

**‘My Pintle onely shall my scepter bee’: Anarchy and the Politics of Queer Sex in
Rochester and Cleland**

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‘She could not name an exception hardly of one of them whose character was not in all other respects the most worthless and despicable that could be’ (Cleland 196)

In its recognition that nonnormative sexual practices and identities are asymmetrical and multiplicitous, ‘queer’ is an appealing analytic; the risk, as Terry Castle argues, is that it obscures these differences under the guise of inclusivity (12). To claim that ‘queer sex is inherently anarchic’ is to suggest that there is some essential propensity for disorder tethered to the bodies engaging in it. This is complicated by the fact that only male-male sex has historically been the target of punitive legislation in Britain (Crompton, 19). In public discourse, representations, and negations of, lesbian and gay sex differ. I use ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ in relation to the actions of sexed bodies within eighteenth-century texts, not with the intent of upholding the essentialist binary of sexual difference, but to highlight how the positional logic that configures it, as Lee Edelman demonstrates, is upturned by the spectacle of gay sex (104). Both Rochester’s closet drama *Sodom and Gomorah* (1684), and John Cleland’s pornographic novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), depict the virulent presence of sodomy but are either silent or dismissive towards sex between women. Sodomy, imbricated with the public sphere, constitutes a pervasive threat to the heterosexual male body politic. Ambivalence towards lesbian sexuality, however, indicates that queer sex is not inherently anarchic. I argue, then, that the anarchic potential of queer sex lies not in the behaviour itself, but in its discursive positioning.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner discourage viewing sex merely ‘as a form of intimacy and subjectivity,’ arguing for the existence of a sexual public (566). Sex becomes public in the Prologue to *Sodom*, when Bolloxinian proclaims he will no longer have sex with women: ‘From thence to Arse hee hath his Pricke conveyed/ And thinks itt Treason to behold a maid’ (3-4). The legal tone of ‘Treason’ portends the dissemination of this commitment to sodomy throughout the kingdom, as does the King’s early declaration that ‘[m]y Pintle onely shall my scepter bee./ [...] And with my Prick I’le gouerne all the land’ (1.6-8). The innuendo of the phallic sceptre establishes a sphere of governance that is decidedly

phallogocentric. The sexual is public, but the public is also sexual, ruled by Bolloxinian's 'Prick' in an obscene subversion of the recognisable image of the King as the head of the body politic (see appendix). Berlant and Warner note that confining sex to the private sphere is a heteronormative agenda, designed to 'block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures' (553). Though they, and Foucault, date this normalising project to the birth of modernity in the eighteenth century, there are traces of it here. Pockennello describes the '[I]etchery of old' prior to Bolloxinian's outlawing of it: '[h]ow full of shame, how feeble & how cold,/ Confin'd to a formality of law/ When woman nere her husbands P-ntle saw' (B5. 17-20). This image of heterosexual sex as inexplicit and disconnected – the wife does not even see her husband's body – is mockingly private. Rochester's play encapsulates the libertine celebration of 'the escape of sexuality out of marriage and into language,' criticising the puritanical – later heterosexual – privatisation of sex (Simmons, 44). The publicity of sodomy, both in the declaration of the King and the play's explicitness, frames a libertine public fantasy in which sex leaves the bedroom and enters discourse.

Rochester's work is characteristically contradictory, for at the same time as it purports to celebrate the public staging of sex, it never actually stages sodomitical encounters. Sodomy codes an upturning of the social order, a kingdom ruled from the bottom-up. The play's alternative title, *The Quintessence of Debauchery*, presents sodomy as the intrinsic quality of social upheaval. Notably, sodomy is quintessential to anarchy, not the other way around; here sodomy occupies a discursive function as a signifier of disruption to a system in which 'a whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality' (Berlant and Warner, 554). Inversely, a whole field of social disorder becomes intelligible as sodomy. By the conclusion, the kingdom is erotically mad. Brother and sister commit incest with one another, women engage in bestiality, and the Queen dies from venereal disease; all these aberrations are a trickle-down effect of sodomy. It is no coincidence that Flux describes the

chaos in medical language: '[t]he heavy Simptom has infected all:/ I may now call itt epidemicall' (B7. 22-27). Rochester was writing at a moment of scientific and medical advancement, and sexuality and desire were becoming tethered to bodily appetite rather than consciousness. The pathologized discourse, and the preoccupation with sexually transmitted disease, are part of the play's rhetoric which, as Leah Benedict articulates, '[folds] medical language into Hobbesian theories of sociality, showing how bodily ideas are exchanged and replicated through the population' (73). More than a tirade against one sexual activity, *Sodom* attacks the 'Tyrant' Bolloxinian who infects the body politic with his disorderly sodomitical behaviour (B7. 68).

Sodom emerged shortly after the Interregnum; it is the product of a culture dominated by discourse about monarchical power. Rochester elsewhere satirises Charles II for his excessive sexual appetite: '[a]nd, rather than a Crowne, a Cunt he chooses.' He declares that he 'hate[s] all Monarchs,' whether the King of France or 'the Cully of Britaine' ('A Satyr,' 19, 15-16). The normalising of heterosexuality is apparent here, as Rochester ties Charles' inability to rule to his sexual gullibility. There is a heterosexualising of the discourse of governance, also present in Fflux's solution to the national disorder that reigns over Sodom: 'To love & nature all their rights restore:/ ffuck women & let Bugg'ry be no more' (43-44). That Bolloxinian's subsequent refusal results in the descent of demons from the air validates the assertion that heterosexual intercourse is the natural order. If the idea that queer sex is inherently disorderly is an invention of modernity, *Sodom* contributes to the germination of this myth through its conflation of sodomitical behaviour with discourses about control of the public sphere.

This discursive fashioning of sodomy as a threat to social order is more established in Cleland's *Memoirs*. Nowhere is the novel more condemnatory than towards the sodomites Fanny watches through a hole that, allying her to the heterosexual male reader, she creates by

penetrating the partition with a needle (Edelman, 108). The scene she describes is private and amorous; the ‘young sparks’ embrace and kiss, unsuspecting of Fanny’s espy (194). While it is Fanny’s prurient voyeurism that ostensibly metamorphoses this private, even domestic sexual interaction into a public one, it bears remembering, as Cameron McFarlane observes, that they are in the same room, separated by a movable partition (173). In placing Fanny and the sodomites under one ceiling, Cleland constructs a moment in which ‘intimacy itself is publicly mediated’ (Berlant and Warner, 553). Fanny watches the entire encounter, ‘purely that [she] might gather more facts, and [...] do their deserts instant justice’ (195); the discourse is legalistic and condemnatory.

Mrs Cole’s remarks about sodomy demonstrate that, though she and Fanny abhor the behaviour, it is nonetheless swept into a wider debate about the public sphere. She inscribes sodomy with a general moral depravity:

there was a plague-spot visibly imprinted on all that are tainted with it, in this nation at least [...] she could not name an exception hardly of one of them whose character was not in all other respects the most worthless and despicable that could be. (196)

Sodomy is distinctly un-British; Fanny’s reference to the ‘mount-pleasants of Rome’ also imbibes this tradition of associating sodomy with foreignness (McFarlane, 170). David Weed convincingly posits that this condemnation ‘emerges out of the specific national and class tensions of mid-eighteenth-century England, in which sodomy is becoming classified as antithetical to the English national identity’ (12). As a signifier of anarchy, it represents a challenge to the collective – implicitly heterosexual – public body.

Returning to the physical body, or at least, as it is mediated through psychoanalytic discourse, sheds light on how sodomy ‘destabilis[es] [...] the foundational logic on which

knowledge as such depends' (Edelman, 97). '[T]he scene of sodomy,' for Edelman, 'comes to figure [...] a spatial disturbance in the logic of positions and a temporal disturbance in the logic essential to narrative development' (104). It does so by negating the castration complex which, according to Freudian psychoanalysis and the narrative of the primal scene, leads to the narcissistic rejection of homosexuality by the male to preserve the penis from the fate of the mother (Edelman 101). The notion of female anatomy as defined by an inherent lack predates Freud and is clear in Cleland's configuration of Phoebe's body as a 'cavity,' 'where everything was so flat! so hollow!' (50, 71). The defining moment of Edelman's reading of *Memoirs*' sodomy scene is its exposition of Fanny's comment that 'if [the sodomite] was like his mother from behind he was like his father before' (195). Implicit is that the sodomite is also like his mother before, behind. The sodomitical body, forming a single-sided 'moebius loop' whose front and behind cannot be distinguished, invalidates the castration complex by 'playing out the possibility of multiple, non-exclusive erotic identifications and positionings' (Edelman, 105-107). This bodily plurality is radically, anarchically queer, not as an essential trait, but because of its discursive capacity 'to effect a contagious disturbance of [the] positional logic' that is the organisational centre of society (Edelman, 109-110). I assume Edelman's view that sodomy threatens the 'epistemological security' of heterosexuality, building on it by positing that this threat is also ontological, highlighted in the societal collapse effected by the dissemination of sodomy into broader sexual anarchy in *Sodom* (113).

Fanny fails to incriminate the sodomites: 'with such an unlucky impetuosity [...] some nail or ruggedness in the floor caught [her] foot, and flung [her] on [her] face,' giving them time to flee (195). Cleland reverses Fanny's position in the scene; previously the penetrator, she is injured by the protruding nail over which she trips. Here, 'bottom-up on this suddenly unreliable ground,' she embodies the positional disruption instigated by the

spectacle of sodomy (Edelman, 108). Although this is followed by Mrs Cole's violent rebuke of their behaviour, the fact remains that the sodomites have escaped. In setting them free, the novel confronts the difficulties of representation, for while representing the sodomitical encounter is necessary for the strong disarticulation of it, it also invites the reader's 'imaginative, if not hormonal, participation' in the scene (Simmons, 56). The necessity for the reader to occupy the position of voyeur to sodomy negates any possibility of an "uncontaminated" spectatorial relation' (Edelman, 109). If sodomy derives its infectiousness from its discursive capacity to destabilise the heterosexual episteme, then its literary inscription is surely no less dangerous than the real thing. As McFarlane notes, there is never a clear distinction between 'the text of erotic condemnation and the text of pornographic indulgence' (153-154). Though Fanny justifies her inclusion of sodomy by claiming 'that ignorance of vice, is by no means a guard against it' (195) the novel plays with the titillating potential for pleasure in the acquisition of knowledge prior to condemnation. This manipulation of the reader is characteristic of pornography: 'to ask us to read these words is to invite us to trespass, [...] and sample the pleasures' (Simmons, 44). Cleland trips and falls, losing all control of his sodomitical pair, who run away from him as from Fanny, the moment he reproduces their encounter on the page.

Edelman only briefly considers the implications of his hypothesis for sex between women, but I do so more thoroughly here. Under the terms of the 'phallogocentric positional logic' of modern culture, the scene of lesbian sex is empty, a site of double castration (Edelman, 104). It poses no threat to the psychoanalytic formation of heterosexuality. The staging of lesbian sex, insidiously, operates discursively to reinforce the heterosexual identification founded upon 'the articulation of sexual difference through the agency of castration' (Edelman, 107). Despite *Sodom* containing a character named Clitoris, all sexual interactions between women orbit the penis, reinforcing its dominance through its absence.

Clitoris describes her attempts to pleasure the Queen: '[t]oucht yor Large wombe & vrged my frigger still,/ Tired my weake armed ye pleasure to fulfill; But C-nts dull mocon all my hopes did kill' (2. 47-49). She becomes a disembodied substitute for the penis, only barely bringing Cuntigratia to orgasm through cunnilingus, notably simulating intercourse rather than clitoral stimulation. But while her tongue may be 'like Pricke', the play makes clear that it can never adequately replace the real thing (2. 63).

Nor can dildos, never 'stifle' or long enough: '[s]hort Dildoes leaue ye pleasure halfe vndone' (B6. 3-5, B2. 74). *Sodom* perpetuates the centralisation of the penis through its continuous assertion that it cannot be substituted or, to invoke the Derridean notion, supplemented; for, as Valerie Traub eloquently puts it, 'the supplement deconstructs the putative unity, integrity, and singularity of the subject' (68). Like the sodomite's undermining of the castration complex, the prospect that prosthetic objects, fingers, or tongues could supplement for the phallic subject around which society is organised is a fatal one; but unlike sodomy, the willingness of the play to stage lesbian encounters suggests it is not a threat palpably felt, and can be simply disavowed by stressing the insufficiency of any substitute for the penis itself. Even if it were, the woman would not, like the sodomite, constitute a 'single-sided surface whose front and back are never completely distinguishable'; she does not disrupt the positional logic of phallogentrism because the need to simulate the phallus recalls the cavity left by its castration, and keeps it at the fore (Edelman, 105). *Sodom* retains this positional stability further as the pleasure offered to the Queen is never returned, always pointed in one direction. As for sex between women where there is no phallic understudy, the play is resoundingly silent.

Castle poignantly writes that '[t]o try to write the literary history of lesbianism is to confront [...] something ghostly: an impalpability, a misting over, an evaporation, or "whiting out" of possibility' (28). This spectral image of lesbian sex, subsequently 'whited out', to

catch the euphemism, by the dominating (and seminal) potency of the penis, haunts the narrative of *Memoirs*. The novel's first sex scene is a lesbian encounter between Fanny and an older prostitute, Phoebe, but is not understood by the characters as such. Fanny remains a virgin as her hymen remains unbroken by Phoebe's finger, and Fanny displays a plain ambivalence to the activity: '[w]hat pleasure she had found I will not say' (49-50). '[T]he hackneyed, thoroughbred Phoebe, to whom all modes and devices of pleasure were known', receives, through her occupation, an association with lasciviousness that obscures any recognition of her preferential desires, and the equine imagery frames unnatural, animalistic carnality as her motivation for sex with women (50). Fanny anchors Phoebe's behaviour to a sort of salacious bisexuality which 'inclined her to make the most of pleasure where she could find it, without distinction of the sexes' (50). Phoebe is at the mercy of Fanny's distressingly problematic judgement. She epitomises Castle's apparitional lesbian: 'to love another woman is to lose one's solidity in the world, to evanesce, and fade into the spectral' (32). Even the description of her orgasm, in which she 'exhale[d] her soul through her lips', is one of ghostly disembodiment. Fanny, conversely, describes her orgasms in terms of matter: 'What floods of bliss! what melting transports! [...] a delicious momentary dissolution' (50, 80). She, too, loses her solidity, but is dissolved into liquidity that, aside from the obvious allusion to sexual fluids, is notably corporeal.

Phoebe's deathly pleasure is without the potential of a return to the flesh; her presence in the novel is merely to introduce Fanny to 'the first tinctures of pleasure' that begin to mould her into a sexual subject prepared to consume 'more solid food' (61, 71). This persisting metaphor of substantial versus shadowy pleasure undermines Phoebe and her desires, dismissing them as 'foolery from woman to woman' (71). As much as I want to believe Castle's revisionist interpretation of these spectralising representations of lesbianism as an indication of the 'ineluctable challenge' it poses to patriarchy, this cannot account for

the discursive gap between the sharp condemnation of sodomy and the flippancy towards sex between women (62). If sodomy is ‘so criminal a scene’, and lesbian sex is merely foolery, this substantiates Edelman’s claim that the phallogentric positioning around which sexuality is organised ‘insistently (and dismissively) articulat[es] lesbianism as a form of extended, non-productive foreplay’ (Cleland 195; 104). Phoebe’s positioning in the novel is itself a sort of narrative foreplay to the scenes of heterosexual sex. Once Fanny has been satiated with the ‘solid food’ she desires, she vanishes; Cleland erases her, and in so doing, ‘whites out’ the possibility of passion between women (61; Castle 28).

When Clitoris describes ‘[t]he warring Sodomites in crowds’, she positions sodomy as a public spectacle, rather than a private behaviour (A3. 19). Fanny’s remark that she must wash her hands – and the narrative – of the sodomites intimates that, as spectacle, sex between men signifies contagion and disorder (196). *Sodom* and *Memoirs* enfold sodomy and anarchy into one another but represent lesbian sexuality as inconsequential and lacking. *Sodom* appropriates sex between women to centralise and buttress the hegemony of the phallus, for which no substitute is ever satisfactory. For Fanny, sex with Phoebe is merely a folly, a precursor to the more substantial heterosexual intercourse. Censure and erasure are disparate but similarly troubling methods of representing queer sex. But in representing sodomy, even to condemn it, the writers destabilise the positional logic that comes to produce heterosexual identification in psychoanalytic discourse. ‘From the perspective of castration,’ Edelman writes, sodomy ‘can only be seen as a “catastrophe”’ (113). Queer sex may not be inherently anarchic, but in this discursive positioning of sodomy, it becomes dramatically so.



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