

CROSSING BOUNDARIES



Edited by Satu Lidman, Meri Heinonen,  
Tom Linkinen, and Marjo Kaartinen

# Framing Premodern Desires

Sexual Ideas, Attitudes,  
and Practices in Europe

Amsterdam  
University  
Press



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# Crossing Boundaries

## Turku Medieval and Early Modern Studies

The series from the Turku Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (TUCEMEMS) publishes monographs and collective volumes placed at the intersection of disciplinary boundaries, introducing fresh connections between established fields of study. The series especially welcomes research combining or juxtaposing different kinds of primary sources and new methodological solutions to deal with problems presented by them. Encouraged themes and approaches include, but are not limited to, identity formation in medieval/early modern communities, and the analysis of texts and other cultural products as a communicative process comprising shared symbols and meanings.

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*Edited by*

*Satu Lidman, Meri Heinonen, Tom Linkinen, and Marjo Kaartinen*

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# Editors' foreword

*Satu Lidman, Tom Linkinen, Marjo Kaartinen, and Meri Heinonen*

The University of Turku hosted a conference, *Framing Premodern Desires: Between Sexuality, Sin and Crime* in 2014. This intellectually stimulating event inspired the book, which contains a selection of articles based on the presentations.

Sexuality and desires, closely linked with well-being and individual identities, have been perceived, described, and encountered in a variety of ways. They have belonged to the most regulated areas of human behaviour, bridled by religious and legal authorities. At the same time, the praise concerning procreation, as well as sexual acts within the frames of marital institutions and between people in love, are strongly present in surviving sources.

Recently, the scholarly field of the history of sexuality has laid a special emphasis on the many ways past sexual desires had been understood in a particular time and place. Of course, one collection cannot cover the polymorphic world of premodern European desires entirely, but the understanding of past sexual ideas, attitudes, and practices can be deepened by bringing together multidisciplinary approaches and various microscopic analyses.

The articles in this book focus on exploring the localities and temporalities of sexuality, the visibility and invisibility of sexual desires, as well as the intersections of sexuality and moral offences in late medieval and early modern European societies.

The editors would like to thank all the participants at the Turku conference for their valuable input to scholarship on desires. We are especially grateful to Garthine Walker for the introductory chapter and to all our wonderful authors for their insightful contributions. We would also like to thank the editor-in-chief of the series *Crossing Boundaries*, Matti Peikola, for superb cooperation, and Miika Norro for his sharp eye and overall help in finalising the manuscript.

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# Framing premodern desires between sexuality, sin, and crime

An introduction

*Garthine Walker*

In medieval and early modern societies, sexualities were perceived, described, and encountered in a variety of ways, some but not all of them familiar to us. This volume emphasises the localities and temporalities of sexuality, the visibility and invisibility of sexual desires, as well as the intersections of sexuality and moral offences between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. The chapters that follow touch upon a series of related issues: how perceptions of sexuality changed over time and in relation to other types of change; how love, desire, and a range of other emotions related to people's sexual identities and behaviours; how sexuality and perceptions of it were connected to religion, law, ethnicity, and other cultural forms. Some of the essays invite us to consider the ways in which intersections of fiction and academic research can deepen our understanding of sexualities as conceptualised and practised many centuries ago. Throughout the volume, we return to the fact that in many societies, certain forms of sex were crimes, including sex before marriage, adultery, sodomy, and incest. Yet even these were not legally or culturally understood in precisely the same way in all parts of Europe during these several centuries. We are invited to consider, therefore, in what ways and why certain sexual acts were defined as crimes and how such cases were handled in court, the extent to which people shared the concerns of legislators, churchmen, and jurists, as well as to interrogate our assumptions about what form a historicised category of 'desire' might take.

When we speak of 'desire', we may refer to sexual practices or fantasies. 'Desire' might also be understood to be a constituent element of sexual identity. At particular historiographical moments and in certain traditions, the distinction between acts and identities has been central to how historians and other scholars interested in past sexualities have constituted both their approach and their object of study. But 'desire' might be conceived as more or other than this. Edward Shorter described his history of sexual desire as a history 'of longing, of what people yearn to do in their heart of hearts'. Yet what types of source (no matter how individual or rich and however

brilliant our analysis) can provide us with evidence of what medieval and early modern people yearned for in their heart of hearts? Articulating – even knowing – what we desire, as well as explaining motivations for desire, can be an incredibly complex matter. Moreover, Shorter's main argument that 'sexual behaviour and sensual pleasure are the product of biologically driven desire' fails to take us into the subjective realm of longing. In any case, he himself soon veers away from the individual's innermost desires to biological, social, and cultural norms: 'what people actually experience is always a mixture of biology and social conditioning: desire surges from the body, the mind interprets what society will accept and what not, and the rest of the signals are edited out by culture'.<sup>1</sup> For historians of earlier periods, the notion that sexual desire begins with a biological urge is not illuminating. Indeed, earlier assumptions on the part of sexologists that desire was the expression of one or more of three things – love, a desire for pleasure, and/or a desire to procreate – have been replaced by the recognition that people engage in sexual activities for a multitude of reasons.<sup>2</sup> Those identified for men range from pleasure and procreation to a desire 'to degrade, control, and dominate, to punish and hurt, to overcome loneliness and boredom, to rebel against authority, to establish one's sexuality, or one's achieving sexual competence (adulthood), or to show that sexual access was possible (to "score"), for duty, for adventure, to obtain favours such as a better position or role in love, or even for livelihood'.<sup>3</sup> Whether, and in what ways, such motivations for sexual activity or its avoidance applied to earlier periods, particular places, and in specific contexts is a matter for historical investigation.

The following chapters raise issues about how we as twenty-first-century scholars might approach the desires of medieval and early modern subjects and explore how people in various parts of medieval and early modern Europe framed their own and others' sexual desires and attractions. The essays reflect a rich and vibrant field of scholarship, and engage with the subject of premodern desire from a variety of perspectives. How one frames desire historically depends partly on which questions one wishes to pose and the perspective from which one asks them. The authors share much common ground but their contributions do not amount to a single interpretation or approach to sexual desire. Indeed, one of the book's strengths is the breadth demonstrated by the methods and conclusions of the contributors, a characteristic that reflects the vitality of the field.

1 Shorter 2005, 1, 3-4, 7.

2 Hatfield *et al.* 2012, 138.

3 Levin 1994, 125, cited in Hatfield *et al.* 2012, 138.

Until relatively recently, much historical work that focused explicitly upon sexuality was self-consciously theoretical. The birth of the history of sexuality as a subfield of history is frequently and for good reason associated with the post-structuralist philosopher, Michel Foucault, whose seminal three-volume *History of Sexuality* was published between 1976 and 1984. Yet there has been a tendency to focus more on the first volume, in which 'the truth of sexuality is [...] controlled by the circuits of power'. Foucault had more to say about desires and pleasures, on what he termed 'the hermeneutics of desire', in the second and third volumes, which have been less commonly cited.<sup>4</sup> Foucault was not alone in noting either that sexuality had a history or that it was associated with power.<sup>5</sup> Radical feminist scholars, for instance, placed men's control of women's bodies and sexuality at the core of their critique of patriarchy in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Feminists of certain other persuasions saw sexuality as one type of women's oppression among the many that had previously been 'hidden from history'.<sup>7</sup> The notion that the 'personal is political' put sex firmly on the academic agenda. Historians of male and female homosexuality similarly aimed to make visible a previously unwritten history in which sexual identities were central.<sup>8</sup> The 1980s and 1990s saw the development of gender history, which among other things took seriously the ways in which masculinity, as well as femininity, was constructed, and how those constructions impacted upon sexual acts and identities. In fact, from the 1960s onwards, sexual expression and the regulation of sexuality in the past was considered by historians working in a number of subfields as well as by literary critics, feminist theorists, anthropologists, sociologists, and others in the humanities and social sciences. In many works, theoretical assumptions only tacitly informed the study of sexuality.

Of course, the roots of the history of sexuality predates Foucault. Scholars working across the humanities and social sciences drew upon earlier social theorists such as Lucien Febvre, Bronislaw Malinowski, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, and not merely those whose names might be more familiarly associated with sexuality such as Sigmund Freud.<sup>9</sup> Sexuality is integral to a host of categories (gender, race, class, status, and age, for example), topics (such as religion, kinship and family formation, courtship and marriage,

4 Starkey and Hatchuel 2002, 649, 645; Foucault 1984b, 46.

5 Foucault 1976, 1984a, 1984b.

6 Millett 1970; Dworkin 1974.

7 Rowbotham 1973.

8 E.g. Katz 1976.

9 Febvre 1973; Weston 1998, 2-4.

the household, social relations, demography, life cycle, the body, childhood, the rise of the state, crime in general and certain crimes in particular such as sodomy, infanticide, adultery, bigamy), and explanatory concepts and models (for instance, progress, evolution, tradition, and modernity) that have been the subject of historical analysis. One recent collection of essays dealing with adultery and impotence in Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries found heightened concerns about those issues in an array of moments and contexts: in the political and diplomatic realms, in religious writings, medical literature, and in literary and artistic expression.<sup>10</sup> It is the implications of and for sexual practices and identities in varied historical, cultural, and institutional circumstances that makes *Framing Premodern Desires* such an exciting volume.

Nonetheless, Foucault's legacy and that of the cultural turn more generally ought not to be underestimated. No student of the subject can ignore questions of whether we are dealing with sexuality or with discourses about sexuality, of how people in the past defined sexuality, desire, and construct sex and desire as sins and crimes or not. Studies which considered those many aspects of sexuality that went against normative or prescriptive sexual standards have collectively produced a category of 'sexualities', which has included diverse forms of men's and women's sexual activities. The relationship between discourse and practice is raised in different ways by many of the essays in this volume, not only by the content and argument of individual chapters but also by reading them alongside and against each other. The plural concept of sexualities also reflects the fact that the history of sexuality – like that of gender – is not only intersectional but also frequently a history or histories of something else.<sup>11</sup> The starting points for histories of sex and desire are accordingly varied. One textbook on sexualities in early modern Europe begins with an eighteenth-century painting of a domestic scene on the grounds that 'domesticity includes a great deal of sex'.<sup>12</sup> Another starts not with an ordinary everyday scene but with a description of an extraordinary event depicted in an early fifteenth-century painting: the torture of Saint Paul, the first Christian Hermit, being bound and caressed by a woman; afterwards, to escape the anguish of sexual temptation, Paul bit off his own tongue and chose to spend the rest of his life without human contact in a cave in the desert.<sup>13</sup> The history of

10 Matthews-Grieco 2014.

11 For a useful introduction to intersectionality, see Taylor *et al.* 2010.

12 Crawford 2007, 1.

13 Phillips and Reay 2011, 1-2.

sexual desire is to be found at each end of this spectrum of ordinary and extraordinary, and at many points between.

Foucault's influence can also be seen in how scholars have conceptualised change over time. Many historians have argued that attitudes to sex underwent significant change between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Historians of the eighteenth century and later are fond of privileging the eighteenth century as the time at which modern sexualities were forged. Consequently, the centuries before 1700 are sometimes presented as a premodern 'other'.<sup>14</sup> The idea that linking sexuality ('the way in which people experience their bodies, pleasures, and desires') with sexual identity 'is in fact a modern phenomenon, which has emerged only in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe', has become axiomatic.<sup>15</sup> Some scholars have seen the eighteenth century as a time of sharp, paradigmatic change. Randolph Trumbach, for instance, found an array of changes all of which he dates to around 1700 in the practices of and attitudes towards homosexuality, prostitution, illegitimacy, and rape.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Laqueur famously argued that the early modern period saw a shift from a one-sex model of the body to a two-sex one. Whereas the one-sex model, based on Galenic humoral theory, prevailed from antiquity until the later seventeenth century, 'natural' differences between the sexes thereafter become accepted and fixed. A concomitant shift saw a move away from the long-standing image of women as sexually rapacious temptresses towards that of the passive, passionless feminine who no longer needed to orgasm in order to conceive.<sup>17</sup> Thus the eighteenth century was a pivotal moment which left behind an earlier 'golden age of freedom in sex/gender identity' in which, according to Foucault, 'direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions' abounded.<sup>18</sup> Robert Muchembled's comparative history of desire in France, Britain and the USA from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, conversely presented the eighteenth century as a period of moral laxity sandwiched between two periods of sexual repression (the latter of which persisted until the sexual revolution of the 1960s).<sup>19</sup> Readers will find various engagements with such views in the chapters that follow. One of the volume's strengths is the long

14 E.g. Buffington *et al.* 2014; Toulalan and Fisher 2013, in which every topic is divided into essays dealing with before and after 1750.

15 Mottier 2008, 3.

16 Trumbach 1998.

17 Laqueur 1992. Laqueur's thesis has been roundly criticised. See e.g. Harvey 2002.

18 Harvey 2002, 208; Foucault 1978, 3.

19 Muchembled 2005.

chronological period it covers, which invites a nuanced comparison of different times and places.

So much of what we know of sexual behaviour and attitudes towards sex in the centuries before 1800 has been gleaned from sources produced by its regulation and punishment.<sup>20</sup> The history of sexuality has thus to a great extent been framed by sources created only because certain acts were deemed illicit. It was frequently also as unlawful and 'deviant' acts that they populated a host of non-legal or extralegal sources, such as fictive literature and drama, visual culture, and conduct books. Yet our interpretation of sexual acts that were defined as sins and crimes in past centuries can betray our present-centred stance in ways that may not facilitate our understanding of the likely meanings ascribed by the people whom we study.

Compare, for example, common approaches to rape, sodomy, and infanticide based upon medieval and early modern legal records. In many parts of Europe, these crimes carried serious penalties yet had low conviction rates as a number of cultural and legal circumstances meant that they were difficult to prove in a court of law. Because we are aware in the present that rape has a low conviction rate, even when evidence suggests that many accused men are guilty, the historiography of rape likewise assumes that accused men are guilty. The history of rape is often written from the perspective that men routinely 'get away with' sexual crimes against women. Similarly, scholars frequently assume that men accused of sodomy committed the acts of which they were accused, but our analysis of cases tends to be informed by our belief that such men ought not to have been punished. Indeed, the history of homosexuality has an investment in accused men being 'guilty' to the end that records of prosecution allow us to construct a history of homosexual behaviour and identity. The history of infanticide is also often predicated on the assumption that the unmarried women prosecuted for killing their newborn infants or concealing their deaths were guilty. But they too are seen as victims of a patriarchal society which permitted them little choice but to kill their newborn bastards, as the alternative was too shameful and/or practically impossible. Their conviction and punishment is seen as a reflection of a harsh, traditional, patriarchal society which unfairly held women, rather than men, responsible for sexual behaviour outside of marriage. It is worth considering witchcraft alongside these sexual offences, for using the same genres of primary source material, scholars generally assume that people accused of witchcraft were innocent on the grounds that witchcraft was an impossible crime that they could

20 See, for example, Lever 1983; Carrasco 1985; Ruggiero 1989; Sánchez Ortega 1992.

not have committed. Here too the accused are viewed as victims of the persecuting and superstitious mentalities of the past.

Scholars have also hoped that such crimes might potentially reveal something more intimate: if we peer into the legal record, we may perceive the interior experience of the person so prosecuted. Partly this is because for medieval and early modern history, legal testimony provides one of the few sources of ordinary people's words. Of course, everyone knows that the documents are heavily mediated. But they nonetheless offer us an account not only of words uttered by the person being examined before legal officials that were recorded or paraphrased by a clerk, but also of words that other people had allegedly spoken in informal contexts and which were repeated by the examinant. Records of sexual offences may seem to provide us with access to early modern subjectivities in part because we frame the offences in particular ways: the desperation of a young woman accused of infanticide, a gay man accused of sodomy, or an innocent individual accused of witchcraft, creates a historical subject with whom we can empathise. These are subjects with whose subjectivity we wish to engage. We often perceive them to be history's victims, and part of our job as historians is to give them their voices, to tell their stories, to invest their lives with meaning. No one, however, wants to identify with a rapist, to ask what it was like to be a man who raped. In rape, it has almost always been the victim's experience, not the rapist's, that concerns historians.

Indeed, the history of rape – the subject of my own current research – provides an interesting prism through which to problematise our framing of premodern desire. Is it helpful, we might ask, to categorise rape in terms of desire at all. Rape certainly sits uneasily within histories of sexuality which have been so focused positively on sexual identities. There is no consensus in academic scholarship on rape on how it ought to be historicised. We are confronted by competing narratives which tend either to insist upon the transhistorical and unchanging nature of rape or to produce (often incompatible) accounts of change in which rape often figures as a marker of modernity. These stories are usually entangled with histories of sexuality. For some, rape seems ahistorical: we can find evidence of coerced, violent, violatory, and/or unwanted sexual acts in all historical periods. Indeed, sexual aggression has been identified not only as an integral part of masculinity, but also as a central plank of patriarchy. Yet there is a tension between the apparent timelessness of rape and the historiographical emphasis since the cultural turn on the constructed and contingent nature of the past. We find, therefore, seeming contradictions in the work of scholars who claim that the meaning of rape is historically and culturally specific yet



who nonetheless assert that the ideology of rape is pretty much the same across centuries and continents.<sup>21</sup> These tensions are compounded, I think, by historians' reluctance to appear to relativise rape. Saying that rape is a constructed category could be misunderstood as reinforcing arguments used against women who make rape allegations. Historiographically, then, there is an apparent disconnect between rape and sexuality. Thus, we find articles and books aplenty with titles containing the terms 'invention' or 'self-invention' applied to homosexuality, lesbianism, heterosexuality, sex addiction, but no one is publishing under the title of 'the invention of rape'. We can find rape myths being 'invented' but not rape itself.

Attempts to historicise rape by arguing not for continuity but for change, on the other hand, are frequently predicated on notions of modernisation. Some have argued that premodern men were all potential rapists because they had not yet developed 'modern' self-control.<sup>22</sup> Others have asserted that in the sixteenth century rape was viewed as a property crime against victims' fathers and husbands but by the late eighteenth century was seen as a form of male violence against the individual.<sup>23</sup> In still other accounts, rape is presented as a sin that was seen to affect 'traditional' communities, but which, with eighteenth-century secularisation, came to be seen as a serious crime committed by strangers.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Foucauldian readings see women being enmeshed in an ever-tightening web of power during the eighteenth century, which constructed them as the passive victims of men who were told that they were unable to control their natural sexual urges.<sup>25</sup> Not all of these accounts of change are equally convincing, of course.<sup>26</sup> But they do beg the question: does rape have one history, or many? It seems to me that there is more than one history of rape, in the sense that rape's history involves a number of changes not all of which go in the same direction. Partly the history and its trajectory depends on whom we focus upon: rapist or victim, categories which themselves may be subdivided by others such as age, marital status, and so forth.

One aspect of my own recent work on early modern rape has been to shift the focus to include accused men, and away from the experience of female victims alone. In one article, I have shown that in England and Wales people did not necessarily believe that acquittals denoted the innocence of

21 Baines 2003.

22 Flandrin 1991; Durston 2007.

23 Wiener 1998.

24 Dayton 1995.

25 Hitchcock 1997.

26 On the historiography of rape in early modern Europe, see Walker 2013c.

accused men. Rather, they believed that many *guilty* men were acquitted because the legal criteria for rape could not be met. Misogyny preventing most rape cases from getting anywhere near a court, of course. But in the courtroom up to the mid-eighteenth century, at least, women's sexual reputations, the likelihood that they were lying or had brought the rape upon themselves, were not commonly evoked as justifications for acquittals.<sup>27</sup> By the late eighteenth century, this situation no longer held. With the introduction of defence lawyers into the courtroom, the emphasis of trials moved towards the reputation and behaviour of rape victims. Here, then, we can see the relationship between rape and female sexuality shifting, as the latter became more pertinent to the former in the nature and outcome of criminal trials.<sup>28</sup> The relationship between rape and male sexuality also changed between 1500 and 1800. In the sixteenth century, all human nature was commonly understood to be bestial, carnal, and weak. This meant that potentially any man might rape, but there also existed a conception of the sort of man whose behaviour went beyond the acceptable desires of the ordinary man.<sup>29</sup> By the turn of the nineteenth century, rape appears to have been associated primarily with the unacceptable, perverted desires of a monstrous brute and not so much with the fervent desire of a lover or sex pest. Broadening our focus explicitly to include men who were accused of or prosecuted for rape allows us to see that the history of rape follows unexpected trajectories. The same applies to children as objects of study.<sup>30</sup> This is not to essentialise the categories of men, women, and children but rather to allow connected but discrete histories to emerge. What we might aim for are histories of desire and its implications that do not simply plot rape onto familiar existing narratives of premodern and modern sexualities.

Historians and other scholars have tended to evoke the legal definition of rape only to argue that the law was not strictly applied, or they have used our categories rather than those of contemporaries. It is true that in the past many instances of what we would class as rape were considered by contemporaries to be a natural part of male sexuality and therefore, from that perspective, perhaps not really a crime. Even women who were raped (in the literal sense of forced coitus) might have thought it an unavoidable evil, an intrinsic part of male sexuality that they had to endure. Marital rape, for instance, falls into this category: it was criminalised in most parts of

27 Walker 2013a.

28 Walker 2014.

29 Walker 2013b.

30 Toulalan 2011.

Europe in the twentieth century, early in the cases of the Soviet Union (1922) and Poland (1932) but not until the 1990s in states such as the Netherlands (1991); Ireland, Spain, France, England, and Wales (1992); Finland and Cyprus (1994); Macedonia (1996); Germany (1997); and Croatia (1998). Yet where the line fell between persuasion and force was contested in individual cases in the medieval and early modern period, just as it is now.

If we wish to develop further our understanding of premodern desires, it is helpful to move away from talking about generic 'seventeenth-century attitudes', say, or 'medieval' or 'early modern views'. Instead, we may attempt to chart where and how certain distinctions were made at different historical moments as well as within contemporaneous contexts. Of course, we can use our own categories in our research, but we must be clear about which are ours and which are those of historical actors. Scholars will never come to a complete agreement on an exact definition of sexuality or its history. An essential part of the history of sexuality is to ask what counts as sexuality in particular times and places. We can ask how the past looks if we compare our own categories of sexuality with those in the past. But if we just attribute our categories to past actors, we simply become propagandists for a particular point of view.<sup>31</sup> Certain histories of homosexuality are cases in point: as Barry Reay noted, the 'danger of writing general homosexual histories is that the very nature of the exercise, the act of naming' as a gay or lesbian history, 'imposes modern meanings and interpretations, when the very purpose of the writing and research may have been to work against such assumptions'.<sup>32</sup> Some of the chapters that follow analyse particular instances in great detail, while others take a longer or more general view of their topic. But each contributes to the larger project of reframing and expanding the history of premodern desire.

In the first chapter in Part I of this volume, Thomas Parry-Jones breaks new ground in shifting attention from the attitudes to sexual intercourse expressed in medieval canon law, upon which there has been much excellent modern scholarship, to the work of medieval Roman lawyers, whose views on sexuality have been rarely explored beyond the Roman law doctrine of marriage. Natural law (*ius naturale*) was initially understood to apply to all living beings – human and animal – and thus included sexual union, procreation, and the rearing of infants, which was extended to the idea of marriage. Medieval canon and Roman jurists were confronted with the tricky question of whether sex outside of marriage was also natural

31 Boydston 2008.

32 Reay 2009, 215.

behaviour. Whereas twelfth-century canonists debated this issue, Roman lawyers believed that the sexual union referred to in natural law inevitably included all sexual intercourse, regardless of the marital status of the parties involved. From the thirteenth century, Roman law treated sexual desire as a natural instinct – but unlike beasts who lacked reason, humans were expected to exercise restraint in order to desist from sinful sexual activity, namely that which was indulged in outside of holy matrimony. This in turn raised the issue of whether sexual desire and fantasy were sinful in themselves or whether the sin materialised only in the acting out of such impulses. The most influential answer to this question was that provided by Azo, who conceptualised humans' relationship to sexual desire on a continuum with the unthinking impulses of brute beasts at one end and the fully self-aware human who tempered sexual instincts with reason and self-restraint at the other.

Kathleen Smith takes as her point of departure the Foucauldian argument that in medieval Europe, the ritual of confession was the means by which people's experience of sexual desire and practice was rigidly controlled and monitored. Smith explores the ways in which the practice and experience of sexual sin was understood in popular pastoral and penitential manuals for the priests who administered confession. She finds that, in practice, medieval parish priests did not operate simply as agents to suppress sexual ideas and behaviours that deviated from those few sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, she argues that the evidence of priests' manuals not only suggests that prohibitions of sexual practices did not necessarily constitute prohibitions of particular sexual desires, but also demonstrates that many loopholes existed for confessors and penitents when desire rather than its physical expression lay at the heart of confessions. The manuals followed the strand of canon law thought that tallied with Roman law, as Parry-Jones discussed, which saw sexual desire as a precedent to sin rather than sin itself. They also expanded upon it, making pragmatic distinctions between desire, intent, and acts on the part of their parishioners. The authors of these manuals did not always do so in precisely the same way, however.

Bonnie Clementsson's study of incest between in-laws in early modern Sweden reminds us that what does and does not legally constitute a sexual offence is highly variable over time and place. Not only was incest technically a form of treason at that time, but between 8 and 9 of every 10 incest cases brought before the courts involved seemingly consensual relationships between non-biological relatives, including stepfathers and stepdaughters. Of the 126 relationships in her appeal court material, only 1

involved a father and biological daughter. One wonders whether this reflects cultural silences about biological father–daughter incest in general or the perceived pointlessness in appealing punishments in such cases. Clementsson examines two cases of non-biological incest – between men and their wives’ sisters – brought before the appeal court, *Göta hovrätt*, which look superficially similar but which had very different legal outcomes. Through a persuasive close reading of the evidence, she demonstrates that early modern cultural assumptions informed legal interpretations in ways that were very different from our own.

Tomasz Wiślicz also focuses on an incest case, this time prosecuted in mid-eighteenth-century Poland: the relationship between two teenagers in a peasant household who were fellow servants and first cousins. In analysing this case and explaining its legal outcome, Wiślicz unsettles some common assumptions made by historians and ethnographers about ‘general’ European attitudes and behaviours. The family and household structure of Western Poland was similar to that in much of Europe, with young people leaving their own households to take up service in others of similar social status to their own, and the prescriptions and proscriptions of the church concerning sexual behaviour were also familiar. Yet there existed important differences. The illegitimacy rate was very low, for instance, yet virginity (and its loss) did not appear to have the cultural significance that we might expect. The case did not end happily, and is a telling parallel with one of the Swedish incest court cases discussed by Clementsson.

Faramerz Dabhoiwala’s chapter summarises the central argument of his 2012 book, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*.<sup>33</sup> Dabhoiwala charts a crucial change over the course of the early modern period: a shift from a medieval and early modern concern with sexual regulation and punishment to the virtual disappearance of public discipline for sexual offences by the end of the eighteenth century. He identifies a number of related forces as agents or consequences of this change: sex outside of marriage ceased to be publicly punished; people engaged in more pre- and extramarital sexual activity; women came to be characterised no longer as lusty temptresses but rather as fragile, sexually passive beings; and the explosion of public communication and mass media. For Dabhoiwala, the eighteenth century is in these respects the period in which the modern sexual universe was born. In this present collection of essays, Dabhoiwala’s chapter, and indeed the book it is based upon, demonstrates how far our perspectives are shaped by the lens we choose to look through.

Dabhoiwala argues that despite local variations in the pace and character of intellectual, social, and sexual change across Europe, the Western world nonetheless experienced an analogous transformation, and he invites scholars to examine how the revolution developed and differed in other cultures in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. With the exception of Jonas Liliequist's chapter, most of the others which follow might be seen as evidence of such local regional variations in ways that perhaps complicate any metanarrative of change.

The essays in Part II of the book concern the construction of passions. Carin Franzén shifts the discussion away from religious and legal discourses and the sexual relationships and acts for which individuals were prosecuted to think through some of the implications of seventeenth-century French secular writings about sexuality, in particular French moralists, François de La Rochefoucauld, Charles de Saint-Évremond, and Ninon de Lenclos. Franzén's essay raises interesting questions about periodisation. She identifies the sixteenth century as a key period in which views on sexuality became more complex and ambiguous, and sees in seventeenth-century moralist writings a version of the split subject familiar to psychoanalytic theory, which suggests a narrative of change that does not privilege the rational individual as the central unit in modern society. Nonetheless, this split subject did not take the form of female subject positions other than those already determined by existing ideals, such as that of the chaste, virtuous, and unattainable lover. Even Ninon de Lenclos, the female writer whom Franzén considers, appropriates a masculine position from which to construct love and desire.

Karen Hollewand looks anew at the humanist scholar, Hadriaan Beverland (1650-1716), situating his writings about sex in their broader context and re-evaluating his historical significance. For Beverland, as for other classical, Christian and humanist scholars, sex and desire were fundamental to human nature. Yet Beverland identified sexual lust, not pride as was conventional, as the original sin committed when Adam bit into the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. This was a radical departure from conventional humanist scholarship – and one that was so significant to Beverland that he sought to expose and reinstate the explicit sexual content that other scholars had ignored or removed from their discussions and translations of older works. Hollewand's reading of Beverland takes the implications of his work further: if all people were 'fornicators in body and in soul', and sex was 'the gift of the earth', then was he advocating greater sexual freedom, suggesting that people might as well enjoy sex outside of marriage? While Hollewand concludes that Beverland expressed a 'progressive' view of sexual

liberty, setting it alongside the other contributions to this volume we might wish to consider further how we use terms such as 'progressive' and 'sexual liberty' in medieval and early modern contexts.

Moving on from sexual activities and what people said about them, Juliette Lancel discusses attitudes to sexual dreams in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French works of oneiromancy, the art of interpreting dreams to predict the future. Here we return to the familiar question of how sinful it was to think or fantasise about illicit sex even if one was not acting out those thoughts and fantasies. How accountable was the dreamer for the content of his or her erotic dreams? Oneirocritics did not agree on the answer to this question. They generally followed conventional gender stereotypes that reinforced the double standard: thus in one text, women's erotic dreams were a bad omen unless their husbands appeared in them, while the converse did not apply to men. Moreover, as we might expect, the 'dreamer' to which the authors speak is almost always assumed to be male. The concept of 'directed' dreams, in which the dreamer could influence the dream's content, sounds very similar to conventional love magic in the seventeenth century and moves towards medical advice in the eighteenth. The genre did not represent a systematic theory of dreams. The lack of coherence that characterises the genre perhaps illuminates the fact that in any culture (including our own), people can believe many inconsistent, contradictory, and incompatible things about sex, selecting from a range of positions contingently.

Kaye McLelland explores some of the shifting cultural links between sex, sin, and disability in early modern England. She considers the complex issues that disability theory raises for scholars of gender and sexuality before moving on to the relationship between disability and sexuality, thereby covering terrain which will be unfamiliar to many scholars of premodern sexualities. Inherited disabilities and 'birth defects' appear in early modern discourses of monstrosity which interpreted such births as divine messages sometimes reflecting the sin of a community but usually those of the parents. In particular, women's fantasies during sex might produce monstrous progeny. Here again we see contemporary concerns about whether lusting and desiring were themselves sinful even if no outward action was taken. Yet ideas about disability were also bound up with concerns about vagrancy and poverty in complicated ways.

Jonas Liliequist examines the ways in which male sexual desire was problematised in post-Reformation Sweden by focusing on three different spheres of activity: medical writings, the law courts, and literary culture. Again, we see that even in a given period, ideas about the same thing (in this case, male sexual desire) might be expressed in different ways and



with different implications in different contexts. Early seventeenth-century medical manuals published in Swedish evoked the natural law with which earlier jurists had been so concerned, asserting that while desire might have been an instinct common to all humans, its expression was also bad for one's health if it was not managed properly. Moreover, carnal desire – lust – was imagined to be a problem that applied primarily to men. By the turn of the eighteenth century, medical writers were more concerned about the behaviours of adolescent girls as well as boys, as excess in all things was to be avoided, and in the later eighteenth century, they emphasised supposed differences between male and female desire. In the judicial arena, Liliequist charts a shift from a religious to a more secular understanding of the motivation for sexual crimes. Here too, however, the sexual offender referred to in juridical discussions was imagined to be a male, propelled by male sexual desire. This active and thrusting male figure also inhabited Swedish literature and drama, while women are presented as feigning a lack of passion which was revealed to have been smouldering underneath.

A wonderful epilogue to the volume is provided by Lois Leveen, who reflects as a historian and novelist upon what is at stake for us as communicators of premodern desires for modern readers. She poses a question that few academics are brave enough to ask: what does it matter if anyone studies the lives of people who've been dead for centuries? Her essay serves as a rewarding answer to that question by considering the path she navigated in her own research and writing in preparing her novel, *Juliet's Nurse*, and in engaging with readers beyond the academy after its publication. The novel is set in fourteenth-century Florence but is refracted through Shakespeare's late sixteenth-century telling of the story in which her eponymous heroine played a minor role. It will be read by people whose knowledge of either period may be minimal. Leveen's discussion of how these things inform her work casts an illuminating light on the predicament of all scholars of earlier periods. We all wish to tell the stories of and make comprehensible to our readers the desires of medieval and early modern people. We will do well to reflect upon how much our own desires to tell one type of story and not another shapes the work we produce.

How we, as modern scholars, frame our approaches to premodern desire depends greatly on our own perspectives. Lois Leveen remarks that if there is a single desire that connects all of the chapters, it is surely our own: 'the desire that drives us, as readers and authors of these pieces, to try to understand the past and to share what we learn with others'. This desire of ours to understand the past is connected to our emotional as well as our intellectual engagement with our material. The most important, original and insightful research into



sexualities could often *only* have been written by the historian in question because of their personal, emotional engagement with their sources. In the end, the most satisfying history is written by scholars for whom it matters.

### About the author

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