrutiny over sexual sin started to take hold and the state policed sexuality more effectively. Confession was

[2] On the debate, see for instance Edward Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* (London, 1992).

[3] Vern L. Bullough, "Sex in History: A Redux," in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, 1996), 4.

[4] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978). Foucault planned a six-volume history of sexuality, but had completed only two volumes before his death. They are *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon, 1985); and *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1986).

especially important because Europeans were exhorted to think critically about their sexual practices, to articulate them, and then to repress those deemed unproductive or "bad." Confession required that every desire, every action got transformed into language so that it could be mastered by the self.

Foucault further argues that Enlightenment thinkers, concerned about birth patterns, death rates, and manpower capacity, made interest in sexual practices widespread. Bourgeois Victorians then made all sorts of rules about sex. Sexual prudery worked in such a way that Victorians had to talk about sex all the time under the guise of condemning and rejecting it. Confession, population concerns, and prudery came together in the idea that, to be "good," one had to expel forms of sexuality that were unacceptable, often defined as unproductive in economic terms. Healthy, affluent married couples who produced children were economically beneficial; those who were healthy and affluent and did not reproduce or who were unhealthy (physically or mentally) and/or poor were increasingly regarded as not merely unproductive, but worse, as detrimental to civilized society. Sexual irregularity in these terms defined an individual's identity within a social context. For Foucault, sex became a matter of identity, rather than merely a set of discrete and particular actions under convergent pressures in the nineteenth century.

Very much a social constructionist, Foucault emphasized the centrality of discourse – of language – in the construction of power. Confession was the mechanism that defined the self in language; population issues, expressed in treatises, tracts, newspapers, political speeches and sermons, were presented as language. Victorians demanded silence, but had to describe by means of language that which one had to be silent about. While the emphasis on power created by words, rather than such coercive structures as guns or prisons, might seem to make change more imaginable, Foucault was pessimistic about disaggregating the interlocking structures of discourse that made sex repressive.

Despite, or more precisely, because of, Foucault's extreme constructionist approach, several of his propositions outlined above proved especially controversial – and ultimately productive – for historians. Within his radical rethinking of categories of knowledge, Foucault posited that, before the advent of sexology in the nineteenth century, individuals who committed sexual transgressions were condemned for what they did, rather than for who they were. That is, a person committed an act of sodomy; he or she was not a homosexual. Sexual "acts" rather than "identities" prevailed. Foucault maintained that, before science developed categories and pathologies around sex, there was no concept that the person who engaged in a particular sex act was fundamentally defined

by it. Historians (myself included – see the title of this book) maintained that this was not quite right. Scholars of premodern Europe contested Foucault's assertion that sexual identity was a nineteenth-century invention. Some medievalists found assertions of sexual difference by sodomites, women, and non-Christian "others." Several early modernists argued that ties between men created homoerotic identifications. Male friendship, urban areas for sexual liaisons, and homosocial environments all created habits of sexual identification outside of marriage or declared celibacy.[5] "Sodomites" and "mollies" were recognized sexual types, as were prostitutes and celibates. Early modern people did at times identify people by their sexual practices. The aggregation of sodomites in urban environments in the Renaissance was made possible by, and facilitated, sexual identity.[6]

If the move from acts to identities needed a more nuanced approach, Foucault's insistence on the body as completely culturally constructed was met with complaints that actual people did not figure in his account. Indeed, some studies following Foucault considered the body almost entirely from the perspective of learned texts. Bodily conditions such as pregnancy, sickness, and health were detached from everyday experience.[7] As a correction to this abstraction, historians, including Peter Brown and Carolyn Walker Bynum, insisted on the material specificity of individual bodies in the past. Issues such as fertility, death, decay, biological functions, and sensual experiences were recuperated in a range of times and places.[8] Recently, efforts have been made to fuse individual,

[5] See for instance Glenn Burger and Stephen F. Kruger, eds., *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2001); Karma Lochrie, "Desiring Foucault," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 27, 1 (Winter 1996), 3–17; Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago and London, 2003); Joseph Cady, " 'Masculine Love,' Renaissance Writing, and the 'New Invention' of Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, ed. Claude Summers (New York, 1992), 9–40; Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London, 1997).

[6] Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, 1982); Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London, 1992); Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke, *Love, Sex, Intimacy and Friendship Between Men, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 2003).

[7] This has been a criticism leveled at Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

[8] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York, 1995) and "Bodily Miracles and the Resurrection of the Body in the High Middle Ages," in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, ed. Thomas Kselman (South Bend, IN, 1991), 68–106; and for an overview, Roy Porter, "History of the Body," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, PA, 1991), 206–32.