

The Eighteenth Century According to Jeffrey Merrick

Same-Sex Sexuality according to Jeffrey Merrick

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It is a real pleasure to celebrate Jeffrey Merrick's scholarly contributions to eighteenth-century French historiography. Jeff has produced an impressive corpus of research that analyzes fundamental problems in political, social, and gender history during pre-revolutionary France. I would like to meditate on those publications focusing on French lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer history (i.e., LGBTQ history) and to offer a few thoughts about why Jeff's work has proven to be so inspirational and how it has opened up the field in such fundamentally important ways. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Jeff is the father of French LGBTQ history, nor is it possible to understate the impact made by his work in motivating new scholars to answer his call to take to the archives in order to deepen our understanding of the queer past of the country that continues to fascinate us all.

In order to evaluate this contribution to LGBT history, I would first like to discuss what led Jeff to work in this newly emerging field in the 1980s and early 1990s. Then, I hope to suggest certain characteristics that, taken together, comprise a "Merrick approach." Finally, I intend to highlight how Jeff's commitment to scholarship has had a tremendously positive impact on teaching and outreach, both in and out of the classroom, something we unfortunately see all too rarely today.

Given recent debates of gay marriage, and the recent embrace of LGBTQ peoples by so many straight allies, it is difficult, and fairly unpleasant, to remember what the climate toward homosexuality was like in the 1970s and 1980s. In short, it was hostile. And I'm not simply characterizing the general public; I am also speaking about academics, including historians. A very few brave souls, importantly Randolph Trumbach in English history, were starting to do research on gay topics, but for the most part professional historians were unwilling to take this kind of study seriously.¹ The publication of John Boswell's work, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* in 1980 was perhaps the first gay history that drew note from the mainstream, but even so, few scholars were willing to own up to an interest in reading this kind of history, let alone writing it.²

In the 1980s, a handful of brave historians followed in the footsteps of Trumbach and Boswell, for the most part in Classics and the history of Great Britain and the United States. Here I'm thinking about people like John Winkler, David Halperin, Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey. I

¹ See, for example, Randolph Trumbach, "London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Social History* 11 (1977): 1-33; and Trumbach, "Sodomitical Subcultures, Sodomitical Roles, and the Gender Revolution of the 18th Century: The Recent Historiography," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 9 (1985): 109-21.

² John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

would also like to mention Judith Brown for her work on a lesbian nun in Renaissance Italy.³ For the most part, though, young historians who were interested in pursuing the “gay past” were warned off by their senior mentors, actually with good reason because such research was likely to be career suicide.

So what *was* being done in French gay history? Well, pretty much, zippo. For many of us who were gay, and who oftentimes had even been drawn initially to studying France because of our sexual identity, we found ways to sublimate our interest in homosexuality by exploring other forms of marginality. In my case, for instance, I found inspiration in studying peasant politics as a way to think about how relatively powerless groups of people could try to exert themselves against daunting odds.

I won’t presume to say what led Jeff to study political culture in this period. But whatever the motivation, unlike many other historians, his focus on political culture somehow led him to (perhaps even compelled him into) the domain of gender and sexuality, and I am quite sure that his homosexuality had something to do with encouraging him to pursue that line of inquiry.

Now I don’t want to be overly deterministic here. But it interests me that at a time in American history, in which opponents of gay visibility were finding new ways to inscribe homophobia into discourses about nature, Jeff published in 1988 a fascinating article, “Royal Bees: The Gender Politics of the Beehive in Early Modern Europe.”⁴ In this article, reminiscent of the eloquent and just plain brilliant articles written by Natalie Davis that were subsequently published in *Culture and Society in Early Modern France*, Jeff argued, “early modern texts about bees demonstrate the circularity involved in recourse to nature to ratify patriarchal values.”⁵ More generally, he maintained that, throughout the early modern period and beyond, thinkers “translated cultural norms into natural laws.”⁶ He could have been writing about conservative discourse in the United States in the 1980s.

The “Royal Bees” article did not discuss gay history per se. However, it did set the stage for a way of thinking about gender that was going to prove a hallmark of Jeff’s future work on sexuality in fundamental ways. I’ll return to that perspective in a bit. For now, I’d like to continue the chronological narrative leading up to his work on gay history. In 1990, just two years after the publication of the “Royal Bees” article, Jeff directly confronted homosexuality, at least in terms of how it was represented, in a terrific article, “Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late Eighteenth-Century

³ See, for example, John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990); David M. Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?” *History & Theory* 28:3 (October 1989): 257-74; Halperin, “Sex before Sexuality: Pederasty, Politics, and Power in Classical Athens,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 37-53; Martin Bauml Duberman, “I Am Not Contented’: Female Masochism and Lesbianism in Early Twentieth-Century New England,” *Signs* 5:4 (Summer 1980): 825-841; Martha Vicinus, “Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships,” *Signs* 9:4 (Summer 1984): 600-622; George Chauncey, Jr., “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War One Era,” *Journal of Social History* 19:2 (Winter 1985): 189-211; and Judith Brown, “Lesbian Sexuality in Renaissance Italy: The Case of Sister Benedetta Carlini,” *Signs* 9:4 (Summer 1984): 751-758.

⁴ Jeffrey Merrick, “Royal Bees: The Gender Politics of the Beehive in Early Modern Europe,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 18 (1988): 7-37.

⁵ Merrick, “Royal Bees,” 27. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

⁶ Merrick, “Royal Bees,” 27.

France.”⁷ It would be easy to devote this entire article to the myriad of ideas that bubbled forth in this essay. The characterization of the monarchy in sexual terms, the different forms taken by the “news” and gossip in the public eye, the escalation of depictions of same-sex sexual behavior, the seeming proliferation of homosexuality in all levels of society, the attention paid by scribblers and the public to tribades, particularly those in the theatrical world, the suggestive relationship between the rise of autonomous and powerful women and the rise of same-sex sexuality, etc., etc., etc. This portrayal was not of the Enlightenment that we once knew!

Following the appearance of “Sexual Politics and Public Order,” Jeff became a public advocate for research in gay history, both in the French case and beyond. I remember clearly the first time I met Jeff. Funnily enough, I don’t remember the actual year; it was in the early 1990s. I don’t remember the actual place, but it was at a late night party in a hotel room in some city during a meeting of the American Historical Association. I was very eager to meet Jeff, I am loathe to say not as much for his great reputation as author of *Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*, a book that I had encountered on the shelves of the *usuels* of the Bibliothèque Nationale, but primarily because he was an out gay man working in French history, one of the very few.⁸ For me, that fact was huge. We spent a long time talking about our mutual frustration that there was so little work being done in gay history, particularly on the French case, and we pledged to try to change that.

Jeff certainly fulfilled that promise. Many French historians probably do not know that he was an early coordinator of the Committee on Lesbian and Gay History, under the auspices of the American Historical Association. He agreed to serve as editor of that body’s newsletter from 1992 to 1995, and under his direction, the *CLGH Newsletter* became de facto a serious historical journal.⁹ Replete with articles and book reviews, as well as information about archives, libraries, and professional meetings, this newsletter created a forum that stimulated research on the history of homosexuality across space, from case studies in the Mediterranean world, Asia, and beyond; across time, from Antiquity to the recent past; and across disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, literary studies, and art history. In addition, it created a virtual salon that brought together different members of this “republic of letters”: women, men, and transgendered peoples; scholars working with different, and oftentimes opposing, theoretical approaches; and individuals at different stages of their academic careers, from the very senior to the very junior. Our profession oftentimes fails to recognize sufficiently this kind of service, but I can honestly say that Jeff’s years at the helm of the CLGH Newsletter probably did as much to advance gay history in the historical profession as any individual’s book or article.

That is not to say that the indefatigable Jeff was silent on that front! In 1994, he published in *French Historical Studies* a provocative article, “The Cardinal and the Queen: Sexual and Political Disorders in the Mazarinades.”¹⁰ I have to say that I had never read a scholarly essay quite like this one. We’re all

⁷ Jeffrey Merrick, “Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late Eighteenth-Century France: The *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète*,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1:1 (July 1990): 68-84.

⁸ Jeffrey W. Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

⁹ The Committee on Lesbian and Gay History was founded in 1979 and has been an official affiliate of the American Historical Association since 1982. The name was changed to the Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in 2009. Current and previous issues (2005 and later) of the Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender History Newsletter can be found online at: <http://clgbthistory.org/newsletter/> (Accessed November 1, 2013).

¹⁰ Jeffrey Merrick, “The Cardinal and the Queen: Sexual and Political Disorders in the Mazarinades,” *French Historical Studies* 18:3 (Spring 1994): 667-99.

so jaded today that it's hard to remember what things were like even a relatively short while ago. Jeff's analysis used words, both English and French, which I had read only in pornography! It was incredibly refreshing to realize that we had finally arrived at a place where sexuality could be forthrightly and unapologetically addressed.

The Fronde piece was important, of course, for much more high-minded reasons. Continuing his exploration of the relationship between representations of sexual license and political disorder, Jeff showed how sodomy in the seventeenth century was intertwined with "irreligion, Italy, bestiality, depravity, and effeminacy."¹¹ This type of conceptual linkage, elaborated on in Jeff's future work, highlighted not only how same-sex sexuality is of interest to queer readers, but also how it speaks to a wider audience about fundamental political, cultural, and social concerns. Over the course of the next two decades, Jeff would go on to discuss, for example, links between homosexuality and urban history, the history of friendship, and institutional history, just to name a few.

This foray into the seventeenth century was to prove instructive in another way, as well. By thinking systematically about the representation of sodomy in the mid seventeenth century, Jeff was able thereafter to consider eighteenth-century "homosexuality" in relief. In other words, he was in a position to see more clearly the continuities, as well as the differences, in portrayals of same-sex sexuality over the course of the Old Regime.

At this point, Jeff decided that the time was ripe to seed the field and encourage more people to understand why gay history should be of interest to a wider academic audience. To that end, he and I hosted a conference in 1994 on the history of homosexuality in modern France. Given the newness of the field, the conference was designed not to come up with a "grand narrative" of lesbian and gay history from the Enlightenment to the present, which in any case would have been impossible. Rather, we hoped to invite scholars who represented different scholarly approaches and interests to think about homosexuality in a wide variety of contexts. It was a sign of the times that there really weren't any scholars working in the field; instead, Jeff invited scholars who were open to such exploration. And it was a sign of Jeff's hallmark commitment to inclusiveness that the conference brought together scholars who were female and male, straight and gay. That conference led to the publication of *Homosexuality in Modern France* in 1996.¹² Not too long thereafter, in 2001, Jeff and Michael Sibalis edited another similar volume, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*.¹³ In that space of time, the field had become more solidified, and this later collection was able to benefit from the expertise of scholars who worked primarily in the field of lesbian and gay history.

Under Jeff's influence, both of these books respond to new ways of thinking about homosexuality—ways that I would call "promiscuous," and I use this term in a very positive way. To show what I mean here, please allow me first to characterize briefly the historiography of homosexuality from writers who had homophile perspectives. Until the 1970s, on the rare occasion that homosexuality was mentioned, authors invoked great individuals of the past who happened to be homosexual.¹⁴ In line with first-wave

¹¹ Merrick, "The Cardinal," 679.

¹² Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹³ Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalis, eds., *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁴ See for example Marc Daniel, [Michel Duchein] "Essai de méthodologie pour l'étude des aspects homosexuels de l'Histoire," *Arcadie* 131 (November 1964): 497-505; 132 (December 1964): 559-565; 133 (January 1965): 31-37; 134 (February 1965): 72-77.

feminist perspectives, homosexuals were seen here as essentially being just like heterosexuals, if flawed. And homosexuals, who were haunted and hunted in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, found sustenance in knowing that there had been gay Leonardos, Sapphos, and Alexanders in the past. Following Stonewall, lesbians and gay men proudly asserted their differences with mainstream society, as second wave feminists had previously done vis-à-vis men. While gay communities became more visible in the Village, San Francisco, and other large cities, a second generation of historical work focused more on examining homosexual communities of the past. In some ways, the Molly clubs studied in the 1970s by Randolph Trumbach fit into this paradigm.¹⁵

Under the impulse of Foucault, a third generation of historiography emerged, queer theory. Like third wave feminism, scholars working in this tradition are particularly attuned to thinking about sexuality as changeable, malleable, dynamic, unstable. And this line of research has been in a productive feedback loop with younger people, who eschew labels about sexual identity and believe more generally in sexual fluidity both in the past and in the present.

Jeff's more "promiscuous" approach does not worry overly much about whether it is better to study famous homosexuals, explore gay communities, or to problematize sexual identity. In his edited volumes, he brought together people who, taken collectively, did all of these things. In his own work, he historicizes sexuality (so as not to ascribe modern ways of thinking on to past peoples), investigates the networks of homosexually-inclined women and men and the people who interact with them, and analyzes case studies of sodomites and tribades to unpack how sexuality is related to politics, culture, and society in the eighteenth century.

There is one other way that Jeff has been promiscuous. He has been very open to engaging in dialogue with scholars representing our sister disciplines, primarily those in literary and cultural studies. Jeff has been extremely active in the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, and he has participated in many productive sessions on homosexuality in eighteenth-century France at that organization's annual meetings. Talking with specialists from Departments of French, English, Art, and History has had a significant, and very positive, impact, I think, on his work.

First, Jeff developed the analytic tools to bring together in his studies what for want of a better word I'll call the "real" and the "represented." (OK, I know that the "real" is not very "real," and I know that the "represented" is actually quite "real.") And in a way, that is how Jeff discusses same-sex sexuality in his research. What are the ways that homosexuality is thought about in different kinds of texts? What are the assumptions, the norms, the flights of imagination? How do the different kinds of texts, whether gossip and satire, police reports, legal codes, philosophical tracts, etc., operate? How do they interact with one another? To what extent can we speculate on what individuals who engaged in sexual relations with members of the same sex thought about themselves? Jeff's interdisciplinary approach has helped deepen our understanding of same-sex sexuality in countless ways.

Second, I would argue that Jeff developed his methodology in some ways by arguing against scholars in literary and cultural studies. For him, there's a balance to be struck between naively believing in the "real" and seeing everything only in terms of representation. The two thousand or so men who were arrested by the pederasty patrols in the capital during the 1780s were real people. The handful of men burned at the stake mattered. And the public ridicule of Mademoiselle Raucourt had real consequences. Although we cannot ever know gay history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, going to the archives to try to compile and understand the experiences of real women and men is meaningful, and it is essential.

There are three other characteristics of Jeff's work that I would like to highlight briefly before ending. First, Jeff is committed to inclusiveness. For years, historians interested in homosexuality focused

¹⁵ Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

almost exclusively on the history of male homosexuality. When criticized, these historians, not surprisingly male, tended to exclaim, “I couldn’t find any lesbians in the archives,” or “Gay men and lesbians have different histories, so let lesbian historians work on lesbian history”—both defenses offensive and, in fact, incorrect. There was historical work on lesbians, but it came for the most part from scholars in literary studies. Jeff stood out, and continues to do so, in his commitment to analyzing the male and female cases side-by-side. His article on the Marquis de Villette and Mademoiselle Raucourt, for instance, stands as a model for why it is essential to think about how female and male sexuality are constructed vis-à-vis one another, as well as how they are both embedded in larger assumptions about gender.¹⁶

Second, Jeff’s work is marked by a commitment to the *longue durée*. When it comes to sexuality, he accentuates continuities, while portraying change as it occurs slowly and incrementally over time. Remember that article on the bees? Remember how he showed how patriarchy persisted, albeit on different bases? Or the *Memoires secrets* article? There Jeff argued, “If Louis XV, identified with sexual promiscuity and royal despotism, embodies patriarchalism in the old style, Louis XVI, identified with sexual monogamy and royal justice, embodies paternalism in the new style.”¹⁷ That is the kind of nuanced, careful, and source-faithful approach that typifies Jeff’s work on sexuality.

So when the Revolution decriminalized sodomy, did this mark a real shift in attitudes about or the policing of homosexuality? Don’t be so quick to leap to such a conclusion, Jeff warns. When queer theorists assert that homosexuality was born in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, did that mean that some huge shift had occurred? Get thee to the archives and you might be surprised what you will find, Jeff admonishes.

Finally, I’d like to underscore Jeff’s commitment to bringing sources to students and to the general public. In 1996, for instance, he published an article in the *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* giving advice on how to integrate gay history into French history courses.¹⁸ In 2001, he co-edited a collection of translated primary sources on homosexuality in early modern France.¹⁹ This sourcebook included documents as varied as sermons, travel literature, jurisprudence, gossip and satire, poetry, pornography, police records, memoirs and diaries, and philosophical treatises. So much for the canard that it is impossible to do gay history because until modern times nobody had ever talked about it!

Jeff has continued to bring sources to our collective attention by publishing a series of articles on the oppression of sodomites in the early, mid, and late eighteenth century.²⁰ In these case studies, he

¹⁶ Jeffrey Merrick, “The Marquis de Villette and Mademoiselle de Raucourt: Representations of Male and Female Sexual Deviance in Late Eighteenth-Century France,” in Merrick and Ragan, eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France*, 30-53.

¹⁷ Merrick, “Sexual Politics and Public Order,” 79.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Merrick, “The Old Regime and the French Revolution,” in “Integrating Lesbian and Gay History into French History Courses,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 23 (1996): 405-7.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, eds., *Homosexuality in Early Modern France: A Documentary Collection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁰ See, for instance, Jeffrey Merrick, “Chaussons in the Streets: Sodomy in Paris, 1666,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15 (2006): 167-203; Jeffrey Merrick, “‘Nocturnal Birds’ in the Champs-Élysées: Police and Pederasty in Pre-Revolutionary Paris,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8 (2002): 425-32;

includes large appendices of translated primary source materials from the archives. Although one reviewer said that it might be hard to assign Jeff's fascinating translations to her students in Texas, given the naughty language, one imagines that with the changes going around us, that will change, if it hasn't already.²¹

It's hard to sum up Jeff's work on LGBTQ history. (Yes, in keeping with his desire to move toward inclusiveness, Jeff was one of the first historians to use this term, recognizing the exciting possibilities, as well as the rectitude, in thinking more broadly about queer sexualities....) And in fact, it's premature to sum up the work of someone who continues to be so active in the profession. Among other things, Jeff is currently translating and editing all of the police records of men arrested for same-sex sexual behavior in Paris in 1781, and I'm quite sure that he'll continue on to 1782 and beyond!

But let me end with this. A few years ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to moderate a plenary session at the Society for French Historical Studies annual meeting at Rutgers University. Interviewing Natalie Davis and Denis Crouzet, we tried to get at what it meant to do "histoire engagée."²² Even after that discussion, I'm still not exactly sure what engaged history is, but I know that Jeff is doing it.

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Jeffrey Merrick, "Sodomites and Police in Paris, 1715," *Journal of Homosexuality* 42/3 (2002): 101-26; and Jeffrey Merrick, "'Brutal Passion' and 'Depraved Taste': The Case of Jacques François Pascal," in *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalis, eds. (New York: Haworth Press, 2002), 85-104.

²¹ Marilyn Morris, Review of Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr., eds. *Homosexuality in Early Modern France: A Documentary Collection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) *CLGH Newsletter* 15:2 (Winter 2001), 13-14, esp. 14.

²² Bryant "Tip" Ragan, Natalie Zemon Davis, Denis Crouzet, "What is *Histoire Engagée*?" 54th Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, Rutgers University, April 5, 2008.