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Queer Theory, Historicism, and Early Modern Sexualities

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M A R I O D I G A N G I

Queer Theory, Historicism, and Early Modern Sexualities

Queer/Early/Modern, by Carla Freccero. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. Pp. x + 182. \$74.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Before Intimacy: Asocial Sexuality in Early Modern England, by Daniel Juan Gil. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Pp. xvi + 187. \$66.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England, by Maureen Quilligan. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. Pp. 281. \$59.95 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

Constructions of Female Homoeroticism in Early Modern Drama, by Denise A. Walen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. x + 230. \$69.95 cloth.

THERE WAS A TIME in Renaissance studies when any acknowledgment of the presence of homosexuality in a poem or play was likely to be accompanied by indignant or apologetic disavowals. Publishing *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947) at a time when "all editions of Shakespeare intended for use in schools were bowdlerized," Eric Partridge protected himself by coming out as one of those rational "heterosexual persons" who must find the notion of a homosexual Shakespeare ludicrous. C. S. Lewis, writing a few years later, could not deny the overt homoeroticism of Richard Barnfield's poetry, but could still express his distaste for the poet's sexual and artistic failures: "His sonnets, like *The Affectionate Shepherd*, are pederastic, whether because Barnfield suffered in fact from the most uninteresting of all misfortunes or in a sheer humanist frenzy of imitation."¹

During the last quarter century, literary scholars of diverse critical and political stripes have given sustained and rigorous attention not only to Renaissance homosexuality, but also to graphically sexual topics such as bestiality and enemas in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and fisting in *Coriolanus*.² Yet at least one recent

voice has suggested that such openness to the multiplicity of sexual meanings in Renaissance texts has gone too far. The exegesis of bawdy wordplay that might have seemed daring in 1947 is simply business as usual today, complains Stanley Wells in *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare*. Claiming that critics such as Patricia Parker continue to “seek out sexuality in previously unsuspected places and to attribute indecent meanings to characters who might, if they were able to react, be aghast to know of them,” Wells laments the “currently fashionable” prominence of “lewd interpreters,” whose work has the appearance “of scholarly rigour and critical sophistication” but derives largely from “fantasies released in their author’s minds by the texts.”³

Appropriately enough, the shaping power of “fantasy” that Wells blames for specious scholarship—the imaginative fertility of the critic’s desires and identifications as they engage with literary texts—has been elsewhere championed as necessary to any properly “queer” confrontation with premodern sexuality. In a widely cited introductory essay to their 1996 anthology, *Premodern Sexualities*, Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero argue that queer theory can productively dislodge the “truth-effects” of critical practices that privilege historical alterity over historical continuity and that “repudiate the roles of fantasy and pleasure in the production of historiography.”⁴ Promoting queer theory as a “pleasure-positive,” epistemologically destabilizing, and anti-normalizing critical discourse, Fradenburg and Freccero intervene in what they regard as the ossified and overly schematic critical orthodoxy that has come to dominate the history of sexuality: the spurious distinction between premodern sexual *acts* and modern sexual *identities* derived from a certain reading of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*.

Arguably, the most important theoretical development in scholarship on premodern sexualities during the last decade involves attempts to rethink this distinction between acts and identities. In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (2002), David M. Halperin challenges the “canonical reading” of Foucault that posits that “before the modern era sexual deviance could be predicated only of acts, not of persons or identities.”⁵ Halperin goes on to argue that premodern people might have made connections between “specific sexual acts” and “the particular ethos, or sexual style, or sexual subjectivity, of those who performed them” (32). Even though Halperin reaffirms his commitment to historicism, an approach that insists on the “alterity of the past,” he concurs with Fradenburg and Freccero that affirming the “pleasures of identification” with the past can serve to promote “a heterogeneity of queer identities, past and present” (17, 15–16).

Recent studies of Renaissance sexuality have likewise rejected a strict (pseudo-)Foucauldian division between acts and identities. In “Sexuality: A Renaissance Category?” James Knowles asks whether there might be “kinds of identity which are not our modern, autonomous and self-contained senses of selfhood.”⁶ Avoiding the Foucauldian specification of “sexuality” as a nineteenth-century “apparatus for constituting human subjects” (Halperin 88), Knowles

defines “sexuality” broadly and transhistorically as a “sense of sexual selfhood” or “sexual consciousness” that probably existed, in some form not yet sufficiently understood, in the early modern period (685). Kenneth Borris similarly insists that the early modern discourse of “masculine love” implies a “recognition of an alternate type of erotic pursuit and commitment (exclusive or otherwise), and thus a good deal of potential conscious agency for male same-sex lovers.”⁷ One of the most provocative versions of a theory of conscious homosexual agency has been advanced by Mary Bly in her study of the early seventeenth-century Whitefriars acting company. Bly argues that the Whitefriars company performed queer plays that were intended to appeal to, and even helped to constitute, “a self-aware homoerotic community in early modern London.”⁸

Of the four books I am reviewing, Carla Freccero’s *Queer/Early/Modern* engages most directly with this recent strain of thought. Freccero announces her theoretical affinities up front—a combination of the “psychoanalytic and post-structuralist dimensions of queer theory” (2)—and organizes chapters not around readings of particular texts but around explorations of critical debates in queer, feminist, and early modern studies. In a brief introductory chapter, Freccero uses Stephen Greenblatt’s controversial essay “Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture” to situate her adherence to psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories of subjectivity; chapter 2, “Always Already Queer (French) Theory,” deconstructs Petrarchan love lyrics by mobilizing a Derridean understanding of *queer* as the *différance* that “occupi[es] an interstitial space between binary oppositions” (18); chapter 3, “Undoing the Histories of Homosexuality,” takes David Halperin as the exemplar of an “altericist” historicism that Freccero challenges in the name of “queerer, more fantasmatic approaches to history” (31); chapter 4, “Queer Nation: Early/Modern France,” enacts this “fantasmatic historiography” by reading a fictional sixteenth-century text about incest as an “imagined response” to official (heteronormative) ideologies of family and nation-building (51); and chapter 5, “Queer Spectrality,” applies Jacques Derrida’s theory of “hauntology” to a project of “queer historiography,” which Freccero describes as a “way of thinking and responding ethically within history” by remaining open to “porous, permeable pasts and futures” (70).

Freccero deploys *queer* as a relatively indefinable term that has “something to do” with a critique of heteronormativity; with non-heteronormative sexual subjectivities; and with textuality as a principle of indeterminacy (5). *Queer* thus designates a specific field of inquiry (organized around heteronormativity/non-heteronormativity) as well as a critical practice that unsettles the epistemological certainties of traditional historicism: cause-and-effect sequentiality, teleology, and periodization (as in sharp distinctions between the “early modern” and “modern”). Freccero queers historicism by reading literature and history intertextually, engaging the pleasures of identification and anachronism, and advocating an understanding of the present as haunted by the “historical and affective

legacies" of past traumas (8). In this way, *queer* operates in the book both as a force of negativity, that is, as the agent of a deconstructive critique of sexual and historiographical normativity, and as a principle of affirmation, that is, as a guide for modes of being and thinking that do justice to the claims of the past as they reverberate through the present and into the future.

Queer also operates as a kind of shibboleth affiliating Freccero with a veritable canon of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theoretical work on sexuality and gender by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, Lee Edelman, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Jonathan Goldberg. In the first half of "Always Already Queer (French) Theory," Freccero marshals these critics in an argument justifying the deconstructive understanding of *queer* that informs her project. Citing Donald Morton's materialist critique of queer theory as a form of "ludic postmodernism," Freccero complains that *queer* has come to be "hypostasiz[ed]" as a personal identity (queers) and "institutionalized" as an object of knowledge (queer studies), consequently blunting its force as a "non-identity-based critical cultural and political practice" (14–15). She urges us to "think about *queer* again in a deconstructive context," as a theoretical practice that critiques "identity-based fields of inquiry and political movements" (18, 15). Despite the caveats of Morton and the vernacular use of *queer* to name a personal identity and a field of academic study, however, there seems little need to advocate a return to a poststructuralist understanding of *queer* to the highly specialized academic audience at which *Queer/Early/Modern* is directed. This anti-identitarian definition of *queer* has remained dominant in cultural scholarship for about fifteen years, as the pantheon of queer theorists Freccero cites clearly demonstrates.⁹

In that Freccero's apparent exaggeration of a crisis around the institutionalization of *queer* gives her the opportunity to elaborate her affiliations with prestigious queer and poststructuralist theorists, one wonders if it does not reflect a certain canon-forming tendency in Renaissance sexuality studies—a drawing of sharp distinctions between properly "queer" and "non-queer" approaches—that should give us pause.¹⁰ In a later chapter, for instance, Freccero faults conventional historicism for its failure to recognize that unlike medical, psychiatric, and pedagogical discourses, literary texts "explicitly resist the project of conceptual categorization and classification through the complex rhetorical displacements of subjectivity and the impossibility of closing off—delineating the boundaries of—the field of signification" (47). This is a compelling argument. Yet it also bears a striking resemblance to the central methodological premise of Bruce Smith's 1991 book, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*. Arguing that literary discourse offers a different kind of "imaginative" access to Renaissance homosexuality than the official discourses of law, theology, or medicine, Smith describes Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as open-ended explorations of a "self-conscious [sexual] subjectivity" that "seems distinctly modern."¹¹ Smith, to be sure, conveys this

premise without Freccero's poststructuralist vocabulary or metacritical polemic, and doubtless from a more identitarian "gay" (i.e., not "queer") perspective. Moreover, his emphasis on the imaginative dexterity of literary discourse does not prevent him from inserting literary texts into a taxonomical scheme, a move that Freccero would reject. Nonetheless, it seems significant that Freccero makes no effort even to acknowledge the possible relevance of Smith's work, let alone to engage it. In *Queer/Early/Modern*, as in other early modern scholarship that operates under the aegis of the *queer*, judgments about what counts as *queer* and what counts as *theory* are working to accord visibility and invisibility to individual contributions to the field, and as such are problematically reshaping the history (and hence the possible critical futures) of early modern sexuality studies.¹²

That Freccero so narrowly imagines the range of queer scholarship worthy of her attention is even more regrettable because of her ability to produce thought-provoking analyses of theoretical controversies within the history of sexuality. For example, in "Undoing the Histories of Homosexuality," Freccero characterizes David Halperin's work as representative of an "altericist" historicism that taxonomizes identities, constructs teleological accounts of the development of "modern" homosexuality, and uses literary texts as stable repositories of historical information about sexual attitudes (47). Freccero also faults Halperin's account of the modern discourse of homosexuality for falsely universalizing male homosexuality. Following Foucault, Halperin extrapolates from the particular example of male homosexuality a general definition of "modern" homosexuality in terms of the production of "normalized embodied subjects through a discursive implantation of perversions" (36). In a departure from Foucault, Halperin further claims that the modern concept of sexual orientation is grounded primarily in same-sex desire rather than in gender identity. According to Freccero, Halperin thereby produces a spurious analytic distinction between premodern and modern sexuality and risks marginalizing the role of gender in the construction of contemporary sexual subjectivities, especially for women and the transgendered. Drawing on the work of medieval scholars Karma Lochrie and Ruth Mazo Karras, Freccero goes on to argue that in the premodern era, perversions were already discursively deployed to construct female subjectivity, since a woman's illicit sexual behavior would have immediately exposed her as a specific kind of "personage," for instance, as a "whore" (36–37). Taking gender into account allows us to perceive a premodern division of female sexuality into what Eve Sedgwick, speaking of modern sexual epistemologies, calls "minoritizing" definitions (some women are whores) and "universalizing" definitions (all women are potentially whores). Freccero's insistence on keeping sexuality in tension with gender is a salutary reminder of the overdetermined relationships among early modern discourses of desire, embodiment, and power.

When Freccero turns to the analysis of literary texts, her deployment of *queer* as a principle of Derridean *différance* works to confute the boundaries of both

sexuality and gender. Through an astute analysis of the “grammatical perversion” of lyric syntax in the poems of Petrarch, Louise Labé, and Melissa Etheridge, Freccero shows that the structure of address in Petrarchan poetics articulates a relationship of both desire and identification between the speaker and the addressee, thus undoing the heteronormative subjectivity of the lyric “I.” Freccero’s individual readings are perceptive and suggestive; however, the conclusion she draws from them is surprisingly reductive. With a discussion of only two brief stanzas in poems by Labé and three songs by Etheridge, Freccero claims that her “critical genealogy” of the love lyric demonstrates that “the Western love song is always already queer and that we have only to deconstruct heteronormative culture for these differences within to appear to displace and estrange the subject of heteronormativity from itself” (20, 29). If the point of the truncated analysis is simply to illustrate that every Western love song is “always already queer,” then it seems that we have little else to learn from reading lyric poems of different historical eras queerly, or from asking how the queer meanings of particular poems might be complexly determined by the particular cultural contexts in which they are produced and consumed.

Queer/Early/Modern makes its most innovative and generative contribution to early modern sexuality studies in demonstrating, via Derrida’s theory of spectrality, what an affirmative queer historiography might look like. Queer historicism involves an openness to the “affective investments of the present in the past” and hence to “the possibility of being haunted, even inhabited, by ghosts,” that is, by the trauma of the past (79–80). As a critical practice, queer historicism adopts a model of “spectral” historical analysis that, in the terms of Michel de Certeau, eschews both the “necrological” model that buries the past by categorizing and containing its artifacts, and the “colonial” model that appropriates the past by mastering and silencing the “other” (70–71). Freccero demonstrates the ethical and affective stakes of these historiological models by considering the contemporary case of the transgendered Brandon Teena and the sixteenth-century case of Jean de Léry, a French Protestant minister who in 1556 visited the French colony in Brazil, a transcultural experience he recorded in *Histoire d’un voyage en terre de Brésil* (1578). Whereas necrological and colonial historicisms would attempt to identify, stabilize, and utilize the meanings of Brandon Teena’s traumatic rape and murder, spectral historicity remains receptive to its ghostly returns, its ethical demands for the “the creation of a future where categorical definitions so dependent on gender and desire might prove affirmingly impossible and unnecessary” (75). Himself a kind of early modern spectral historicist, Jean de Léry allows himself to be psychically penetrated by the voices and movements of New World inhabitants, producing effects ranging from “acute visual pleasure to mystical *jouissance*” (91). Léry’s “queer subjectivity, characterized by a penetrative reciprocity,” represents an ethical relationship to the other in which neither resemblance nor identification is foreclosed (102). In her elegant and

impassioned reading of L ery's narrative, Freccero demonstrates how a queer historiography might serve both to advance our understanding of alternative early modern histories and to bring the analytic resources of psychoanalysis and deconstruction into productive tension with those of historicism.

Daniel Juan Gil's *Before Intimacy* might also be defined as a kind of queer historicism, in that it approaches early modern sexuality through the combined insights of psychoanalytic queer theory and historical sociology. Constructed from an elaborately interlocking chain of premises, Gil's method works to *disarticulate* the sexual from the social. Whereas much Renaissance scholarship understands sexuality as either the erotic expression of a socially normative homosocial desire or the eruption of an antisocial sodomy, Gil defines sexuality as "*a special class of interpersonal relations* that, like modern intimacy, is set apart from conventional modes of sociability" (xi; italics in original). As theorized by Niklas Luhmann, modern intimacy provides "an institutionalized home" for interpersonal relations "in a private, domestic sphere" (xi). Although the domestic institutionalization of intimacy postdates the early modern period, early modern writers such as Thomas Wyatt, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare articulate a literary discourse of asocial sexual intimacy "rooted in the friction generated when a characteristically modern ideal of universal humanity is undercut or abraded by residual elements of a premodern social imaginary that emphasizes inherent identities and quasi-biological differences between persons" (xi). Gil locates the emergence of this characteristically modern ideal of universal humanity in the civilizing process influentially described by Norbert Elias. Sexuality, then, is the affective outcome of a socially dysfunctional experience in which "people are driven together by the allure of a shared humanity only to be plunged apart at the last moment by a resurgent sense of fundamental, blood-borne difference and almost bodily incompatibility"; in this clash of social imaginaries, "the pain of interpersonal breakdown is recast as a pleasurable connection to another body" (xi-xii). To theorize the "corporeal, often depersonalized emotions" that attend this experience of asocial sexuality (xii), Gil draws upon scholarship on the history of emotions, but his primary theoretical innovation is to historicize Leo Bersani's psychoanalytic account of sexuality as "socially dysfunctional" (9).¹³

Gil exudes a dazzling confidence in marshaling such a diverse array of historical and theoretical arguments in support of his master narrative of the trauma of an emergent modernity, a trauma to which the discourse of asocial sexuality offers an "adaptive response" (xiii). Ultimately, however, the plausibility of this hypothesis must rest on the persuasiveness of the individual readings, and in this regard Gil meets with uneven success. His theory of the breakdown of socially functional relationships yields a compelling interpretation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, in which "recurring interpersonal failure" and social rejection are the conditions for the melancholy poet's erotic fascination with a radically narcissistic,

aristocratic Young Man, and consequently for the compensatory pleasure he takes in the power of his own radically autonomous poetry (123). Gil produces supple, insightful readings of individual poems across the sequence as he unfolds the development of asocial eroticism between Shakespeare and the Young Man amid the intimations of antisocial sodomy between Shakespeare and the Dark Lady and between the rival poets and the Young Man. Mining the densely impacted languages of interiority, passion, and status in the *Sonnets*, Gil's theoretical apparatus extracts from the poems rich imbrications of erotic and social meanings.

In other instances, however, the literary text seems to buckle under the weight of that theoretical apparatus, as if Gil, like some scholarly Malvolio, were willfully crushing the text to produce the desired meaning. For instance, in an analysis of Wyatt's "The Long Love That in My Thought Doth Harbour," Gil argues that the Petrarchan mistress's insistence on her lover's sexual restraint represents a standard of civility, or a "respect for a hypothetically universal core of humanity" associated with the "modern, complex social totality" from which the poet retreats into the "arms of his feudal warlord" (16). It is difficult to see how the mistress's appeal to "reason, shame, and reverence" might be referred to a social ideology that promotes a "universal core of humanity." As Gil later explains, "the beloved who educates her lover in refined love is a standard trope of Neoplatonic and Petrarchan conventions" (29). What does it mean, then, to make the aristocratic mistress in Wyatt's early sixteenth-century poem not the conventional advocate of a "premodern" ideology of male honor (manly restraint) and female honor (chastity), but the mouthpiece of a nascent discourse of shared humanity, as if her intention were to cool the poet's blood by reading him a lecture in civics?

Arguably the most important methodological issue raised by *Before Intimacy* concerns the implications that its theory of asocial sexuality might have for the resolutely social account of sexuality offered by much early modern scholarship. Does Gil's theory simply reveal the presence in the period of an alternative discourse of asocial sexuality, or does his theory necessarily challenge the emphasis that Renaissance critics have placed on the social determinants of erotic subjectivity? More pointedly, what might Gil have to say about a text such as Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*? Perhaps Gil would argue that his intersubjective definition of "sexuality" would not apply to *Edward II*, as Marlowe fails to recognize or to register the trauma of emergent modernity that yields an asocial understanding of sexuality in authors such as Spenser or Shakespeare. Consequently, asocial and social theories of sexuality might well be able to coexist as different heuristic tools for illuminating different literary registers of the erotic.

Nonetheless, Gil's approach becomes problematic when it has the effect of depoliticizing sexuality in one of his central texts, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. While acknowledging that Patroclus's theatrical mockery of the Greek generals demystifies their political authority, Gil argues that "Patroclus's theater aims

not to deconstruct state power *in reality* but only to produce erotic pleasure" (96; my emphasis). Because Patroclus's use of theater depends on the difference between "theatrical representations and *reality*," its "*real* effect" is only to affirm the sexual tie between himself and Achilles (97; my emphasis). The reductive tendencies of Gil's argument manifest here, as elsewhere, through a rhetorical reliance on the authority of the "real": asocial sexuality is "the *real* subject of *The Faerie Queene*"; in Petrarchan poetry, "what is *really* the encounter of differently constituted social identities" is made to look like the antagonistic "encounter of two genders" (51, 103; my emphasis). The definition of sexuality as *prima facie* asocial thus appears to necessitate a reductive interpretation of *Troilus and Cressida* in which Patroclus's theatricality cannot be *both* erotic *and* political, *both* theatrically pleasurable *and* effectual of social dissent. From a methodological standpoint, Gil's sharp demarcation between the social and the sexual recalls Freccero's efforts to demarcate the practices of a properly queer historicism, in which the material processes of history or society cannot be called upon to limit the significations of sexual discourse.

An alternative to queer historicism is offered by Denise Walen's *Constructions of Female Homoeroticism in Early Modern Drama*. Where Freccero deconstructs sexual meanings, Walen's primary metaphor for the cultural representation of same-sex desire is "construction," with all of its architectural connotations of containment, solidity, and visibility. Indeed, the ability to *see* female homoeroticism in the drama is central to Walen's thesis that female same-sex desire "enjoyed a more prominent position in early modern culture than previously suspected" (2). In other words, there is a certain quantifying tendency in Walen's effort to prove that there was simply *more* representation of female homoeroticism on the Renaissance stage, and hence greater awareness of its existence in society, than previously believed. The demonstration of a broad cultural presence constitutes the strength of this book, in that Walen treats over seventy plays, many of them obscure and rarely read, that depict or allude to female same-sex relationships.

Not surprisingly, the archival impulse of the project lends itself to a taxonomical organization, another significant departure from queer historicism's commitment to indeterminacy. Walen divides dramatic representations of female homoeroticism into four categories that identify types of relationships ranging from the "predatory" to the "utopian." In "predatory" scenarios (chapter 4), jealous or vengeful women strategically manipulate sexual relations in plots to victimize younger or less experienced women; in "utopian" scenarios (chapter 5), women of similar status, age, and experience develop "open and often idealized relationships" based in erotic affection rather than sexual consummation (121). Cross-dressing plays a central role in Walen's other categories, which are defined by genre: comic scenarios in which gender disguise leads to "playfully emergent" eroticism between women (chapter 2); tragic and tragicomic scenarios in which gender disguise leads to "anxiously emergent" eroticism between women (chapter 3).

To explain the presence of these different typologies of female same-sex desire on the early modern stage, Walen advances a kind of functionalist theory of the relationship between dramatic representations and cultural perceptions of female homoeroticism. Disputing Valerie Traub's claim that later seventeenth-century texts register a shift in cultural attitudes toward lesbianism from "the acceptance of an impossible desire to the fear of immoral practice" (82), Walen claims that cultural attitudes toward lesbianism were negative throughout the early modern period.¹⁴ What changed is that Jacobean and Caroline playwrights finally discovered a form, as it were, in which to represent the "serious" anxieties about lesbianism that were always present in the culture. Hence, the "dramatic literature expanded to embrace multiple classifications of homoerotic attraction" (81).

The most intriguing and frustrating aspect of Walen's argument concerns the agency of those playwrights who went against public sentiment to depict female homoeroticism as "not only tolerable but also pleasurable" (3). Spanning the era from the 1590s to the 1660s, such playwrights include Robert Greene, William Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, Abraham Cowley, Richard Brome, James Shirley, and Margaret Cavendish. Yet did playwrights so different in historical circumstances, social status, theatrical experience, professional vocation, and political affiliation all have the same motives for presenting female homoeroticism in a positive light? The question is especially pressing in the case of Caroline playwright Lodowick Carlell, whose *The Passionate Lovers* (1629–1638) presents a singularly "unambiguous defense of female same-sex desire" as a valid form of romantic love (138). Insisting that it would be anachronistic to claim that Carlell "was taking a sociopolitical stand to promote or defend an oppressed sexuality," Walen offers instead the disappointingly bland conclusion that such plays "illustrate that male authors conceived of female homoerotic desire as an element of romantic love" (148). But certainly something more extraordinary is going on with Carlell. His impulse and ability to mount an explicit defense of female homoerotic desire in a way never previously attempted seems to cry out for some kind of historical explanation that Walen is not interested in pursuing.

Walen's emphasis on the anomalously positive representation of female homoeroticism in Renaissance drama instead leads to a problematic line of argumentation that assigns modern sexual identities to characters in early modern plays. In stark contrast to Freccero's queer anti-identitarianism, Walen claims that playwrights made cross-dressed heroines more acceptable to audiences by presenting them as "ultimately heterosexual women stuck in awkward situations" or as "clearly heterosexual" women who "generally reject female advances" (66, 96). A guiding assumption of the book as a whole is that the plays display a "dominant heterosexual plot" from which "homoerotic subtexts" might emerge (5). These formulations subject sexual desire itself to a transparent and unchanging binary taxonomy: there is heterosexual desire and there is homosexual desire, and we know each when we see it.

In her concluding chapter, Walen explicitly articulates the overarching binary distinction that guides her analysis of female homoeroticism in early modern drama. She ultimately explains the difference between positive and negative representations of female homoeroticism in terms of “love” and “lust,” a distinction she takes from Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. However, Catherine Belsey, using the same passage from Shakespeare’s poem, has shown how untenable and tendentious is the distinction between love and lust in the early modern period.¹⁵ Walen’s impressive archival research could have benefited from a serious engagement with the kind of historical and philological argument Belsey mounts regarding the changing ideological terrains of love and lust during this period.

As much of the above has implied, to speak of Renaissance “sexuality” has been, to a large extent, to speak of homosexuality, but Maureen Quilligan’s *Incest and Agency* reminds us that sexuality has long been a central category of feminist analysis. Quilligan is indebted to Gayle Rubin’s influential feminist critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological theory of incest. According to Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo functions to extend patriarchal alliances across social groupings through the exchange of women in marriage. According to Quilligan, by showing that “female *agency*,” including the ability to use language, “is at stake in the suppression of female *desire*,” Rubin exposes how the “traffic in women” promotes social inequality between men and women (12). Theoretically, there are three ways for women to halt their exchange in marriage: incest, where “women make an erotic choice within their own close kin”; celibacy; or lesbian desire (13). Drawing on the work of feminist anthropologist Annette Weiner, Quilligan argues that an additional form of resistance to marital exchange involves the theory of “inalienable possessions”: the imperative to retain valuable goods within the family. By circulating properties among female relatives or brothers in order to maintain and enhance family prestige, women can “exercise immense political power” (24).

Quilligan’s brilliantly counterintuitive move is to posit a literary form of such “incestuous” agency in early modern women’s authorship of texts that publicly link them to socially prominent brothers, uncles, or female cousins in an “endogamous assertion of family prestige” (27). These links might take the form of gifts of books, dedications, allusions to the writings of famous family members, or “incest schemes” within the texts themselves (7). Implicitly defined by Quilligan as any exertion of social, erotic, or symbolic agency that halts the traffic in women, “incest” thus encompasses a wide range of desires and practices: actual or imagined sexual contact between siblings (Philip and Mary Sidney) or first cousins (Mary Wroth and William Herbert); cross-generational emotional dependency (Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Cordelia); female homoeroticism and friendship (Britomart’s cross-dressed encounters with Malecasta and Amoret in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*); metaphorical formulations of the Christian sinner’s relationship with God (in the young Elizabeth Tudor’s translation of Marguerite

de Navarre's *Glass of a Sinful Soul*); or the lifelong choice of virginity (Queen Elizabeth). By placing female-authored texts in dialogue with canonical texts by Spenser, Shakespeare, and John Milton, Quilligan also produces a "useful estrangement of texts that we have told ourselves we already know very well" (9)—that is, a kind of queering of the canonical, masculinist Renaissance.

Like Jonathan Goldberg's *Desiring Women Writing*, Quilligan's book represents an important attempt to reread both the texts and the authorial practices of early modern women writers in terms of sexuality and power.¹⁶ To understand how, exactly, Quilligan deploys the concept of sexuality, it is instructive to compare her approach to a specific text, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, with that of Gil. Gil argues that Sidney authorizes his intimate erotic relationship with Stella (Lady Penelope Rich) by giving Astrophil a "private language" of love that excludes those who are socially unworthy of access to elite women (39). Quilligan, however, regards *Astrophil and Stella* as a "social practice that addresses relations of real power" (91). By addressing his sonnet sequence to Lady Rich rather than to the queen who had punished him for interfering in her marriage negotiations, Sidney publicly flaunts "his own political importance" while tendentially elevating private erotic courtship above the political courtiership at which he had failed (97). Far from a private interpersonal relationship, sexuality in Quilligan's reading is deeply embedded in social relations of status, power, and property.

Consequently, when Quilligan describes how female authors and characters mobilize incest, she does not posit that their agency derives from a "queer" sexuality as such, in the sense that Walen understands the transgressive sexual agency of women who seduce other women. Rather, in Quilligan's account women exert power by mobilizing a conservative ideology of aristocratic prestige that puts an endogamous halt to marital exchange. Hence Quilligan argues that female homoeroticism did not in and of itself provoke the cultural anxiety that Walen claims: there was no need for early modern culture "to interdict, as a special case, female-to-female sexual desire," because *any* form of female homosociality was already regarded as threatening to patriarchal control (21). This formulation points to a truth insofar as it suggests that for early modern women sexual practices generally cannot be separated from gender ideologies; but its complete absorption of the sexual into the social problematically erases the specific ways in which, as both Walen and Gil demonstrate, homoerotic desires might disrupt or disengage from homosocial structures and functions.

As we have seen, in all four of these studies the very definition of the "sexual" in relationship to the "social" draws the examination of the erotic into different avenues enabled by the frameworks of historicism, genre criticism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and feminism. That three of the four books under review here deal centrally with female sexuality might indicate a common recognition of the need to address more directly the ongoing gender imbalance in early modern queer scholarship. Finally, these studies suggest the importance of confronting the disci-

plinary and professional allegiances signaled by a commitment to “theory” or “history.” Whereas Gil attempts to reconcile a (queer) psychoanalytic theory of sexuality to a historicist narrative of emergent modernity, the claims of theory and history are more at odds in Freccero and Quilligan. Freccero uses queer theory to critique the category-constructing imperatives of an altericist historicism. Quilligan, however, demonstrates that contemporary feminist theories of *écriture féminine* and the privileging of overt political resistance to gender inequality cannot adequately account for the “historical practice of premodern women writers” (16), whose agency was delimited by the “extremely different social conditions” of early modern kinship systems (121). As such, Quilligan’s study is a useful reminder that an altericist historicism need not be construed as antithetical to a *queer* emphasis on analytic flexibility or political engagement.

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Notes

This essay has benefited from conversations with Nicholas Radel and Steven Kruger.

1. Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* (1947; New York: Routledge, 1968), vii, 11–12; C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 497.
2. See, respectively, Bruce Boehrer, “Economies of Desire in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 32 (2004): 99–117; Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Jonathan Goldberg, “The Anus in *Coriolanus*,” in *Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Carla Mazzio and Douglas Trevor (New York: Routledge, 2000), 260–71.
3. Stanley Wells, *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1, 36–37.
4. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, “Caxton, Foucault, and the Pleasures of History,” *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvii.
5. David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 29.
6. James Knowles, “Sexuality: A Renaissance Category?” in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 682.
7. Kenneth Borris, *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance: A Sourcebook of Texts, 1470–1650* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.
8. Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5–6.
9. The year 1991 saw the publication of the “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” special issue of *differences* (3.2) edited by Teresa de Lauretis.
10. As far as canonicity is concerned, it might be relevant to note that the only critic who gets more citations in Freccero’s bibliography than Freccero herself (17) is Derrida

- (19); at the same time, other contributors to early modern sexuality studies are entirely absent.
11. Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 267.
 12. In this regard, *Queer/Early/Modern* can be considered alongside the more overt adjudication of inclusion and exclusion from the queer critical canon performed in "Queering History," a 2005 *PMLA* essay by Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon that celebrates the legacy of Goldberg's 1994 anthology, *Queering the Renaissance* ("Queering History," *PMLA* 120 [2005]: 1608–17). The essay builds on a session at the 2004 MLA convention called "Ten Years Since *Queering the Renaissance*," organized by Menon, chaired by Goldberg, and featuring Jeffrey Masten, Richard Rambuss, and Laurie Shannon. As their MLA session title reveals particularly baldly, Goldberg and Menon identify *Queering the Renaissance* as the privileged origin of truly "queer" approaches to early modern sexuality. As such, Goldberg and Menon can ignore the earlier groundbreaking books of Bruce Smith and Gregory Bredbeck (*Sodomy and Interpretation: Marlowe to Milton* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991]), the latter of which first showed how powerfully and brilliantly poststructuralist theory could be brought to bear on Renaissance sexuality. While proclaiming that the recent books of Freccero, Laurie Shannon, and Menon herself have carried on the legacy of *Queering the Renaissance*, Goldberg and Menon disavow a canon-forming agenda, claiming, "Such work contributes to and demarcates a field but at the same time marks it as one whose boundaries must remain indeterminate" (1608). Nonetheless, the boundaries seem determinate enough to exclude other projects that, despite explicitly aligning themselves with a queer approach, are not acknowledged as contributing to the "field" as Goldberg and Menon officially constitute it. These include Theodora A. Jankowski's *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), Mary Bly's *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*, and my own *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). In light of the explicit efforts of Freccero, Goldberg, and Menon to "queer history," why are we given such partial (and ironically familial) histories of queer criticism? Tellingly, in response to a critique by Carolyn Dinshaw and Karma Lochrie that "Queering History" ironically upholds the traditional borders between the medieval and the Renaissance, Menon quickly abandons the ideal of queer indeterminacy when she flatly pronounces that "our modes of studying desire have become predictable and boring" ("Forum: Queering History," *PMLA* 121 [2006]: 837–39, especially, p. 838).
 13. The "anti-social thesis" articulated in Bersani's *Homos* was the subject of a panel at the 2005 MLA convention, and of a subsequent discussion in *PMLA*. See "Conference Debates: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 819–28.
 14. See Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
 15. Catherine Belsey, "Love as Trompe-l'oeil: Taxonomies of Desire in *Venus and Adonis*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46 (1995): 257–76.
 16. Jonathan Goldberg, *Desiring Women Writing: English Renaissance Examples* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).