

## The (in)significance of 'lesbian' desire in early modern England

Valerie Traub

The 'lesbian desire' of my title is a deliberate come-on. If this is the last you hear of it, it is because, enticing as it may sound, it doesn't exist. Not, at least, as such. For the conceptual framework within which was articulated an early modern discourse of female desire is radically different from that which governs our own modes of perception and experience. If, as David Halperin reminds us, we have witnessed only one hundred years of homosexuality (Halperin 1990), then how is the even more recent discursive invention, the lesbian, to be related to sexual systems of four hundred years ago? The following discussion attempts to begin to answer that question by examining the asymmetrical representations of three early modern discursive figures: the French female sodomite, the English tribade, and the theatrical 'femme'. My intent is to keep alive our historical difference from early modern women and at the same time to show how historically distant representations of female desire *can* be correlated, though not in any simple fashion, to modern systems of intelligibility and political efficacy. This essay is at once an act of historical recovery and a meditation on the difficulties inhering in such an act.

In *A View of Ancient Laws Against Immorality and Profaneness*, published in 1729, John Disney reviews ancient vice laws from the perspective of a Protestant Englishman. Beginning his compendium of sexual sins with a chapter entitled 'Of the Incentives to Vice, ill company, obscene Talk, and lewd Books or Pictures' and proceeding to such matters as 'Of Polygamy', 'Of Incestuous Lewdness' and 'Of Rape', the ten chapters of Section One exhaustively order people and behaviours according to their alleged deviations from 'nature'. What immediately strikes anyone who has read Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* is the implicit shift as the volume progresses from categories of being – 'Common Whores, and such that frequent them', 'Bawds, Procurers, Pimps, &c' – to categories of acts – concubinage, adultery, sodomy and bestiality. But something more peculiar than this division animates Disney's categories. In the final chapter, 'Of Sodomy and Bestiality', not only are these two deviations linked, as they commonly were, in a rather strained narrative of causality,<sup>1</sup> but no mention is

made of women. Defining sodomy as 'the unnatural Conjunction of Men with Men or Boys' (Disney 1729: 180–1), Disney thwarts our modern expectation that all those engaged in same-gender erotic acts belong together. Used as we are to linking the identities and political fates of gay men and lesbians under the medico-scientific label of 'homosexuality' or the political banner of 'gay rights', Disney's silence about sexual 'conjunction' among women seems odd, especially when we note that the only chapters focusing on women are 'Of Common Whores' and 'Of What the Roman laws called Stuprum; the Lewdness of (or with) unmarried Women, who are *not* Common Whores' (emphasis mine). This exacting division between those women who are lewd with men for money and those who are lewd with men for free provides a negative contrast against which must be measured any attempt to articulate a discourse of lewdness (pecuniary or not) between women.

A second curiosity arises when we note that in his discussion of prostitution, Disney conventionally cites Deuteronomy 23:17: 'There shall be no Whore of the Daughters of Israel; nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel', parenthetically glossing 'sodomite' as 'whoremaster', and registering his incredulity that 'How our [biblical] Translators came to think of a *Sodomite* here, is hard to say . . .' (Disney 1729). For Disney, the biblical 'sodomite', linked in Deuteronomy to female prostitution, must refer to a pimp, not to a male prostitute. Disney's dependence upon discrete, mutually exclusive categories of sexual sin gives his treatise an acute definitional clarity: not only can women not be sodomites; men cannot be whores.

We know, however, that men *could* be whores, not only because early modern plays employ the word and its variants to describe male characters, but because anti-theatrical tracts obsessively articulate the anxiety that men will use their 'feminized' bodies as loose women do (Kinney 1974; Stubbes 1583; Prynne 1632–3). Indeed, in the anti-theatricalists' conflation of the male sodomite and the male whore we find precisely the interpenetration of categories that Disney's treatise, one hundred years later, so assiduously denies.<sup>2</sup>

If we recognize in Disney's tract not the idiosyncrasies of an individual but the discourse of a culture, we gain a point of access into the historical obscurity of early modern women's erotic desires for one another. For if the gender of the whore was not delimited in early modern culture, other categories of sexual sin may not have been as rigidly fixed as Disney would have us believe. In so far as *A View of Ancient Laws Against Immorality and Profaneness* demonstrates an Enlightenment attempt to stabilize, codify and delimit those desires and practices which previously may have been unstable, resistant to codification, and defiant of limits, it suggests that what is at stake is the instability of gender within categories of sexuality.

Such anxiety about gender instability usefully illuminates and contextualizes the historical vacuum into which early modern women's erotic desires for one another seem to fall.<sup>3</sup> We know that prior to the codifications and

normalizations initiated by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criminology, sexology, and psychology, same-gender desire in England was, despite the apocalyptic talk about sodomy, hardly regulated at all (Bray 1982). We also know that theology and the law are only *two* social discourses, and not necessarily the most revealing of popular ideologies or practices. And yet, within our contemporary critical discussions, the theological and, more importantly, legal category of sodomy has functioned implicitly as a regulatory mechanism, pre-empting all possibility of analysis precisely because the discourse of law has stood as arbiter of social fact: if no Englishwoman was brought to trial under the sodomy statute, *ipso facto* no women practised such behaviours.

If we look for the inscription of Englishwomen within the confines of the category of sodomy, we will find only absence, hear only silence. But if we shift our gaze slightly, away from exclusive attention on theological treatises, legal statutes, and court cases, and toward other discourses concerned with the representation and regulation of female sexuality – gynaecology and stage-plays, for instance – we discover a discourse of desires and acts that not only can be articulated but correlated with our modern understanding of diverse erotic practices among women. That discourse, of course, is not authored by women; it is highly mediated by the protocols of patriarchal control. At the same time, in its particular representations of female desire, and in its expression of anxiety (or, perhaps more significantly, *lack* of anxiety) about desire among women, it dramatizes the particular conventions according to which such desire was culturally ‘staged’. As critics and historians, the difficulty we face is not necessarily the lack of erotically desiring women, but our inability to crack the code organizing the conceptual categories of an earlier culture. Once that code is recognized, our task becomes not only the detection of a discourse of such desire, but delineating that discourse’s proper parameters and evaluating its various ideological effects.

Before moving to gynaecological and theatrical discourses, however, it is necessary to point out that the conceptual categories and codes of different nations varied. Contrary to the experience of Englishwomen, Frenchwomen were prosecuted under sodomy statutes (Daston and Park 1985). Consider the following anecdote with which Stephen Greenblatt begins his essay ‘Fiction and friction’:

In September 1580, as he passed through a small French town . . . Montaigne was told an unusual story that he duly recorded in his travel journal. It seems that seven or eight girls . . . plotted together ‘to dress up as males and thus continue their life in the world.’ One of them set up as a weaver . . . fell in love with a woman, courted her, and married. The couple lived together for four or five months, to the wife’s satisfaction, ‘so they say.’ But then, Montaigne reports, the transvestite was

recognized . . . ‘the matter was brought to justice, and she was condemned to be hanged, which she said she would rather undergo than return to a girl’s status; and she was hanged for using *illicit devices* to supply her *defect in sex*.’<sup>4</sup>

(Greenblatt 1988: 66, emphasis mine)

I recall Greenblatt’s use of Montaigne’s anecdote in order to suggest that desire among women is revealed less in the discourse of the authorities – the trial and execution that took place just days before Montaigne’s visit to the French town where the story was narrated to him – than in the discourse of the community, whose members were sifting the controversy through their own understandings of appropriate gender roles and their curiosity about the variety of erotic practices. That popular discourse is apparent in those ambivalently coded, anonymously referring words ‘so they say’, which follow the widespread community affirmation of ‘the wife’s satisfaction’. People in that small French town were talking, and talking publicly enough for a stranger to overhear the details of the couple’s conjugal relations, including their four or five months of apparently mutual erotic pleasure.

As this and other cases suggest, in the French context, sodomy for women is defined as the use of illicit sexual devices, devices which, as Greenblatt later remarks, ‘enable a woman to take the part of a man’ (Greenblatt 1988: 67).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we possess a historical record of such cases not primarily because the women desired or seduced other women, but because of their prosthetic use of implements of penetration.<sup>6</sup> French sodomy, by definition, entails penetration; legal discourse demanded rigorous definitions of *proof*, and penetration seemed to meet that test. By means of this definition, an implicit distinction is set up between, on the one hand, sinful *desires* and criminal *acts* and, on the other hand, those sexual practices that do not involve penetration and those that do.<sup>7</sup> Neither a Frenchwoman’s *desire* for another woman, nor any nonpenetrative acts she might commit were crimes, but the prosthetic supplementation of her body was grounds for execution.

This concern about the supplementation of women’s bodies crosses the Channel in those French and English gynaecological texts which repeatedly refer to female sexual organs growing beyond ‘normal’ bounds.<sup>8</sup> An enlarged clitoris was believed to cause ‘unnatural’ desires in a body already defined as sexually excessive. Writes Helkiah Crooke in the 1631 edition of *A Description of the Body of Man*:

[S]ometimes [the clitoris] groweth to such a length that it hangeth without the cleft like a mans member, especially when it is fretted with the touch of the cloaths, and so strutteth and groweth to a rigiditie as doth the yarde [penis] of a man. And this part it is which those wicked women do abuse called Tribades (often mentioned by many authors, and in some states worthily punished) to their mutual and unnatural lusts.<sup>9</sup>

(Crooke 1631: 238)

The reference to tribadism in the discourse of gynaecology complicates the operation of sodomy as a legal if not moral category. Indeed, the asymmetrical prosecution of French and English 'tribades' under sodomy statutes brings to light an irregular fracturing of the early modern conceptual terrain. Yet, when we shift our focus from legal categories, we find a previously undetected structural coherence unifying the French and English divide: both gynaecological tribadism and statutory sodomy depend upon a logic of supplementarity for their condition of possibility, with tribadism functioning through anatomical rather than artificial supplementation. The discursive shift from a legal concern with prosthesis to a medical focus on clitoral hypertrophy enacts only a slight distinction within an overall economy of the supplement. Both discourses fail to distinguish between specific sexual acts: penetration, rubbing of clitoris on thigh or pudendum, and auto-erotic or partnered masturbation. Instead, they employ vague analogies to male sexual practices, as in Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671), which reports that sometimes the clitoris 'grows so long that it hangs forth at the slit like a Yard, and will swell and stand stiff if it be provoked, and some lewd women have endeavoured to use it as men do theirs' (Sharp 1671: 45).<sup>10</sup> Whether employing a dildo or her enlarged clitoris, a sodomite's or tribade's 'natural', 'feminine' body becomes, in the gendered discourse of both nations, 'masculine'.

And yet . . . the terms by which such supplementation have been defined heretofore not only describe but *reproduce* gender ideology. In particular, in the passages cited above, Greenblatt's rhetorical style collapses any distance that might obtain between early modern ideology and a postmodern feminist understanding of female-centred erotic acts. His rigorous adherence to the replication of not only Renaissance discourses, but dominant discourses within the Renaissance, leads to a failure to articulate the multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings that erotic acts can express, and, in particular, obscures whatever meanings the use of 'illicit devices' signified for the women involved. Within Greenblatt's rhetoric, as within the rhetoric of early modern authorities, the commingling of two female bodies is subsumed by a heterosexual, male-oriented narrative: female penetration signifies an *imitation* of male (body and role-defined) 'parts'. Whatever independent agency obtains in the performance of such erotic acts is rendered invisible at the same time as it is resecured into a patriarchal economy. Gaining no metacritical distance on the problems of representation and power posed by the 'conjunction' of female bodies, Greenblatt implicitly, if unintentionally, preserves gender as an essence – it can be imitated, but not, ultimately, subverted.

The fact that the model of imitation was favoured by early modern legal and medical authorities prompts my search for a more dynamic and heteronomous understanding of the ways erotic pleasure was achieved. Here, it seems necessary to employ a postmodern feminist analytic to create

a conceptual space wherein erotic acts might be conceived differently than in the terms inscribed by the dominant ideology. Although we possess no first-person accounts written by 'tribades' or female 'sodomites', their actions were neither wholly imitative nor wholly autonomous. Taking place within a system of signification that precedes them, their erotic practice is moulded by a set of conventions and contingencies for possible action – which does not, however, exhaust the meanings such practices signified to and for the women themselves.

If, as Judith Butler argues, gender is not only a representation, but a performance staged within the enclosure of cultural coordinates; and if masculinity is not an essential trait but a cultural production (Butler 1991), then what these women perform is, in the words of Jonathan Dollimore, a 'transgressive reinscription' of gender and erotic codes (Dollimore 1991). At once repetition *and* transgression, such reinscription displaces conventional understandings from *within* dominant systems of intelligibility. Indeed, by using the term 'supplement', I have been importing deliberately a Derridean instrument to break open the gender codes that have heretofore delimited the terms by which tribadism and sodomy are conceived. Derrida employs the notion of supplementarity as that which both adds to *and* replaces the original term; an instance of 'différance', the supplement deconstructs the putative unity, integrity, and singularity of the subject, of its gender and its sexual desires, and registers them as always internally *different* from themselves (Derrida 1974). Early modern women's prosthetic supplementation of their bodies is, I would argue, both additive and substitutive: as a material addition to the woman's body and as a replacement of the man's body *by* the woman's, it not only displaces male prerogatives, but exposes 'man' as a simulacrum, and gender as a construction built on the faulty ground of exclusive, binary difference. Indeed, in the authorities' discourse, the enlarged clitoris and the dildo become objects of cultural *fantasy*. Which is not to imply that there did not exist real confusion about the status of and differentiation between male and female 'yards'; but it is to suggest that the meanings attached to women's appendages exceed the biological. It is not scientifically established anatomical norms, but gender expectations that manifest themselves in descriptions of 'tribades'. I would go so far as to argue that the enlarged clitoris and the dildo take on the quality of a fetish, a stand-in for a lost object of desire. The question is, whose desire is being represented in these accounts? What the authoritative discourse reveals is less the desire of the women than the authorities' desire for the (always already missing) phallus precisely at the moment of its literal displacement; and Greenblatt's account tacitly repeats this gesture by focusing on the replacement rather than the pleasures afforded by the performance of erotic supplementarity.

Primarily at issue, it seems to me, is not sexuality but gender. In England and in France, in gynaecology and the law, it is not woman's desire for

other women, but her usurpation of male prerogatives that incites writers to record and thus reveal the anxieties of their (and our) culture. What, then, of a female erotic practice that did not involve the use of a supplement? Although I have only a tentative response to this question, it seems worth noting that whereas such practices are *not* recorded by gynaecology and the law, they *are* the subject of many early modern stage-plays. From Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594–5) to his collaboration with Fletcher on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613), from Heywood's *The Golden Age* (1611) to Shirley's *The Bird in a Cage* (1632–3), what we might call not a little anachronistically 'femme-femme' love is registered as a viable if ultimately untenable state.<sup>11</sup> By turning to early modern theatrical representations, I want to stress that although they do not function mimetically to reveal erotic practices, they indicate discursively a broader range of desires than those inscribed by gynaecology and the law. Early modern drama does not express women's self-perceptions and experiences, but it does provide an index to how the male-authored culture imagined, impersonated, and regulated their desires.

In the absence of a historically accurate term for such desires, I will provisionally call them 'homoerotic', in order to differentiate between, on the one hand, the early modern legal and medical discourses of sodomy and tribadism and, on the other hand, the modern identificatory classifications of 'lesbian', 'gay', and 'homosexual'. Neither a category of self nor normatively male, the term 'homoerotic' retains both the necessary strangeness and historical contiguity between early modern and postmodern forms of desire.

Before discussing female homoeroticism, it is important to note that when placed within the context of gynaecological and legal discourses, the prominence of female cross-dressing on the English Renaissance stage takes on a very specific meaning. It is not just that transvestism accorded female characters the linguistic and social powers of men, nor that the phenomenon itself registered cultural anxieties about the instability of gender identity, but that male clothes worked as external projections, theatrical equivalents, of the cultural fantasy of the enlarged clitoris. Theatrical transvestism, in short, was also prosthetic; the donning of masculine dress enacts the logic of the supplement through the displacement of the body to the clothes. Signifying the independent use of a woman's always possibly inordinately endowed clitoris, cross-dressing not only masculinizes but eroticizes the female body. Such a displaced equivalence gives a more situated, more embodied meaning to many critics' current understanding of female transvestism as a strategic appropriation of the phallus.<sup>12</sup>

The prosthetic logic of cross-dressing also enables us to achieve some metacritical distance from our dependence on the transvestite heroine as the privileged stage representative of early modern female desire. The mutability of desire that infuses so many early modern plays tempts us to

depend on the changeability of dress as the originating instance of homoeroticism. But, I wonder whether we have not inadvertently brought the 'epistemology of the closet', to invoke Eve Sedgwick's phrase, to bear on a world prior to closets (Sedgwick 1990). Did homoeroticism have to be physically disguised to be articulated? Or were there other ways of registering the expression of female homoeroticism while psychologically dispelling any anxieties such expression might elicit? The problem is not only that female transvestism has seemed the only means of access into homoeroticism, but that the result has been a privileging of Viola's self-indictment in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1603):

Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness  
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much. . . .  
How will this fadge? My master loves her dearly,  
And I, poor monster, fond as much on him.

(2.2.27–34)

Not only is cross-dressing presented as wicked, but a homoerotic position to desire is implicitly monstrous. In contemporary critical practice, Viola's articulation of anxiety has implicitly served as the summation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attitudes toward female homoeroticism, whereas it is more appropriately viewed as the expression of the *dominant* discourse on *tribadism* and *sodomy*. In addition, however much a fantasy of monstrosity underlies the discourse of tribadism, it hardly sums up the self-perception and experience of women who were erotically compelled by other women.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It* both present two pairs of female characters whose initial erotic investment is in one another. The dialogues between Helena and Hermia, and Celia's speeches to Rosalind, are as erotically compelling as anything spoken in the heterosexual moments in these comedies. This eroticism, however, does not depend upon a cross-dressed figure like Rosalind who is not, in fact, the enunciator of homoerotic desire, but instead depends upon the 'feminine' Celia, who urges Rosalind to 'love no man in good earnest' (1.2.26), and later asserts, 'We still have slept together, / Rose at an instant, learn'd, play'd, eat together, / And wheresoe'er we went, like Juno's swans, / Still we went coupled and inseparable' (1.3.71–4). Their love is presented as both exceptional in quantity, and unexceptionable in type: 'never two ladies lov'd as they do' (1.1.107), says Charles, and Le Beau describes their love as 'dearer than the natural bond of sisters' (1.2.265). Similarly, when Hermia compares the 'primrose beds where' she and Helena 'were wont to lie' (1.2.215) to the meeting place, and later the bedding place, of Hermia and Lysander, we are encouraged to notice a repetition and displacement of one bedmate for another. Indeed, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play thoroughly concerned with the tension between unity and duality, merger and separation, oneness and twoness, presents Lysander's seductive come-on, 'One

heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth' (2.2.42) as no different – qualitatively, emotionally, physically – from Helena's pained admonition:

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,  
Have with our needles created both one flower,  
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds  
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition;  
Two lovely berries molded on one stem;  
So, with two seeming bodies, but one heart.

(3.2.203–12)

Helena concludes this passionate appeal with the question, 'And will you rent our ancient love asunder . . . ?' (3.2.215), a motif repeated by Celia, who complains, 'Rosalind lacks then the love/Which teacheth thee that thou and I am one./Shall we be sund'red?' (1.3.94–6). That these texts formulate the divorce of female unity in such similar terms substantiates James Holstun's contention that female homoerotic desire was figured in seventeenth-century poetry primarily in an elegiac mode (Holstun 1987). Likewise, in Fletcher and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Emilia's love for her childhood friend Flavina is rendered elegiacally, even as the love of Theseus and Pirithous is allowed expression up to the eve of Theseus' marriage to Hippolyta (1.3.55–92). Presented as always already in the past, and hence irrecoverable, female homoerotic desire simultaneously was acknowledged and mastered by male poets. Or, in my reworking of Holstun's terms, symmetrical, 'feminine' homoerotic desire was granted signification only after it was rendered insignificant.<sup>13</sup>

I am less interested in the male poets' containment of this desire, however, than in the implicit power asymmetry that seems to constitute the homoerotic pair: the relative power of each woman is aligned according to her denial of homoerotic bonds. It is the female, rather than the male characters of these plays, who, by their silent denial of the other woman's emotional claims, position homoerotic desire in the past. Female homoeroticism is thus figurable not only in terms of the always already lost, but the always about to be betrayed. And the incipient heterosexuality of the woman who is recipient rather than enunciator of homoerotic desire comes to stand as the *telos* of the play.

This staging of the eradication of homoerotic desire is replicated in the Titania-Oberon subplot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Titania is psychologically threatening precisely to the degree she upsets the homosocial 'traffic in women' formally negotiated by Egeus and Theseus in the opening scene, and implicitly played out by Demetrius and Lysander in the forest.<sup>14</sup>

The changeling boy, child of Titania's votress and representative not only of her female order, but of female-oriented erotic bonds, is an object of maternal exchange between women. In inverting the gendered relations of the homosocial triangle, Titania not only 'effeminizes' the boy, but usurps patriarchal power. The child is the manifest link of a prior, homoerotic affection between women that doesn't so much exclude Oberon as render him temporarily superfluous. This affront motivates Oberon's attempt to humiliate Titania *erotically*, capture the boy, and secure him for martial, exclusively masculine, purposes.

The gendered and erotic scenarios enacted in these plays do not exemplify psychosexual *necessity* – that is, a developmental movement through progressive erotic stages – but an economic, political imperative: as each woman is resecured in the patriarchal, reproductive order, her desires are made to conform to her 'place'. Significantly, the homoerotic desires of these female characters existed comfortably within the patriarchal order until the onset of marriage; it is only with the cementing of male bonds through the exchange of women, or, in Titania's case, the usurpation of the right to formalize bonds through the bodies of others, that the independent desires of female bodies become a focus of male anxiety and heterosexual retribution.

In Shakespeare's plays, an originary, prior homoerotic desire is crossed, abandoned, betrayed; correlatively, a heterosexual desire is produced and inserted into the narrative in order to create a formal, 'natural' mechanism of closure. The elegiac mode of Shakespearean drama, however, which renders 'feminine' homoeroticism insignificant by situating it safely in the past, is supplanted in the history of the drama by a more immediate mode that not only locates such desire in the present tense, but depicts it as explicitly erotic. Thomas Heywood's *The Golden Age* and James Shirley's *The Bird in a Cage* both momentarily stage the temptations of a female-oriented eroticism; but they achieve temporal and psychological distance, not by the use of elegy, rather by employing mythological conceits and self-referential theatricality. Exuding homoerotic content within separatist female realms, the 'Ladies Interlude' (Act 4, scene 2) of Shirley's play, and Diana's virgin circle in Heywood's, repeat and extend the homoerotic pastoralism of *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

*The Golden Age* is an episodic dramatization of the lives of Jupiter and Saturn, focusing, as does so much Greek and Roman myth, on military and erotic conquest. Act 2 of the play concerns Jupiter's attempted seduction and eventual rape of Calisto, daughter of his vanquished enemy, King Lycaon. Upon Calisto's refusal of Jupiter's offer of marriage, she flees her father's kingdom, joining Diana's virgin circle in the forest. Hot in pursuit, Jupiter disguises himself as a 'virago', and successfully infiltrates Diana's pastoral cloister.

According to the rule of Diana's order, her 'princesses' are paired off in

a manner reminiscent of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. When Diana welcomes and prepares to accommodate Calisto, she asks Atlanta:

DIANA: Is there no princess in our train,  
As yet unmatch'd, to be her cabin fellow,  
And sleep by her?  
ATLANTA: Madam, we are all coupled  
And twinn'd in love, and hardly is there any  
That will be won to change her bedfellow.  
DIANA [to Calisto]: You must be single till the next arrive:  
She that is next admitted of our train,  
Must be her bed-companion; so 'tis 'lotted.

(Collier 1851: 2.1)

Jupiter, of course, is the 'next admitted', who quickly vows Diana's oath of loyalty and chastity; the circle's definition of chastity, however, is explicitly defined as protection of one's hymen from *phallic* penetration:

ATLANTA: You never shall with hated man atone,  
But lie with woman, or else lodge alone. . . .  
With ladies only you shall sport and play,  
And in their fellowship spend night and day. . . .  
Consort with them at board and bed,  
And swear no man shall have your maidenhead.

To which Jupiter eagerly responds: 'By all the powers, both early and divine,/If e'er I lose't, a woman shall have mine!' Not only is the *double entendre* spoken directly to Diana, and not as a secretive aside, but the huntress applauds Jupiter's vow – 'You promise well; we like you, and will grace you' – and thereby grants Calisto as 'her' bedmate.

The continual reiteration of the concept of women lying in bed, 'consort'-ing together as 'bedfellows' and 'bedcompanions', explicitly and matter-of-factly poses erotic 'sport and play' between women as a 'chaste' alternative to penetrative sex with 'hated man'. With their emphasis on being 'match'd', 'coupled', 'twinn'd in love', Diana's 'nymphs' pose monogamous, erotic 'virginity' as the natural expression of love between women.

When Jupiter quickly attempts to capitalize sexually on his good fortune, however, Calisto resists. The play, however, takes no stand on whether her resistance is due to an aversion to passion between women, because of Jupiter's haste and aggressiveness, or because of some inchoate suspicion regarding Jupiter's coercive designs:

JUPITER: Oh, how I love thee: come, let's kiss and play.  
CALISTO: How?

JUPITER: So a woman with a woman may.  
CALISTO: I do not like this kissing.  
JUPITER: Sweet, sit still.  
Lend me thy lips, that I may taste my fill.  
CALISTO: You kiss too wantonly.  
JUPITER: Thy bosom lend,  
And by thy soft paps let my hand descend.  
CALISTO: Nay, fie what mean you?

To which Jupiter offers the ambiguous response: 'Prithee, let me toy./I would the Gods would shape thee to a boy,/Or me into a man.' That Calisto's transformation into a boy would help Jupiter's plight adds the further titillation of male homoeroticism to a plot already full of erotic possibilities. This enticing possibility, however, is foreclosed as Jupiter forcefully asserts his 'rights' as a man, and carries Calisto offstage to be raped. The contrast between Jupiter's sexual assault and the loving ministrations of Diana's circle could not be more clear. And the ramifications for Calisto are tragic: eight months later, her pregnant evidence of heterosexual intercourse leads to banishment from Diana's society.

This theme of rape is doubled and complicated in *The Bird in a Cage*, as the Princess Eugenia is 'threatened' not only by the sexual advances of her male beloved, but by those of one of her ladies. But, perhaps more importantly, the strategies that Heywood employs to distance his depiction of homoeroticism are in evidence in Shirley's play as well. Not only does *The Bird in a Cage* import into its subplot a mythological past, but that subplot also focuses on the exploits of Jupiter. In addition, Shirley's dramatic device of a play-within-a-play heightens the sense of theatricality to which Jupiter's cross-dressing in *The Golden Age* merely alludes.

At the same time, however, the social context of *The Bird in a Cage* works to obviate the efficacy of these distancing mechanisms, with the play's role in a contemporary controversy pushing its meaning toward a material referent and verisimilitude. Satirically dedicated to the Puritan polemicist William Prynne, who attacked women actors as 'notorious whores' in *Histrion-mastix: The Players Scourge or Actors Tragedy* (1632–3), Shirley's play is implicitly a defence of Queen Henrietta, patroness of the Cockpit players for whom Shirley was principal dramatist. Just weeks before Prynne's publication, the Queen and her ladies had performed speaking parts at court in Walter Montague's *The Shepherd's Paradise*. Prynne's alleged libel against the Queen gave the authorities the chance they had been looking for to imprison him, inflict corporal punishment, and suppress his book. The gender and erotic consciousness expressed in *The Bird in a Cage* thus implicitly refers to the material reality of female royalty displaying and speaking her body not only in courtly but theatrical spectacle. A liminal moment in the history of the relation between

theatricality and sexuality, Shirley's play thus renders problematic the use of those conventions that previously had governed depictions of female desire: the necessity of boy actors and the cross-dressing of homoerotically desiring female characters.

The 'bird in a cage' refers extra-theatrically to Prynne languishing in prison, and within the play to both the Princess Eugenia, confined with her ladies to a tower by her over-zealous father, and to her beloved Philenzo, who secretly enters her chamber disguised as a bird in an enormous cage. During their confinement, the ladies decide to pass the time by staging an 'interlude', the story of Jupiter's 'seduction' of Danaë, which replicates in miniature the themes of the main plot, with Eugenia acting the part of Danaë, and her lady, Donella, playing Jupiter. Significantly, Donella's impersonation of the lustful god is not burdened with cross-dressing, which makes even more remarkable the extent to which she discovers and articulates her own desire through the course of play-acting. As 'Jupiter', her twenty-eight-line amorous speech to the sleeping 'Danaë' ends with a self-admonition to forgo poeticizing and begin *acting*: 'But I rob my selfe of Treasure,/This is but the Gate of Pleasure./To dwell here, it were a sin,/When *Elizium* is within./Leave off then this flattering Kisses,/To rifle other greater Blissés' (Shirley 1633:4.2. Sig H2v, 24–9). The threatened rape is interrupted by a bell announcing the surprise arrival of the bird cage, and, by means of this device, Philenzo's 'rescue' of Eugenia. Donella's response to this interruption is explicit and confused disappointment: 'Beshrew the Belman, and you had not wak'd as you did Madam, I should ha' forgot my selfe and play'd *Jupiter* indeed with you, my imaginations were strong upon me; and you lay so sweetly – how now?' (Sig H2v, 32–5).

In the context of Prynne's condemnation of the theatrical imagination and Shirley's implicit counter-argument in favour of it, Donella's erotic 'imaginings' are positively rendered. This affirmation of desire is voiced as well by the character Cassiana, who earlier remarked upon Jupiter's entrance: 'now comes *Jupiter* to take my Lady napping, we'l sleep too, let the wanton have her swinge, would she were a man for her sake' (Sig H2r, 36–Sig H2v, 1). That the 'wanton' is simultaneously Donella and 'Jupiter' is suggested by Cassiana's retention of female pronouns, which helps to materialize the pun embedded in Donella's wish: to play Jupiter in *deed*. In light of this, it might not be stretching erotic allusion too far to see in Donella's earlier response to Cassiana's impromptu poeticizing a bawdy joke about female arousal. Cassiana begins: 'Thinke Madame all is but a dreame,/That we are in – Now I am out – beame, creame./Helpe me *Katerina*, I can make no sence rime to't.' To which Donella puns: 'Creame is as good a Rime as your mouth can wish,/Ha, ha, ha' (Sig. H1r, 34–8).

The two rapes with which Eugenia is threatened invert conventional expectations: whereas Donella's erotic approach first seems to exist only in the realm of her imagination, and conversely, the disguised Philenzo's erotic

demands appear as a real threat to the princess's safety, it soon becomes clear that it is Donella who is actually so transported with desire as to force herself upon her mistress, and that Philenzo only adopted the guise of rapist as a manipulative ploy.<sup>15</sup> And whereas the stage directions tell us that Philenzo 'discovers himselfe' to the princess (Sig. I1r, 12–13), Donella seems to have 'forgot [her] selfe' (Sig. H2v, 33) in precisely the way Prynne and other anti-theatricalists feared.

Despite the strength of Donella's 'imaginings', the dramatic process of Heywood and Shirley is, like Shakespeare, to pose eroticism between women as an option, only to displace it through the force of a seemingly 'natural', ultimately more powerful heterosexual impulse. The final closure of these erotic incidents, and the dominant economy of desire that these plays endorse, however, does not cancel out the erotic attraction between some female characters which is represented as a legitimate, if ultimately futile, endeavour.

In all of these plays, the displacement of the homoerotic by the heterosexual happens so 'naturally' that the *tension* between the two modes of desire is erased. But are these in fact *two separate* modes of desire? It would seem that for certain types of women, such a contiguity existed between female homoeroticism and heterosexuality that the direction of object choice hardly figured at all. At least, for female characters who did not challenge conventional gender roles – who did *not* cross-dress, who did *not* wear swords, who were not anatomically 'excessive' and who did not use 'illicit devices', whose gendered 'femininity' belied the possibility of 'unnatural' behaviours – desire may have been allowed to flow rather more freely if less sensationally between homoerotic and heterosexual modes. That in these plays such desire is ultimately reduced and fixed within the institutional prerogatives of heterosexual marriage – that the eradication of the 'feminine' homoerotic position to desire is precisely what must be *staged* – points to the political and economic use of women's erotic bodies within a patriarchal economy.

At issue here, it seems to me, is less sexuality or gender *per se*, than reproduction. These women's desires are untenable not, as is the case with transvestism, tribadism, or sodomy, because they are viewed as implicitly imitative and hence monstrous, but because they are essentially non-reproductive; such desire becomes an issue – becomes significant – only when the time comes for the patriarchal imperative of reproduction to be enforced. Woman's social role within a system of reproduction relies not only on her biological capacity to give birth, but on her willingness to perform that labour. It is only when women's erotic relations with one another threaten exclusivity, and thus endanger their reproductive 'performance', that cultural injunctions are levied against them. And it is precisely the cultural anxiety that women will fail to comply with this role, a role that is violently forced upon Calisto, that the drama obsessively articulates and assuages. It is hardly incidental that such theatrical liaisons are

articulated only within the context of heterosexual courtship plots, where the expulsion of female relationships from the dramatic terrain resecures the promise of husbandly authority. The drama also suggests, however, that *if* same-gender erotic practices *could* exist coterminously with the marriage contract, there would be little cause for alarm. Heywood's Jupiter, for instance, shows no distress upon learning of Diana's separatist 'rule'; he merely tries to turn to his advantage the behavioural norms of a homoerotic environment. Although 'tribades' and 'sodomites' supplementing their bodies necessarily performed a certain amount of what Judith Butler terms 'gender trouble' (Butler 1991), the absence of outcry against 'feminine' homoeroticism suggests that it posed very little gender trouble at all. In the psychic landscape of the time, 'femmes' would be assumed available to give birth; tribades and sodomites would not.<sup>16</sup> The 'femme' involved with a tribade was seen as 'abused', the not altogether innocent victim of another woman's lust; her crime was correspondingly more minor, her punishment less severe.

Conceptual problems, of course, exist with my account. Perhaps most importantly, my analysis extrapolates a cultural *presence* from a discursive *silence*; it therefore could be accused not only of applying illegitimately twentieth-century categories to an earlier time, but of creating something quite literally out of nothing. To this charge, I can only answer that I find it inconceivable that within the vast array of erotic choices reported by early modern culture, 'feminine' bodies did not meet, touch, and pleasure one another.

Secondly, I presume that the erotic practices of 'tribades' and 'femmes' were radically discontinuous; that only 'tribades', for instance, used dildoes on their partners. But here we stumble across a certain circularity of definition: it is, after all, the penetrative use of a dildo or an enlarged clitoris that *defines* the 'sodomite' or 'tribade'. I confess ignorance as to the specific erotic acts in which early modern women may have engaged; but, in light of the fact that gynaecological texts encouraged men to arouse their wives by caressing their breasts and genitals, it seems implausible that women's pleasure was exclusively centred on penetration (Laqueur 1990; Johnson 1634; Pare 1573).

To what extent, then, can women's relationships with one another be perceived as 'resistant', 'oppositional', or 'transgressive'? To the extent that they existed coterminously with patriarchal prerogatives, not at all. They only *became* oppositional when perceived as a threat to the reproductive designs of heterosexual marriage. Whereas the 'tribade' and 'sodomite' functioned as magnets for cultural fantasies and fears – about gender, reproduction, monstrosity, and the ultimate instability of all such cultural categories – the 'femme' woman, who challenged neither gender roles nor reproductive imperatives, seems to have been so unworthy of notice that little note was taken of her at all.

In conclusion, there seems to have existed a radical discontinuity between, on the one hand, sodomy and tribadism, and their theatrical correlative in cross-dressing plays, and, on the other hand, a theatricalized 'feminine' homoeroticism that has no discernible material equivalent in the fantasized typologies in which early modern women were represented. Whereas the tribade and sodomite haunt essays, travel accounts, and gynaecological texts, femme-femme love seems to exist discursively solely as a theatrical invention. However, perhaps we can extrapolate from the drama itself the reasons for this disjuncture, for the absence of animus against 'femme-femme' love. For, if we have not interpreted the language of Helena, Hermia, Titania, Celia, Diana and Donella as homoerotic, it is not only because of our internalized homophobia, or because of our formalistic inclinations to privilege the final heterosexual teleology of these comedies, but because the palpable 'femininity' of these characters blinds us – and, I suspect, may have blinded many of their contemporaries as well – to the eroticism evident in their language of desire. Existing independently of the representational nexus of sodomy and tribadism, bodily supplementation and gender appropriation, these theatrical representations suggest that 'feminine' homoerotic desires were dramatized precisely because they did not signify.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The quotation in full is:

These lewdnesses are so detestable, that nothing needs to be said to increase their Horror: for Nature suffers almost as great a violence in *hearing* of them, as in the perpetration. It is wonderful, indeed, how it ever came into the thoughts of *Men* to commit them: but, as the Apostle says, (Rom. I. 20–28) when they gave them-selves up to Idolatry, God gave them up to vile affections; and the Devil put them upon going as much out of the way for wickedness, as he had brought them to do for their Religious Worship. They had changed the glory of the incorruptible God into Images of corruptible Men and Beasts, for Adoration: and therefore He left them to debase *themselves*; and turn the Channel of their Lusts, as well as their Devotions, from what was natural, to what was abhorrent from Nature; to their own Sex, and to brute beasts.

(Disney 1729: 180)

- 2 See, for instance, Thersites' labelling of Patroclus as 'Achilles' male varlet, his masculine whore' in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (5.1.15–17) and Hamlet's self-representation as a 'drab, a stallion' in *Hamlet* (2.2.588).
- 3 With the exception of recent work by Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, little historical, theoretical, or literary investigation has been attempted on early modern female same-gender pleasure. Lillian Faderman's encyclopaedic historical overview of love between women devotes only two short chapters to the period prior to the eighteenth century, focusing mainly on Brantôme's *Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies*. Judith Brown's archival work on the life of Benedetta Carlini is helpful, but in many ways is more revealing of religious than erotic



practices. The important work of James Holstun, Harriette Andreadis, and Elizabeth Harvey picks up the representation of Englishwomen's desires in the mid-seventeenth century, focusing primarily on the poetry of John Donne and Katherine Philips. And an important recent anthology, *Lesbian Texts and Contexts* (Kay and Glasgow 1990) discusses only nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts.

- 4 By means of this anecdote, Greenblatt positions his analysis of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, which he views as a partial retelling of Montaigne's story, in relation to non-theatrical discourses; correlatively, he employs the play to support his claim that within the Renaissance imagination, transformations of identity occurred unidirectionally: from imperfect to perfect, from female to male.
- 5 Greenblatt retells another anecdote (originally recorded by the French physician Jacques Duval in *On Hermaphrodites, Childbirth, and the Medical Treatment of Mothers and Children* [Rouen, 1603]) of gender ambiguity, in this case occasioned not primarily by the adoption of clothes but by the confusions of the body. A female servant, Marie, revealed to the woman she loves, Jeane, that she was really a man. After consummating the vows they had made, to the apparently mutual enjoyment of each, the couple sought public approval of their love. Marie changed her name to Marin, and began wearing masculine clothing. The two were subsequently arrested, tried, and condemned. The crime for which both were convicted was sodomy; despite Marin's claim that the terror of the trial had caused his penis to retract, the court maintained that Marie was a tribade who had used her unnaturally large clitoris to abuse Jeane. It was only upon Marin's appeal to the Parlement of Rouen, which appointed a panel of doctors, surgeons, and midwives to repeat a medical examination, that Jacques Duval applied pressure to Marin's organs, and found there 'a male organ', which on second examination, 'ejaculated' in a manner consistent not with woman's expulsion of seed, but man's (Greenblatt 1988: 73–5). These French cases are also discussed by Daston and Park (1985) and Jones and Stallybrass (1991).
- 6 In France (but not in England) cross-dressing was a punishable offence. In England only class transvestism was a crime (Jones and Stallybrass, 1991).
- 7 For the distinction between desires and acts, see Smith (1991).
- 8 See, for instance, Nicholas Culpepper:

Some are of opinion, and I could almost afford to side with them that such kind of Creatures they call Hermaphrodites, which they say bear the Genitals both of men and women, are nothing else but such women in whom the Clitoris hangs out externally, and so resembles the form of a Yard; leave the truth or falsehood of it to be judged by such who have seen them anatomized: however, this is agreeable both to reason and authority, that the bigger the Clitoris is in women, the more lustful they are.

(Culpepper 1684)

The uniformity of French and English gynaecological texts is explained by their general dependence on previous authority, and especially their common inheritance of the Galenic model of heat.

- 9 According to Audrey Eccles, Bartholm referred to such women as 'Rubsters', and Dionis observed that 'there are some lascivious Women, who by *Friction* of this Part, receive so great Pleasure, that they care not for Men' (Eccles 1982: 34). Ambrose Pare included a section on such women in his original *Des Monstres et prodiges* (1573), but, according to Jean Ceard, he 'was forced to eliminate a section on lesbianism, with a graphic description of the female genitals, before

including *Des Monstres* in later editions of his collected works' (Pare 1573 [1971]: 26–7).

- 10 Sharp, however, takes care to minimize Englishwomen's culpability. In my edition she writes: 'In the Indies, and Egypt [tribades] are frequent', and another edition of her work adds these words – 'but I have never heard but of one in this Country' (Sharp 1671: 45). Sharp's displacement of the 'unnatural' on to other nations is totally conventional within the context of medical discourses that regularly employed nationalist paradigms of contamination and disease.
- 11 Despite my use of the term 'femme', I want to encourage the reader to resist viewing these women as prototypes of modern erotic identities, and to emphasize instead the risk of collapsing their difference into *our* desire for continuity and similitude.
- 12 See my *Desire and Anxiety* for an analysis of the connection between early modern homoeroticism and theatrical cross-dressing (Traub 1992).
- 13 In using the term 'feminine', I do not mean to reinscribe arbitrary binary gender designations. However, it seems fruitful to differentiate between those women who were charged with appropriating masculine prerogatives and those who were not.
- 14 The phrase 'traffic in women' was first coined by Emma Goldman in her critique of marriage as prostitution. It gained critical prominence through the work of Gayle Rubin. For the most powerful elucidation of homosocial triangles, see Sedgwick (1985).
- 15 By conflating rape with seduction, I self-consciously reproduce the ideology of the play, and in no way mean to endorse such a view.
- 16 In arguing that 'femme' women were not threatening because they did not disrupt the reproductive economy, I could be interpreted to mean that they were always sexually available to men. My point is merely that they were culturally *perceived* to be more available, more capable, more willing.
- 17 I would like to acknowledge Brenda Marshall, Susan Zimmerman, Margaret Hunt, Richard Burt, Linda Gregerson, and Will Fisher for giving me suggestions of where and how to look for female-centred desire. I would also like to thank the Gay and Lesbian Studies seminar participants at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University for their insightful comments on an early draft. Finally, Misty Anderson provided timely research assistance and Kathy Cody gave invaluable help with the manuscript.

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