

Lesbianism and Womanhood During the French Revolution

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In 1791, a pamphlet entitled *Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)* was discovered behind the scenes of many theatres in Paris. The text boldly began with a woman delivering a speech to “[Her] dearest cunt-sisters.”¹ This anonymous pamphlet, one of many circulating at the time, described in explicit detail the sexual musings and activities of Mademoiselle de Raucourt, the imaginary leader of the “Anandrine Sect.” This sect was not a real organization; it was instead a fictional gathering made up of lesbians who sought to escape the domination of men through having sex almost exclusively with each other.² Though lesbian representation tends to be lacking in legal and theological texts about homosexuality in early-modern France, pornographic pamphlets similar to this one emerged as a major form of public discourse during the French Revolution (1789-1799). These pamphlets, which often included fictional, pornographic accounts of the sexual escapades of aristocratic women, demonstrated public discourse on many issues pertaining to gender and sexuality, as their subjects almost always committed some type of sexual crime. One of these crimes was same-sex sexuality, in which aristocratic women were depicted as engaging sexually with each other instead of with men. In examining these lesbian-centric pornographic pamphlets dispersed during the French Revolution, I examine the ways in which the French general public understood lesbians within the social upheaval of the Revolution, during which gender hierarchies and sexual differentiation were rigid sources of stability and security for republican men.

¹“Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)” in *Homosexuality in Early Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 204-212.

² Scott Magelssen and Ann Haugo, *Querying Difference in Theatre History* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 43.

Though homosexual women were not legally attacked at the same level as homosexual men during the French Revolution, they were socially and culturally ridiculed, referred to with slurs such as “tribades” (a derogatory term alluding to masturbation)³. These pornographic pamphlets thus do not reflect the reality of lesbians’ experiences during the French Revolution, but rather popular ideologies about lesbians during this era. Starting in 1774 with a “satirical lampoon about [Marie Antoinette’s] early morning promenades,”⁴ pornographic pamphlets that claimed to include realistic accounts of the sexual activities of female aristocrats eventually became an entirely new genre of political discourse. This literary genre was an expression of the relatively new concept of libertinism, in which public discourse pertaining to female sexuality largely aimed to expose the “licentious ways of the declining French aristocracy.”⁵ The genre was created in one of the most politically contentious periods of French History. In violently overturning the monarchy, French revolutionaries eliminated the system of absolutism under which France had existed for centuries. Absolutism, defined as the complete rule of a divinely-empowered king, was the ultimate establishment of masculine power within civil society. As the king was delegitimized and eventually killed during the French Revolution, this stable and enduring structure of power was eliminated, destabilizing the social hierarchy of French society.⁶ In this fundamental transition from absolutism to republican democracy, a crisis of social disorder was born. As theorized by anthropologist Renè Girard, during times of social upheaval like the French Revolution, scapegoats are often used as objects of blame for any resulting

³ Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 232-240.

⁴ Lynn Hunt, “The Many Bodies of Marie Antionette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution” in *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, ed. Gary Kates (London: Routledge, 1997), 116.

⁵ Michel Feher, “Libertinisms” in *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York City: Urzone, Inc, 1997), 11.

⁶ James Farr, “Politics, Law, and the Military: Overview” in *Industrial Revolution in Europe, 1750-1914* (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 173-174.

trauma, and stabilizing systems of hierarchy are emphasized.⁷ In this context, the scapegoats were the homosexual “tribades”; they were the sexually active, aristocratic subjects of pornographic pamphlets who, in their hypersexual and counter-revolutionary sentiments, symbolized the anxieties about gender inversion and hierarchy felt by revolutionary men during the transition away from absolutist, masculine rule.

Many scholars have argued that traditional historical analyses of homosexuality in early-modern Europe have focused too extensively on the criminalization of homosexual men within theological and legal documents. They argue that traditional historiographies have generally avoided more informal sources of empirical evidence, like pornographic pamphlets, which have the potential to indicate how common people understood gay men and lesbians in a social context.⁸ Lynn Hunt argues that the sexuality of women depicted in these pamphlets symbolizes the anxieties of new republican men about the corrupting political power that women held under the Old Regime. She asserts that this anxiety led republican men to view a woman’s ability to influence the public sphere as a violation of stabilizing gender roles that placed women within the private sphere of domestic service: “virtue could only be restored if women returned to the private sphere.”⁹ Hunt’s scholarship builds upon René Girard’s theory that enforcement of strict gender differentiation follows general social disorganization as a function of anxiety that comes with great change.¹⁰ She attributes this anxiety specifically to dissimulation, in which women are seen as having sex with men to promote their political priorities and enact change in the public sphere. This anxiety permeated many areas of society, leading anti-feminists to make further

⁷ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

⁸ Kenneth Borris and George Rousseau, *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-40; Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 168. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr, *Homosexuality in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁹ Hunt, 108-130.

¹⁰ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

pushes for women to be officially relegated to the home, where they could obey their husbands and help restore society to its stabilizing traditions in masculine power.¹¹ Furthering anxiety about a lack of differentiation between men and women's roles in society, according to historian Thomas Laqueur, this time in history was characterized as the last years in which members of civil society understood gender and sex through a one-sex model. This model held that female and male genitalia was made of the same basic materials, with females lacking a certain "vital heat" that would make them fully developed and fully male. Gender was thus seen as being malleable both physically and socially.¹²

The revival of strict gender hierarchy during this era is thus imagined within current scholarship as resulting from anxiety over the possibility of women being able to participate in the public sphere. Men feared that by forming political clubs and utilizing the influence of men they could manipulate with sex, women would take on a more masculine role in society. Though existing scholarship addresses the representations of female sexuality broadly, little attention has been paid to the specific representation of lesbians as abandoning their role of marrying and bearing children to instead sexually fulfill each other created within these pornographic pamphlets.¹³ I argue that there is significant anxiety presented within these pamphlets not just in women abusing sex with men, but also in women simply having sex with each other. Homosexual women were not regarded as just an added clause within the religious and legal delegitimization of homosexual men, as some historiographies would suggest¹⁴; rather, in this highly public form of popular discourse, they were uniquely oppressed and criticized within the

¹¹ Jane Abrey, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 80, No.1. (1975):45.

¹² Thomas Laqueur, "Of Language and the Flesh" in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greek to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1-24.

¹³ Hunt, 108-130; Traub, 181.

¹⁴ Borris and Rousseau, 1-40; Traub, 168; Merrick and Ragan, Jr., 171.

context of revived gender differentiation. In examining these homosexual-based, pornographic pamphlets from the French Revolution, I argue that they serve as both a critique on the sexual immorality of pre-revolutionary, aristocratic women and as an indication of common understandings of lesbianism as a form of gender inversion that threatened the physical health and social stability of society. I further argue that these portrayals of lesbians highlight republican male anxiety that without strict gender hierarchies, women would become more masculine and politically powerful. These republican men feared that this masculinization of women would contribute to societal deterioration and the creation of a new French Republic just as morally corrupt as the pre-revolutionary French monarchy.

Following Thomas Laqueur's one-sex model of gender differentiation, one may assume that gender was seen as physically changeable during this era. This lack of differentiation between male and female body parts, a clear indication of gender inversion, was heavily present within pornographic pamphlets about lesbian aristocrats. In these pamphlets, lesbianism was depicted as able to make women's bodies more masculine. One example of this physical gender inversion is the description of the clitoris. The clitoris, a body part attributed to the biologically female body, was often referred to in terms of male anatomy or in terms of exaggerated size. For example, in the pamphlet *Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt (1791)*, the leading aristocratic lesbian Raucourt described her own body as follows: "my cunt, which is of a very nice size, contracting prodigiously...I lose my erection."¹⁵ Frequently, words such as "erection" and "sperm," typically used in reference to male body parts, were used to describe female bodies as well, demonstrating that the men who likely authored these pamphlets feared women's ability to

¹⁵"*Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)*", 205.

become more masculine.¹⁶ This pamphlet and others like it also made a point to specifically address that these women, portrayed as being gathered in counter-revolutionary, political societies, were overly preoccupied with physical, bodily nature of their sexuality. Raucourt went as far as to declare that “as active citizens...let’s not forget our cunts and our clitorises”¹⁷. With statements like this, authors of these pamphlets constructed common understandings of lesbianism not as a valid identity but as a selfish preoccupation of aristocratic women. These pamphlets portrayed lesbians as women with an excess of social and physical masculinity that could corrupt stabilizing systems of gender differentiation. The men writing these pamphlets used this inversion, based in corporeal sexuality, as a critique of the Old Regime aristocracy and as proof that to protect societal stability in the transition to democracy, women needed to discontinue this behavior and return to the gender role of the docile, male-obeying, female-bodied wife. That these critiques occur alongside physical descriptions of same-sex sexuality further constructed lesbianism as part of a larger anxiety about physical gender inversion, in which aristocratic women contributed to societal disarray by having sex with other women and thus masculinizing their physical and social selves.

The topic of pregnancy and the subsequent gendered role of women as mothers and caretakers constitutes another manifestation of anxiety within depictions of lesbians’ bodies. In the pamphlet *Private, Libertine, and Scandalous Life of Marie-Antoinette (1793)*, Marie Antoinette became pregnant. As her pregnancy progressed, however, she continued to have sex with women on many different occasions, causing her body to become less and less capable of

¹⁶ “Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)”, 205; Anonymus, “The Little Buggers at the Riding School, or Response of Monsieur ***, Grand Master of the Butt-fuckers and of his Followers, Defendants, to the Petition of the Female Fuckers, Bawds, and Handjobbers, Petitioners (1790)” in *Homosexuality in Early Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2001), 192-198.

¹⁷ “Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)”, 204.

carrying a healthy child. Her condition “consisted of a sinking or loosening of the womb, the result of her continual debauchery and the excesses to which she surrendered herself with the tribades, her favorites.”¹⁸ This pamphlet presented lesbianism as a literal force of gender inversion that, through bodily defeminization, caused Marie Antoinette to become gradually less able to fulfill the woman’s physical and social role of caring, selfless motherhood. Women in these pamphlets were not, however, just characterized by a physical inability to produce children; they were also portrayed as making the conscious decision not to fulfill the traditional female gender role of motherhood. In *Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt (1791)*, for example, Raucourt declared that she and her lesbian followers “[had] taken an oath to make use of pricks and balls no longer, so as not to have the trouble of seeing our bellies get big and our waists become heavy and bulky.”¹⁹ This portrayal not only criticized Old Regime, aristocratic women as being shallow and unable to make serious, rational decisions, but also presented the sexually-empowered lesbian as a person who had completely abandoned the most distinctly non-masculine feature of the female gender: pregnancy and motherhood. The image of the lesbian as the selfish, incapable mother evoked the republican male anxiety that women, if not kept within the heterosexual home as obedient wives and mothers through strict codes of gender differentiation, would throw an already destabilized society into disarray by failing to fulfill their role as bearers of new life. These portrayals of motherhood drew parallels between lesbianism and the decay of civil society, evincing anxiety that if women were free to have sex with each other, they would become indistinguishable from men. Further, the texts display an anxiety that this masculinization would cause women to abandon their role as mothers, invade the public

¹⁸ “Private, Libertine, and Scandalous Life of Marie-Antoinette (1793)” in *Homosexuality in Early Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2001), 215.

¹⁹ “Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)”, 208.

sphere by gathering in political societies, and diminish men's political power in the new French Republic.

The language used by these women to describe the roles, or lack thereof, that men play in their lives represents another source of anxiety displayed in these pamphlets. This is especially important in the pamphlet *Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt (1791)*, in which Raucourt delivered the following piece of wisdom her political society of lesbian aristocrats: "Accustomed to performing the functions of men, let's take on their courage."²⁰ In this quotation, Raucourt confirmed anxieties about the relationship between physical, same-sex sexuality and gender inversion. She demonstrated that she and her fellow lesbians, in performing the traditionally masculine action of having sex with women, now felt empowered to act with the same public agency as men. Having mentioned previously that she had manipulated men into providing her with money by using the influence of her sexual body, she was surpassing Lynn Hunt's argument that the male writers feared that women could use sexual favors from politically powerful men to influence the public sphere. Raucourt expressed an anxiety that without reinforcing the strict gender differentiation that lesbianism actively defied, women would not just manipulate men to use their positions of power for their own benefit but would rather literally take the place of men in the dominant class of people in the new French Republic. Another example of this disrespect towards and independence from men is presented in the pamphlet *Private, Libertine, and Scandalous Life of Marie-Antoinette (1793)*. Marie Antoinette, after having criminal, incestuous sex with her brother, tells him the following: "Leaving your arms- from which I withdraw only when you, exhausted, can no longer surrender yourself to further ecstasy- I crave further delights...I burn to consummate the pleasure that you only began to make me feel."²¹ In this

²⁰ Ibid., 205.

²¹ "Private, Libertine, and Scandalous Life of Marie-Antoinette (1793)", 215.

example specifically, the male anxiety that women in the new Republic could possess sexual agency like that of Marie Antoinette is visible. They feared that if women were to behave like the Old Regime subjects of these pamphlets, they would find pleasure and power without depending on men, unsettling civil society and derailing long traditions of male dominance.

This dismissive description of men was thus another way in which lesbians were depicted and understood as delegitimizing the societal differentiation that placed women at the receiving end of the political and social will of men. These descriptions reflected the overall cultural anxiety that without clear gender differentiation, morally inept and sex-hungry women would become politically independent. Republican men feared that these women would thus permanently corrupt the public sphere with their inappropriate influence, creating even more disarray among the chaos of the French Revolution.

Female subjects of these pornographic pamphlets were not average women in terms of socioeconomic and political status; rather, they were aristocrats viewed as counter-revolutionary figures. Marie Antoinette specifically was the prevailing counter-revolutionary figurehead for the Old Regime, symbolizing the morally corrupt monarchy that ruled society in pre-revolutionary France. In the pamphlet *Private, Libertine, and Scandalous Life of Marie-Antoinette (1793)*, the Queen had a “natural inclination for women”²² which is described by the author as a crime meriting punishment in the form of “the horrors of the cruelest tortures.”²³ The accusations of this sexual crime reflected common, revolutionary citizens’ views of aristocracy and of lesbianism as part of a network of sexual criminality that contributed to the immoral nature of the aristocracy. Same-sex sexuality, in this context, had contributed to the decay of the Old Regime and its most wealthy members; subsequently, it was perceived as a demoralizing entity that

²² Ibid., 212.

²³ Ibid., 212.

would need to be left behind with immoral aristocrats like Marie Antoinette in the formation of a new, democratic society. Additionally, in the pamphlet *Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt* (1791), Raucourt was portrayed as blatantly counter-revolutionary, describing the pursuit of liberty through the French Revolution as “produc[ing] results that are as disastrous as they are numerous throughout the entire kingdom every day.”²⁴ The authors of these pamphlets clearly believed that aristocratic women in the Old Regime had contributed to societal disarray by abandoning their traditional gender roles of male-service and engaging sexually with women instead. By pairing these criminal depictions of lesbianism with counter-revolutionary sentiments, the authors of these pamphlets make manifest the republican male anxiety that this betrayal of gender norms and the state could be repeated in the context of the new French Republic. These representations thus reflected the moral corruption of the aristocracy with instances of female same-sex sexuality. They sent the message that to create a new society free of the demoralization that plagued the Old Regime, women needed to be controlled under a strict, differentiated gender hierarchy in which they were politically and sexually submissive to men.

Although there are still gaps in knowledge of the actual experiences of living as a lesbian during the era of the French Revolution, these pornographic pamphlets at the very least help to demonstrate the ways in which lesbians were generally understood through public discourse. Released during a time of heightened social disarray, these pamphlets portrayed lesbians as inverted, masculine, and counter-revolutionary aristocrats with the potential to bring the moral decay of aristocratic women into revolutionary-era France. These pamphlets thus conveyed an anxiety held by republican men that lesbians would contribute to a disintegration of enduring,

²⁴ “Liberty, or Mademoiselle Raucourt to the Whole Anandrine Sect, Assembled in the Entry Hall of the Comédie-Française (1791)”, 204.

stabilizing gender hierarchies. Republican men feared that lesbianism, portrayed as causing women to abandon the traditional roles of motherhood, demoralizing the aristocratic class, making women feel empowered and independent from men, and causing masculinization of the physical body, would prevent the creation of a new, organized, French Republic. These conclusions are significant in that they make clear not only how the common body of French citizens during the French Revolution viewed lesbianism, but also in that they expand in more detail the rhetorical and intellectual basis upon which the historical and continuing marginalization of non-heterosexual women relies. We must understand these representations as historical manifestations of anxiety about the endurance of stabilizing gender roles within the chaotic changes associated with transitioning from absolutist rule to egalitarian democracy during the French Revolution. In this way, examining the ways in which these pamphlets portrayed lesbians will further allow us to connect modern means of subjugation applied to this community to their historical foundations.

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