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The homosexual, the queen and models of gay history

For many years, gay historiography has been pervaded by the problem of constructionism versus essentialism. Nowadays, most historians assume that forms of homosexual preferences and behaviours are historically, culturally, and individually shaped. Social constructionism is the dominant theory in gay history.¹ But one problem remains: if sexual conduct and preference have historical forms, when did these particular forms come into being, and how widely were they distributed? For Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks, homosexuals and homosexuality date from the end of the nineteenth century when they, and so many other sexual neologisms, were introduced. Then, the homosexual was constructed as a person with a specific, often inborn identity, whose gender role was inverted, the

male homosexual being effeminate and the lesbian being masculine.² As Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, the first homosexual theorist of homosexuality (or Uranism as he termed it) formulated in Latin: *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa* – a female soul in a male body.³

Randolph Trumbach has asserted that the model of the homosexual can and should be traced back further, to about 1700, when the elements of gender inversion and sexual identity were perceptible in the mollies and sodomites who gathered in specialised clubs in London, Amsterdam and Paris. Trumbach has termed this model 'the queen'. Nineteenth century medical theories of homosexuality drew upon changes that had taken place one and a half centuries earlier, and brought little new to homosexual categorisations. Other historians of the eighteenth century have also claimed that the beginning of the concept of a homosexual, gender-inverted identity and its social counterpart, a sodomitical subculture, has to be placed around 1700.⁴

The model of the queen is a seductive concept for gay history because so much available material asserts the presence of gender-inverted homosexuality: males adopting female sex roles, often to facilitate gay sex. Immediately, questions arise about the visibility of this phenomenon, especially when it was so spectacular as travesty of genders. And really how similar are these different gender inversions? Does the molly of the 1730s really correspond to the homosexual third sexer of 1900, and to the gay man of today – and if so, how could so many men consider the first sexological books such eye-openers with regard to their sexual preferences?

There is also a missing link in the queen model, for who were their sexual partners? In most parts of the world and in most times, sexuality was based on inequality, with men sexually subjugating women, boys

or weaker males. In most cultures, penetration was the male sex act, being penetrated the female – although sometimes these roles were reversed. Sexual democracy with companionate marriages and equitable relations have existed hardly anywhere, except in modern Western countries.⁵ Of course, there are many variations on the themes of gender, sexual subordination and penetration. Male-to-male sexuality took two forms: sex between men and boys, as with Greek pederasty and Melanesian boy-inseminating rituals; and the form of gender inversion, in which two persons of the same sex, but of different genders had sex, with the 'male' penetrating.⁶ According to Trumbach, the most common homosexual form in Western Europe till 1700 was pederasty. Married men fell in love with 'ganymedes', younger men or boys whom they dominated.

But who were the lovers of the queens after 1700? Most probably these lovers were 'trade' – as they were called in the 1950s – working class young men who did not identify as queens and who were often soldiers, sailors or manservants. Many of them will have started their sexual career having sex with their male friends, continuing by having sex with queens, and ending up married to women. This pattern can be found everywhere in homosexual literature and archival sources. Of course, there is also the possibility of queens having sex and love relations with each other. Rictor Norton suggests that in England's gay subculture of the mollies, most of the mollies had sexual relations with other mollies, and not with trade.⁷

But why did the mollies adopt female habits, clothes, names and idioms when they were detested both as sodomites and effeminate? If they were indeed male-identified and if they had sexual relations among themselves, why should the mollies have endangered

their lives and exposed themselves to the opprobrium of their compatriots with these female customs that had no particular aim? If it was only camp irony, then they paid dearly for their jokes. According to my reading of literary and archival material of a later date, queens looked for trade, not sex with other queens. A variation on this theme was gentlemen who looked for sex with working class men. As one of my informers commented about sex with trade in the 1930s: 'the gentleman had to be the female in bed'. Sexual relations were based on a combination of class and gender inequality, the gentleman being superior in the ballroom, the male servants in the bedroom. The gentlemen were queens according to sex and gender ideology in their private encounters with trade, although they did not have to show gender inversion in public life. So, when we discuss the model of the queen, trade should be included, because queen and trade were mutually dependent.

Alternative models: friendship, male promiscuity and gay cohorts

Moreover, there have been other models of homosexuality in the era from 1700 till the present in North-Western Europe, the region Trumbach considered. The main examples are the modern gay (whom Trumbach however sees as an effete gender-crosser), and the cult of friendship which started with Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century and continued until World War II. It was a masculine ideal that had nothing to do with the effeminacy of the mollies. The cult of friendship was very highly regarded in Germany, but England and Holland also had some prominent supporters around 1800. Eulogists of friendship never compared it with the effeminacy of sodomites (very

much an urban phenomenon), but to Greek pederasty. Against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, several philosophers of the Counter-Enlightenment and Romanticism stressed the importance of the senses and defended friendship or male Eros as a sensual affair. Hamann in Germany and Hemsterhuis in Holland praised the delights of a sensual friendship, clearly stating it had nothing to do with the beastliness into which Greek pederasty had degenerated. The question was always left open as to what was beastliness, what was friendship and what was considered to be border-line. Presumably, sodomy or anal intercourse was beastliness, but what about mutual masturbation? Several writers, indeed, ventured into erotic relations with younger men, such as Johann Winckelmann in Germany and Johannes Kneppelhout in Holland, with the poet August van Platen as the most famous homosexual example. The proponents of Eros and friendship were literary figures who circulated in the upper classes, whose orientation was towards life at the courts, universities, boarding schools or in the army, and who had little idea of the sexual underworlds of the city.⁸

About 1900 Magnus Hirschfeld launched his campaign to decriminalise unnatural fornication in Germany, and founded the first homosexual movement in the world. His defence of homosexual love was based on his theory that homosexuals were an intermediate sex, whose sexual preferences were inborn and could not be changed.⁹ At the same time, there was a competing group of men who defended male love, *Die Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*, the Community of the Specific. They stressed that the love of friendship had nothing to do with gender inversion, and did not exclude heterosexual relations. They followed a Greek ideal of friendship and love. According to Benedikt

Friedländer, there were three kinds of love: maternal love, love between spouses, and male love. Women belonged at home and had to care for and love the children; marriage was the bridge between the privacy of the home and the public realm where men belonged; and male eros was the foundation of culture and politics, in the sense of *Freundesliebe* (love of friends) and also of men educating boys to public life because they loved them. It was an eroticised version of romantic German ideals of *Bildung* (cultured socialisation), that already had a strong sensual component. This *Freundesliebe* was far removed from the idea of gender-inversion, a third sex or the queen.¹⁰

The most common form of homosexual behaviour was, however, something quite different. It was to be found not in the proud tradition of friendship and male eros, nor among the mollies Trumbach studies, nor among the third sexers of Hirschfeld. Because marriage occurred relatively late in Western societies, and women had to remain virgins until they married, males had few sexual avenues – prostitution being their main sexual option. The cities of nineteenth-century Europe harboured many whores.¹¹ But even if unmarried men had this chance, many of them, certainly the younger and poorer ones, did not have the money to pay for prostitutes. Research conducted by the city of Amsterdam revealed that the clients of the city's bordellos in the nineteenth century were mainly older married men, and not the unmarried younger ones for whom nineteenth-century authorities had organised a system of medical control of prostitutes. The report on this research resulted in the prohibition of bordellos in Amsterdam. Apparently the younger and poorer males had sexual outlets elsewhere or abstained from sexual relations.¹²

Since sexual crimes (especially sex in public) were

prosecuted in Amsterdam, many men did indeed have other outlets, among which homosexual ones were very important. Legal papers indicate that the number of prosecutions and convictions was low (10 per year for Amsterdam around 1900 for homosexual offences), but circumstantial evidence from the prosecutions and from other sources makes it quite clear that many parks and public conveniences functioned in 1900 as homosexual meeting places, as they had done in the eighteenth century.¹³ Most men who were arrested in toilets and elsewhere for gay sex did not show the characteristics of the queen. They were mostly working class men who looked for pleasure, like the soldiers who came before the military courts, and who were not in the least effeminate. Sometimes there is a suggestion that a man was queer, for example because he had a long-standing male lover, but in most cases their pleasures seem to have been accidental sexual adventures. The most important source of convictions was neither queens nor pederasts (sexual relations with minors under 16 had been a criminal offence in the Netherlands since 1886), but working class men whose masculinity was rarely questioned. Of course, gender identity was not a topic in the courts: reports in the criminal archives are rather elaborate and broached many topics, but seldom gender identity. Twice, men approached for sex in public places resisted the temptation and stated that they felt they had been put in a female position, which indicates that the queer would-be seducers were considered to be aggressive, masculine men, and not effeminate weaklings.

Of course, mollies who liked to dress up and show off their feminine qualities often appear in the literature on homosexuality. Certainly they offered social images of male love that many people were acquainted with. It is very probable that queens started their sexual

careers in the world of male promiscuity before entering their female roles. The model of the queen was certainly not the only model for homosexuality since 1700, and many people did not live and love according to this model.

Quite another proposal for historical analysis of homosexual preferences and behaviours is put forward by Gilbert Herdt. From his research on Chicago's gay history, he claims there have been four cohorts of men in this century, each representing a certain lifestyle. The first cohort of invisibles did not even belong to a community (1900-1945). The second cohort of closet homosexuals formed a community but kept their sexual preferences secret (1945-1969). The third and fourth cohorts are gay men before and after AIDS. Before AIDS, gay men developed a hedonistic, promiscuous lifestyle and stressed their masculine identity (1969-1982); after AIDS, they put more emphasis on relations and solidarity (1982-now).¹⁴ We might now add the 'queer' stage, with a new radicalism that unites all sexual variations. These cohorts indicate that the model of the queen is too general a concept, even more so if applied across three centuries. But however interesting Herdt's analysis may be, there are many problems associated with it, because there are invisible and closeted gay youngsters even today, 25 years after the Stonewall riots. It is too simplistic to claim that these people are living in the past; perhaps a closeted lifestyle is the best way to realise their desires or survive in their particular environment. The queen model yields problems too, but it directs our attention to some important aspects of sexual modelling.

Intermezzo: the queen and the *berdache*

The models of queen and homosexual show some
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striking similarities, the most important being that both stress identity and femininity. But comparable appearances do not have to represent similar contents. The same can be asked for all the third-gender forms that anthropology discusses: are the *xanith* from Oman, the *waria* from Indonesia, the *hijra* from India, the native American *berdache* comparable figures, or are they quite different because of divergent contents, contexts and consequences?¹⁵ Many of these third genders had religious functions, whereas the queen was an abominable sinner. The queen was a sexual persona, the other third-genders probably less so. The question of the importance of the sexual identities and behaviours of these third-genders has not been resolved. In Indonesia, diverse forms (*waria*, gay) exist next to each other independently, suggesting their irreducibility, even in one culture. We should be very careful not to overstate either similarities or differences. Even when certain forms show a strong resemblance, we should be wary of equating these forms too readily.

Between social conventions and sexual meanings

Sexual desire is always specific. It does not aim at women or men in general, but always at specific attributes or situations. It has a highly individual and fetishistic character. Private sexual desires are results but also basic elements of the socio-sexual system in which the individual takes part. This may be the sex/gender system of Gayle Rubin, Trumbach's queen model, or the sexual politics Foucault and others have described.¹⁶ With such general concepts, the interaction between social models and private wishes is mostly overlooked. There are always discrepancies between sexual systems and individual choices.

Individuals live off the sexual system in which they
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