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Walking the Line: Renaissance and Reformation Societal Views on Lesbians and Lesbianism

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Introduction

In Anglo-Saxon England, from the end of Roman occupation in the fifth century until 1066, men and women stood on mostly equal ground. When William of Normandy defeated Harald Godwinson in 1066, the rights of women changed dramatically, omitting them from the new social order. The Norman conquest of England brought much change to the nation but was also held by the feudalistic views of mainland Europe. William's Domesday Book includes around 350 women as landholders, holding only five percent of the land, half of which was held by three women belonging to the Godwin family. English society, like the mainland, considered women inferior to men - rather than equal to - in both morals and intellect. The rules of the new social order extended to the natural rights of women who came to be known in the nineteenth century as lesbians. With the Renaissance and later the Reformation came changes in law, religion, society, art and literature. A woman's position in society, however, remained the same, if not reduced; like a child, they were expected to be seen and not heard. Being ignored gave women who preferred the company of other women enjoyed some measure of freedom in their personal relationships.

At the beginning of the Renaissance period Italy was far more advanced than the rest of Europe, primarily due to its early consolidation of proper states and the industry that supported them, which led to a reorganization of Italian society. While one would expect these changes to affect all people in a positive way, women were adversely affected, to the extent that it could be argued they had no renaissance at all until later in the historical narrative. Female sexuality was tightly regulated compared to that of men and their political, economic and cultural roles were greatly reduced. Sources speaking on the interests of Italian nobility, with the exceptions of such people as Boccaccio and Ariosto, makes female chastity the norm in accordance with a

relationship structure between the sexes of female dependency versus male domination.¹ The marginalization of women goes hand in hand with the marginalization of lesbians. Since women were effectively considered second-class citizens, they were largely ignored. Lesbian relationships in particular were even more marginalized, due to the widespread notion that women did not have a sex drive. However, there were some exceptions, as seen in the legal and religious attitudes of the time.

Law and Religion

England's legal code is built on English Common Law, which originated in the Middle Ages and from there spread to British colonies, including the United States. In the late ninth century King Alfred the Great, compiled a book known as the Doom book, which contained all of the existing laws of Kent, Wessex and Mercia. Before the Norman Conquest, justice was carried out by country (shire) courts, headed by both a bishop and a sheriff. The term "common law" itself comes from the reign of the first Plantagenet King Henry II, who established secular English tribunals. "Common law" was law that was common throughout the realm, dictated by tradition, custom and precedent. England's traditional "buggery" statute, which was first put into effect under Henry VIII, made no explicit mentions criminalizing lesbian relationships, despite its continued use until 1967. In fact, both English and Venetian law typically ignored lesbian relationships.²

In most of Western Christian Europe, however, canon and secular law were heavily influenced by Roman law. Although there is no Roman precedent for the legal condemnation of

¹ Joan Kelly-Gadol, *Women & Theory The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

² Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 87.

sex between women, in several European countries (including France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Switzerland), “lesbian acts” were seen as legally on par with acts of male sodomy and consequently punishable by death. The earliest existing law that specifically references sexual relations between women is in the French code *Li Livres di justice et de plet*, circa 1270, from the district of Orleans. It contains two almost identical penalties, one concerning men and one women:

22. He who has been proved to be a sodomite must lose his testicles. And if he does it a second time, he must lose his member. And if he does it a third time, he must be burned.

23. A woman who does this shall lose her member each time, and on the third must be burned. (Feme qui le jet doit a chescune joiz perdre membre et la tierce doit estre arsse.)³

While executions of women for sodomy are far rarer than those for men, for various reasons, in *Das Strafrecht des deutschen Mittelalters* by Rudolf His there is a record of a girl being drowned “for lesbian love.” There are also records of two Spanish nuns being burned for using, “material instruments,” a woman from Fontaines being burned for impersonating a man and marrying another woman,⁴ and the hanging of a girl in Marne in 1580 for refusing to return to “the state of a girl.”⁵ This stemmed from an ongoing debate on what exactly constituted female sodomy. Western Europe was a patriarchal society, and up to the twentieth century most European (and American) men and physicians believed that women had no sex drive. While doctors in the thirteenth century recognized that women had libidos, by the seventeenth century the methods

³ Louis Compton, “The Myth of Lesbian Impunity Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, no. 1-2 (1981): 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 91.

prescribed to relieve sexual frustration, namely dildos, were less of a viable option due to the demonization of masturbation.⁶

Traditionally, sodomy required penetration of a fleshy part, typically anally. Luigi-Maria Sinistrari's detailed treatise on the subject, *De Delictis et Poenis*, theorizes that, "if the insertion of a finger into the vagina was not a sodomitical act, why should it be a crime to insert an inanimate object?"⁷ This was in direct opposition to the views of Paul and Aquinas, who put male and female sodomy on an equal field. However, he also stated that some women have overdeveloped clitorises, allowing them to penetrate another woman the same way a man would, but that accusations of female sodomy should be "discountenanced" if such abnormalities are absent.

A prime example of this conflict is recorded in the trial records of Catharina Margaertha Linck and Catharina Magaretha Mühlhahn in Halberstadt, Germany in 1721. This record is a fascinating look at the life and romantic relationship of two women, and the only record of Linck's life. Linck was born illegitimately in Gehowen, baptized there, then sent to an orphanage in Halle. After leaving there, she dressed as a man to remain chaste and for a time travelled with a band of Inspirants (a form of Quakerism), before returning to Halle after believing she had lost her power of prophecy. She served in several different militaries, including the Hanoverians, the Volunteer Company of Royal Prussians, and the Hessians. She used several different names, deserted several times, and was other times exposed for a woman and dismissed.

⁶ Michael Castlemen, "'Hysteria' and the Strange History of Vibrators," *Psychology Today*, March 01, 2013, Accessed November 03, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/all-about-sex/201303/hysteria-and-the-strange-history-vibrators>.

⁷ Louis Compton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791," *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, no. 1-2 (1981): 20.

In 1717, while working for a French stocking maker, she met Mühlhahn, and quickly engaged and married her. They lived together as a married couple, sharing the same table as well as the same bed. Linck, as part of her disguise, “had made a penis of stuffed leather with two stuffed testicles made from pig’s bladder attached to it and tied it to her pubes with a leather strap”⁸ The trial record describes how Linck and Mühlhahn had intercourse, both orally and vaginally. Linck was eventually exposed by her mother-in-law and arrested. Linck admitted her guilt, but when it came down to the punishment, there was disagreement amongst the jurymen on whether the death penalty should be applied:

Furthermore, several members of our department are of the opinion that in this case the death penalty is not applicable, since with these types of instruments actual fleshly union is not possible, much less can semen be released – both processes being required for the real offense in regard to the act of sodomy, consequently the same formal sin, if not our law, does not apply in this case.⁹

Ultimately, Linck was sentenced to death by the sword (beheading), and Mühlhahn imprisoned. Her trial was the last instance of an execution being carried out for acts of lesbianism, and the account of her life given during the trial is a valuable window into the lives of other women like her.

Over half of the texts printed in the sixteenth century were religious in nature. In the interpretation of the New Testament from between 1549 to at least 1580, acts of sodomy between males were widely condemned, as was sodomy between females. In the Elizabethan *Book of Common Prayer* (in use and relatively unchanged from 1559 until Elizabeth’s death in 1603), all those who engaged in illicit sex were threatened with “that utter darkness, where weeping and

⁸ Brigitte Erikson, “A Lesbian Execution in Germany, 1721,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, no. 1-2 (1981): 31.

⁹ *Ibid*, 40.

gnashing of teeth shall be.”¹⁰ In most cases, however, it was sex between males, bestiality aside, that prompted the most punitive horror. Most male theologians considered their male status and sexuality more challenged by a male assuming a “feminine” role. The gender hierarchy, male topping female, was deemed essential to the natural order. In England, sexual acts committed between two women were ignored by the law, while “buggery” was punished according to the statute laid out by Henry VIII.

Views on sex between females were generally more diverse. According to Thomas Aquinas, an Italian Dominican friar, Catholic priest and Doctor of the Church, sex between women was sometimes considered sodomy, but could also constitute fornication or “pollution.” It could become sodomy if penetration was involved, or if one partner had a “psuedophallic clitoris.” Many masculine authorities considered nonpenetrative sex between women a form of masturbation, rather than sodomy. Erasmus, the Dutch humanist, priest, and teacher, denounced female sexual behaviour as against nature.

In Paul’s Romans and Corinthians letters, he views homoerotic behaviour as, “contrary to natural law and therefore worthy of death.”¹¹ In the *Apocalypse of Peter* only passive male partners occupy hell, but *both* female partners count as sinners. The *Acts of Thomas* state that both male and female homosexuals will suffer in hell. While two versions of this apocalypse exist - in Greek and the original Syriac - the sins in both versions are virtually identical. In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the sin deserving punishment in hell is also likely sexual contact between

¹⁰ Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 31.

¹¹ Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between women: Early Christian responses to female homoeroticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 303.

two women. All three early Christian apocalypses differ on punishments, but share the vision of God punishing *both* partners in female homoerotic relationships.¹²

Early modern views on same sex love did not stop those lovers from contesting “homophobic religious orthodoxy with considerable critical self-possession,” as seen in stories by Matteo Bandello, Antonia Vignali, and Antonio Rocco. Homosexual inspiration and support could be drawn from the relationship between David and Johnathan, and Christopher Marlowe even claimed that Jesus Christ himself practiced sodomy, citing his love for his disciple John as seen in John 13:23 and 21:20. Women could draw similar comfort from the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, with Ruth pledging to remain with Naomi until death (Ruth 1:16-17). It could also be insisted that Romans 1:26 failed to so much as address female same sex relationships. Even statements and rejections by Aquinas’ concerning his condemnation of sexual sins could be twisted to suit homoerotic advocacy:

3. “A person can lawfully do what he likes with what belongs to him. But in the sexual act a man does but use what is his own, except perhaps with adultery or rape. Therefore there is nothing wrong in venery and looseness there will not be sinful.”¹³

Lesbianism was also particularly common within nunneries. The most well-known case is that of Sister Benedetta Carlini, Abbess of the Convent of the Mother of God at Pescia in Tuscany, Italy. She was literate, intelligent, and persuasive and asserted that not only had she received the stigmata, but that Christ himself as well as several male angels spoke through her. This case is the earliest and only concrete case that historian Judith C. Brown was able to uncover during her research into Carlini. In her article, “Lesbian Sexuality in Renaissance Italy: The Case of Sister Benedetta Carlini,” she states that in Renaissance Europe almost ten percent of the adult female

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 33.

population lived in convents. Medieval theologians and learned men were not unaware of sexual relationships between women, but they were largely ignored. The thought that women could bring each other pleasure without the aid of a man occurred to very few.

The case of Benedetta Carlini served to answer a very important question in the eyes of Renaissance men: what did women do with each other? The ecclesiastical authorities who presided over Carlini's case were constricted by Renaissance notions of female sexuality. At worst, Carlini's actions would have been labelled sodomy, at best mutual masturbation. Carlini herself declared that she was possessed by the spirit of an angel called Splendidiello, and that it was he who initiated all sexual contact between Carlini and the nun Bartolomea. He would appear as a boy of eight or nine and, "through the mouth and hands of Benedetta, taught her companion [Bartolomea] to read, and write, making her be near her on her knees and kissing her and putting her hands on her breasts..."¹⁴ Bartolomea's admission to this and many other acts sealed Carlini's fate. She was stripped of her position as abbess and placed under guard for the rest of her life. While nunneries were very common places for lesbian relationships to flourish, they were by no means the only avenue available.

The period of the Renaissance and Reformation was a man's world, through and through; a world where women were, like children, meant to be seen (rarely), but not heard, and where almost every aspect of their lives were, in some way, controlled by a man. The roles that each sex filled were separate and clearly defined. Any breach of the status quo, even in an age of questioning, could cause chaos. Since the publication of Joan Kelly Gadol's article, "Did women have a Renaissance?" in 1972, an effort has been made by historians to examine the true role of

¹⁴ Judith C. Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality in Renaissance Italy: The Case of Sister Benedetta Carlini," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (1984): 758.

women in society, discovering, for example, the truer extent of women's influence, and role as patrons of the art. More attention is also being paid to women's history, the realities of their lives, and reassessing exactly how much power and independence a woman enjoyed.

Women in Society

The social standing of women was restrictive and limited. They were increasingly forced into jobs relating to domestic work. Men were in control of all institutions of society, "including social, religious, political, economic, and legal." A man was the "king" of his family, and over the course of the seventeenth century exhibited an increasing amount of absolute power over, not only his wife, but also his unmarried and widowed female relatives.¹⁵

The options provided to most noblewomen were either to marry or to enter a convent. The bride's family was expected to provide the dowry. In many cases, the age differences between married men and women were quite large. Most noblewomen were not expected nor allowed to do work outside the home, nor were they allowed to breast-feed their own children. Women in the growing middle class and even poor women had more freedom than noblewomen did. No matter their class, they were denied all political rights and were legally subject to their husbands, considered more property than people. It was not until the Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment that women began to reclaim some of the rights they had lost over time.¹⁶

For the women who would eventually be known as lesbians in the nineteenth century, many of society's rules were still too restrictive, as were the religious and legal codes of the time, with marriage being one of the most important and highly contested issues. French essayist

¹⁵ Christa Dierksheide, "Women from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment," (online course, The Saylor Foundation, Saylor.org, 2015). <https://legacy.saylor.org/hist201/Intro/#8.2.3>.

¹⁶ Joan Kelly-Gadol, *Women & Theory The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Michel de Montaigne wrote of two marriages between people of the same sex in the late sixteenth century, one between two women in eastern France, and one between two men in Rome.¹⁷ Many women, like Catalina de Erauso and Catherina Linick, assumed lives as men to pursue their interests, which included marrying other women, and Julie D'Aubigny, who often dressed as a man and had both male and female lovers. The emergence of lesbian visibility over the course of the Renaissance also influenced the art and literature of the time.

Art and Literature

The Renaissance produced many literary and artistic works, from poetry to printed engravings and erotica. In a male dominated society, much of the available literature concerning female same sex love and relationships was written by men, for men, and from a male perspective, especially concerning erotica from the period. The Renaissance also saw the re-emergence of Sappho as a literary influence, bringing with her the “influence of Sapphic and thus sexually Sapphic knowledge.”¹⁸ While many of these works were produced by men, there were several pieces produced by women.

An early example is a Scottish lesbian love poem titled “Poem XLIX” contained in *The Maitland Quarto Manuscript* from 1586. While the poem has no official author, the style of written script reveals that the author was at the very least a woman, and has been attributed to Marie Maitland, the daughter of the man responsible for the creation of the manuscript. In the poem, the female speaker begs to be changed into a man, so she may marry her beloved. It also contains a reference to *The Book of Ruth* 1:16:

¹⁷ Gary Ferguson, “Inside Renaissance-Era Rome’s Gay Marriage,” *The Daily Beast*, February 09, 2017, Accessed November 26, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-renaissance-era-romes-gay-marriage>.

¹⁸ Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 317.

Poem XLIX

Nor yet Penelope, I wis,
 So loved Ulysses in her days,
 Nor Ruth the kind Moabitess
 Naomi, as the scripture says...¹⁹

Forty years after the publication of the *Manuscript*, Anne de Rohan produced and published what may be the first female-written French poem to make direct allusions to Sappho, “*Sur une dame nommée Aimée*” (“On A Lady Named Beloved.”) The most well-known and translated poem was, and remains, Fragment 31, titled in French as *A l’aimée* (To the Beloved.) While in English, “beloved” can refer to men or women, the French word “aimée” can only ever refer to a woman. By addressing her lover this way, de Rohan makes it very clear that said lover is female, not male. Though short, its length does nothing to diminish its significance.

On A Lady Named Beloved

Beauty, it would be a great wrong,
 If, for your worthy graces,
 I had been dealt the lover’s fate;
 For anyone but you, my dear Beloved,

All the Olympic torches,
 Illuminated in their course,
 Are not lovelier ornaments,
 Than the eyes of my beautiful Beloved...²⁰

A later example can be found in “Madrigal,” and “Letter to Madame la Marquise de S----, On Sending Her Tobacco,” written by Pauline de Simiane in 1715. These poems, addressed to women in friendship, contain distinct tinges of homoeroticism. “Madrigal” makes references to Diane, Apollo and Endymion:

Madrigal

¹⁹ Terry Castle, *The literature of lesbianism: a historical anthology from Arisoto to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 84.

²⁰ Terry Castle, *The literature of lesbianism: a historical anthology from Arisoto to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 116.

You kiss me like a sister,
 Kisses filled with sweetness;
 Yet you must allow me to condemn them,
 For I am only mortal, my Diane;
 Why treat me like Apollo great?
 I'd be so happy with Endymion's fate.²¹

Letter to Madame la Marquise...

...As reward
 For my tobacco and my care,
 All I ask, my lovable Corinne,
 Is that your hand sometimes choose
 To trace for me with tenderness
 All of your pleasures, all your fine times.²²

Even William Shakespeare, England's most popular and successful playwright, had lesbian and other homosexual themes running through his plays. Both *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* can be considered "honorary" Sapphic comedies. Each features charismatic heroines, disguised as men, who, "inspire ardour in unwitting females."²³ Olivia in *Twelfth Night* is so distinguished a lesbian example that a lesbian specific cruise line is named after her.

Twelfth Night (3.i.)

Olivia: Give me leave, beseech you. I did send,
 After the last enchantment you did here,
 A ring in chase of you. So did I abuse
 Myself, my servant, and, I fear me, you.
 Under your hard construction must I sit,
 To force that on you, in shameful cunning,
 Which you knew none of yours. What might you think?
 Have you not set mine honor at the stake
 And baited it with all the unmuzzled thoughts
 That tyrannous heart can think? To one of your receiving
 Enough is shown. A cypress, not a bosom,
 Hides my heart. So let me hear you speak.
 Viola: I pity you.

²¹ Ibid, 229.

²² Ibid, 230.

²³ Ibid, 100.

Olivia: That's a degree to love.²⁴

They are not the only examples of shamelessly gay women in Shakespeare's works. Dr. Theodora Jankowski, former professor of English literature at the University of Washington, conducted a study in 2001 that identified Hermione (*The Winter's Tale*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*) as lesbians. Jankowski raised the possibility that, while hiding from her husband, Hermione's courtier Paulina attended to *all* her needs, and the place where Hermione was hidden, "represented a secure, private place where a woman could engage in erotic interludes with another woman without arousing suspicion."²⁵ Portia, though she marries Bassanio with no conclusive signs of real love, is likely truly in love with her serving woman Nerissa. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice and Hero share a bed for a year. Jankowski states, "If Hero could have been unchaste with a strange man the night before her wedding, then it's entirely possible she may have been unchaste with her cousin."²⁶ She also identified four scenes with high levels of erotic rhetoric in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, when Iras, Charmian and Cleopatra are together. It is entirely possible that there may have been erotic encounters between the two ladies-in-waiting and their queen, as it is possible that a similar relationship existed between Titania and her votress in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Art, as literature, held sway in the Renaissance and Reformation world, growing more varied, creative and popular as the arts moved away from strictly religious depictions. A scene painted by several different artists is Amarillis Crowning Mirtillo, painted by Anthony Van Dyck (1631-32), Bartholomeus Breenbergh (1635) and Jacob Van Loo (1645-50), all of which show acts

²⁴ Terry Castle, *The literature of lesbianism: a historical anthology from Arisoto to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 105-06.

²⁵ Ben, Summerskill, "Shakespeare's hidden lesbians," *The Observer*. September 02, 2001, Accessed November 07, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/sep/02/books.medicalscience>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

of female love in the form of passionate kisses, two of which (Van Dyck and Van Loo) are between the titular characters, though Mirtillo is a man disguised as a nymph. A series of paintings housed in Bolsover Castle, a Stuart mansion in Bolsover, Derbyshire, England, “depict classically proportioned nude female figures amorously entangled,”²⁷ copied from a series of engravings by Hendrik Goltzius called *Allied Virtues*; Justice and Prudence, and Faith and Hope.

Mythology features heavily in many paintings and engravings from this era. A fresco by Francesco Mazzola Parmigianino (the *Fable of Diana and Acteon*, 1523), located in the private bathing chamber of an Italian noblewoman in Parma shows two bathing nymphs and is decorated with images of Diana. Diana herself features very heavily in Renaissance and Reformation Sapphic art. Titian finished his *Diana Discovering the Pregnancy of Calisto* in 1559, depicting classically posed, nude women. Jupiter and Calisto were painted in several forms by Rubens (1613), Amigoni (c. 1730s) and Boucher (1744), with Jupiter taking on the form of a woman, specifically Diana, to seduce Calisto.

Art was also a popular form of erotica, the most common depiction of Sapphic love during this period. As is still the case with erotica, or pornography, most of what was in circulation was created by men and catered to the male gaze. Due to official, restrictive printing constraints, any material of this nature from after the early sixteenth century would have been circulated only in manuscript form, and only among like-minded individuals. While the examples we do have were produced by and for men, with relationships between females rarely addressed, it is not impossible that some manuscripts were produced by and for women.

²⁷ Valerie Traub, *The renaissance of lesbianism in early modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 161.

As it did in so many other areas, Italy led the pack when it came to erotic writing, providing significant inspiration for other European writers. The presence of “much casual and celebratory treatment of male same-sex love in Greek and Roman writings endorsed its pursuit and advocacy in the Renaissance,”²⁸ and it is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that applied to female same-sex love as well. Religious rivalries during the Reformation attempted to regulate the publication of theological ideas as well as imposing restrictions that quickly extended to include political and erotic writings. The papal Tridentine Index of 1564 was the first to, “identify perceived obscenity or immorality as a reason for prohibition,”²⁹ and remained in effect until 1966.

Among these privately circulated manuscripts was what is often called, “perhaps the single most influential piece of early modern European erotic writing,”³⁰ the *Putanna errante* (Wandering Whore), a piece of erotic prose produced by The Aretines (a group of Venetian associates and imitators of the male writer Aretino,) includes episodes of tribadic sex. Verbal texts like these only exist from male writers and masculine viewpoints, and, “indicate how such sexually adventurous males might accommodate it [female-female love] into their personal panoramas of erotic perspectives, desires, and practices, or into the normative androcentric sex/gender system.”³¹ However, despite the male-centred gaze, female readers could still enjoy (specifically Aretino’s) “sexual transvestism,”³² an expression of intimate *female* perspectives. Aretino was described by Bette Talvacchia, author of *Taking Positions: On Erotic Renaissance Culture* to write sexually empowered, authoritative, and dominant women.

²⁸ Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 346.

²⁹ Ibid, 347.

³⁰ Ibid, 354.

³¹ Ibid, 355.

³² Kenneth Borris, *Same-sex desire in the English Renaissance a sourcebook of texts, 1470-1650*, (London: Routledge, 2015),, 357.

As did art, so did erotica focus heavily on classical Greek and Roman mythology, with several male homoerotic figures for men to display in their works, but also examples for women, specifically the Amazons, or Diana and her bathing nymphs. Erotic engravings included, “imagistically coded eroticism,” for example the “slung leg” motif present in *Women Bathing* (1540), drawn by Luca Penni, and engraved by Jean Mignon. *Two women* by Giovanni Antonia da Brescia (active from c. 1490-1519) features one woman with her dress pulled up to her breasts, with the other woman embracing her with one hand beneath the bunched-up fabric. In a world where art held such importance, the presence of so many lesbian figures, even if they were intended for men, reaffirmed the concept that women could truly love and desire other women, as several notable women in history have proved.

Notable Women

Many of history’s notable figures have been described as women-loving women, commonly abbreviated as WLW, several of whom were rulers of great European kingdoms including Russia and Great Britain. These women are ordered in accordance to their date of birth, starting with Catalina de Erauso, “The Lieutenant Nun.” De Erauso was born in 1585 (or possibly 1592, according to her baptismal certificate,) and sent to a convent at an early age, then transferred to another, from which she promptly escaped disguised as a man named as Francisco de Loyola. She was notorious for drinking, brawling, and womanizing; she romanced one employer’s mistress and another’s sister-in law, got engaged to two women at the same time and skipped out on marrying both while keeping her sex a secret. When she was finally found out,

she was given a pardon for all her misdeeds by a bishop, and given special leave by Pope Urban VIII to continue living her life as a man.³³

A more famous example was Queen Christina of Sweden. Born in 1626, she became queen in November of 1632 and abdicated in June of 1654 after naming her cousin as her successor. Christina was smart and independent, and dressed and acted like a man during her rule and after. While she had many lovers, both male and female, the most famous is her relationship with Ebba Sparre, nicknamed “Belle” by Christina, whom she wrote passionate love letters to until Sparre’s death in 1662:

How happy I would be if I could only see you, Belle, but though I will always love you, I can never see you, and so I can never be happy. I am yours as much as ever I was, no matter where I may be in the world. Can it be that you still remember me? And am I as dear to you as I used to be? Do you still love me more than anyone else in the world? If not, do not undeceive me. Let me believe it is still so. Leave me the comfort of you love, and do not let time or my absence diminish it. Adieu, Belle, adieu. I kiss you a million times.

Christina Alexandra.³⁴

After Christina’s death in 1689 in Rome, she was buried in St. Peter’s Basilica, a very unusual occurrence for women.³⁵

Katherine Phillips, born in 1631, was a well-known English poet who wrote under the pen name Orinda. Her works earned her the title “The Matchless Orinda,” despite the manuscript form of her poems only being published shortly before her early death at only thirty-two. Many of her poems were addressed to her female lovers, the most famous of whom were “Rosiana”

³³ Catalina De Erauso, Marjorie B. Garber, Michele Stepto, and Gabriel Stepto, *Lieutenant nun: memoir of a Basque transvestite in the New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

³⁴ Veronica Buckley, *Christina, Queen of Sweden: the restless life of a European eccentric* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), location 3538.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

(Mary Aubrey), and later “Lucasia” (Anne Owen.) She also founded the Society of Friendship, a place for people to gather to discuss poetry and religion.³⁶

Friendship’s Mysteries: To My Dearest Lucasia

Come, my *Lucasia*, since we see
That Miracles Men’s faith do move,
By wonder and by prodigy
To dull the angry world let’s prove
There’s a Religion in our Love.

For though we were design’d t’agree,
That Fate no liberty destroyes,
But our Election is as free
As Angles, who with greedy choice
Are yet determin’d to their joys.

Our hearts are doubled by the loss,
Here Mixture is Addition grown;

We both diffuse, we both ingross:
And we whose minds are so much one,
Never, yet ever are alone...³⁷

Another famously gay queen was Queen Anne of England. She was born in 1665 and was an incredibly independent woman, who helped overthrow her father James II to allow her brother in law to become king. She was loved by the people, and was the last queen with the ability to overrule parliament and hold power over the cabinet. Though she did marry, the union did not produce any children who lived to adulthood. It was a well-known secret that the queen and her confidante Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, shared a very passionate relationship, complete with pet names and the official title of “Lady of the Bedchamber.” Their relationship

³⁶ Keith Stern and Ian McKellen, *Queers in history: the comprehensive encyclopedia of historical gays, lesbians, and bisexuals* (Dallas: Tex: BenBella, 0920), 364.

³⁷ Terry Castle, *The literature of lesbianism: a historical anthology from Arisoto to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 162.

waned in later years, and Sarah was eventually replaced in Anne's affections by one of her cousins, Abigail Hill.³⁸

Julie D'Aubigny, also known by her stage name Mademoiselle Maupin, or La Maupin, was a French opera singer and swordswoman born in 1670 to Gaston d'Aubigny, secretary to Louis de Lorraine-Guise, the comte d'Armagnac and Master of the Horse for King Louis XIV. She was taught dancing, reading, and drawing as well as fencing, and from an early age began to dress as a boy. Despite being married she took a lover named Serannes, an assistant fencing master, and when she grew bored of him she became involved with a young woman. The girl's parents, upon discovering the relationship, placed their daughter in a convent, which Maupin followed her to. She concocted a plot involving the body of a dead nun and a fire to give her cover to escape with her young lover, who remained with Maupin for three months before returning to her family. With charges of kidnapping, body snatching, arson and failing to appear in court hanging over her, she fled to Rouen. Eventually, she was granted a pardon by the king, and resumed her opera career. She spent the final years of her career with the Madam la Marquise de Florensac, retired from opera in 1705 and lived in a convent until she died two years later at thirty-three, leaving behind no known grave.³⁹

Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796, shared an intimate relationship with Princess Ekaterina Romanova Vorontsova-Dashkova (1744-1810). Catherine's sexual appetites were legendary, and were alleged to include lesbian tendencies, which surfaced late in her reign. Princess Dashkova, thanks to her close relationship with Catherine, enjoyed

³⁸ Keith Stern and Ian McKellen, *Queers in history: the comprehensive encyclopedia of historical gays, lesbians, and bisexuals* (Dallas: Tex: BenBella, 0920), 21.

³⁹ Jim Burrows, "Mademoiselle Maupin Home Page," Mademoiselle Maupin, Accessed November 26, 2017, <http://www.eldacur.com/~brons/Maupin/MaupinIndex.html>.

power and influence second only to the empress herself. While Dashkova's sexuality was ambiguous to her contemporaries, she was an independent and powerful woman who enjoyed the favour of an empress, which made her the envy of men among the court. Catherine and Dashkova shared an emotional, erotic and intellectual "marriage," and Dashkova's most precious memories were those of Catherine and herself.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The period of the Renaissance and Reformation was a tumultuous time, full of great scientific, artistic, and religious achievements. The terms "lesbian" and "lesbianism" did not come into use until the nineteenth century, but women who loved other women still existed in the early-modern period. While their position in society was the same as that of heterosexual women, due to their homosexuality they enjoyed greater freedom than others of their sex, and in many cases even more than male homosexuals. Lesbians tended to be ignored by both law and religion, and the definition of sodomy shifted so rapidly that it was rarely applied to women. Even the religious nature of society at the time could not stop these women from acting on their desires, whether it be assuming the life of a man and marrying women or setting a convent on fire to rescue an imprisoned lover.

While women, specifically lesbians, were marginalized in European society, their existence and contributions cannot be pushed aside. There was a solidarity of struggle against a world that does not want to acknowledge the existence of anything outside the already established norm, a norm that still exists even in the present day, as seen in the continued discrimination against male and female homosexuals. This continues to be a relevant issue.

⁴⁰ Diana Burgin, "CHAPTER TWO: Was She or Wasn't She? Only her Empress Knew for Sure," Accessed November 26, 2017. <http://dianaburgin.com/Ch3WasSheOrWasntShe.html>.

Lesbians walked the line between being visible and invisible parts of society, ignored by law and society, condemned by religion, but praised in art and literature. Many even held positions of power and influence. Despite living in a patriarchal world, women loving women still managed to carve out a small niche for themselves and left behind legacies that still inspire modern-day women following in their footsteps.

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