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# The Challenge for Historians

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*The following essay is based on the author's book, Of Sodomites, Effeminate, Hermaphrodites, and Androgynes: Sodomy in the Age of Peter Damian (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2012), extracted with kind permission.*

The flood of writings during the last generation on topics having to do with the history of sexuality and gender has enriched the understanding of all historical periods, none more than the middle ages. Yet it is difficult to take the measure of this scholarship, for not only have its approaches and conclusions shifted significantly over time, it often presents us with conflicting, if not incompatible, methodologies and perspectives. Bold is the person who would now attempt a sustained overview and analysis of the whole middle ages of the order of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980).[1]

Though the history of homosexuality on a grand scale had been attempted before, Boswell's book, often greeted on its appearance as very novel in its arguments, struck a deep chord, and has been widely read to the present, in some quarters becoming a scholarly guide to the history of homosexuality. From the first it was also met by skepticism, and over time the doubts have grown. Much medieval scholarship on same-sex relations has been concerned to draw a more accurate or better picture than that given by Boswell, and to join his concerns to those which had simultaneously appeared in an emerging generation of historians of sex and gender.

One of the greatest problems coming from the exciting but in many ways exploratory decades through which we have just passed has been the temptation to over-generalization, to suggesting more comprehensive views and chronologies than our state of knowledge can justify. A second problem, often acknowledged and much discussed but not always treated well, has been that of anachronism. Debate about whether words such as "gay" or "homosexuality" or "lesbianism" should be used in study of the ancient world or the middle ages has been vigorous (on issue after issue scholarship on the ancient world has been particularly impressive, and naturally provides a point of departure for study of the middle ages). Everyone acknowledges that some degree of anachronism is inevitable, for we begin all study of the past with the language and categories of our own world. But the question remains whether Giambattista Vico and the classical philologists were not right to insist that we must enter earlier ages through fidelity to their language as a window on how they viewed their world, so that we may think with them in an act of sympathetic imagination. At the end of the day, I stand with those who see close examination of language as allowing both empathy and the formation of a sense of the otherness of the past. Hence my own book's title, *Of Sodomites, Effeminate, Hermaphrodites, and Androgynes*, [2] and my use (where possible) of the terms ancient and medieval people actually used to talk about male same-sex sexuality, in preference to a later vocabulary. What I have aimed for is a history which becomes a "genealogy of the present."

In the disputes which long raged between “essentialists” (those who think “homosexuality” and other categories of sexual classification are universal) and various schools of “constructionists” (those who think sexual identities are specific to a time and place, constructed either by individuals or by society itself), one thing that emerged was the possibility that a given idea about gender might change with glacial slowness; might transmute very quickly at a specific time and place; or might exist cheek-by-jowl with competing and incompatible gender understandings. This is yet another reason we must use great care in generalization, and need to consider more than power relations in writing about gender.

In a famous passage in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault wrote of a simple-minded nineteenth-century French farm hand accustomed like others to receiving caresses from a little girl at the edge of the village. Foucault spoke of the “timeless gestures” and “barely furtive pleasures” involved, and then showed how they got caught up in the discourse of science about matters sexual then developing.[3] The contrasts Foucault drew between the “inarticulate” country simpleton, caught unaware in the net of science and confined to a hospital for study for the rest of his life, and the seemingly unending “articulate” scientific discourse about him, was meant to identify a point at which sex was put into words. This passage from “sex” to “words,” from the “inarticulate” into the “articulate,” occurred many times before the nineteenth century.

Foucault never published his intended volume on the middle ages, and, naturally enough, we are curious about what he would have said about other and earlier “simpletons.” Especially in the early medieval centuries, were most people inarticulate about sex and lacking in sexual imagination and a vocabulary to express whatever desire they experienced? The early medieval penitentials (handbooks to guide priests in hearing confession) and canon law collections and the occasional poem suggest that many possessed some degree of sexual imagination, and that the clergy “imagined sex,” but how is this imagination to be characterized? Though the sexual imaginings lying behind or expressed in desire have been rather fully studied for certain periods and kinds of evidence, for Greek and Roman antiquity generally and for the high medieval movements initially centering on courtly and love literature, especially the early medieval centuries can seem almost mute. And a number of scholars have pointed out the dangers of treating sexual topics with a specifically genital definition of sex in mind, that is, of writing as if sex is to be equated with sexual activity.[4]

In my book I focus on Peter Damian. As the author of the longest essay on *sodomia* written during the middle ages, Peter’s importance has long been recognized, and he has been the subject of continuing study. Considerable novelty has been claimed for him, and innovating he was, but many older traditions also met in and spoke through him, and his overall position cannot be understood without assessment of his relation to these traditions, as well as what came after. A large body of scholarship exists which argues that he stands on the threshold of “the persecuting society.” No doubt high medieval society persecuted, and sodomites were among those persecuted, but the view that from some time around 1100 a society formed bent on persecution of all kinds of “others” seems more a caricature than a helpful entrance into the complexity of high medieval life.

The picture that is emerging today reveals a much more complicated situation than anything dreamt of by Boswell in 1980. Then one could characterize large sweeps of time and whole civilizations by a few overarching concepts. The persistence of historical ideas derived from the Enlightenment, even among those who thought of themselves as “post-modern,” was obvious in beliefs that it was meaningful to say that medieval civilization moved from being generally tolerant (using some modern and likely unexamined idea of tolerance as the measure) to the opposite; or from being open about sexual matters

to being secretive, or the opposite.[5] Such views implied continuing belief in Enlightenment-derived ideas that the human story is ultimately on a single time-line and is one of general progress. Negatively, they were made possible by the degree to which the relatively new discipline of gender studies had not mastered the unending details of history.

On the first point, of progress, the problem was compounded by certain Romantic notions of cultural unity, which habitually spoke of “spirits of the age,” attributing to civilizations more uniformity than had really existed. On the second point, in the unending human quest for understanding, “theory” had come to replace the ancient “politics” and the medieval “theology of history” as a key to understanding or framing one’s story. That is, just as Thucydides had found in politics the narrative framework he needed for a story he wished to tell; or Augustine had found the frame for his story in Christian revelation; secularization in the West had left scholars “theory,” an interpretive key or way to generalize, probably coming from one of the new sciences of the nineteenth century.

In recent decades, *theories* have abounded, some of them, as it turns out, very useful. The development of new historical fields such as social history, in particular, has allowed us to see things in the historical record that earlier generations missed. But it is still difficult to see the full plurality of things, the ways in which the “on the ground realities” resist being accounted for by some master theory. Many have returned to “business as usual,” perhaps with the sense that after a period of fermentation someone would write a “new Boswell,” a new attempt to survey something as large. At present, however, we better understand the evolution over time of even highly polyvalent ideas such as “nature” than generalizations about past sexual practice and terminology.

Some do now better understand that the idea of a definitive history is beyond human achievement. So far as the history of sexuality is concerned, the ambition for lasting synthesis may well now appear to express both the enthusiasm and naiveté of a founding generation of gender historians. There was and is something very valuable in an “old philology,” which insisted that at the heart of all historical understanding is the pursuit of the ever-changing meaning of language. Not only does philology provide inoculation against the assumption that we can easily pass into an earlier world, it can make us aware of our own world-views, in the same way philosophy does. By itself such study should have warned us that it is unlikely that the sweeping generalizations of an earlier generation were correct. Seeing that language is *in history* is closely connected to seeing the plurality in things. Both warn against premature generalization. Yet in a sense generalization is always premature and always necessary. We can only hope for a constant passing back and forth from the historical record to generalization about it.

Some factors seem relatively fixed, such as human quest for power over others, specifically male quest for power over females, but to account for everything according to categories of power is to miss all that is “other than power” in human life, things such as love, affection, and altruism. As, slowly, analysis according solely to categories of power has given way before a more complicated analysis in which power is only one element, the result has effectively been another crack in the Enlightenment façade, which as Foucault saw, dictated for true believers a kind of reductionism in which explanation only according to measurable and, in a sense, base qualities was allowed. So much depends on the world-view or theory we bring to the past, even if that world-view is undigested, contradictory, and only semi-conscious! Already in surveying the philosophers preceding him, Aristotle saw how much depended on whether one at the first step with the idealists opted for the priority of idea, or with the materialists, the priority of matter (his not unreasonable conclusion was to insist on the simultaneity and eternity of both, that one was the form of the other).

It is therefore dangerous to be consumed with the question of “theory.” The essentialist/ constructionist debate raised issues that will not go away. It may now seem naive to affirm one or the other of the polar views in this debate, but it is also clear that many went astray by trying to fit what they knew of the facts into one or the other of the poles. Better, by analogy, to follow Aristotle’s response to the idealist/ materialist debate, and suspect some element of truth in both views, and strive for a way in which both can speak. Generalization is not wrong, indeed is necessary and inevitable, but many of us need to be clearer about the limits of what we presently know. Instead of generalizing about scores of centuries and cultures, we need a “close reading,” so to speak a reading in small doses, of what records these cultures have left.

## NOTES

[1] Boswell’s writings, along with much else on medieval homosexuality, continue to be discussed at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh). *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on “Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality,”* ed. Mathew Kuefler (Chicago, 2006), reconsiders Boswell’s book “twenty-five years later.” See especially Kuefler’s essay on “The Boswell Thesis,” pp. 1-31. Kuefler has also edited *The History of Sexuality Sourcebook* (Peterborough, ON, 2007).

[2] Glenn W. Olsen, *Of Sodomites, Effeminate, Hermaphrodites, and Androgynes: Sodomy in the Age of Peter Damian* (Toronto, 2011).

[3] *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, p. 32. David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, 1995), provides an entrance into the large bibliography on Foucault’s life and thought; and James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Bold New Exploration of the Ancient World* (New York, 2007), pp. 185–204, a critique. Cf. Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York, 2010).

[4] Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from “Beowulf” to “Angels in America”* (Chicago, 1998), is particularly useful here, esp. his “Afterword.”

[5] I have dealt at greater length with the question of contemporary use of the term “Enlightenment” in my *The Turn to Transcendence: The Role of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Washington, DC, 2010.

