KIM M. PHILLIPS & BARRY REAY

Sex Before Sexuality

A PREMODERN HISTORY

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A Premodern History

Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay

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Introduction: Sex before Sexuality

A woman bends over a man in a woodland glen. She is elegantly dressed in a low-cut rose-coloured gown, tight around her high breasts and narrow waist, then falling in fullness over a swelling belly. Her golden hair is fashionably dressed with a pointed kerchief. She gazes to the horizon as her right hand grasps the reclining man behind his back and her left reaches boldly under his raised tunic to fondle his naked thigh, or something higher up. We notice two troubled older men at the right of the scene, one raising his eyes and gesturing with dismay. The lady's right knee is raised to the young man's chest, pinning him to the ground. As he attempts to rise we see that his hands are bound behind his back. He is a handsome youth with fleshy lips and thick curling hair and his rich blue tunic is lined with fur. At first glance he might be thought to be rising to meet the embrace of the lady, gazing at her with abandoned desire, but at last one notices the bloody object he has spat at her face – his own tongue – and the bloody trail issuing from his mouth.

This scene from the Limbourg brothers' early fifteenth-century masterpiece, the *Belles Heures*, made for Jean de France, Duc de Berry (1340–1416), illuminates the story of St Paul the Hermit. Its accompanying text briefly tells the story: 'Saint Paul, the first hermit, under the vehement persecution of Decius, saw a certain Christian bound to a pleasurable place (*inter amena ligatus*), and caressed by an impure woman. Whereupon he bit off his tongue and spat in her face. To escape the anguish of temptation he [Paul] fled from Rome.'[1] *The Golden Legend* (*c*. 1260) explains in a little more detail that the unfortunate youth was one of two

Christians tortured for their faith under Roman rule in the later third century; the first covered in honey and left to be stung to death by bees, hornets and wasps, the second ‘laid upon a downy bed in a pleasant place … bound down with ropes entwined with flowers’, and accosted by a ‘very beautiful but totally depraved young woman’. Feeling his flesh responding in spite of himself, the youth repelled her in the only way left to him.[2]

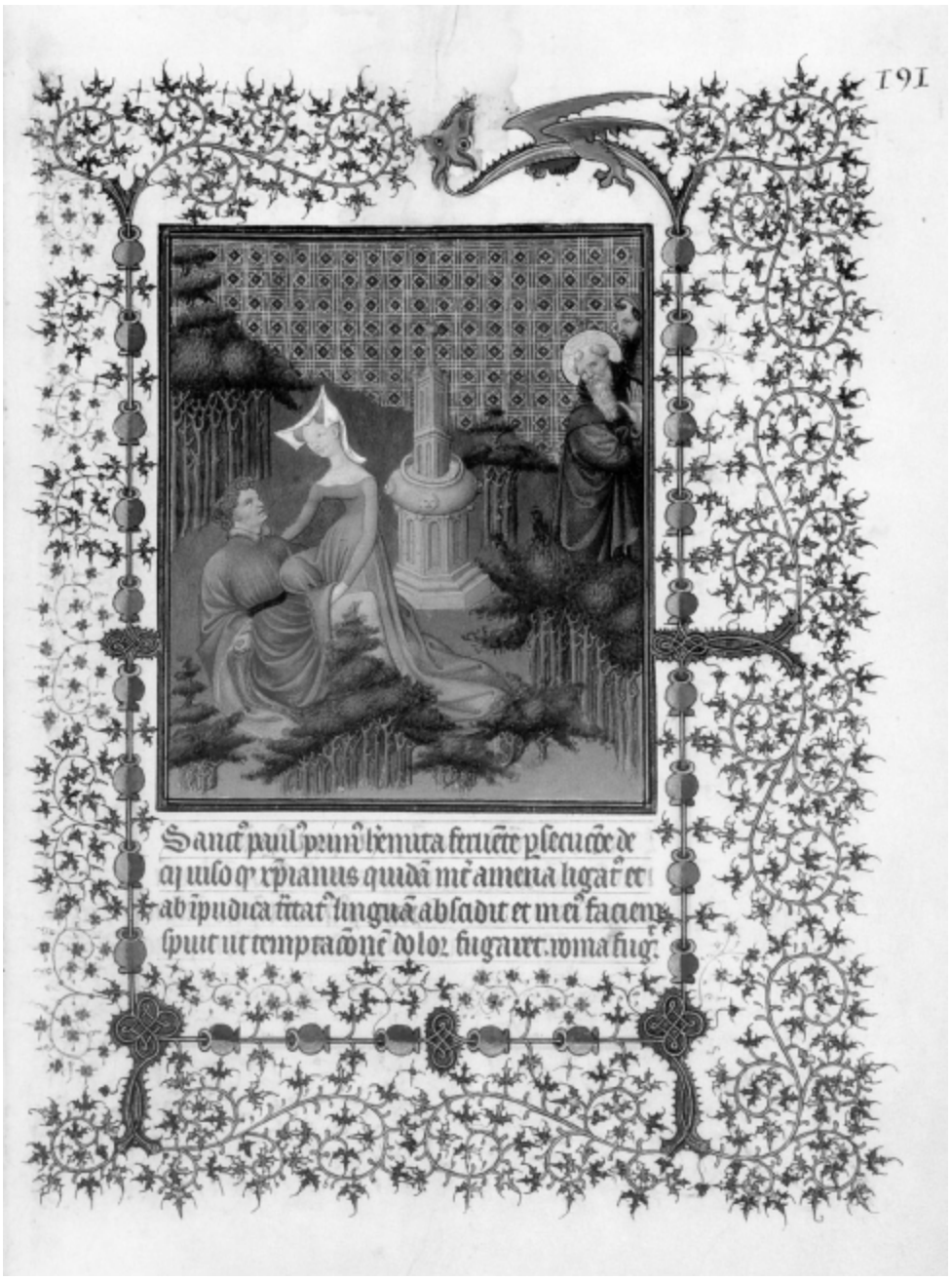
St Paul the Hermit (not to be confused with St Paul the Apostle) is a minor figure in Christian hagiography and reasons for including his life in the *Belles Heures* are unclear. Most likely it gains a place simply to provide a vivid moment between the image cycles from the lives of the better-known figures St Jerome (who wrote Paul’s hagiography) and St Anthony (who succeeded Paul as a pioneer among Christian hermits and is likely the second of the two older observers in the image in question). The book’s owner, the Duc de Berry, younger brother of King Charles V (d. 1382) and uncle of Charles VI (d. 1422), was an important political figure of his day but is now mainly remembered for his lavish patronage of the arts. His sexual interests and preferences have also been subject to recent scholarly interest. Some art historians have suggested, taking their cues from hints in medieval texts, that he might have been ‘homosexual’. Michael Camille has argued instead that his desire for bodies should be seen in relationship to his connoisseurship of images and things.[3] Living in an age when, as we will document at length in the present book, ‘homosexuality’, ‘heterosexuality’ and the other sexual categories familiar to us did not yet exist and women, youths and children were available for the possession of more powerful men, Jean took delight in the faces and bodies of lower-ranking androgynous young males in a manner congruent with the pleasure he took in the books and *objets* made for him by the greatest artists of his

day. This pleasure, moreover, could sit happily alongside his apparent taste for very young or lower-class women.

What lessons or pleasures might the scene of *St Paul the Hermit Sees a Christian Tempted* have offered its owner? As a medieval Christian, Jean may have read it straight: that is, as an illustration of the temptations of the flesh and the virtues of carnal renunciation. All sexual response was understood in Jean's day and for several preceding centuries to be tainted to some extent with sin. The seductive *femme fatale* was a recurrent trope of Christian literature on sin – figured most prominently in the first woman, Eve, and her role in the fall of humankind – and the seductive woman of this scene could be sister to the 'dancing girls' seen tormenting the daydreaming St Jerome a few folios earlier.[4] Alternatively, the near helplessness of the man when provoked by the beautiful 'depraved' woman may have roused masculine sympathy. The sexually forward or dominant woman was familiar to readers of courtly literature and viewers of secular art.[5] The assertive woman of the *Belles Heures* reminds fifteenth-century viewers that women – in this pre-heterosexual erotic regime – allegedly felt lust more powerfully than men and as such were objects of at once phobic and ardent imaginings. Clothed and in control, she poses an erotic alternative to the naked tortured figures of virgin martyrs seen elsewhere in the book.[6] Indeed in the hermit scene the roles are reversed: it is the male victim, bound and assaulted, who has no escape except through brutal action on his own body. The woman's cold gaze to the horizon, meanwhile, gives clear indication (according to the visual codes of medieval art) that in this case she is not in love.[7] Yet perhaps the youth's response is more complex than fear or revulsion. As Brigitte Buettner reminds us in her short but scintillating reading of the image, 'for medieval people all bodily fluids, including

semen, were considered to be a form of bleeding'.[8] The youth's bleeding tongue is, by implication, a form of ejaculation. Another reading could pick up on Jean's apparently homoerotic inclinations (even if these were not his sole sexual tastes) and see amusing connotations in the handsome youth's violent rejection of the temptress.

Image 1. *Paul the Hermit Sees a Christian Tempted*, The Belles Heures of Jean de France, Duc de Berry, Herman, Paul and Jean de Limbourg (Franco-Netherlandish, active in France by 1399–1416), French, 1405–1408/1409. Tempera and gold leaf on vellum. Single leaf, 23.8 × 27 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1954 (54.1.1).



There are layers of looking: one hermit watches the couple, the other looks to the heavens, the man directs his gaze at the woman, the reader views the scene, and the temptress stares past both the young man and the reader. Are there layers of touching too? The woman fondles the young man, the painter caresses the page to fashion the scene, and perhaps the book’s owner, the Duc, is drawn to

touch the beautiful painting. Voyeurism and touch: is this piece of religious art sexual?

None of these interpretations is necessarily more ‘true’ than any other. What the scene can do is alert us to a few of the many strands to premodern sexual cultures, warn us against singular or premature interpretations, and illuminate the highly visible and often explicit nature of premodern erotic representation. As we will argue near the end of this volume, the modern discourse of ‘pornography’ is not very helpful to us in interpreting premodern erotic images, yet sex was very much ‘on-scene’.

In his glittering exposition of male same-sex erotics in the early modern Arab-Islamic world, Khaled El-Rouayheb has explained the ways in which a society that seemed to have so many of the components or strands that comprise the thing called homosexuality never combined them in this sexual formation – the concept of homosexuality was available to that world only in the twentieth century. Outsiders who have navigated that culture have been puzzled by its perceived proscription of homosexual acts while simultaneously celebrating male beauty and the close male bonds that could tempt such breaches. Yet there was no contradiction. Much like the ancient Greeks, Ottoman literature distinguished commendable, chaste infatuation with youthful, male beauty from baser, carnal longing. The former, expressed in a whole genre of poetry, was aesthetic appreciation; the latter was the lust that might result in sexual contact. Anal intercourse was the male–male act that was severely proscribed but other sexual contact between males that did not involve intercourse was treated less seriously.[9]

In many respects this regime is reminiscent of sexual cultures in Classical Athens, but with a clearer prohibition on anal penetration. Scholarly debates endure on the question

of whether Athenians and indeed other Greeks condoned most forms of consensual male–male sexual contact provided they respected broader social hierarchies including age, status and citizenship, or instead celebrated only chaste love between men and were more morally dubious about penetration.[10] Despite ongoing controversy, it appears that in both the early modern Ottoman and ancient Athenian contexts the active and passive in the sex act were conceived differently. Those prone to committing sodomy exhibited moral failure rather than sexual pathology in ways that will become familiar from the pages below.

In the premodern West, sex accommodated what we would term homosexual desire, in fact that desire was part of a culture that actively encouraged homosociality (strong bonds between men) and the homoerotic (representation of female–female and male–male desires). There are certainly behaviour and desires that prefigure what we would term heterosexual: opposite-sex courtship, the centrality of marriage and married reproduction, and male dominance. Shakespeare and other playwrights repeatedly take us through the various stages of man meets woman, man marries woman, and so on. So why should we hesitate to use the word ‘heterosexuality’ to describe premodern desires? Because the desires we have to deal with are different to those associated with conventional heterosexuality today.[11]

Critics once interpreted early modern drama in terms of heterosexual courtship and marriage. But for the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century, as Jean Howard has put it, the ‘heterosexual marriage plot was carried out, literally, by a man and a boy actor’.[12] The Cleopatra who in 1606 referred, self-referentially, to ‘Some squeaking Cleopatra boy … / I’ th’ posture of a whore’ was indeed a boy.[13] The sexual permutations are bewildering

when one thinks of the scenarios of early modern drama with boys playing women who cross-dress as men in pursuit of women who are really boy actors.[14] When two female characters dressed as boys fall in love with each other – as happens in John Lyly's *Gallathea* (1592) – did spectators focus on the male actors or the female characters? It is a question that has certainly divided modern critics.[15]

Stephen Orgel has explained premodern fears of what could happen when men watched boys playing female roles in the theatre. They might lust after the woman being played by the boy, but they might also yearn for the boy beneath the woman's clothing. When female actors replaced the boys in the later seventeenth century, the layers of lusting could be reversed. Although Orgel is more interested in the male-to-male erotics involved in these desires, the point really is that male wants were focused on both males and females, and the sexual identity of the spectator (as we would see it) was as unstable as the actor's. It is what Orgel refers to as 'an undifferentiated sexuality, a sexuality that does not distinguish men from women and reduces men to women'.[16] English drama indicates that both boys and women were objects of sexual desire for early modern men; and Alan Sinfield has isolated dramatic moments of the appeal of sexual ambivalence.[17] We certainly know that this was the case in Italy, where a boy's lack of beard, youth and beauty, and perceived passivity put him in the same category as a woman.[18] We are a long way from conventional modern heterosexuality. A similar point can be made for women: they might lust after the boy who they knew was beneath the clothing or be seduced by the surface woman. There is copious evidence of female homoerotics on the early modern stage.[19] Life could imitate art. The depositions relating to the marriage of two women in England in 1680 revealed that the woman

who had assumed male identity during the ceremony had sometimes courted ‘his’ bride in woman’s apparel, pretending to be a man in disguise![20]

The respective erotics of the premodern and modern are very different. Michael Rocke has explained the essential distinction between the sexual cultures of Renaissance Italy and the modern West as one of gender versus sex: in Renaissance Italy it was not ‘the biological sex of one’s partners in erotic pleasures that significantly distinguished and classified individuals, but rather the extent to which their sexual behaviour conformed to culturally determined gender roles’.[21]

This was a society, we need to remind ourselves, that could seriously consider copulation with demons and reflect upon the nature of the bodies, genitals, fluids and pleasures involved in such sexual transactions.[22] The demons in *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486–7) demonstrate remarkable erotic and gender versatility, able (as a succubus) to remove the semen from a man in order (as an incubus) to impregnate a woman. Their seed can mingle with the semen of a woman’s husband if they follow marital congress. There are claims that men had witnessed demons ‘performing such acts with their wives, though they thought them not to be demons but men’. And demons can pass seed from one to another between human transfer. ‘It could happen that in place of one succubus demon another one receives the seed from him and makes himself an incubus in his place,’ write the *Malleus*’s authors, though they do not explain how this male-to-male transfer might occur.[23] (These demons were what moderns might term aficionados of bisexual multi-partnered sex.)

The premodern dildo or statue with penis that emits fake semen in the form of milk or fluid to heighten its user’s sexual passion – both mentioned in pornography and

surviving as actual artefact – demonstrates at least some sexual dissonance between premodern and modern.[24] Such things are not quite what we have in mind when we think of modern heterosexuality. As Valerie Traub once put it, we will find neither heterosexuals nor homosexuals in the contemporary sense in the premodern world.[25]

The nineteenth century has a special place in the making of Western sex. The terms ‘heterosexual’, ‘homosexual’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’, ‘sadist’, ‘masochist’ – indeed ‘sexuality’ itself – all date from that period and are to be found in the works of those who came to be called the sexologists, those who made a scientific study of sexual behaviour.[26] Following the great Michel Foucault, Arnold Davidson has argued that the nineteenth century saw an epistemological or conceptual shift, with the emergence of ‘new structures of knowledge’ and ‘a new style of reasoning’. The ‘science of sexuality’, he writes, ‘made it possible, even inevitable, for us to become preoccupied with our true sexuality. Thus our existence became a sexistence, saturated with the promises and threats of sexuality.’[27] Both the word ‘sexuality’ and our sense of it date from the nineteenth century: 1879 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[28]

In the period dealt with in this book, *c.* 1100–1800, there was sex but no sexuality. That is, modern preoccupations with the centrality of sexual habits, tastes or preferences (what are often termed ‘orientations’, ‘identities’) to one’s *true* or *inner* self were yet to emerge. In a discussion of the much-printed, premodern medical text *Aristotle’s Master-piece* (1684), Roy Porter explained its difference from modern sexology. *Aristotle’s Master-piece* was not concerned with sexual identity, desire or perversion; it conveyed ‘no notion that sexual activity involves problems

inherent to the psyche and expressive of unconscious predicaments of the self'.[29]

If one person whips another in the modern West that act will reveal – however ritualistically – something of the sexuality of those involved, based on the biological sex of the flogger and flogged. It will be evidence of either heterosexual or homosexual sex and a declaration of the participant's sadism or masochism. But no such assumptions can be made of the premodern period, where, as Niklaus Largier has charted in some detail, flagellation was either an aesthetic religious act or a means of enabling the flow of blood and increasing bodily heat to facilitate female sexual pleasure or male erection.[30] When a nun in *Venus in the Cloister* (1725) scourges herself to discipline her immoderate desires, the joke is that it merely increases them: 'For thou must know that these Sorts of Exercises, far from extinguishing those Flames that consumed her, had on the contrary increased them more and more.'[31] Lawrence Stone misapprehended the cultural context when he referred to an episode of adultery, whipping and group sex in Norwich in the 1700s as a 'flagellant sex ring' and to what he termed the participants' 'psychosexual preoccupations'.[32] Neither description applies to the premodern period. Davidson has provided the telling comparison between a seventeenth-century medical treatise on the use of flogging to facilitate erection, and late nineteenth-century descriptions of masochism. The former, it was believed, involved a physiological (humoral) response to the stimulation of the blood; the latter was an expression of sexuality. The difference between the two was the difference between a physical and a psychological act, between therapy and identity.[33]

It is true that the authors of *A Treatise on the Use of Flogging in Venereal Affairs* (1718) hinted at those who

derived rather too much pleasure from the act, the man 'who the more Stripes he received, was the more violently hurried to Coition … it was a Question which he desired most, the blows or the Act itself … a rare Instance of a Man who went with an equal pace to Pleasure and Pain'.[34] And there is a tantalizing reference to 'the Hanging-lechers', practising, presumably, a version of what is now termed erotic asphyxiation but based then on the logic of manipulation of the blood-flow.[35] Yet while the authors disagreed on the precise bodily architecture of the blood's flow, they were agreed that the predominant response was physiological, a matter of the stimulation of the blood, with heat transferred to the 'Organs of Generation'.[36] The flogging cure could be abused by those whose appetites and practices were excessive – 'for the Continuation of their ungovernable Lusts, and a Repetition of the same filthy Enjoyments' – but was also available for men whose flagging desire rendered them unable to perform their marital duty and to women who wanted to improve their fertility ('*Women too*, are raised and inflam'd by Strokes to a more easy Conception').[37]

We argue that historians of premodern sex will be constantly blocked in their understanding if they use terms and concepts applicable to sexuality since the late nineteenth century. The key words qualified in successive chapters – heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, pornography – are products of a particular historical moment – modernity – and are best reserved for it. There is nothing at all revolutionary or exceptional about our analysis, although readers will see that it runs counter to the assumptions (assumed is the most accurate description) of many historians. If one attempts to understand the past on its own terms and to refuse to see sex and sexuality as somehow excluded from

historical specificity, and if so much about our world is different from that of Athens in the fourth century BCE, or France in the twelfth century, or England in the seventeenth century, we should not be surprised to find a fundamentally different sexual regime there as well. Sex, as so many others have also argued, is a historical construct.

However, our approach could be said to run counter to one recent turn in sexuality studies. Though certainly sympathetic to Madhavi Menon's desire to avoid 'progressive chronology' and sharing her antipathy to teleology, we are puzzled by her claim that the separation between past and present in the history of sex is unavoidably a privileging of heterosexuality: what she terms 'hetero-time'.[38] Nothing could be further from our project. We are not historians who 'invest in a progressive chronology according to which the stable present becomes the point from which to map an unstable past (whose instability is fixed under the mark of its pastness)'.[39] (Indeed the most recent book by one of us has been primarily concerned with the instabilities of modern sexualities.[40]) Nor are we convinced of the wisdom – quite the opposite – of embracing an approach (what Menon calls homohistory) in which 'the past is not different from us, but rather coeval with the present and, ultimately, indistinguishable from it'.[41] We do not embrace 'an understanding of sexuality bound not to historical specificity but rather to rhetorical dexterity', where postmodern and premodern Shakespeare are indistinguishable.[42] Nor would we support Menon's endorsement of a recent collection of essays 'that takes seriously the condition of being out of time. … As long as queer Renaissance scholarship is tied *to* fixed time, it will also remained confined *by* it.'[43] For us, the historical context is all-important.

For others we will not have gone far enough in our deconstruction. Peter Cryle has argued that post-sexological (modern) meanings of desire, orgasm and a sexual act distort our understandings of their *ancien régime* approximations.[44] They, like our focused-upon heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian and pornographic, are subject to his 'distancing … from the overweening assumptions of modern sexual knowledge'.[45] Yet even he cannot avoid using the very words whose cultural meanings he unpicks: 'My point, put most broadly, is that there was in eighteenth-century France a discursive order of pleasures and *desires* [our emphasis] other than the one that dominates our time.'[46]

In a way, medieval and early modern sex is more difficult to accommodate to the 'variation' model of sexual histories that we advocate than the sexual cultures of non-Western and classical societies have proved. It is not always as dramatically different from or unfamiliar to current Western sensibilities as Arab-Islamic or ancient Athenian sex. In some respects, premodern sexual norms share similarities with current Western ones. Monogamous marriage involving a man and a woman was a central institution of premodern sexual cultures, and to a large extent it still is. The Catholic Church is still headed by a celibate male priesthood and condemns same-sex sex, while sometimes practising it. Homosexual and lesbian cultures are arguably no more stable or easy to define than premodern patterns of relationships between men and between women.

Yet our appraisal, based on years of reading and analysis within the field, is that premodern sexual cultures were significantly different from modern or indeed postmodern ones and we misrepresent them if we emphasize historical continuities and enduring patterns of sexual identity.

Surface likenesses, we believe, should not be read as samenesses.

We are intrigued by subtle as well as drastic differences between sexual cultures. The first chapter, ‘Sin’, explores the processes by which erotic desire and arousal in themselves – even within marriage or in the absence of a sexual act – came to be attainted as sinful from the beginning of the Christian era to the Reformation. It also seeks to show the inconsistencies in this message and its frequent disavowal. We begin by examining the problem of desire because it was so central to teachings on sex, especially during the medieval millennium, that any attempt to comprehend premodern eros is impossible without it. Before the modern ‘invention’ of sexuality, erotic acts and desires were comprehended as species of sin, not as outworkings of an aspect of one’s innermost self.

The second chapter discusses the deceptively familiar contours of what we call ‘Before Heterosexuality’. Romantic love was celebrated but (at least in the medieval era) thought possible only within a social elite. Desire and sexual activity could be licit outside of marriage but only with the expectation of an imminent wedding. Women were widely believed to be more sexually voracious than men, with the consequence that non-consent was hard to argue in rape cases and feminine fickleness and perfidy were articles of truth. Women had to orgasm to conceive. Male dominance was taken for granted and forceful sex could be celebrated even in courtly literature. Adultery was subject to both official and popular repression and the figure of the male cuckold was a reliable trope of risible masculinity. ‘Unnatural’ sex acts were as illicit within as outside of marriage.

The case for variation is easier to make in our other chapters. The third chapter, ‘Between Men’, embraces the diverse range of close or intimate relationships between

men – often but not always erotic – expressed in premodern discourses.[47] Encompassing ‘sodomy’ (which did not initially or always refer to same-sex acts), active–passive relations, friendship and effeminacy, and often compatible with desire for women, premodern same-sex love and sex between men cannot be satisfactorily described by our term ‘homosexuality’.

In the fourth chapter we come to similar conclusions about relationships ‘between women’, but insist that these must be examined in their own right and not only in conjunction with those ‘between men’. ‘Sodomy’ could apply to sex between women, especially (though not only) where a phallic substitute was employed. Masculine behaviour and even male impersonation were regular means by which female–female desire was ‘rendered intelligible’. Intensely affective relations or ‘particular friendships’ between women, especially in convents, deserve a place in this history even if we avoid the unanswerable question of whether erotic acts occurred, partly because they came under suspicion by contemporaries but also given current debates about where to draw the lines around the ‘sexual’. Visionary writing further blurs the boundaries by expressing female desires for the feminine Divine. From the sixteenth century with the ‘Renaissance of Lesbianism’ new expressions of intimacy between women emerged, with the tribade, female husband, the secular friend and the Sapphist. We argue that comprehending such diversity of intimacy between women is limited by application of the label ‘lesbian’, though as in our chapter on men we demonstrate that exclusively homoerotic desires are indicated by the records on certain women.

Our final chapter seeks to explore sexually explicit art and literature in a time ‘before pornography’. We examine the potential meanings and uses of the bawdy carvings, illuminations and ribald literature which proliferated in

medieval and early modern cultures and whose purpose was only peripherally, if at all, to arouse.

We end with an epilogue that connects the premodern and modern worlds by setting out to sea. What did Europeans find when they ventured into new worlds such as the islands of the Pacific in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and how far did these newly viewed erotic cultures cause upheaval in the worlds of the observers? We suggest, on the basis of the premodern cultures documented in our study, that Europeans found such features as sexual excess and homoeroticism less startling than some recent commentators have suggested. If one of our aims is to challenge simplistic notions of premodern 'heteronormativity' (an assumption that 'heterosexual' desires and practices are the norm) and sexual constraint, then, we hope the encounter of old and new sexual worlds will be found to be one aspect of sexual histories that needs rethinking.

The title of this book, *Sex before Sexuality*, is deliberately provocative, and not everyone will approve. 'Sexuality' possesses a range of meanings, common in both popular and academic usage. Anna Clark, who (contrary to Cryle) uses the term 'desire' as a heuristic device to link her general history of European sex, characterizes sexuality 'in its widest sense as the desires, relationships, acts, and identities concerned with sexual behavior', before she notes the complex relationship between these elements.[48] Another helpfully broad definition is offered by Ruth Mazo Karras in her survey of medieval sexuality: it 'refers to the whole realm of human erotic experience. Sexuality is the universe of meanings that people place on sex acts, rather than the acts themselves.'[49] This formulation has wide applicability, and it is not our intention to prohibit it; on the contrary the present authors have often used 'sexuality' or

‘sexualities’ in something like this meaning (though not excluding sex acts) in their own writings on premodern sexual histories.[50] In the present book, as already intimated, we prefer a more chronologically precise application. If Peter Stearns’s title ‘Sexuality before modern times’ was taken literally it would – for us – be an oxymoron.[51] ‘ “Sexuality” ’, Jeffrey Weeks observes, ‘is a “fictional unity”, that once did not exist, and at some time in the future may not exist again.’[52]

When *Before Sexuality* (1990), an important early collection of essays on ancient sex, proclaimed that sexuality is particular to modernity, a number of classical and medieval scholars raised objections, arguing that they had evidence for primary sexual preferences among ancient and medieval people.[53] The opposition by some to constructionist approaches to sexual histories, the idea that sexual desires, practices and the concepts associated with them are subject to fundamental variation across time, seems to have derived at least in part from the ‘acts versus identities’ debates of the 1980s and 1990s, stemming from Foucault’s infamous passage in the first volume of his *The History of Sexuality* (1978):

> As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology. … The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.[54]

Although focused on the shift from ‘sodomite’ to ‘homosexual’, this passage inspired a broader opposition of premodern and modern sexual discourses: where the former knew only of ‘acts’, the latter came to conceive of

‘identities’. For many, the opposition of ‘acts and identities’ seemed to imply that to endorse a constructionist approach, inevitably influenced by Foucault, was to deny the possibility of sexual preferences or orientations – towards one’s own sex, the ‘opposite’ sex, or something else. David Halperin subjects this reading to strong critique, arguing that Foucault was making a narrow, discursive point rather than attempting a grand narrative of historical change. The *legal* (‘ancient civil or canonical codes’) category of the sodomite gave way to the *psychiatric* category of homosexual. Moreover, as other classicists have argued, ancient figures such as the Greek *kinaidos* and Roman *cinaedus* are indicative of past conceptions of sexual dispositions, subjectivities, character – not merely acts.[55]

Like Halperin, we do not view sexual histories in the black and white of ‘acts versus identities’. It is not that no one ever had particular sexual leanings before nineteenth-century sexologists identified them for us; rather that ancient and other premodern dispositions were of their own time (we hesitate around the blunt term ‘identities’, in its common modern sense of self-image, or perception of coherent individuality or selfhood).[56] Peoples of past cultures, including those of medieval and early modern Europe, do indeed show sexual preferences (for example, some men preferred to take the passive role in sex with other men; some women preferred to live as men in what may have been erotic relationships with other women). Our consistent point is that use of the terms ‘homosexual’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘heterosexual’ as substantives is not particularly helpful, though for stylistic reasons they are sometimes useful as adjectives. Premodern people lived without our familiar sexual categories and should not be forced to occupy them retrospectively. It is hard work to try to comprehend and describe the special nature of premodern sexual cultures, and often we lack suitable

vocabulary to describe the patterns we observe. That intellectual challenge is a large part of the reason we find sexual histories enduringly fascinating.

If ‘sexuality’ is a problematic term, ‘sex’ is arguably little better. It dates to the late fourteenth century in English as a term for the differences of male and female (deriving from classical Latin *sexus*). That is how it is used in *Aristotle’s Master-piece* (1684).[57] In our title, however, sex is, in part, short for ‘sexual intercourse’, which is attested in English (along with other forms such as ‘sexual commerce’) only from the mid-eighteenth century.[58] The Cambridge University Press English translation of the first edition of *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486–7) writes of demons practising ‘the most revolting sexual acts’ and, in various contexts, refers to what is rendered in English as ‘the sexual act’. This translation is not unreasonable but the terms used are modern. The original Latin refers to ‘actus venerei’, ‘actum venereum’ and ‘carnalia facta’.[59] The candid memoirs of the eighteenth-century excise officer John Cannon, brought to the attention of historians by Tim Hitchcock, never refer to sex when describing what we would call his sexual encounters. He writes of ‘carnality’, feeling ‘privities’, ‘emission’, ‘copulation’, ‘pleasure’, ‘will and pleasure’, ‘kissing and toying’, ‘close familiarity’ and ‘caressing’.[60] Our term ‘sex’, however, refers not only to sexual acts as such, but also (indeed, more often) to their representation in written and visual discourses and their relationship to broader moral, political and aesthetic concerns.

Throughout our book we warn against using modern terms for premodern erotic phenomena, so may be taken to task for our use of ‘sex’. In our own defence, we say only that *coitus*, *concubitus* or *l’acte vénérien* do not have a winning ring, and sex has the additional advantage over those alternatives of alluding to the penumbra of erotic

phenomena (such as desire, arousal, connotation, representation, imagination) as well as the physical act or (as Cryle would have it) *action* itself.[61] It would be unwise to aim for total semantic purity when we try to write such history. The best we can do is be aware of our language and justify usages as far as we can.

We could also debate the extent to which contemporary postmodern sexual cultures could be said to be 'after sexuality'. When Weeks states that '[s]exuality pinned you down like a butterfly on the table', his use of tense seems auspicious.[62] For him, 'sexuality' already belongs in the past. While reactionary political and religious movements have urgently sought to reaffirm sexual categories (ironically, they uphold the relatively new species of heterosexual, homosexual, and so on, rather than the older, more fluid models we partially chronicle here), other popular movements of our digitalized, globalized world have entered an era of 'post-sexuality'. According to one observer in contemporary Denmark, sexual identities are disappearing: 'Many people with strong same-sex sexual interests are beginning to think and speak of themselves in terms of *taste*. Thus, they do not see themselves as possessing a gay, lesbian, or queer identity.'[63] We will leave assessment of the current state of sex to social scientists, but if our exploration of the unstable and sometimes surprising world of premodern sex helps commentators to see the unexpected in the present then so much the better.

Our geographic and chronological focus is on the countries of 'Western' Europe (thus excluding areas covered by the Eastern Orthodox churches) from around 1100 to around 1800, although the first chapter paints some of the ideological backdrop by stretching back to the beginning of Christianity and subsequent chapters include a small amount of early medieval material. As the reader will