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Clio in Search of Eros: Redefining Sexualities in Early America

Sharon Block and Kathleen M. Brown

THE *William and Mary Quarterly* used to boast a *Trivia* section devoted to humorous archival anecdotes sent in by its readers. Tidbits about a wide range of human foibles were printed under headings that connected them to modern concerns. Sexual tales constituted a small but noteworthy portion of *Trivia*, joining anecdotes about excessive alcohol consumption, political corruption, and the curse of lawyers. “NEVER LET A WOMAN IN YOUR LIFE” included archival material on a “lady of delicate dress” who encouraged a drunken “young coxcomb” admiring her from behind to “kiss the part you like best,” a “bachanalian” festival of “white and red men and women without distinction” who danced and made “sacrifices to Venus,” and information about a cross-dressing “LADY in Man’s breeches.” Two decades later, an entry on “CAPITAL PUNISHMENT” told of a raped woman who selected “the SEVEREST punishment” for the man who had raped her: marriage.¹

In the era of postmodern and feminist scholarship, we might deride these submissions as undertheorized and misogynist. But they had a clear theoretical foundation, grounded in the premise that there is humor to be found in human beings’ eternal efforts to scratch the sexual itch. That itch was never the subject of historical inquiry; rather, it was presumed to be unchanging and collectively understood, today as well as 300 years ago. This is precisely why the sexual material—indeed, nearly all material—in *Trivia* was supposed to be funny: modern readers would be titillated by evidence of a familiar itch being scratched in frank, publicly visible, or deviant ways by the otherwise foreign people of the past. Contributions to *Trivia* rarely included scholarly treatment—the anecdotes were believed to speak for themselves. “Nudge, nudge, wink, wink” seemed to be the desired conclusion, and more often than not, the laughs were garnered at women’s expense.

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¹ *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 24 (1967), 629–31; *ibid.*, 44 (1987), 371. See also *ibid.*, 29 (1972), 490–91, and *ibid.*, 33 (1976), 331.

The *Quarterly's* sanction of public laughter about sex ended in the wake of the feminist movement, the rise of cultural history, and the emergence of the history of sexuality as a dynamic field of inquiry. By historicizing matters once understood as universal and eternal, scholars of sexuality have connected sexual behaviors and desires to specific political, social, and economic contexts. Many have discovered links between this seemingly private realm of human experience and broader structures of power. Still others doubt the coherence of the category of sexuality itself, raising new questions about how scholars in the modern era can even begin to understand the complex relationships that contributed to the meanings and expressions of sexuality in the early American past.

This topical issue grows out of this new interest in the history of sexuality. It also reflects our interest in having early American scholars participate in defining this new field. When we decided on a conference and circulated the call for papers, we encouraged studies that investigated the historically contingent meanings of desire, pleasure, and physical intimacy; the impact of colonial ambitions, racial hierarchies, and gender relations; the erotic and the romantic; popular mores, etiquette, and legal regulations; and folk and scientific theories of reproduction. It is gratifying to see how this collection touches on so many of the themes that we initially hoped the conference would explore.

The history of sexuality in early America has developed from a wide range of disciplines and historical subfields. Some of the earliest studies forwarded demographic explanations for regional sexual patterns and humanized the heretofore dour Puritans by documenting their marital sexual pleasure. Winthrop D. Jordan's comprehensive cultural history of race and slavery officially broke the color line in 1968 by implicating sexual attitudes in the racial formations of the colonial period.² By the 1970s and 1980s, scholars interested in quantitative history, legal history, or social history were publishing findings on sexual activity, with a special focus on transgressions. Rather than investigating the meaning of sexual acts for participants, however, most of these studies traced the

² Herbert Moller, "Sex Composition and Correlated Culture Patterns of Colonial America," *ibid.*, 2 (1945), 113-53; Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *New England Quarterly*, 15 (1942), 591-607. In response to Morgan, see Kathleen Verduin, "'Our Cursed Natures': Sexuality and the Puritan Conscience," *ibid.*, 56 (1983), 220-37, and Thomas Foster, "Deficient Husbands: Manhood, Sexual Incapacity, and Male Marital Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century New England," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 56 (1999), 723-44. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

legal response to sexual crimes and adopted a functionalist approach to behavior.³

In the first textbook on the history of American sexuality, John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman attempted to synthesize these new findings and present an early American sexual regime in which reproduction remained the prescribed purpose of sexuality. They also acknowledged the ways that power infused the meanings and regulations of sexuality, ultimately making it an arena of politics as well as of intimate personal interaction.⁴ In so doing, D'Emilio and Freedman incorporated an increasingly influential theoretical approach to sexuality that would significantly change the terms of scholars' engagement with its history.

Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* represents a turning point in the way Western historians conceptualize and write about sexuality. Although his conclusions have been criticized and modified, no one working in the field today can afford to ignore Foucault's work. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we distill some of his key contributions into the following points:

1. Twentieth-century beliefs in sexuality as the essence of modern identity mask other relations of power and perform important cultural work rather than reflect an authentic unmediated self.
2. Rather than repress sexuality, increasing strictures on sexual behavior and new efforts to define and categorize sexual

³ Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, "Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640–1971: An Overview and Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (1975), 537–70; Peter C. Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull, *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England, 1558–1803* (New York, 1981); Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 34 (1977), 542–71; Barbara Lindemann, "'To Ravish and Carnally Know': Rape in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Signs*, 10 (1984), 63–82; Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649–1699* (Amherst, Mass., 1986); Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767–1878* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 49–51, 68–69, 152–53; Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705–1865* (Louisiana, 1988), 71–72, 82–84, 150–64, 205–10. In one of the rare pre-Foucauldian forays into sexual identity, Randolph Trumbach worked within a sex-gender framework to uncover evidence of transgressive sexual cultures in 18th-century London. See, for example, "London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the 18th Century," *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1977), 1–33.

⁴ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York, 1988). For an important critique of the mainstream narrative in *Intimate Matters*, see Ann DuCille, "Othered' Matters: Reconceptualizing Dominance and Difference in the History of Sexuality in America" and Response, *J. Hist. Sexuality*, 1 (1990), 102–30.

deviance in the nineteenth century led to its reformation and proliferation.

3. The bourgeois family played a central role in producing the normative sexual desire that was then policed publicly by such other institutions as the church, courts, police, psychiatrists, and prisons. Together, these institutions produced modern sexuality, which defines an individual's sexual identity according to the objects of that individual's sexual desire.

4. Until this relatively recent epistemic shift, sexual desire was not understood to define identity, and identity was not understood primarily as sexual. Rather, sexual desire might affix itself to any number and variety of objects. What varied was not the quality or type of desire, which early modern people would likely have seen as undifferentiated, but the amount and government of that desire.

Despite Foucault's contention that sexuality is a modern invention produced in part by nineteenth-century institutions and their regimes of the normal, early modern scholars have appropriated his conceptualization of sexual desires, mores, and identities infused and diffused by power.⁵ His work has helped to shift the focus of sexuality scholarship, opening up questions about the identities of individuals who engaged in same-sex relationships and sparking inquiries into the discrepancy between popular morality and legal prescription. Yet signs are abundant that the Foucauldian paradigm is breaking down on both ends of the chronological continuum. Twentieth-century historians like Regina Kunzel are increasingly dissatisfied with a theory that sees sexuality at the core of some fixed modern identity. Rather, they are turning to the early modern period, with its allegedly fluid, changing, and inchoate sexual personalities, for inspiration in explaining inconsistencies in modern sexual identities. Early modernists, meanwhile, are no longer satisfied with a theoretical framework that fails to explain repeated acts as evidence of a directed sexual desire in certain individuals. Reconstructing the sexual history of Nicholas Sension, a prosperous resident of Windsor, Connecticut, circa 1640–1677, whose sexual interest in young men eventually became part of the public record, Richard Godbeer pointed out that, contra American applications of Foucault, the residents of Sension's community recognized and for many years tolerated the coherence and consistency of his sexual desire, treating it almost like an identity. In cases like that of Sension, a seemingly modern

⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).

sexual self seemed to be at work. In the *Forum*, Bruce Burgett, Stephen Shapiro, Michael L. Wilson, and Susan Juster all take up the questions of desire, identity, chronology, and modernity left in the wake of Foucault and his revisionists.⁶

Writing after Foucault, several theorists have brought new vantage points to sexuality studies. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler suggested alternative ways to understand identity formation. Rather than seek identity in some authentic sexual self at the center of the modern personality, she urges that we find it in repeated acts and performances. Butler and others, including several influential literary scholars, opened up new questions and approaches to behavior and subjectivity that have contributed to the development of queer theory, one of the most innovative and provocative recent approaches to the study of sexuality. Anne G. Myles and Thomas A. Foster build on this perspective, providing, respectively, a compelling rationale for queer theory and a fascinating example of how one might use it to interpret a document.⁷

Feminist scholars have also pushed the investigation of the historical nature of sexual acts and identities. Even before Foucault, many argued that power always infused sexual relationships between men and women, adults and children, and masters and bound laborers. During the early 1990s, several historians approached sexuality from the perspective of gender, tracking changes in efforts to control unruly, sexual bodies.⁸ Also in that decade, scholars began to examine sexual conflicts across racial and cultural boundaries as part of a larger colonial process. In 1991, Ramon D. Gutiérrez's provocative recreation of southwestern Pueblo Indians' sexual worldview provided a sophisticated examination of the violence of colonization. More recent examinations of European attitudes toward Native American and African sexuality have concluded that differences in sexual expectations heightened the conflicts between cultures.⁹

⁶ Kunzel, *Outlaw Desire: Prison Sexual Culture and the Problem of Situational Homosexuality* (forthcoming); Godbeer, "The Cry of Sodom': Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 52 (1995), 259–86.

⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990). For other influential works, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990); Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis, 1993); and Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N. C., 1998).

⁸ Cornelia Hughes Dayton, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 48 (1991), 19–49; Kathleen M. Brown, "'Changed . . . into the fashion of a man': The Politics of Sexual Difference in a Seventeenth-Century British Settlement," *J. Hist. Sexuality*, 6 (1995), 171–93. For early feminist work on sexual relations, see Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1975), in Joan Wallach Scott, ed., *Feminism and History* (New York, 1996), 105–51.

⁹ Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, 1991), 3–94. See also Karen Anderson, *Chain*

In the past half decade, a spate of articles, anthologies, and monographs devoted to early American sexuality has been published, with more expected over the next few years.¹⁰ This thematic issue contributes to the growing depth and breadth of the field by showcasing some of the most interesting work and raising an array of new questions, concerns, and opportunities for study. Many of these revolve around how best to conceptualize the meanings, functions, and boundaries of sex in early America; what kinds of evidence might be most productive in that conceptualization; and how various historical subjects are represented in these histories.

Several of the contributors question the portrayal of sex as a symptom of a problem. In such an approach, violations of sexual mores reflect some kind of extrasexual discontent or conflict. An upsurge in same-sex relations among men in European cities can thus be correlated to unemployment, the rise of premarital pregnancies signifies the breakdown of patriarchy, and sexual relations between slaveowner and the enslaved reflect gross inequities of power. Brian D. Carroll's *Note* successfully refines this framework, setting a seventeenth-century New England man's masturbation in the context of his social uncertainties. The pervasiveness of this approach in the scholarship on early American sexuality raises still-unanswered questions: Was sex in early America—a colonial society of emerging racial and class identities and new cultural forms—especially susceptible to conflict? Or have historians overemphasized the ways that early American sexuality reflected other power relations as a consequence of their sources and methods?

Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France (New York, 1991); Al Hurtado, "Sexuality in California's Franciscan Mission: Cultural Perceptions and Sad Realities," *California History*, 71 (1992), 371–85, 451–53; Brown, "The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier," in Nancy Shoemaker, ed., *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (New York, 1995), 26–48; Jennifer Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 54 (1997), 167–92; and Gordon Sayre, "Native American Sexuality in the Eyes of the Beholders, 1535–1710," in Merrill Smith, ed., *Sex and Sexuality in Early America* (New York, 1999), 35–54.

¹⁰ Recent anthologies include Smith, ed., *Sex and Sexuality in Early America* and *Sex without Consent: Rape and Sexual Coercion in America* (New York, 2001); Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York, 1999); Elizabeth Reis, ed., *American Sexual Histories* (Malden, Mass., 2001); and Kathy Peiss, ed., *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality: Documents and Essays* (Lexington, Mass., 2001). Monographs include Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, 2002), and Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore, 2002). Forthcoming works include monographs by Jennifer Morgan, Sharon Block, Jennifer Spear, and Clare Lyons, all contributors to this issue.

The emphasis on transgressive sexual relations relates, in part, to the kinds of evidence traditionally used in studies of sexual behavior: legal records, for instance, tend to focus primarily on proscribed acts. Many of the articles here present a more complex view of early American sexuality through a diversity of sources and methodological approaches. Ruth H. Bloch pointedly questions the ongoing emphasis on conflict-laden sexuality, exploring instead the ideals for heterosexual behavior found in literary, philosophic, and religious sources. Clare A. Lyons looks beyond silent legal records to investigate the homoerotic literary representations popular with eighteenth-century Philadelphians. Mary E. Fissell analyzes the transformation of images in the popular sex guide, *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. Marion Rust suggests that *Charlotte Temple* provided a lesson to young women in the early republic, not about the dangers of sexual misbehavior, but about the consequences of Charlotte's inability to act and think for herself. By incorporating various cultural and literary approaches, these authors go beyond the sexual history of individuals to investigate the place of sexuality in early American popular culture.

In connecting sexuality to broader systems of power, how do we best avoid replicating the dynamics of colonial society in our own histories? How do we account for the sexual lives of nonliterate people? Relationships between masters and enslaved women present one of the most challenging examples of how difficult it can be to analyze the relationship of sex to power in the past. Perhaps no early American interracial sexual relationship has gained more attention than that of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Despite Annette Gordon-Reed's pathbreaking monograph, scholars continue to speculate about the relationship between Jefferson's interior life and his public persona, leaving Hemings still in the shadows.¹¹ Finding an appropriate framework in which to interpret the Jefferson-Hemings union is also difficult. Years ago, scholars of American slavery were too quick to assume that interracial sexual activity pointed to a benign human connection. More recently, feminist scholars have emphasized how the gendered patterns of such relationships—white male and black female—reflected a larger grid of power in which individuals could make only limited choices. But interpretations of interracial sexual acts as simply the consequence of a rigid and demeaning racial hierarchy reduces their complexity as much as assumptions about their benignity. Kirsten Fischer and Jennifer Morgan address some of these dilemmas in their *Forum* essay, questioning how we can best recapture both individual relations and broader patterns of coercion.

¹¹ Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1997).

Several of the articles herein are informed by comparative history and situated in the larger fields of the Atlantic world, colonialism, and the rise of urban cultures. Taking as their starting point the way commerce, imperial aims, and migration created domains of power and webs of connection, these studies contextualize local patterns of illicit and interracial sex. Examining the distribution of sexual discourse and image in print and the specific policies of colonial regimes, the best of these studies recognize the gap as well as a relationship between representations of sexuality—playful, commercial, or official—and the sexual practices of people on the ground. Jennifer M. Spear, for instance, looks at early Louisiana for just these kinds of colonial dynamics, showing how Louisiana's institutional policies molded and solidified various racial boundaries. Sophisticated methodologies such as these promise to unpack the power at work in regimes of the normal, making visible the ways such regimes supported racial hierarchies and colonial relationships as well as categories of sexual deviance. These remind us that sexual desire and sexual behavior both need to be understood in the multiple contexts of region, demography, law, citizenship, the criteria for legal marriage, and the meanings of racial and ethnic difference.¹²

Early American sexuality has come a long way from the days when it appeared in the *Quarterly* primarily for its entertainment value. This collection showcases the vitality of this field and testifies to the many ways the history of sexuality *is* early American history. Scholars of print culture, politics, colonialism, race, and the Atlantic world can learn something new about their own fields from these articles. We hope that *Sexuality in Early America* will inspire others as much as it has inspired us to rethink the importance of sexuality to our understanding of early American life.

¹² Influential works include Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia," in Micaela Di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1991), 51–101; Lenore Manderson, "Colonial Desires: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in British Malaya," *J. Hist. Sexuality*, 7 (1997), 372–88; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York, 1995); and Antoinette Burton, ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (New York, 1999). On colonial British American comparisons to other imperial projects, see Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History*, 88 (2001), 829–65.