

Paradigms of Same-Sex Marriage in the Long Eighteenth Century

Rictor Norton

Presentation given at the “After Marriage in the Long Eighteenth Century” Seminar at the University of Kent, Canterbury, on 4 November 2011.

INTRODUCTION

The UK Government in 2014 has brought in legislation that legalises marriage between members of the same sex. Same-sex “civil partnerships” already grant the same legal rights and benefits to same-sex partners as are enjoyed by partners in heterosexual marriages. The difference seems to reside solely in the symbolic importance attached to the word “marriage”. There are various issues we could discuss regarding the contemporary situation, but my main contribution to the debate must be as a gay historian. Specifically, a frequent argument against gay marriage is that such an institution has never before existed and runs counter to history and tradition. But this claim is false. There are in fact abundant historical precedents for the practice of same-sex marriage, and there is a tradition and history of gay and lesbian marriages which goes back hundreds of years.

DEFINITIONS

In this paper I’m going to review some typical examples of what I consider to be the three main paradigms of same-sex marriage, which are fairly distinct though they can overlap in practice:

Probably *the oldest paradigm of same-sex love is the pederastic relationship of master and pupil*. Some historians call this the intergenerational model, but in fact the age difference usually isn’t a full generation of 25 years but more often less than one-third generation. Some historians therefore call it just “age asymmetrical”, but I think this still overemphasises the importance of age. The real

difference is usually a difference in power. In the early modern period this paradigm is best thought of as a master/servant relationship or as a patron/protégé relationship. The strict pederastic or teacher/pupil paradigm doesn't work very well to define a type of same-sex *marriage*, because usually that relationship lacks an element of cohabitation, and it is inherently short-lived: the younger partner in the Socratic teacher/pupil relationship matures fairly quickly and will no longer want to continue in his subordinate role; he will either go on to marry a woman, or become a master to his own pupil.

The second paradigm is the Faithful Friend or Sworn Brothers model. In this model the partners are about the same age and have about the same status. In fact, the ideology of equality is often an important feature in the idealisation of this relationship, even though in reality there is usually an important class or status difference. Certain rituals or contracts are often used to construct a kind of artificial kinship, and this relationship is interesting because it often involves a public declaration of love.

The third paradigm is simply the homosexual mirror of heterosexual marriage, i.e. the husband/wife model. Sometimes this is called the transgender model, because the relationship is typically gender-organised, with one partner playing the opposite-sex role, sometimes even to the extent of disguising oneself in the clothes of the opposite sex. Homosexual connubial love is more common in history than is usually realised.

These three patterns often overlap in practice.

The models for female sex-sex unions are fewer than those available for male-male unions. A kind of "sisterhood" model is available, but it has seldom been institutionalised and provided with rituals and symbols in the same way that "brotherhood" or even "fraternity" have. In the archaicising mythology of Renaissance thinkers, there are hardly any lesbian equivalents to the idealisation of Socratic or Platonic love, or the Sacred Band of Thebes, or the lists of "faithful friends", or the lists of gods and their favourites, so often cited in poetry. Women may allude to Sappho and her girl pupils to justify their love, but they seldom use this as the basis for their marital relationship. I think it was only in the late eighteenth century

that the idea of “romantic friendships” between women was conceptualised and practised, which I will discuss later. The husband and wife paradigm is the model most frequently followed in female same-sex marriages.

EARLY DATA CONCERNING SAME-SEX UNIONS

I want to focus on the long eighteenth century, roughly from the mid-seventeenth century through about 1820, in Europe but mainly in England, but we cannot consider the subject without some discussion of earlier periods. John Boswell in his book *The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (1994) established the existence in early medieval Europe, mainly in the eastern Christian church, of a formal Christian ritual called adelphopoeosis, which means “brother-making”. Some surviving texts of this ritual blessing of same-sex unions very closely match church celebrations of heterosexual marriage, in terms of expressions of fidelity, the exchange of rings, walking round the altar, and so on. The full union of bodies, however, is not explicitly sanctioned in these ceremonies, and many historians are hesitant to call them same-sex marriages or sexual unions.

Every so often we get a tantalising glimpse of same-sex marriage ceremonies in more modern times. In 1581 Montaigne met a cleric who a few years earlier had witnessed the rites of a “strange brotherhood” of Portuguese men in the church of San Giovanni in Rome: “They married one another, male to male, at Mass, with the same ceremonies with which we perform our marriages, read the same marriage gospel service, and then went to bed and lived together.” But for fear that other people might follow this heresy and believe that marriage alone would justify homosexual relations, several of the male couples were subsequently burned at the stake. These same-sex marriages seem to have survived into modern times in countries such as the Balkans. Lord Byron observed these homosexual unions in Albania in the early nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century a German gay anthropologist documented that same-sex marriages celebrated by priests in the Balkans were explicitly homosexual.

Recent research has documented the existence of legalised same-sex unions in late-medieval and sixteenth-century France, called “enfrerement” or “brotherment”. Two individuals, sometimes literally brothers, sometimes distant relatives, sometimes strangers, and sometimes probably a homosexual couple, would sign a legal contract witnessed by a notary, agreeing to form a single household, with all their property held jointly, with each other as the heir. It was very similar to a secular marriage contract, and the reason for the enfrerement was usually cited as the individuals’ great affection for one another – that is, purely financial reasons were seldom given. The friends were subsequently called *affrèrés* and they usually began to live together. However, as with *adelphophoesis*, our interpretation of any actual sexual content is speculative – but it seems possible at least in instances when the friends were not married. Some documented instances show that an opposite-sex marital breakup preceded an enfrerement, and many enfrerements suggest that passionate mutual affection was the sole purpose of the arrangement rather than economic factors. Insofar as an enfrerement involves a public declaration of a relationship, it is highly unlikely that any man would want to publicly declare himself a sodomite, so the most that we might be able to argue is that an enfrerement could occasionally be used as cover for a same-sex sexual union.

Another same-sex union which had a formal religious context was the sixteenth and seventeenth-century practice documented by Alan Bray in which two men who consider themselves to be a couple, arranged to be buried together in a joint tomb. Bray’s leading example is the case of Sir Thomas Baines and Sir John Finch who were buried together in the chapel of Christ’s College, Cambridge, in 1682. Finch was Baines’s personal servant; Baines died in Istanbul in 1681 and Finch brought the body back to England and Finch set up a monument in which he was himself placed when he died a year later. The monument refers to their relationship as an “*animorum connubium*”, a marriage of souls. Many similar monuments describe the couple buried within as “sworn brothers”, and many of them employ heraldic devices identical to those used for a married couple. Some of these men engaged in the late medieval ceremony of swearing brotherhood on a relic and then taking the eucharist together. Many of the men who were buried in joint graves do not

seem to have been married, and in any case certainly were not buried with their wives, but in fact we don't know if these men had a sexual union. Alan Bray argues that this really does not matter, and perhaps he is right, but I find the ambiguity unsatisfactory.

However, even though I include erotic desire in my definition of same-sex *relationships*, I would agree that historical evidence for same-sex *marriages* must also focus more narrowly upon evidence of cohabitation and mutual cherishing. In this respect I'm happy to adopt the definition of marriage given in a lecture by the nonconformist minister and hymnist Rev. Philip Doddridge in the 1740s, disregarding only the references to opposite genders: "Marriage is a covenant between man and woman, in which they mutually promise cohabitation, and a continual care to promote the comfort and happiness of each other." In my own definition, therefore, same-sex marriage ideally has four elements: sexual desire; cohabitation; the making of a covenant; and mutual cherishing. With those features in mind, let us see what evidence we can find.

THE MASTER/SERVANT OR PATRON/PROTÉGÉ MODEL

The criminal records of many European countries contain evidence that cohabitation was an important feature of some same-sex unions, including intergenerational unions. The sodomy court in fifteenth-century Tuscany heard cases in which youths were 'kept' (*si tiene*) by men in ongoing relationships. For example, as the court heard in 1495: "Niccolò, son of Brunetto, shoemaker . . . retains Bastiano his apprentice, about sixteen years old. He keeps him at home like a wife. And in fact he isn't married, so that his wife is Bastiano." Nearly all such sources turn up cases of men who lived together in "sodomitical sin" that included intimacy and tenderness. According to a Paris police report of 1748 concerning two men who had lived and slept together intimately for two years: "It was even almost always necessary for Duquesnel to have his arm extended along the headboard, under Dumaine's head. Without that Dumaine could not rest."

During the early modern period intergenerational unions are seen mainly in master/apprentice or master/servant relationships in

large households. It's hard to know if such relationships became long-term stable relationships. But evidence occasionally comes to light, as in some Dutch trials in 1730, when 250 men were prosecuted for sodomy and 60 were sentenced to death, where we see that good-looking poor young men sought the protection of older rich men and that these relationships sometimes became permanent. There are documented cases in sixteenth-century Europe of men arranging for their nieces to marry their apprentices so that the master can gain regular sexual access to his apprentice without attracting attention from society. And in early-modern Italy, it's noticeable how many Fathers of the Church lived with a handsome young "nephew". It's not quite accurate to classify such unions as same-sex marriages, but since they involve cohabitation they cannot be classified simply as temporary seductions.

At the top end of the social scale, we're familiar with the fact that some kings had favourites rather than mistresses, in parallel to their wives whom they married for reasons of state. In the early seventeenth century, King James I/VI was notorious for having a homosexual relationship with his favourite George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. James wrote many intimate letters to Buckingham, in which he addressed Buckingham as "Sweet child and wife", and signed himself "They dear dad and husband". So they perceived their relationship as being equivalent to a marriage. They often travelled together, and enjoyed "princely recreation" when they stayed at their subjects' houses, e.g. at Apethorpe Hall in Northamptonshire in the 1620s; when the hall was restored by English Heritage about ten years ago, they discovered a secret passage connecting the bedchambers of the two men.

Among the upper classes in Renaissance and Jacobean England, we are familiar with the practice of aristocrats seducing their servants, pages as well as maids. Sir Francis Bacon's mother complained to her son about him keeping his Welsh serving man Thomas Percy as a bed companion and a coach companion. Other of his Welsh gentlemen ushers and servants of whom she complained were eventually left substantial bequests in his will. His intimate friend and one-time servant Sir Toby Matthew lived with him in his London home, and was the inspiration of his famous essay on

Friendship. Although Bacon was married (but was childless, and does not seem to have had good relations with his wife), he valued masculine friendship – in fact he was the first person to use the term “masculine love” in English literature – much higher than heterosexual marriage, and wrote a famous essay in praise of Friendship, in which he expressed the view that unmarried men contributed more to society than married men. Francis was criticised by his contemporaries as a “pederast”.

Francis’s brother Anthony Bacon was notorious for bugging his pageboys in his household in France; he was formally charged with sodomy, but he somehow managed to avoid execution through the intervention of Henri, King of Navarre. Anthony lay low for a while, then returned to England with his Gascon valet de chambre Jacques Petit, and for a time they lived quietly with his brother Francis in Gray’s Inn in London, before setting up a bachelor household in Redbourne, a village near the family home in St Albans. We know the names of several young men Anthony lived with over longish periods; he never married. Insofar as several of Anthony’s serving men chose to come to England with him and remained in his employment, I wouldn’t dismiss the patron/protégé model as being entirely manipulative and the abuse of power: both parties benefited. Francis Bacon’s younger partners also made no complaints about him, and benefited by the relationship, financially and in terms of his recommendations for government employment. Such benefits were common in patron/protégé relationships.

Patron/protégé arrangements should not be dismissed as merely exploitative or utilitarian, because friendship and love are very often the main motive for both partners. Such same-sex relationships often parallel the relationship of an aristocrat and his mistress. Let’s look at the case of John, Lord Hervey, an important courtier and future Keeper of the Great Seal. He met and fell in love with a country squire named Stephen Fox in 1726, when Hervey was 31 and Stephen was 23; they travelled together on the Grand Tour for 15 months, and when they returned to England Hervey returned to his wife, but wrote to Stephen “I can’t live without You.” Hervey arranged for his homosexual friend Lord Bateman to lend Stephen his house in Windsor so the two men could be together while Hervey

performed his courtly duties at Windsor Castle. In 1730 Hervey proposed that they live together: “why should we see one another by Visits, but never have a common home?” Hervey signed over the lease of his house on Old Burlington Street to Stephen, and they set up house-keeping together even though Hervey officially occupied an apartment in St James’s Palace. During the summer season when the Court moved to Kew, Hervey spent every Sunday and Monday in London with Stephen. Lady Hervey lived separately, with their children (eventually totalling eight), at their town house in St James’s Square, and at their country house at Ickworth. However, Stephen was conscious of being an unpolished provincial who could not match the sophisticated urbanity of Hervey, and in late 1733 he said he was unfit company for Hervey and he returned to live alone in the country. Some years later Hervey arranged a marriage between Stephen and a young child-heiress, and he himself fell in love with the handsome bisexual Francesco Algarotti, but that was more of a passionate fling than a marriage. A contemporary claimed that Lord and Lady Hervey “lived together . . . without any strong sympathies, and more like a French couple than an English one”. Hervey in his will left his wife only the minimum amount dictated by their marriage contract. Aristocrats of course own a couple of houses in town and a couple of houses in the country, plus a shooting box or two, which makes it easier for a bisexual like Hervey to maintain a same-sex marriage as well as an opposite-sex marriage.

However, the setting-up of an alternative homosexual household usually creates a scandal. For example, in 1801 the young Lord Leicester began making regular weekly visits to the lodgings of an Italian man named Neri, who was a waiter at a coffee house. After 18 months, Neri became Leicester’s servant at Trinity College, Cambridge, and slept in his Lordship’s chambers. There he would play the guitar in duets with Leicester. Leicester commonly wore a pink robe and slippers with pink ribbons, and the other fellows of the college called him Miss Leicester. He travelled abroad with Neri, and when they returned he got married, as also did Neri, but he and Neri, who was now his Secretary, lived together in his house in Westbourn Place, Paddington, while her Ladyship lived separately at their other house in Gloucester Place, and Neri’s wife lived alone at her house, paid for by Leicester. In 1808 Lady Leicester separated from her

husband, and a newspaper published rumours that her husband was a sodomite. With Neri, Leicester fled the country, first to Paris where he resided until 1823, and then to a villa near Genoa, where he lived under a false name until his death in 1855 at the age of 77. It seems clear that Leicester and his Secretary had a long-term marriage-like relationship, in which Neri was probably the husband, and Leicester was the wife.

It was relatively common in the eighteenth century for wealthy unmarried men to have a secretary-cum-companion. In British newspapers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries we frequently find notices in the obituary pages about confirmed bachelors who die and leave a fortune to their steward or faithful butler. Here is an example, from the *British Spy* for 13 March 1756: “Last week died, at his lodgings in Ipswich, Mr. Phillips, a Batchelor, who always changed his place of Residence when found out by any of his Acquaintance, chusing to live retired. He has left all his Fortune, which is near One hundred thousand Pounds, to a poor labouring Man, who was formerly his Servant, and who was on Saturday last at the Bank to claim what Money is there. . . . By his Will Phillips order’d his Body to be buried next to an old Servant of his who died about seven Years ago.” It seems to me that the newspaper publisher clearly thought this report would raise eyebrows, and I think modern historians need to be less reticent to speculate about the existence of homosexual marriage-like unions between masters and servants in the eighteenth century.

THE HETEROSEXUAL MODEL

Let’s look more closely at the husband-and-wife or heterosexual model of male same-sex marriages.

During the early modern period, for men whose sexual relationships extended to actual cohabitation, there was sometimes an element of opposite-sex role playing. For example, the Council of Ten in Venice in 1640 investigated the case of a patrician who lived with his male lover in the same house for several years, and who slept in the same bed, and discovered that on many occasions the patrician

bought women's clothes for his partner. However, we don't know how common this was.

In the late seventeenth century homosexual subculture in the Portuguese bases of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, long-term domestic same-sex relationships have been documented, some of them being inter-racial. There was also the occasional instance of a type of relationship which I think was probably more common than the records show, because it was less likely to be discovered. For example, in 1686 a widowed grocer picked up a sixteen-year-old boy playing the part of a woman at the theatre, and they lived together as husband and wife for two-and-a-half years, until the Inquisition responded to the public scandal and brought them to trial. Both men were exiled, but the grocer formed more homosexual liaisons later in life. In late seventeenth-century Lisbon, records of the Portuguese Inquisition reveal cases of men living together who were called "amancebados", a term which in a heterosexual content referred to cohabiting with a concubine.

I've written extensively about the sodomitical subculture in eighteenth-century England, which we've been able to document through trial records and newspaper reports. Most notably, in central London there were some 30 "molly houses", that is, disorderly pubs and coffee houses where sodomites regularly gathered to sing and dance together and sometimes have sex together. Some of these molly houses provided facilities for same-sex marriages. For example, the famous molly coffee house run by Margaret Clap had what was called "the marrying room" which had a large double bed. This was guarded by a doorman, who allowed pairs of men to enter it to get "married – as they called it". A well-known pub the Royal Oak, on the corner of St George's Square, Pall Mall, had a front room for the regular customers from the neighbourhood, and a back room for the mollies to gather in, as well as a small room called "the Chapel" where men could "marry", which again was the term they used. Our limited knowledge of what went on in these marrying rooms would suggest that getting married often meant little more than having a quick encounter.

Other references to molly relationships contain facetious use of the words "husband" and "wedding night", and anti-sodomitical

satires occasionally refer to mock marriage ceremonies. William Eskridge in his “History of Same Sex Marriage” published in 1993 says “I am not including facetious or mocking references such as these in this history.” I think it is probably a mistake to exclude this kind of practice from the serious history of same-sex marriage. Some historians won’t acknowledge the existence of a camp sensibility and camp strategies in the early eighteenth century, but it seems to me that the mollies would naturally use such terms in a self-aware fashion, in ways that were simultaneously mocking yet sincere.

Let us examine a little more closely one particular same-sex “wedding” that was celebrated in a molly house in 1727, which was described in a pamphlet by James Dalton, the head of a gang of street robbers, some of whom were blackmailers of sodomites. The marriage probably took place in a molly pub in the Mint, in Southwark, run by a man who took the nickname Sukey or Susan Bevell. The two men who got married were called Hanover Kate and Queen Irons; they were attended by men acting as bridesmaids, called Miss Kitten and Princess Seraphina; and guests at the wedding included a molly couple who were said to be “deeply in love” with one another, called Madam Blackwell and St Dunstan’s Kate. Historians who are heavily influenced by discourse theory have tended to dismiss this material as a satirical sketch. But the men at this molly wedding were in fact real people, who can be identified by examining court trials and newspaper accounts. The bride and groom were John Hyons, a recent French immigrant who was known by the nickname Queen Irons, and John Coleman, who was a butcher. Prior to the marriage, in late October 1726, both men had been tried and convicted of assault with intent to commit sodomy upon one another. They were each sentenced to stand in the pillory, to pay a fine of 5 Marks, and to suffer three months’ imprisonment. When they stood in the pillory, according to a newspaper report they were “sadly mauled” by the mob. Some time after they got out of prison, they married one another. Clearly these men had some kind of long-term commitment to one another, and perhaps their marriage was even a kind of defiance of the expectations of a persecuting culture. Certainly this marriage in a molly house constituted a public declaration of their commitment, in the same way that a heterosexual wedding was a public declaration to the community.

Of the bridesmaids, Miss Kitten's real name was James Oviat; he regularly blackmailed men by offering sex to them and then threatening to accuse them of sodomy. The other bridesmaid, Princess Seraphina, was John Cooper, an unemployed gentleman's valet who regularly dressed as a woman and went to the masquerades at Vauxhall Gardens and acted as a pimp for sodomites. Princess Seraphina was a regular cross-dresser, who was widely known to people where he lived, who always referred to him as "she" and addressed him as "Princess". Among the wedding party, St Dunstan's Kate's real name was Powell; he worked as a clerk at St Dunstan's church, and perhaps he was the one who performed the marriage ceremony. Queen Irons was said to be "a charming warbler" who specialised in singing dirty songs. One of her alleged songs was printed, which begins

Let the Fops of the Town upbraid
Us, for an unnatural Trade,
We value not Man nor Maid;

But among our own selves we'll be free,

This song probably is not genuine, but bawdy songs were in fact sung in molly houses, and one is mentioned in a court trial which contained the line "Come, let us fuck finely", so it is very likely that a bawdy song would have been sung at the molly wedding.

It is interesting that the two men who got married, and who were described as the "spouse" to one another, both had female nicknames, as did the other probable molly couple Madam Blackwell and St Dunstan's Kate. Another molly house that had a so-called "Chapel" was operated by Robert Whale and his partner York Horner; they had lived together for at least three years before their house was raided, and they were known to their friends as Peggy and Pru. So although there are many transgender elements in molly marriages, it would be difficult for us to detect strict male/female sexual role playing within the union; that is, there is no evidence of a hard separation between active and passive roles or a clear perception of one of the men as the husband and the other as the wife. The molly wedding seems to be a subcultural institution participated in mainly by effeminate men who are all "sisters" to one another. But this is complicated by the fact that some quite masculine men also adopted

female nicknames. For example, one of the men who may have been present at this wedding was Nurse Mitchel, whose real name was John Mitchell, and he was pretty much a piece of rough trade, a hustler-cum-blackmailer who bragged that his penis was nine inches long. At a trial for extortion he admitted ‘when I wanted Money, I took a Walk in the Park, and got 4 or 5 Guineas a-Night from Gentlemen, because they would not be expos’d’. Another complicating factor regarding male/female dichotomies is the fact that most men caught in molly houses were prosecuted for committing active sodomy. Some very explicit evidence produced in court suggests that the norm was for sodomites and mollies to enjoy a wide range of sexual activity, regularly taking turn and turn about. So effeminate social behavior does not map directly onto a male/female dichotomy of sexual practice – at last in the case of male-male relations. As I’ll note later, the sexual binary seems to be more common in female–female relations.

Although the molly subculture was centred in London, there were sodomitical networks in other British cities. For example, in Bristol in the 1730s there was a network of sodomitical blackmailers-cum-hustlers. During a trial, a letter was discovered and published, addressed by one man to another. It begins “Dear Friend and Loving Sister”, and ends “Your once adopted, and loving Spouse”. Of course the word “spouse” and the allusion to adoption perhaps just indicates some kind of regular sexual liaison without implying any cohabitation. But it is nevertheless interesting for illustrating a broad range of kinship links between sodomites.

In the Netherlands in the early eighteenth century, there were gay clubs similar to the molly houses, and men sometimes used female nicknames for one another. Monogamous same-sex unions among Dutchmen have been documented, in which the partners indicated that they “belonged to each other” by referring to each other as “nicht” or “nichtje”, which means “(female) cousin”. In The Hague, two young sodomites had made a “marriage contract” in which they agreed that they would not have sexual contact with any other man without first informing their partner of their intentions. Love-letters between such couples were discovered during some Dutch trials, containing declarations such as “you are faithful to me

until death, no one will separate us for we are tied in love forever.” In Amsterdam, some long-term same-sex marriage contracts were sealed in blood.

One of the earliest full-fledged male brothels in London was the White Swan public house on Vere Street, near Clare Market, which was set up in 1810 by a married heterosexual man, though it survived for less than a year before it was raided. The men who provided the services were mainly Guardsmen and very masculine types, though some of them as well as their customers used camp nicknames. The main floor was for drinking and socialising, and the upper floors had rooms for sex. One room had four beds in it, another room was fitted up as a ladies’ dressing room, and one room was called The Chapel, where mock marriage ceremonies were performed, followed immediately by the “wedding night”. These homosexual marriages were blessed by Rev John Church, a genuine Dissenting minister. On several occasions Rev Church married three or four male couples simultaneously, and even the so-called “bridesmaids” celebrated the nuptials. So the marriages he performed might seem to be nothing more than orgies. But it is possible that he occasionally blessed a union with a wider moral purpose. In November 1809 he performed the funeral service for Richard Oakden, a 49-year-old bank clerk who the day before had been hanged for sodomy. After the funeral, the hearse and coach returned to a public house where Rev Church and a group of sodomites ate a feast in honour of the dead. Clearly Rev Church had a serious commitment to a wider homosexual society. Insofar as this was not a mock funeral service, I hesitate to say that all the same-sex marriages he performed were just mock marriages.

Although Rev Church himself was married (twice) and had children, he had an infamous career and several boyfriends over the years. He escaped the raid of 1810, but in 1817 he was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for a homosexual offence. During imprisonment, he wrote his autobiography, in which he did not actively deny the charges and even included poignant excerpts from his love letters to his boyfriend, expressing fear that his wife would find out about him.

FEMALE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

There seem to be no lesbian equivalents to these sodomitical subcultures, until perhaps very late in the eighteenth century, but even up through modern times the lesbian subcultures are always much smaller than gay male subcultures. One possible reason for this is that female sexuality in general may have a more intimate and domestic focus, while male sexuality has more public, exhibitionist features. Whatever the case, in the long eighteenth century, and earlier, homosexual men cruised public areas rather promiscuously and formed clubs, while homosexual women formed pair bonds rather than larger networks. It is somewhat paradoxical that although the historical evidence about male homosexuality is much more abundant than that about female homosexuality, nevertheless we know more about female same-sex marriages than about male same-sex marriages.

Let us look at some examples.

Imperial China seems to have had a tradition called “paired eating”, in which court women sometimes attached themselves to one another and called themselves husband and wife, and indulged in pudendal rubbing and the use of double-headed dildoes. In less refined circles, so-called “Golden Orchid Associations” survived into the twentieth century, and involved formal marriage ceremonies including the exchange of gifts between the so-called husband and wife. Apparently women who married one another could even adopt children.

However, such institutions don’t seem to have had parallels in early modern Western culture – where, incidentally, in some countries, though not in England, female same-sex relations were punishable by death. In France, around 1535 a woman from Fontaines was burned alive for disguising herself as a man and marrying a woman. Montaigne in his diary for 1580 records the hanging of a weaver named Marie who was convicted for dressing as a man and marrying a woman, and using an artificial device for intercourse.

In the Netherlands in the late eighteenth century there are several documented cases of women who left their husbands and set

up home with another woman, with one of the pair dressing as a man and trying to deceive the authorities so that they could get married officially.

I want to look more closely at one trial which has left us abundant details for one such marriage. In 1721 in Saxony, Catharina Margaretha Linck and Catharina Margaretha Muhlhahn were prosecuted for lesbian relations. Catharina Linck, age 27, disguised herself in men's clothes for many years. Using the name Anastasius, she had been in the army and had sexual relations with several women, by using a stuffed leather penis with two stuffed testicles made from pig's bladder, which was attached to her pubes with a leather strap. In 1717 she married, in church, Catharina Muhlhahn, age 22. She would use a leather covered horn to urinate while standing up; and somehow she was able to stiffen her leather penis to achieve sex with her wife. Her wife discovered the deceit and Linck vowed to live together henceforth as brother and sister. But soon they resumed sexual relations, and at one stage she even forced her wife to suck her leather penis, as she enacted a struggle for masculine dominance. Muhlhahn, in effect a battered wife, was too fearful to bring a case against her false husband, but her mother brought the irregularity to the attention of the courts. Both women were convicted of sodomy; Linck was beheaded and her body was then burned; Muhlhahn was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and then to be banished from the country. This isn't a very good role-model for modern lesbian marriages! Nevertheless, the case does illustrate the importance of male/female binary roles to female same-sex marriages, and suggests that the phallus has a highly symbolic value even in some lesbian relationships, going well beyond its usefulness as a tool of deception. Daniel Defoe, in a fictionalised biography of Mrs Christian Davies (1741), who dressed as a man in order to follow her husband into the army, says that she peed standing up by using a silver "urinary instrument" that once belonged to a colonel who was herself a woman in disguise. The importance of being able to pee standing up – i.e. like a man – is mentioned in several accounts of what were called "female husbands", and the necessary instruments for achieving this are in fact documented up through the twentieth century.

In England, a very interesting example of a female husband is Mary East. In 1731 she donned masculine clothing, and took a small public house at Epping together with another woman as her wife. Here, and later at another public house at Poplar, the two women lived together as man and wife for eighteen years. They became relatively wealthy, but kept no servants, presumably to keep the husband's real sex a secret. Mary East was blackmailed by someone who knew her real sex. In 1765, when Mary East's "wife" died after a total of 39 years of "matrimony", she revealed her true sex, and boldly prosecuted her blackmailer in court. He was convicted and sentenced to four years' imprisonment, but this public disclosure made it necessary for Mary East to go into retirement. This was clearly a same-sex marriage, but we frankly do not know if erotic desire played any role in it.

The most notorious 'female husband' in eighteenth-century England was Mary Hamilton, who in 1746 was tried at Taunton in Somersetshire, for fraudulently posing as a man and marrying a woman, Mary Price. It transpired that Hamilton had used a leather dildo, which had deceived her wife at the beginning, though she soon discovered the truth. Nevertheless Mary Price wanted to stand by her pretended husband, but her mother forced the case to trial. As reported in the *Bath Journal*, "There are great numbers of people flock to see [Mary, alias Charles, Hamilton in prison, where she] appears very bold and impudent. She seems very gay, with Periwig, Ruffles and Breeches; and it is publicly talked that she has deceived several of the fair sex by marrying them." She was publicly whipped in four separate market towns, and imprisoned for six months.

The case was popularised by the novelist Henry Fielding, in a short pamphlet titled *The Female Husband*, a sensationalistic account that has persuaded some academics to wrongly conclude that we're dealing with a fictional discourse rather than historical reality. But it was a genuine case, and the trial records survive. The counsel for the prosecution was Henry Gould, who was Henry Fielding's cousin; it's possible that Gould interviewed both of the women, and probable that he passed some information about the case to Fielding. But we need not base our analysis on Fielding's pamphlet, because the trial records exist.

Mary Hamilton in her genuine deposition to the court said that she began wearing her brother's clothes at the age of 14, that she worked for several doctors for two or three years, and "then set up for a Quack doctor myself". "In the Course of my travels in mans apparel I came to the City of Wells . . . and went by the Name of Charles Hamilton, and quartered in the house of Mary Creed, where lived her Neice [*sic*] Mary Price, to whome I proposed Marriage [*sic*] and the s^d Mary Price Consented, and then I put in the [banns] of Marriage [*sic*] to Mr Kin[g]ston Curate of S^t Cuthberts in the City of Wells and was by y^e s^d Mr Kingstone Married to the s^d Mary Price. . . . [I] have since travell^d as a husband with her in several parts of y^e County" Mary Price in her statement to the court said that "after their Marriage they lay together several Nights, and that the said pretended Charles Hamilton . . . entered her Body several times, which made [her] believe, at first, that the said Hamilton was a real Man, but [she] soon had reason to Judge otherwise, that the said Hamilton was not a Man but a Woman, and which the said Hamilton owned acknowledged and confessed afterwards". Neither woman denied the facts, and both were happy to refer to the relationship as a marriage. Insofar as the relationship continued for two or three months after the wedding night, it seems that the wife would have let things continue if her mother had not interfered. Perhaps Mary Hamilton would have gone on to another town and married another woman. However, there seems to be no suggestion that she married Mary Price for the sake of a dowry, so perhaps she would have settled down with her.

The presence of an interfering mother-in-law was important for bringing some of these cases to court. But in cases where the deceived wife didn't bother to consult her mother about certain oddities in the marriage, perhaps partners came to an amicable arrangement. For instance, a woman named Sarah Paul, age 20 in 1760, had passed as a man for the preceding seven years, under the name of Samuel Bundy, and served for a while as a sailor. She lived in Christchurch, Surrey, and had been married to a woman, Mary Parlour, for about six months, when her sex was accidentally discovered by the outside world following a quarrel with her wife. She was arrested for "fraud" and put in prison to await trial. She said that "she dearly loves" her wife, and a newspaper reporter observed that "there seems a strong love and friendship on the other side, as

she [i.e. her wife] keeps the prisoner company in her confinement.” When the time came for the trial, Mary Parlour refused to appear to testify against her “female husband”, and the judge had no alternative but to discharge Sarah Paul, and simply ordered that her men’s clothing be burned in his presence.

The most famous female same-sex marriage during the eighteenth century was that of the Ladies of Llangollen, Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby. They eloped together in 1778 and shared their lives in Plas Newydd in Wales for 53 years. They were visited by all the notable people in society, and they became a byword for romantic friendship. But hints that their friendship wasn’t pure were raised by the *St James’s Chronicle* in July 1790, under the headline ‘EXTRAORDINARY FEMALE AFFECTION’: “Miss Butler is tall and masculine. She wears always a riding-habit. Hangs up her hat with the air of a sportsman in the hall; and appears in all respects as a young man, if we except the petticoat, which she still retains. Miss Ponsonby, on the contrary, is polite and effeminate, fair and beautiful.” The two women consulted the politician Edmund Burke for advice on taking a libel action against the newspaper. But Burke advised them that it would be very difficult to find redress at law, and that most respectable people would ignore such base calumny.

The term ‘romantic friendship’ has become popular among historians, and is often used as an excuse for ignoring sexual possibilities. Modern biographers of the Ladies seem to think that their contemporaries would never have thought of them as being lesbians, but this is not the case. For example, Hester Lynch Piozzi (whose daughter once visited the Ladies and reported back to her mother about it), noted that women were reluctant to stay the night with them unless they were accompanied by men, and in her journals suggested that the Ladies were “damned Sapphists”. So, whether or not we think the Ladies had sex together, it’s important to say that such speculation is not anachronistic, but had occurred to their own contemporaries.

The most revealing and detailed early example of female same-sex marriage is the case of Anne Lister, of Shibden Hall, Halifax. She was actively pursuing and having sex with women in the first decade of the nineteenth century, detailed in coded entries in her

diaries, which were deciphered and published in the 1980s. In 1809 Anne began a loving and sexual relationship with her aunt Isabella, six years older to her. But Isabella was not quite Anne's ideal; she took snuff before going to bed with Anne and drank rather too heavily, and she seems to have taken a butch role, the role which Anne preferred for herself. In 1812 Anne met and fell in love with Marianna Lawton, who was the same age as her. They hoped to live together, but Mariana decided to marry a man for financial security. They nevertheless managed to find many occasions to sleep together during the following years, while they waited hopefully for Mariana's husband to die.

Anne seems always to have taken a male role in sex, and she took great pleasure in deflowering her lover Mariana by using her middle finger and fingernail to break her hymen before her husband could do so. She used her hand to bring her partner to orgasm, but did not like her partner to do the same, and had orgasm herself either by mutual rubbing or by using her own hand. Anne recognised a masculine physical bearing and behaviour in herself, including an unusually deep-toned voice. In the early morning in bed she would engage in masturbatory fantasies in which she imagined herself as wearing men's clothes and possessing a penis and taking possession of one of the women she fancied. She also constructed her masculine image by doing such things as wearing men's leather braces to hold up her drawers. And she consolidated her identity as a woman-loving-woman by burning love letters once sent to her by a man, "so that no trace of any man's admiration may remain. It is not meet for me. I love, and only love, the fairer sex and thus beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love than theirs."

Anne "wanted a companion" she could "settle down" with, and same-sex marriage was her goal despite the occasional "flirtation". Mariana in her letters addressed Anne as her husband and signed off as her "constant, faithful and affectionate wife". Mariana's pet name for Anne was "Fred": while in bed with her she would say "Come again a bit, Freddy". Anne was troubled by the awareness that Mariana was another man's wife and that "no sophistry could gloss over the criminality of our connection". But Mariana did not share the same scruples and felt that because their "engagement" actually

preceded her marriage it therefore made her marriage to her husband a case of “legal prostitution”. Mariana asked Anne to be faithful to her and always to act towards other women as if she were married to Mariana. In 1821 they bound their hearts to one another forever by an irrevocable promise, marked by the pledge of a golden ring placed on Mariana’s finger alongside her wedding ring, and they solemnised the union by taking the sacrament together in church. As in a heterosexual wedding, this constituted a public declaration before God. Rather more privately, as a mark of renewing their love for one another, the two women each cut off some of their pubic hair, mixed the hair together, and kissed it before putting the intermingled strands into gold lockets which they wore under their clothes in mutual remembrance. In fact Anne had a collection of such love tokens from former lovers. (Lady Caroline Lamb once sent Byron a locket containing cuttings from her pubic hair – this is usually interpreted as an insult, but I think there was some kind of secret tradition about such love tokens in the Romantic Era.) Shortly after this ceremonial commitment, it became clear that Mariana had contracted venereal disease from her husband and passed it to Anne, who not long afterwards passed it to her aunt Isabella in a moment of unguarded passion. It took many years for all three women recover from the infection.

Anne wanted a life partner, a companion to live with her who would enhance her social status, and who would act with her authority when she was absent from the household. It became clear that she would never achieve cohabitation with Mariana because of the latter’s marriage to a man who would not conveniently die, and Anne began searching elsewhere. In 1832 she began wooing Ann Walker, 12 years younger than her, an heiress to a local estate near Shibden Hall. In 1834 Miss Walker came to live with Anne as wife to her husband. Miss Walker brought a fortune with her, and Anne began bold plans for rebuilding Shibden Hall. The two women had a really good sex life, with frequent and passionate mutual orgasms. Unfortunately Ann Walker was moody and somewhat neurotic, so they often travelled together to lift her spirits. Sadly, in 1840 during a fifteen-month tour of Europe and Russia, Anne Lister contracted a fever in the Caucasus Mountains and died. Miss Walker had Anne’s body embalmed and with great difficulty brought it back with her

from Russia in a seven-month journey, to be buried in the parish church in Halifax. In her will, Anne Lister left all of her property to Ann Walker, but to be held in trust for a distant Lister cousin. As would be the case in most heterosexual marriages, the “wife” was entitled to a life interest in all benefits from the estate, but in accordance with patriarchal tradition Shibden Hall on her death would continue in the Lister male line. Unfortunately Ann Walker’s relatives began a lawsuit to get the money and managed to put her into a lunatic asylum in 1843. But she wouldn’t give in to them, and continued to receive the rents from the Shibden estate until her death in 1854, when the Lister property went to the Listers and what remained of the Walker estate went to the Walker family. Ann Walker rewrote her will to give pecuniary bequests under her own control to three of Ann Lister’s young female relatives, to prevent the Walker relatives from getting more than they were strictly entitled to.

Interestingly, Anne Lister saw herself as part of the tradition of same-sex marriages. The Ladies of Llangollen were an icon of love between women for Anne. She had admired and thought about them for a long time, and in 1822 visited Wales specifically with the view of meeting them. Lady Butler was ill at the time (she was some 80 years old) and Anne only met Miss Ponsonby, but their 40-minute visit was a great success. She sent an account of her visit to Mariana, who was also very curious about the pair. Mariana wrote “Tell me if you think their regard has always been platonic and if you ever believed pure friendship could be so exalted.” Anne replied “I cannot help thinking that surely it was not platonic. Heaven forgive me, but I look within myself and doubt. I feel the infirmity of our nature and hesitate to pronounce such attachments uncemented by something more tender still than friendship. But much, or all, depends upon the story of their former lives, the period passed before they lived together, that feverish dream called youth.” I think that’s a very astute judgement that can’t be bettered.

CONCLUSIONS

The marriage of Anne Lister and Anne Walker closely matched the typical marriage of men and women of their class. Their relationship was “subversive” only with regard to their sexuality. If we are going

to draw any conclusion from this survey of same-sex marriages, it is simply that there don't seem to be a lot of differences between same-sex marriages and opposite-sex marriages. Marriage is essentially a traditional and conservative institution: as the *London Magazine* observed in 1779, "family life makes Tories of us all". The marriage of two people is sustained by structures and rituals that are pretty well the same regardless of the sexuality expressed in those unions. A radically different sort of arrangement does not emerge simply because the people who unite are two men or two women rather than a man and a woman. The domestic dyad seems to naturally settle into an asymmetrical structure or division of labour, often along lines of age, class, or gender roles. For the past 30 years, many gay and lesbian activists have been ideologically opposed to the idea of a homosexual marriage that simply mirrors a heterosexual marriage, but there haven't been many suggestions for alternatives. The kind of "open marriage" practised by homosexuals – that is, a marriage which doesn't fall apart if a partner has an occasional fling outside the marriage – has in fact been practised by middle and upper-middle-class heterosexual couples for centuries. And the "companionate" marriage adopted by most couples today, opposite-sex and same-sex, was an important feature of heterosexual marriage in the early modern period.

It hasn't been my purpose in this survey to compare same-sex to opposite-sex marriages, but I'm not sure there is much evidence of really significant differences historically. In general I would say that equality or near-equality is more common in same-sex unions: certainly the idealisation of friendship has been important to male-male relations. In fact the strict subordination of wife to husband that was central to the early ideology of marriage was mitigated during the eighteenth century by transplanting onto marriage some of the principles of friendship borrowed from the homosexual tradition, with increasing emphasis on so-called "companionate marriages". Of course homosexuality has been outlawed and condemned for most of history, so no one would ever enter into a same-sex marriage for the purpose of meeting social expectations, and there is no homosexual equivalent to the "marriage market". Heterosexual marriages serve wider social purposes, while homosexual marriages are often

secretive, intensely private, individual, affairs, whose primary or even sole motivation is love rather than status in the community.

FINIS