
Imagined More than Women: lesbians as hermaphrodites, 1671-1766

EMMA DONOGHUE

University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT In texts circulating in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women who had sex with women were often denounced, mocked, and exiled from womanhood; one of the most common strategies was to call them hermaphrodites. There was constant slippage between concepts of sexual deviance at this time, but two ideas in particular – lesbian desire and hermaphroditical anatomy – became tightly bound into the figure of the tribade, a woman whose phallic ‘member’ (whether a prolapsed vagina or an enlarged clitoris) was thought to enable her to have penetrative intercourse with women. This essay follows the hermaphroditical tribade through children’s compendia, gynaecological handbooks, neoclassical satires, love poems and anti-masturbation treatises. Though the writers were generally hostile, their debates over anatomy and motivation, and the tonal ambiguities in their treatment of these freakish heroines, make these texts rich sources for lesbian history.

Ignorance about lesbian existence in early modern Britain has been overestimated by some historians [1]; tolerance for lesbian choices has been exaggerated by others.[2] Though apparently-innocent ‘romantic friendships’ were generally encouraged, and actual prosecutions for lesbianism were practically unknown in Britain, persecution had other routes: women who had sex with women were subjected to regular denunciations, sneers and gibes in print.

Those who passed as men or married women were the commonest targets, because they transgressed the rigid gender boundaries which structured British society; and feminist scholarship of the past decade has revealed an increasing number of such stories.[3] What has received far too little analysis, however, is the way in which lesbianism was usually treated by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British writers as an issue of gender abnormality, whether there was evidence of cross-dressing or not.[4]

Through all the changes in the definition and treatment of people called hermaphrodites over the centuries, homophobia seems to have remained a constant factor.[5] What was the connection? In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault makes some illuminating comments on the slippage between a range of concepts of sexual deviance. He dates the setting apart of the 'unnatural' from other sexual crimes to the eighteenth century, and describes the lack of distinction between the many behaviours included in 'sodomy' until the invention of the 'homosexual' in 1870.[6] One of the limitations of Foucault's discussion, however, is its concentration on men. My study of British texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries suggests that, rather than floating around with many other sexual deviances in a semantic pond, two ideas in particular – lesbianism and hermaphroditism – were tightly connected in ways that can be distinguished and described. While the 'sodomite' may have been a general term for a person (almost always male) who committed unnatural acts, the 'tribade' was a much more specific label which bound into an intimate couple the ideas of lesbian sex and hermaphroditical anatomy.

This slippage between the two concepts went both ways; it was rare to find either mentioned without reference to the other. On the one hand, hermaphrodites were stigmatised by suggestions that their size or shape was either the result of a sexual crime, or could enable such a crime. On the other hand, lesbians could be mocked by references to their confused gender status and presumably monstrous genitals. Thus identity was reduced to anatomy, and a woman who desired women could be explained away as that half-mythical anomaly, a hermaphrodite.

The time frame I have chosen for this article covers, as far as I know, the most important texts about lesbians as hermaphrodites. Over almost a century, new ideas about gynaecological health, libido, psychological patterns, and national and racial character were pulled into the debate. But reading these texts a clear progression is impossible to find; ideas vary or alternate rather than developing in any one direction. A particular writer's assumptions about anatomy could be quoted with scorn by a successor, but revived by yet another. Within almost every text, contradictory ideas held sway; it is rarely clear whether the writer actually believed in the concepts (e.g. of a 'real' hermaphrodite) they were using. Throughout this period the 'female hermaphrodite' was alternately denounced as a monster, pitied as a patient, given a freakish heroine status, or celebrated (tongue-in-cheek) as a sexual prodigy. This variety makes reading a confusing task, but a rewarding one, since it leaves plenty of room for interpretation. The discourse of the lesbian-as-hermaphrodite raises as many questions as it answers.

Though hermaphroditism was discussed in a wide range of texts that reached all sections of society, from court poems to pseudo-medical treatises to children's books, the same queries kept circulating, and no real consensus was ever reached on whether hermaphrodites existed at all. Some

traditionalists used the word to mean fully double-sexed people, conceived in a special central chamber in the womb.[7] Others, including Nicholas Venette and Giles Jacob, made half-hearted attempts to divide so-called hermaphrodites into several classes (depending on the predominance of male or female traits), with the rare double-sexed people as real hermaphrodites, and all the others merely 'pseudo-hermaphroditities', men or women whose body slightly echoed the other sex. Those who presented themselves as most modern and scientific insisted that all those called hermaphrodites were 'pseudo', really feminine men or masculine women.[8] Most attention was paid to the latter; the figure of the hermaphroditical female, with a clitoris longer than the half inch medical writers considered normal, or a 'member' caused by the prolapse or inversion of the vagina, became a favourite subject in medical books and pornographic fiction alike. But even when, by the mid-eighteenth century, the dominant (but not unanimous) opinion among British writers seems to have been that the people called hermaphrodites were nothing but overgrown women, these women were kept in a separate and freakish category, just like hermaphroditities. Only the label had changed.

The primary source of texts on hermaphroditism is medical or pseudo-medical literature, written not so much for the puzzled physician as for the titillated reader. Even if the texts are open to a positive reading, as a source of information about lesbian possibilities for a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century reader, the intention of the writers was clearly hostile, however urbane the tone. Rather than attacking lesbianism directly as a sin, they explained it away as an anomaly. By cutting lesbians off from their sex, from their own femaleness, these writers (usually, but not always male) could reduce them to exceptional, and therefore harmless, freaks of nature.

Their reliance on classical sources was crucial. Starting with the premise that when a woman makes love to a woman she is imitating a man, male classical writers had gradually constructed the myth of the overgrown tribade - the woman whose huge, rigid member enabled her to penetrate her lover in an act that was almost the real thing - and the British texts referred to these sources endlessly, especially Lucian and Martial.[9] The following anecdote from the anonymous *The Supplement to the Onania*, a best-selling treatise against masturbation,[10] is typical:

It is certain, that in some Women, especially those who are very salacious, the *Clitoris* is so vastly extended, that by hanging out of the Passage, it is mistaken for a *Penis*, such have been called *Fricatrices*. By *Celius Aurelianus*, *Tribades*: By *Plautus*, *Subigatrices*, and accounted Hermophrodites [*sic*], because, as said before, they have been able to perform the Actions of Men with other Women.[11]

Note the tangled thread of causality (does the enlarged clitoris here cause lesbian desire, enable lesbian acts, or is it a side-effect of the women's salaciousness?), and the vague labels (are they called hermaphrodites

because they can have sex with women, or vice versa?). Though unsure who to blame for what, the author could not admit to ignorance, but filled in the gaps with classical allusions.

The Supplement to the Onania went on to tell the story of a particular case; it is an excellent example of the cramming together of rather conflicting theories.

A certain young Woman at *Thoulouse*, had a relaxation of the vagina, resembling a Man's *Penis*, and some pretended that she abused it that way, it being six inches in length, and four in Circumference in the middle, where it was very hard. It gradually encreas'd from her Childhood: She was searched by the Physicians there, who gave their Opinion, it was a real *Penis*; upon which the Magistrates of the Town, ordered her to go in Man's Habit. In this Equipage she came to *Paris*, where she got Money by showing herself, till upon other assurances that she was a Woman, and a promise of being cured, she was brought into the *Hôtel Dieu*, where the descent was soon reduc'd, and she forc'd to resume her Female Dress, to her great regret.[12]

This brief account exhibits the typical features of case histories of lesbians portrayed as hermaphrodites. Firstly, the setting is emphatically non-English; France, at a safe but imaginable distance, was a favourite location for British stories of sexual transgression. Next, notice the vagueness about female anatomy; though in his general description of hermaphrodites the writer had identified the member as a huge clitoris, this time it was the vagina which in some way relaxed or inverted to become a potent member. (The phallocentrism is the same in either case. Both often described, in medical literature, as similar to the penis – the vagina, as an inversion of it, and the clitoris, as a miniature version.) This change is described, quite unlike the lofty erection of the penis, as a 'descent' – the moral fall of the female genitals, perhaps. As is typical in texts of this era, hermaphroditism is dramatised as a sex-change, or series of such changes, rather than being a fixed state of being double-sexed.

Next it is suggested – coyly, with the safe formula 'some pretended' – that this ambiguous member was used sexually, presumably with other women, though whether this was the cause or the consequence of the genital growth is not made clear. Gossip brought doctors who intervened, and made what is presented in retrospect as a misdiagnosis; this is another common element of such stories. Typical, too, are the various solutions offered in this Toulouse case. For her appearance to match her sexual identity, her outside to fit her inside, the hermaphrodite must be recast as a whole man. Reasoning that, because she desired women and could make love to them with what the doctors called "a real *Penis*", the magistrates ordered her to play the role (and wear the clothes) of a man. (A similar assumption of universal heterosexuality was made in eighteenth-century Grenoble in the case of Anne Grandjean, whose confessor reacted to her

teenage confession of desire for girls by advising her that she must therefore dress as the boy she clearly was.[13]) In fact, the criteria used to determine sex were based on heterosexuality; the ever-popular *Aristotle's Book of Problems* explained that a hermaphrodite should be considered a man or a woman depending on "in which member it is fittest for the act of copulation".[14]

With the change in clothes came a move to the big city; this represents a fresh start, a new life in urban anonymity. But it is also significant that Paris, as the centre of commerce, offered the unnamed hermaphrodite new rewards for the very abnormality she was running from. Rejecting the safety of passing as a whole man, and thus resisting the story's closure, she found that the status of freak could be made profitable through self-exhibition. But once again the medical establishment intervened, turning her into a patient, this time offering her – or perhaps bullying her into – a stable female identity. Her 'descent' having been "reduced" (fully or partially, we are not told, nor how), she was expected to reclaim her womanhood with gratitude. The sting in the tail of this successful case history is that the woman regretted having to slot back into a female role; it is implied that she missed a man's social freedom and access to (and perhaps capacity for) sexual relations with women.

Stories like this one are found in English literature in increasing numbers from the late seventeenth century. British writers were clearly influenced by the European doctors whose works reached England in many original and translated editions.[15] Because there was no single expert, British writers picked up a wide variety of theories on anatomy and desire, and often incorporated several interpretations in one anecdote.

Many texts, especially the earlier ones, concentrate on magical tales of sex-metamorphosis, with deviant desire as only one of its elements. Generations of readers would have got their first ideas on this subject from Nath Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World* (1678), a giant compendium of oddities which was popular for children right up to the nineteenth century. His succinct chapter on 'Such Persons as have changed their Sex' gave 24 examples, from classical and contemporary sources. Interestingly, 23 of them were female-to-male, a metamorphosis clearly considered more logical, since every creature on the great chain of being was thought to aspire to a higher state. (Judith Brown finds this true of texts about sex-change before the seventeenth century; as she explains dryly, "perfection was not likely to degenerate into imperfection".[16]) Also, for a phallogocentric reader the change from female to male made a better story, since the magic member was mysteriously discovered or created, rather than being lost, or replaced with the nothingness of the vulva.

Gynaecological handbooks tended to describe the vagina as the inverse of the penis, and the clitoris as a miniature version of the penis; everything had to be compared to the central, phallic point of reference. Accordingly,

opinions varied on the question of whether a female hermaphrodite's 'member' was a prolapsed or inverted vagina, or an enlarged clitoris. The vagina theory seems to have been dominant in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but during the period with which I am dealing it was overshadowed by the idea of the tribadic clitoris. For Wanley in 1678, the hermaphroditical member was clearly a vagina; in several cases, the change happened on the wedding night, when the breaking of the hymen let the woman's hidden member slide into view, and "those parts which were inverted and conceal'd, began to appear, and she rose in the Morning of a contrary Sex". In another example, this time in a lesbian situation, a sixteenth-century French teenage girl was "wantoning in bed with a Maid that lay with her" when "the signs of a man brake out of her".[17] In *The Supplement to the Onania* (1710?), as we have seen, the two explanations could coexist; though the Toulouse woman had "a relaxation of the vagina", hermaphrodites in general were explained as women with huge clitorises. The vagina theory seems to have been on the wane; I have found no stories of a vagina inverting into a tribadic member after *The Supplement to the Onania*.

The clitoral theory seems to have predominated from the late seventeenth century on. Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671), a popular work which reached four editions by 1725, described the clitoris as the primary source of women's pleasure, and as a miniature penis or 'yard' because erectile tissue makes it "stand and fall as the Yard doth". This pleasing similarity posed a problem when like became too like. As Sharp suggested warily, "some think" that at a hermaphrodite is only a woman whose clitoris is "greater, and hanging out more" than other women. She went on to explain how physical abnormality could lead to sexual deviance: "sometimes it grows so long that it hangs forth at the slit like a Yard, and will swell and stand stiff if it be provoked, and some lewd women have endeavoured to use it as men do theirs".[18]

The Latin folio of Joannes Benedictus Sinibaldus reached many editions in English throughout this period. A translation of 1687, *Rare Verities*, included a section on 'Whether females may change their Sex', which explained how if the clitoris got stimulated (by anyone, male or female) it could turn into a member: "This Clytoris lies latent within a woman's pudenda, which answers to a mans virile; this if it chance to grow over-much, may stand in stead of a mans member, yet without effusion of seed". Sinibaldus did not make clear whether this was a real change of sex, or merely an addition to female anatomy. What he was explicit about was the consequent lesbian potential: "Wherefore heretofore there hath been laws enacted against feminine congression, because it is a thing that happens too common and frequent". If the sex had really changed, this would not longer be 'feminine congression'; the overgrown woman is thus placed uneasily between the sexes.[19]

For Sharp and Sinibaldus, the primary interest was anatomy; lesbian desire was discussed only as a consequence of a physiological change. But religious writers were more interested in sin. Investigating in the opposite direction – from the sex lesbians wanted, to the anatomy that could facilitate it – the Italian Franciscan monk Lodovico Maria Sinistrari developed the theory of penetrative tribadism. Since for sodomy to occur, genitals had to enclose each other, he reasoned, a finger or dildo was not enough, only representing ‘pollution’. Sinistrari decided that for true lesbian sodomy, one of the women would need a huge clitoris with which she could, not just stimulate, but actually penetrate the other.[20] This theory was very influential, lingering well into the nineteenth century; when two schoolteachers were accused of lesbianism in Scotland, 1810, one judge protested that “without penetration the venereal orgasm could not possibly follow”, and it would be statistically impossible for both of them to have members capable of penetrating.[21]

Racism is often found at the heart of social constructions of lesbianism; it is usually a matter of the ‘West’ sneering at the ‘East’, but there are significant differences between the countries targeted. When British writers wanted to mock lesbianism as a decadent taste, they tended to blame the aristocracy of France or Italy. If the story concerned frustrated, sensual women cooped up with only each other for company, the setting could be a French convent, a Turkish bath or a Persian harem. Lesbians who were featured as eccentric individuals or cross-dressers tended to come from Germany, Italy, France or occasionally Britain; a hot climate was often seen as a contributing factor, especially for Italians. But the discourse of the hermaphroditical pointed farther afield. While British writers would only admit to the occasional tribade with a giant clitoris in their own country, they insisted that vast numbers of such women were to be found among the indigenous populations of India and Africa. As Jane Sharp put it firmly in 1671, “in the Indies and Egypt they are frequent, but I never heard of but one in this country”. Not only the clitoris but the labia (‘nymphae’ or ‘wings’) figures in Sharp’s hearsay: “Some Sea-men say that they have seen *Negro* Women go stark naked, and these wings hanging out”.[22] Nakedness is used here to heighten the voyeuristic appeal, to make the black woman into a living illustration of abnormality.

Why was Egypt a particular target? Rumours of a widespread practice of infibulation there were twisted into proof that there must have been something big that needed cutting off.[23] As Jane Sharp explains with relish, “In some Countries they [the wings] grow so long that the Chirurgeon cuts them off to avoid trouble and shame, chiefly in *Egypt*; they will bleed much when they are cut, and the blood is hardly stopt; wherefore maids have them cut off betimes, and before they marry”.[24] Sinibaldus is similarly vague about the shame and trouble large labia might bring: “Thus many of the Egyptian women have been used by reason of their untamed

lust”.[25] Though these writers tend to cite clitoridectomy as their evidence for sexual deviance among Egyptian women, it would be a mistake to accept this as a sincere confusion. As Elaine Hobby points out with reference to the Sharp passage, locating lesbianism in Africa and India is “a sign of the white (heterosexual) desire to make it something foreign, something unEnglish, something ‘uncivilised’”. [26] These countries functioned as handy dumping grounds for British anxieties about lesbianism. When writers could not bear to accept that women they knew might be tribades, it was much easier to discuss such a horror at a safe distance, a continent or two away.[27] And of course this displacement gave fresh fuel to pseudo-scientific theses about the inferiority and animality of black women, so racism and lesbophobia endlessly reinforced each other.

So far I have concentrated on the tribadic ‘member’ – which women had them, how they got them, what it meant about their gender. But what did they do, these magical organs? Most writers agreed that women used them to have penetrative sex with other (usually more ‘normal’) women. However, there was endless confusion over which came first, the member or the sexuality. Some writers started with the assumption that the enlarged clitoris directly caused desire, in an almost mechanical way. Robert James’s *Medicinal Dictionary* (1745) explained tribades as women who happened to have grown to the point where, suddenly looking down and noticing their pseudo-phallic capacity, they made experimental “attempts to converse in a criminal manner with other Women”. Only when these acts had become habitual, James implied, did the women become “fonder of associating themselves with Women than with Men”. [28] (It is interesting here that experience is shown to reinforce a desire until it hardens into a definite sexual preference and thus an identity called ‘tribade’; such an identity is something that social constructionists have denied the existence of before the late nineteenth century.[29])

James’s chain of causality must have been a comforting one to many writers of the time because it made lesbianism seem accidental, bounded in a small piece of flesh, like a tumour which could be noticed and cured (or cut off) in time. The Swiss doctor Samuel Tissot, whose *Onanism* (1766) had five English editions by 1781, held the same view: insisting that the ‘real’ hermaphrodite is only a ‘chimera’; nonetheless he claimed to know of some women with a ‘semi-resemblance’ to men, a few of whom took it one stage further. “Some women who were thus imperfect, glorying, perhaps, in this kind of resemblance, seized upon the functions of virility”. [30] It was one of the ironies of eighteenth-century sexuality that Tissot could present these women’s abnormal imperfection as something to ‘glory’ in, since even a ‘semi-resemblance’ to men was an honour. Though as freaks they were less than whole women, Tissot could not help admitting that in some sense they were more than women too.

The author of *The Supplement to the Onania* was in two minds about causality. For one unfortunate woman he mentioned, anatomy definitely came first; her story was that her clitoris kept rubbing against her underclothes as she walked, making her the helpless victim of “extravagant Desires”. (She redeemed herself by consenting to a clitoridectomy.)[31] But a letter from ‘E.N.’ in the same text suggested that lesbian desire is primary; lust led to sex which led (perhaps combined with an innate abnormality) to enlargement of the genitals which in turn heightened desire, in an endless cycle of arousal.[32] Whether this was a genuine letter or a fiction by the author we cannot know, but either way the story was told in startlingly frank and appreciative terms. First initiated into pleasure at the age of 11 by the 20-year-old maid who shared her bed, soon “so intimate were we in the Sin”, she reminisced, “that we took all Opportunities of committing it, and invented all the ways we were capable of to heighten the Titillation, and gratifie our sinful lusts the more. We, in short, pleased one another, as well as each our selves”. This seven-year erotic odyssey set off a bewildering chain of symptoms, and E.N. could not tell what caused what:

Whether by the hard usage of my Parts by her, or my self, or both, or whether from any thing in Nature more in my make, than is customary to the Sex, I don't know, but for above half a Year past I have had a swelling that thrusts out from my Body, as big, and almost as hard, and as long or longer than my Thumb, which inclines me to excessive lustful Desires, and from it their [*sic*] issues a moisture or slipp'riness to that degree that I am almost continually wet.

The doctor/author diagnosed this as prolapse of the womb, and claimed to have cured E.N. with a course of his patent powders. Though he compared her to the hermaphrodites of legend, the vivid subjectivity of her letter allowed the reader to identify with her; this was one of the few stories told from the lesbian pseudo-hermaphrodite's own point of view.[33]

Most authors confined their comments to the nature, cause and cure of the ‘member’, leaving erotic details to the imagination. The only detailed account of penetrative tribadism I have found is in Giles Jacob's *A Treatise of Hermaphrodites* (1718). Jacob began with some general remarks on ‘Maculine Females’ who had large clitoral members. “Large Appurtenances” alone did not make a lesbian, he explained, but desire often did match anatomy: “many Lascivious Females divert themselves one with another at this time in the City”. It is interesting that, rather than worrying about the ability of even a giant clitoris to function like a penis, Jacob was concerned about its own ability to feel (like a penis); he had no doubt that tribades could give their women lovers “as much Pleasure as men do”, but doubted whether they could achieve “the Crisis of Enjoyment” themselves, “for want to Ejaculation”. [34]

Jacob included a long story of two friends, the mannish ‘Masculine-Females’ Margureta and Barbarissa, of aristocratic Italy and

France, respectively. The story is told from the point of view of a curious manservant, Nicolini, who had bored a peephole to watch them having sex. After kissing and touching each other, “one of the Females threw herself down upon the Bed, and displaying her self commodiously, the other immediately began the amorous Adventure, covering her Companion so effectually, that *Nicolini* could not possible discover any further Particulars”. The closeness of the bodies hides what brings them together; tribadism here is the mysterious act that can never be really witnessed. But the reader’s curiosity must not be frustrated too long; we are told that, conveniently enough Margureta happened to get up and walk towards the light, so Nicolini could observe “something hang down from her Body of a reddish Colour, and which was very unusual”.^[35]

In the second session after some refreshing wine, the penetrative role was passed to Barbarissa, who being “not so Masculine” was having difficulty getting up the “erection of her Female Member”. Dirty pictures and mutual spanking had little effect; finally, Margureta whipped her with a birch rod: “upon this, something appear’d from the Privities of *Barbarissa*, like unto what *Nicolini* had observ’d of *Margureta*, and they instantly put on their loose Gowns,^[36] and ran to the Bed, where *Barbarissa* embracing her Companion, did her Work effectually”.^[37] There is no name for Barbarissa’s member; it can only be described as a ‘something’ similar to Margureta’s reddish ‘something’. The author could only comprehend it through its ‘work’, in which he assumed it would function exactly like a (rather tired) penis.

Giles Jacob’s pseudo-hermaphrodites were not always exclusively lesbian; the double-sexed heroines of the last story he told, Diana and Isabella, seemed to be bisexual, since they “not only frolick’d with each other, but with both Sexes in general”. This is a more sinister story; the hermaphrodites’ seductions of anybody (female or male) but their own kind have to be punished. Sharing a bed with a parson’s wife, Diana tried to seduce her; the parson’s wife thought little of the initial kisses and embraces, supposing Diana to be drunk, and “was pretty easy” (which shows how acceptable fondling was among women), “till at last *Diana* threw her self upon her, and began an Adventure, very displeasing, which surpriz’d her to that degree, that she cried out vehemently”. The parson burst in, but only when he had examined Diana’s genitals did he take the attack seriously, as attempted rape, and threw her out of the house. A similar disaster befell Isabella in her relationship with a man. The Count and she had a pleasant affair until he reached down in the post-coital darkness and was outraged to discover that his lover was “a Monster”. “In his passion”, Jacob told his readers cheerfully, “he pull’d out a sharp Penknife, and cut off the external Members of *Isabella*”. When she had healed, all she could do was retire to live with Diana “as Man and Wife”. In case readers had missed the point that hermaphrodites both deserved and needed castration, the same thing was

shown to happen to Diana; the next time she tried to seduce a woman, she was punished by having her member cut off. "After which", Jacob reassured his readers, "both of them liv'd to be harmless old Women".[38]

The power attributed to female hermaphrodites went beyond sexual prowess; many stories accused them of impregnating women. Medical authors who claimed not to believe in the existence of real hermaphrodites nonetheless included fragments of such folklore without comment. The official policy of *The Supplement to the Onania* was to interpret all pseudo-hermaphrodites as overgrown women – yet the author mentioned in passing a married mother who got her maids pregnant, and a Scottish maid who impregnated her master's daughters and was buried alive for it.[39] What do these stories mean? The impregnation motif could be read as a sort of metaphor for the unseen, harmful effect of lesbian seduction; perhaps writers who were used to warning women that adultery would bear bastard fruit could think of no other way to dramatise the dangers of tribadic dalliance.

The same motif was used in a playful way in an eighteenth-century literary classic, Anthony Hamilton's *Memoirs of Count Grammont*, written in French in 1713 and published in multiple English editions from 1714. This rambling saga of the English court of Charles II included the tale of the senior maid of honour Mistress Hobart. Along with an ugly vivacity and an "irregular Fancy", Miss Hobart was known to have "a tender Heart, whose sensibility, some pretended, was in Favour of the *Fair Sex*". (Note the 'some pretended' formula common in references to lesbianism.) Her attempts to draw several young women into intimate friendship led to rumours; Hamilton played with multiple interpretations of her behaviour:

'Twas not long before the Report, whether true or false, of this *Singularity*, spread thugh the whole Court, where *People* being yet so unciviliz'd as never to have heard of that kind of *Refinement* in *Tenderness* of ancient Greece, imagined that the *illustrious H-t*, who was so fond of the *fairsex*, was something more than she appear'd to be.[40]

It is a measure of the persistence of the lesbian-as-hermaphrodite myth that such an author, considering himself too sophisticated to actually believe the myth himself, still needed to allude to it to colour his satire. Hamilton's two-edged mockery undercut the 'uncivilised' bigots who have never heard of Greek homosexuality, while making sure that the taint of abnormality still clung to Mistress Hobart. Rather than being more than the woman she appeared to be, he hinted, she was less; the tribade had lost her power to threaten the 'civilised' reader.

Hamilton went on to explain that only when satirical ballads complimented Mistress Hobart did her companions "begin to be afraid of her"; his implication was that court ladies had no real objection to lesbian affairs so long as they were not risking pregnancy. This fear was harnessed by

Mistress Hobart's rival, the poet Rochester, who finally lured the timid Mistress Temple away by telling her that Hobart had impregnated her own maid. What terrified Mistress Temple was not the discovery that Hobart desired her, but the ambiguous danger posed by a hermaphrodite in their midst: "After what she had just learnt concerning her, she look'd upon her as a *Monster* injurious to the *Virtue* of the *Fair Sex*, or what *Sex* soever she might be; and blush'd at the *familiarities* she had with a Creature whose *Woman* was with *Child*."[41] Her credulity was presented in the story as laughably naive. Rochester, like the author, made use of tales he had outgrown; without actually believing that women could impregnate each other, he perpetuated the myth for his own purposes.

Probably the most elaborate attack on a woman in terms of the hermaphroditical was *The Toast* (1736) by the Oxford don William King. Having lost a debt case to the widowed Duchess of Newburgh, King set himself to write a mock-epic poem in four books of English and Latin, which attacked the Duchess as 'Myra', a bisexually promiscuous witch and (mythical) hermaphrodite. King stands out from his contemporaries in his frankness about the aristocratic tribades he hated, as well as in his vocabulary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the noun 'lesbian' only as far back as 1925 and the adjective to 1890, making it seem a modern social construct, but in 1736 King was referring bluntly to "Tribades and Lesbians".[42]

With the misogyny characteristic of male Augustan poetry, he described Myra as outside not only femaleness but humanness:

With a toothless wide Mouth, and a Beard on her Chin.
And a yellow rough Hide in the Place of a Skin;
Brawny Shoulders up-rai's'd; Cow-Udders; Imp's Teat;
And a Pair of bow'd Legs, which were set on splay Feet

Rather than dwelling on her genital anatomy to prove she was a hermaphrodite, he created around her an atmosphere of unspeakable abnormality, using language to do with animals and witchcraft – since, as a footnote helpfully explained, all witches had a 'masculine appetite' for women. Another blunt footnote wound all the hints into a fact: unsated by three husbands and an estimated 200 male lovers, Myra daily practised "that unnatural Act the *Spaniards* call *Donna con Donna*".[43] Though Myra was introduced in the preface as "the principal Hero or Heroine (for she was both a Man and a Woman)", there was no attempt at doubling pronouns, and for most of the poem she was presented not as a literally two-sexed being but as a tribade, with a potent character and clitoris but no phallus. It was her pride in sexual prowess that made her rival men, not her anatomy; for most of the poem her hermaphroditical identity was psychological rather than physical. When towards the end of the poem Venus decided to make Myra "more fit for her sex" (fit to satisfy her sex, that is, not be it), what she gave her was a penis:

Let her thus be erect! (Here she held out her Fan.)
 And be superind'd all the Virtues of Man! ...
 Let her Passions be strong, as her Form is Compleat,
 And her Name of Distinction be FRIGA the Great!

A footnote explains that Venus, like Friga, was often worshipped as an idol with a beard, a divinely hermaphroditical female rather than a true hermaphrodite.[44] Basking in Venus's patronage, Myra enjoyed a brief and illusory period of glory with her new penis. When her cheated husband Mars burst in on her and her woman lover, and commented scornfully "Pretty Lambkins at play!", she told him proudly "I am ripen'd to Man", and announced that she could cuckold him and her lover's husband in one act. But soon, King explained with relish, Myra was blinded by powder from Mars's wig, and threatened with castration.[45] She gave in and surrendered her money and freedom, to avoid that fate – the irony being that by surrendering she was symbolically emasculated anyway, reduced to a female eunuch.

The focus of King's hatred was Myra's sexuality; his tongue-in-cheek use of the discourse of the hermaphroditical was an elegant way of attacking lesbian pretensions to power. (Here I differ from Lillian Faderman, who claims that texts such as *The Toast* accused women of bisexuality "primarily as a metaphor" for assertiveness in other areas of life.[46]) But paradoxically, as well as mocking Myra, King's employment of hermaphroditical terms also glamorised her; at many points in the poem she came across as supremely, sexily powerful. Isolated in what Marjorie Garber calls the 'third space' between genders,[47] the female hermaphrodite could safely be described in glamorous terms, so long as her ultimate impotence was established.

It would be a mistake to assume that the discourse of hermaphroditism could only be used to demean women's sexuality. Celebratory texts were rare but telling; one example is Aphra Behn's fantasy of 1688, 'To the Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to Me, Imagined More than Woman'.[48] This poem played with the idea of a woman she desired (and who desired her) being a hermaphrodite.[49] Though the topic, the personal voice, and the appreciative tone were all risky, Behn was safely situated within literary tradition; for example, the name 'Clarinda' was that of an Amazon in Tasso's sixteenth-century epic poem. Behn described her Clarinda as the best of both sexes:

Fair lovely maid, or if that title be
 Too weak, too feminine for nobler thee,
 Permit a name that more approaches truth:
 And let me call thee lovely charming youth.

Behn's theme was not in fact the exotic delights of loving a hermaphrodite, but the convenient escapes from various guilts provided by a female lover

who was alternately recognised as a woman and a man. The speaker explained that addressing a man would “justify my soft complaint”, but the fact that the object is a fellow woman would “lessen my constraint”. She avoided the forwardness of being seen to pursue a man, and took refuge in the fact that it was aesthetically suitable (even for a woman) to want to look at a woman: “And without blushes I the youth pursue, When so much beauteous woman is in view”. But in case anyone might accuse her of pursuing the woman sexually, Behn’s speaker, tongue in cheek, denied that such a thing could exist in the absence of a penis:

In pity to our sex sure thou wert sent,
That we might love, and yet be innocent;
For sure no crime with thee we can commit;
Or if we should – thy form excuses it.
For who that gathers fairest flowers believes
A snake lies hid beneath the fragrant leaves.

Behn here cleverly took society’s ignorance and waved it in its face. Having admitted in the title that Clarinda is a woman and not really a hermaphrodite, Behn was hinting that a sexual ‘crime’ was indeed being committed, only society was too blind to see it. She knew the snake – not a phallic, but a seductive power – did indeed lie beneath the leaves. Like modern jokes about lesbianism being the safest form of contraception, this poem contrasted the idea of wholesomeness with a hint of delighted wickedness.

Despite the hostility of most of the writers I have dealt with, they wrote some of the only texts that mentioned the unmentionable. As a resource for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers hungry for knowledge about their sexuality, they were probably better than nothing. (A strategy that most lesbian readers learn young, in this century as in others, is to take from a text what interests and pleases us, and shut our eyes to the hatred.) The gaps in knowledge left plenty of leeway for interpretation, and some room for wishful thinking. A reader could learn that, being born that shape, it was not her fault; or that her desire could lead her to the utmost pleasure; or that even if she was a sort of monster, it all sounded like an adventure.

Nor has the discourse of the hermaphroditical quite died out. Nowadays there may be few studies on the length of a lesbian’s clitoris, but there is enduring interest in her brain structure, her chromosomes, her hormones. As Elaine Hobby suggests, “How many people today, I wonder, believe that lesbians are physically peculiar: after all, whatever can we do if ‘all’ we have is women’s bits?”[50] The twentieth-century terms of investigations into the ‘causes’ of lesbianism may be subtler, less overtly hostile, but the motive is generally the same as in those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises: the need to exile us from womanhood.

Notes

- [1] Lillian Faderman (1985) maintains that “English writers seemed not to have been very aware of the possibility of sex without a penis”; *Surpassing the Love of Men: romantic friendship and love between women from the Renaissance to the present*, p. 27 (London: Women’s Press).
- [2] The more obvious persecution of male ‘mollies’ and ‘sodomites’ has led many historians to assume that lesbians avoided attack. For example, on the basis of a couple of lesbian sex scenes in *Fanny Hill*, Peter Wagner concludes that “Lesbianism was tolerated in the eighteenth century, or at least not condemned”. John Cleland (1985) *Fanny Hill, or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (ed. by Peter Wagner), n. 115, p. 230 (London: Penguin).
- [3] A useful study of ‘passing women’ in the military, with limited discussion of lesbian issues, is Julie Wheelwright’s (1989) *Amazons and Military Maids: women who dressed as men in the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness* (London: Pandora). Material on cross-dressing outside the military can be found in Dianne Dugaw (1989) *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850* (Cambridge University Press). ‘Female husbands’ and other lesbian cross-dressers are given a marginal place in Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp. 47-61. Lynne Friedli (1985) *Women who dressed as men, Trouble and Strife*, 6, pp. 24-29, takes them more seriously, pointing out that, unlike romantic friendship (which has received more than its fair share of the attention of lesbian-feminist historians), cross-dressing touched women of all classes.
- [4] In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Faderman deals briefly with Brantome, Robert James, Sinistrari and Mairobert; for each of them, she mentions their theory of penetrative tribadism, and finds it laughably ignorant, unworthy of analysis. She mentions hermaphroditism only in relation to King’s *The Toast* and Hamilton’s *Count Grammont*, and sees it as one of many accusations aimed at women for their social (rather than sexual) ambition and power. A brief but useful passage in Lynne Friedli’s ‘Women who dressed as men’ (p. 29) puts cross-dressers in the context of a mid-eighteenth-century debate over hermaphrodites, in which doctors strove to define what was abnormal, and to find a physical explanation for sexual deviance. The only detailed study I have found of texts about a tribade’s ‘member’ concentrates on the French tradition: Marie-Jo Bonnet (1981) *Un choix sans equivoque: recherches historiques sur les relations amoureuses entre les femmes, xvi-xx siecle* (Paris: Denoel).
- [5] Michel Foucault surveys the changes in public response to hermaphrodites, concentrating more on the interpretation of their anatomy than on their sexuality, in his introduction to *Herculine Barbin: being the recently discovered memoirs of a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite* (trans. by Richard McDougall) (London: Harvester, 1980).

- [6] Michel Foucault (1981) *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (trans. by Robert Hurley), particularly pp. 37-39, 43-4 (Harmondsworth, Penguin).
- [7] Anon (30th edn, 1776) *Aristotle's Book of Problems*, p. 71 (New York: Garland, 1986).
- [8] Samuel Tissot (1766) *Onanism*; p. 46 (New York: Garland, 1985).
- [9] Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, 'Leana and Clonarium'. The text by Martial most commonly cited in this context is the epigram about the lesbian hermaphrodite Bassa (*Epigrams*, No. 91, Book 1). An interesting selection of classical myths around the issues of gender confusion and sex change is presented by Marie Delcourt (1960) *Hermaphrodite* (London).
- [10] The anonymous *Onania* (1708?), probably by the quack-cum-clergyman Balthazar Beckers, launched the war on masturbation in Britain; it went through at least 19 editions throughout the century, selling up to 38,000 copies (See Peter Wagner (1990) *Eros Revived: erotica of the enlightenment in England and America*, p. 17 (London: Paladin/Grafton Books)). It gradually tripled in size; *The Supplement* is thought to date from around 1710.
- [11] Anon [n.d.] *The Supplement to the Onania*, p. 163 (New York: Garland, 1986).
- [12] Anon, *The Supplement to the Onania*, pp. 164-165.
- [13] Oscar Paul Gilbert (1932)(trans. by J. Lewis May) *Women in Men's Guise*, pp. 136-137 (London: Bodley Head).
- [14] Anon, *Aristotle's Book of Problems*, p. 72.
- [15] One important writer of Latin treatises aimed at the medical profession was Martin Schurig, whose *Spermatologia* (Frankfurt, 1720) mentions women changing into men, and whose *Muliebra* (Dresden/Leipzig, 1729) discusses tribades. I have not been able to locate any English translations of Schurig.
- [16] Judith Brown (1986) *Immodest Acts: the life of a lesbian nun in Renaissance Italy*, p. 12 (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [17] Nathaniel Wanley (1678) *The Wonders of the Little World; or, a general history of man*, Book 1, Ch. 33, pp. 52-54 (London).
- [18] Jane Sharp (1671) *The Midwives Book*, pp. 44-45 (New York: Garland, 1985).
- [19] Joannes Benedictus Sinibaldus (Rome, 1642) *Geneanthropeiae* (trans. by Richard Head) *Rare Verities*, p. 13 (London: P. Briggs, 1687).
- [20] For a discussion of Sinistrari's late-seventeenth-century *De Sodomia*, see Brown, *Immodest Acts*, pp. 18-19. A contemptuous account of his theory as developed in *Peccatum Mutum* (1700) is found in Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp. 35-36.
- [21] Lillian Faderman (1983) *Scotch Verdict: Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon*, p. 65 (New York: William Morrow).
- [22] Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, pp. 45-47.
- [23] In *Immodest Acts* (p. 173) Judith Brown makes this point about Sinistrari's backwards reasoning; also see Faderman, *Surpassing*, p. 36.

- [24] Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, p. 46.
- [25] Sinibaldus, *Rare Verities*, p. 50.
- [26] Elaine Hobby (1991) Katherine Philips: seventeenth-century lesbian poet, in Elaine Hobby & Chris White (Eds) *What Lesbians Do in Books*, pp. 183-204 (189) (London: The Women's Press).
- [27] This 'Easternisation' of lesbianism seems to have gained strength in the nineteenth century. In Woods-Pirie trial of 1810, Lord Meadowbank insisted over and over again that no woman 'in this country' would have a big enough clitoris to commit the kind of penetrative tribadism so common in India (Faderman, *Scotch Verdict*, p. 65).
- [28] Robert James (1745) *A Medicinal Dictionary*, 3 vols, III *Tribades* (London: T. Osborne).
- [29] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 43; Lillian Faderman (1991) *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: a history of lesbian life in twentieth-century America*, p. 2 (New York: Penguin).
- [30] Tissot, *Onanism*, p. 46.
- [31] Anon, *The Supplement to the Onania*, p. 156.
- [32] Marie-Jo Bonnet finds a similar circle of infinite causality in French texts about lesbian hermaphrodites; *Un choix sans équivoque*, p. 76.
- [33] Anon, *The Supplement to the Onania*, pp. 152, 165.
- [34] Giles Jacob (1718) *A Treatise of Hermaphrodites* [published with John Henry Meibomius, *A Treatise of the Use of Flogging at Venereal Affairs*, pp. iii-v, 17 (London: E. Curll).
- [35] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- [36] It is a somewhat mysterious convention of tribadic sex scenes that the participants, rather than staying naked, should wear gowns which hang loose or divide up the back and front.
- [37] Jacob, *A Treatise of Hermaphrodites*, pp. 22-23.
- [38] *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 50, 54-55.
- [39] Anon, *The Supplement to the Onania*, pp. 165-166.
- [40] Anthony Hamilton (1714) *Memoirs of the Life of Count de Grammont*, p. 234 (trans. Boyer) (London).
- [41] *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235, 259, 261.
- [42] William King (1736) *The Toast*, p. 53 (London).
- [43] *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 100, 2.
- [44] *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.
- [45] *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178, 194.
- [46] Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p. 46.
- [47] Majorie Garber (1992) *Vested Interests: cross-dressing and cultural anxiety* (London: Routledge).

- [48] Aphra Behn (1688) To the fair Clarinda, who made love to me, imagined more than woman, in Sandra M. Gilber & Susan Gubar (Eds) *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, p. 94 (New York: Norton, 1985).
- [49] Another reading of the poem, concentrating on its playful refusal to give the beloved a fixed identity, is offered by Ros Ballaster (1992) *Seductive Forms: women's amatory fiction from 1684-1740*, pp. 75-76 (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- [50] Hobby, 'Katherine Philips: seventeenth-century lesbian poet', p. 188.