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Disciplines, Institutions—and Desires

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FORUM

Disciplines, Institutions—and Desires

MODERATED BY WILL STOCKTON

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MELISSA E. SANCHEZ



Will Stockton

I would like to begin by asking you to consider the chiasmus under which we gather: “Desiring History and Historicizing Desire.” The chiasmus focuses our attention on the crossing of two terms, each with noun and verb forms—their grammatical flexibility indexed, perhaps, to the methodological flexibility of the fields in which most of us work: early modern (here both Renaissance and late-medieval) queer and/or sexuality studies. Talk a bit about the definitions of *desir/e/ing* and *histor/y/icizing*, and the relation of these terms to the periodization and thematization of your and our work. Is defining these words more hazardous than fruitful? If these terms must remain both undefined and points of critical orientation, then how would you describe what does not qualify as historicizing, or what does not count as desire?

Ruth Mazo Karras

To me the phrase “Historicizing Desire” is quite straightforward. It implies the recognition that the categories through which a culture understands feelings, wishes, bodily and mental states, and other drivers of desire are historically contingent rather than universal. These categories may be found in intellectual culture—as in the nineteenth-century psychomedical definitions of various sexual “conditions” by Krafft-Ebing—or in popular culture,

where what many people think of as a relatively simple binary of “straight” versus “gay” is complicated not only by differences between lesbians and gay men, but also by “bi,” “queer,” “poly,” “asexual,” and a plethora of other identities. Additionally, it is not just the forms of desire that are historically contingent (Clark). The existence of desire may itself be contingent; William Reddy has argued that what he calls desire-as-appetite is found only in the Western tradition, and only after the twelfth century. Whether or not this is true as a matter of empirical fact may be arguable, but the field of sexuality studies, as well as the field of the history of the emotions, is predicated on the principle that, even though there are biological processes that are shared by humans across all societies, the way we think and talk about them varies widely across time and space. It is this context-specificity that is implied in “Historicizing Desire.”

“Desiring History” has another valence. A certain level of unsophisticated cross-disciplinarity is not uncommon not only in my field of medieval studies but in others as well. Even the most Rankean historians, concerned about determining only what really happened, can be tempted to mine works of literature for examples; fictional characters are often so much more forthcoming than historical ones! The tendency among historians of society and culture can be to treat literature (and, *mutatis mutandis*, visual art) as a mirror of society and the behaviors of fictional characters as historical evidence. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, who appears widely in textbooks, sourcebooks and courses on the history of medieval women, is a good example of the misuse of literary representation as evidence.¹ The flip side of this historical use of literature is a literary use of history that can be equally unsophisticated. Some literary scholars seek works of history that they can “use,” that is, that provide a factual master narrative, not just of events but also of cultural practices, as a context into which they can set literary works. They desire a history, in other words, that was fixed and unambiguous, against which the unstable meaning of the text can be set.

The best work in both history and literature in recent years has exploded these methodologies, with the not insignificant help of premodern sexuality studies. Literature cannot be treated merely as a mirror if it is a constituent element of culture(s), and there is no fixed History against which “sexuality” can be studied if the very texts we study create “sexuality” itself. Interpreted this way, I suggest it is a good thing we no longer “desire” History as we once did. Underlying this description is my assumption that history with a lowercase *h* is nonetheless important, that it is important to distinguish between pasts and

presents—but we walk a fine line between ignoring the otherness of the past and ignoring the “situatedness” of our knowledge, as Melissa puts it below.

Melissa Sanchez

In considering the relation between desire and history, I keep thinking of a quotation from the introduction to Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero’s *Premodern Sexualities*:

While recent studies in sexuality make clear that we ought to know the past, they also affirm that we want to. It is true, of course, that after Freud—and Foucault—“wanting” will never be the same. But one of the most productive paradoxes of contemporary work in sexuality is that, while it does not take pleasure at face value, it also does not take it for granted. Pleasure can be doubted, scrutinized, politicized, historicized, debated—and enjoyed. We do not, then, pursue the history of sexuality just because we think we must; we study it because we know that what we must or ought to do is intimately related to what we want to do. (viii)

Historicization, in this account, is a product of desire. If we are to believe Plato, we only desire what we do not have. And if we are to believe Hobbes, we can never “have” the past: it exists only in memory, which is itself a form of imagination or fancy. As just these two examples indicate, to historicize either the concept of desire or of history is to reveal the connection between the terms, and therefore between “fantasy” and “fact,” private feeling and public knowledge, present and past.

The methodological and theoretical implications of these links have been stressed not only by literary scholars, but also by historians as diverse as Michel Foucault, Joan W. Scott, and Hayden White. Yet, the specific import of the connection between desire and history for our study of past eroticism has been the subject of a good deal of debate, especially recently. To sketch the debate in the crudest of terms, on the one hand, Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon have recommended an “unhistoricist” method, one that would reject clear distinctions between past and present—indeed, between history and desire. On the other hand, Valerie Traub, Will Stockton, and James Bromley have argued for the value of recognizing differences between past and present erotic vocabularies, practices, and discourses in order to appreciate what is distinct about each.

I see the value in both methods—and, as I note in this volume’s afterword, I don’t think they need necessarily be opposed. Precisely because I am invested in points of identification (as well as difference) between the present and the past, I appreciate Goldberg and Menon’s challenge to new historicist attacks that target anachronism in queer, feminist, and psychoanalytic approaches to the early modern period. The demand for scrupulous historical accuracy that can be substantiated by empirical evidence can limit our perception of the strangeness and variety of past eroticism by allowing only observations that conform to what we already “know” to count as truth. More problematically, as scholars studying literary representations of sexuality have long pointed out, the association of truth with “factual” discourse and documentation may inadvertently serve a conservative agenda that erases the complexity of past erotic practice and culture. This methodological stance was central to such foundational texts as Bruce Smith’s *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, Jonathan Dollimore’s *Sexual Dissidence*, Valerie Traub’s *Desire and Anxiety*, and Jonathan Goldberg’s *Sodomities* and the essays in his edited volume *Queering the Renaissance*.

Yet these early works, like many others then and now, do not challenge the value of historicist methods, but rather expand what we understand as legitimate inquiry into the past. In fact, it has not been work on the history of sexuality that has demanded conformity to a narrow empiricism in the name of accuracy. Rather, it has been critics hostile to the “presentist” methods of psychoanalytic and queer theory that have tended to invoke the bogey of anachronism (prominent examples include Stephen Greenblatt and Stanley Wells, respectively). For that reason, I am equally grateful for the insightful work of Bromley, Stockton, and Traub (and many others) who show that reading for differences as well as continuities between past and present need not constitute a normative or teleological effort to straighten out history. Early modern studies of erotic desire, practice, and identification cannot do without the empirical and historicist methods that make us aware of the differences between our own desires and investments and those of the past.

For me, one reason that literature is such a fruitful archive for studying early modern eroticism is that it gives us access to fantasies and discourses that may not be available in more “factual” documents, and it therefore allows us to appreciate the complexity of any discussion of past and present, fact and fantasy, history and desire. I don’t think that there is a single or clear relation be-

tween these sets of terms, or that they can be definitively separated or collapsed. Rather, as I see it, the project of early modern scholars focusing on desire and sexuality is to trace the shifting relationship between what we want and what we know, what eroticism was and what it is, what we can “see” in a given text and what remains to be perceived as we shift our interpretive protocols and theoretical frameworks.

Mario DiGangi

In the wake of Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon’s “homohistoricist” critiques of historicism, I would begin by affirming that historicist approaches still have much to teach us about erotic desires and relations in the early modern period, and that what those approaches have to teach has little to do with the caricature of a monolithic “historicism” that frames it as subservient to the evident truth value of facts, as invested in rigid distinctions between present and past, or as concerned primarily with teleological narratives.

Whereas such accounts characterize historicism as a kind of puritanical discipline that imposes *a priori* limits on what can or cannot be said about a particular text, my own “desire” for “history” derives instead from the pleasures of trying to understand the particular strangeness (or queerness) of the entanglement of sex, gender, and social formations in the past. In Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus remarks, “This is the monstrosity in love, lady—that the will is infinite and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit” (3.2.75–77). Troilus provides terms through which we might describe the foundational assumptions of homohistorians, on the one hand, and historicists, on the other: homohistorians emphasize that “desire is boundless” and therefore cannot be captured by the historicist emphasis on time-bound discourses and institutions, which confine our interpretations of how eroticism might have signified in the past. I find more pleasure in confronting the interpretive challenges posed by reading a text within the constraints suggested by particular historical contexts than in demonstrating how that text manifests the boundlessness of desire. Troilus’s point, however, is that infinite will and confined execution are inherent to love; if such a combination is monstrous, it is a necessary and productive monstrosity, and perhaps one to be embraced in our own critical practices.

In the paper I delivered at the “Historicizing Desire” conference, I explored how the word “bawdy” functions in Shakespeare’s plays as a signifier of what I call, following Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, impersonal affect, or an imag-

ined erotic relationship between people and things (e.g., wind, blood, clothes). That my theoretical angle comes from Bennett's analysis of heterogeneous assemblages in contemporary culture suggests that my essay is not "historicist" in the most traditional (and easily caricatured) sense. Nonetheless, my analysis is guided by a sense of the alterity of the past. For instance, I argue that our current understanding of "bawdy" as referring to erotically pleasurable things overlooks an early modern association of "bawdy" with the threatening and contaminating eroticism of things, an association grounded in a now obsolete denotation of "bawdy" as "filthy." Once we recognize this meaning of "bawdy," we can reinterpret the term's role in constructing Shakespearean desire. Thus in *Troilus and Cressida*, Diomedes's denunciation of Helen's "bawdy veins" (4.1.71) suggests that Helen's sexual desire is less at issue than the sexual agency of her blood, which seems to operate independently of human appetite or subjectivity. Although historicism depends on the interpretive constraints posed by alterity (including, in this case, the alterity of the Galenic theory of humors), I would hope that my approach demonstrates that historicist methods are not void of imagination, flexibility, or theoretical risk-taking—qualities that can play a significant role in uncovering the histories of desire.

Will Stockton

In your own way, each of you brings up the issue of how we as sexuality scholars hesitate to regard the literary text as a repository of facts about history or culture. Indeed, there seems to be a shared assumption here that, even in its most historicist modes, the study of sexuality in literature is especially cautious about fact-finding. Mario critiques Madhavi Menon's "caricature of a monolithic 'historicism' as subservient to the evident truth value of facts." Melissa remarks that "literature is such a fruitful archive for studying early modern eroticism" because "it gives us access to fantasies and discourses that may not be available in more 'factual' documents." And Ruth observes, "Literature cannot be treated as a mirror if it is a constituent element of culture(s)."

For me, Ruth's observation, offered from within the discipline of history rather than English, is especially striking in that it recalls Louis Montrose's claim at the end of his famous 1983 essay on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Against both previous historicist readings of the play as precisely such a mirror and New Critical extrapolations of the play from history, Montrose contends that *Midsummer* "creates the culture in which it is created, shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped, begets that which is begotten" (86). This claim

is an especially pithy articulation of a foundational assumption of the literary studies methodology that would come to be known as New Historicism, with its elevation of the text over divisions between fiction and nonfiction and its thick-descriptive isolation of the text in time. It is to New Historicism that many of us in literary studies owe the abandonment of “factual master narratives,” or grand explanatory frameworks, and the consequent erosion of distinctions between our disciplines. Yet if it is safe to say the four of us no longer believe any longer in a factual master narrative against which we can read any text, literary or otherwise, how can you account for our distinct disciplinary locations and our interests in different types of texts? Why do you study history or literature? How do you imagine your work, in history or literature, in relationship to that of the other discipline?

Melissa Sanchez

In thinking about disciplinary specificity for the studies of literature and history, I’ll begin by rehearsing two of the distinctions between these fields that my institution makes for the purpose of assigning general education course credits. While the rubrics for both the “History and Tradition” and the “Arts and Letters” requirements at Penn emphasize interpretation of textual, visual, and material objects, as well as the contextualization of primary sources, courses that cover the “History and Tradition” requirement must “provide students with an interpretive framework for analyzing change over time,” while “Arts and Letters” courses must “allow students to develop an appreciation of the creative process within a medium or in a variety of artistic media.” So, at least as they are categorized for the purposes of undergraduate accreditation, historicist method is diachronous in its focus on change, while literary method is synchronous in its attention to creativity.

Reading over Ruth’s and Mario’s responses to the previous question, however, I’m struck by the extent to which actual scholarly practice challenges such simple distinctions. In asserting that “Literature cannot be treated merely as a mirror if it is a constituent element of culture(s),” Ruth underscores the participation of literature in its historical context. Rather than see literature as static historical data that takes on meaning primarily when set within a diachronous consciousness of difference, Ruth stresses its participation in the very constitution or creation of its cultural moment. This principle that literature participates in the creation of history was central to New Historicism, as Will points out, and distinguished that method of reading from both an “old historicist”

text-/context reflectionist model and a new critical insistence on the autonomy of literary creativity. Yet, as Ruth also notes, a good deal of less sophisticated historicist criticism (old and new) “desire[d] a history . . . that was fixed and unambiguous, against which the unstable meaning of the [literary] text could be set.” Scholars working in premodern sexuality studies, she rightly observes, may help refine these methodologies by seeing change across time, as well as in the creative works that hold in tension the ambiguities and contradictions of a single historical moment.

Mario’s response to the previous question also makes legible both the limitations and the pressures of disciplinarity. On the one hand, his emphasis on the pleasure and utility of alterity resists treating literature (or sexuality) as a domain of creativity that exists apart from historically located norms, interests, discursive fields, and material circumstances. In this way, he not only departs from an unhistoricist or homohistoricist rejection of clear past-present distinctions between past and present. He also (if I read him correctly) resists both new critical claims of aesthetic autonomy and the more recent rejection of close reading and ideological critique in favor of “surface reading” (or “the descriptive turn”) that focuses on the literary text in isolation from its historically or culturally situated silences and latent meanings (Best and Marcus; Love). The close reading of the new critics and the surface reading of these more recent critics seek to assert the value of literary methods in isolation from other disciplines, and it must be more than coincidental that both approaches have emerged at moments when the value of literary criticism as such has come under question. Much as new critics argued for the establishment of literary criticism as a distinct academic discipline capable of producing knowledge unavailable to historians and philosophers, recent proponents of surface or descriptive reading respond to the seemingly omnipresent reports of a crisis in the humanities—and especially literary study—by accentuating the unique insights that emerge through a lingering over words and their formal arrangement. Yet central to Mario’s example of a queer method of reading early modern texts is his engagement with work beyond literary studies proper—here, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, which engages with philosophy and the history of science to reimagine nonhuman subjectivity and desire. Mario’s example, like Ruth’s, offers a useful model for thinking about disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, for in reminding us of the “imagination, flexibility . . . [and] theoretical risk-taking” of historicist methods, Mario argues for a creatively promiscuous methodology that departs from strict empiricism and employs

contemporary theoretical models even as it lingers on differences between past and present.

Undergraduate teaching can illuminate the effects of disciplinary norms at least as much as scholarly research. I teach nearly as many courses in Penn's Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program as in the English Department these days, and by far the largest enrollments I have are in my "Feminist Theory" courses. These courses enroll a lot of non-humanities majors, and students' questions and resistances nearly always have to do more with method and disciplinary assumptions than with particular arguments or feminist politics. These questions repeatedly compel me to recognize how heavily situated I am by training, method, and inclination within the humanities. For instance, I often have to explain to science majors, who tend to be trained in empirical and data-based methods, that in challenging ideals of objectivity and universality, feminist theorists are not mere relativists or anti-empiricists; we are encouraging awareness of the ideological dimensions of all perceptions and paradigms. The attention that theorists of race, gender, and sexuality draw to the situatedness of all knowledges is also a historicist perspective, even if they are writing in the present. Nonetheless, there is a thread running through these theoretical discourses that assumes that there are, at different times and in different locations and cultures, beings called (for instance) "women," and that there is some kind of transhistorical identification and identifiability (though not *identity*) at work in feminist theory.

So while there are important, and perhaps necessary, distinctions between them, the diachronic work of historicists and the synchronic work of literary analysis are not necessarily or always at odds. Within studies of sexuality as well as gender (and I would argue that the two cannot be definitively separated), change and creativity exist in tension as we try to think about diachronic histories and synchronic theories of what it means to have sex, want sex, or "be" a sex. Because our objects are in the past rather than the present, early modernists who study gender and sexuality must be especially self-conscious about our relation to history, theory, and philosophy. We must continually consider historical difference and change, if only to question or reimagine their relevance.

Mario DiGangi

I would align my scholarly approach with what Catherine Belsey, in *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, calls cultural history, or "history at the level of the signifier" (5). According to Belsey, "[s]ocial history gives priority to describing

practices, while cultural history records meanings”; moreover, “there may be a substantial gap between the endorsement of a value and its wide-spread implementation, or between practice and the ambivalences which attend it” (6, 8). Belsey here points to the role of fantasy (or what Raymond Williams calls structures of feeling) in shaping social life, arguing that literary texts can give imaginative form to—or might even “endorse”—certain shared values that do not necessarily manifest as lived practice. Having regularly drawn in my own scholarship on the insights of social and legal historians, I share Belsey’s appreciation for the importance and “meticulousness” of empirical analysis (8). Yet as appealing as it might be to describe cultural history and social history as complementary endeavors, the different methods and assumptions of cultural and social historians can also produce conflicting interpretations of the phenomena we study. Those differences are worth our attention because social historians are also in the business of recording “meanings,” even if those meanings derive from their descriptions of “practices” instead of their interpretations of textual “signifiers.”

In *Sexual Types*, my account of the cultural significance of the Renaissance sodomite draws upon social historian Laura Gowing’s remarkable analysis of thousands of slander depositions from London’s church courts; however, I dispute Gowing’s interpretation of that data (*Sexual Types* 29–31; Gowing 65). Citing historian Alan Bray’s influential thesis about the hyperbolically demonic and alien connotations of sodomy in the period, Gowing explains that there are no slander cases alleging homosexual conduct because sodomy was unthinkable (and thus could not be socially practiced, recognized, and disciplined) in the everyday experience of early modern Londoners. In making this argument, Gowing is not simply “describing practices”—that is, providing an account of the social and legal mechanisms that were activated when people accused each other of sexual misconduct. Rather, she is attributing a cultural “meaning” to an absence of empirical data that requires explanation.

Drawing from a diverse archive of texts—including not only Shakespearean drama but also less conventionally “literary” texts such as sermons, moral ballads, crime pamphlets, biblical commentaries, and an account of the execution of a London gentleman for sodomy in June of 1607—I argue that sodomy was indeed both practiced and legible in the daily life of early moderns. I also suggest that sodomy could have been indirectly disciplined through social and legal mechanisms other than the church courts whose records Gowing so meticulously analyzes; I draw upon another social historian, Marjorie McIntosh,

to support that argument. Of course, my interpretation of both the literary and the historical evidence is subject to dispute. My concern here is not to insist upon the correctness of any one reading of the evidence, however, but to sound a note of caution about an exclusive or reductive reliance on empirical data to draw conclusions about past sexual practices and beliefs. Sexuality is always caught up in desires, fantasies, and ideals that are available to us only through our own partial readings of cultural texts that might unfold many different stories.

Ruth Mazo Karras

Many scholars of the history of sexuality feel equally at home (or equally not at home) in either history or literature. If you think of a Venn diagram of History and Literature, in other words, there are some fine scholars who fit in the area of overlap, and for whom disciplinary divisions are at best a matter of administrative convenience and at worst a serious obstacle to their work. However, the rest of the diagram—the parts of the circles that don't overlap—represents quite different perspectives.

There are literature scholars whose theoretical commitments do not include history or historicism, and who find that historians using a text as a source for something outside the text are misusing it. In my first year as an assistant professor, I was told by a literature scholar of my own academic generation—someone who went on to be a Very Important Scholar—that I was misguided to use troubadour poetry in a course on medieval women, because those poems aren't about women, they're about poetry. I thought that she was willfully blind not to see that the circulation of texts even fictionally addressed to women had implications for actual women. She probably assumed I was teaching the texts as evidence of women's power and status rather than of cultural constructions of gender.

What this anecdote reveals is how scholars in these fields thirty years ago talked at cross-purposes. At that time historians could still ask whether literary texts were valid sources, with "for narrative history" being so obvious an answer to the question "sources for what?" as to go without saying. And it is still characteristic of many historians—those in the non-overlapping portion of the aforementioned Venn diagram, in which group I include myself—to think in terms of "sources" rather than "texts," even when we might be reading the same document. "Sources" here means not "points of origin" but rather "places to find evidence." Nevertheless, most of us have learned now that liter-

ature can be an important source, and also that in order to properly understand what a work can stand as evidence of, we need first to understand it as a text.

The real difference between history and literary study, though, stems not from differing intellectual standpoints but rather from much more mundane institutional factors. Cultural historians in literature departments may have colleagues whose intellectual commitments are to various bodies of literary theory, or to film studies, or to creative writing. Cultural historians in history departments may have colleagues whose intellectual commitments are to economic history, or demography, or historical sociology. At my institution, the College of Liberal Arts has recently decided to place its departments under associate deans for arts and humanities on the one hand and social sciences on the other. History departments usually end up in the social sciences in this kind of division (although many historians consider themselves primarily humanists), and literature departments in the arts and humanities; in this case history will be included as part of arts and humanities, although probably for logistical rather than philosophical reasons. Disciplinary divisions are highly artificial, but they have a history (as well as a literature) and they have repercussions on students' intellectual formation and on scholarly collaboration.

Will Stockton

Ruth and Melissa, you both cite institutional factors as prescriptive of a difference between disciplines—history and literature, the liberal arts, the humanities and the social sciences. Mario, you offer a sharp example of how your work as a literary scholar allows you to use and contest the claims of a historian without yourself being ahistorical. All three of you are also keenly aware of the limitations of disciplinary distinctions and the need to think across them. Your responses resonate with me in part because I frequently find myself divided between being a literary scholar who traffics in presentism and a teacher of literature who spends most of his time teaching students to think historically. As I use it in class, historicism is principally a tool of estrangement—a way to make literary analysis less of an art appreciation exercise and more of an engagement with the difference time makes in the production and reception of a text (be it a play, poem, sermon, etc.). Let me ask you, then, to engage in the utopian experiment of imagining your ideal institution—one that would train both undergraduates and graduate students in the study of both “practices” and “meanings.” What needs radical rethinking within our current organiza-

tional structure? I am especially curious to learn how your work on sexuality—and the disciplinary entanglements therein—would prompt you to organize a university in which students were trained in thinking across, rather than within, traditional distinctions.

Ruth Mazo Karras

As you ask us to imagine an academy where students are “trained in thinking across, rather than within, traditional distinctions,” your use of the phrase “rather than” bothers me. A discipline does not just create distinctions that must be overthrown; it is also a way of thinking. It is one thing for students to learn the latest methodological and theoretical tools, which may not correspond to traditional disciplines, but it is something else again to say that they therefore do not need to know some of the older ones. If we try to dismantle the master’s house without recourse to the master’s tools, there won’t be much house left, and I am not ready to give up the house.

Discipline as a way of thinking should not be confused with discipline as institutional structure, however. Academic departments are necessary to divide large universities into manageable units, but they are arbitrary creations of historical accident. Some are interdisciplinary in nature (e.g., at my institution, the Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies department). Some map nicely onto a single discipline as recognized in the profession but include members whose work ranges over the sciences, social sciences, and humanities (e.g., Anthropology, which may include work in transgender theory and work in the geometric morphometrics of primate skulls). The replacement of departments by groups defined around particular themes that cut across disciplines would simply replicate the same problems of any entrenched institutions; unless the groups constantly re-formed themselves, they too would be creations of a particular historical moment extended indefinitely into the future, and the process of continual re-formation and reconfiguration would result in a lack of stability and massive efforts channeled into planning rather than into teaching and research. And, if faculty have to choose one group as their primary affiliation, there will always be those who don’t really fit in one or another because their work crosses lines.

One solution could be to disaggregate some of the functions of departments. For some tasks it does not matter how arbitrary the group that does it is. Personnel decisions (hiring, merit increases, tenure) always involve the evaluation of faculty by those in a different specialty, through the solicitation of

expert opinion and through the candidate's self-explanation. In my utopian university, this function could continue to be carried out by departments that would, however, acknowledge that excellent work does not have to fit within arbitrarily defined boundaries.

Undergraduate curriculum, at least at a large institution, requires a certain amount of stability so that advisors can help students chart a path to graduation, but my utopian institution would also have a flexible structure that would allow innovative courses to come easily into being for one or more offerings and would encourage students to try them. It would think about curricular structure less in terms of topics to be covered than in terms of ways of thinking that could be practiced in the study of any number of topics. A course on the history of sexuality, for example, would give students the experiences of close encounters with texts and of confronting the question of the alterity of the past.

Graduate education could be even more flexible. Students who intend to remain in the academy may need disciplinary training in methodologies and bodies of scholarship that they will be expected to teach, but they also need to be ready to shape the curricula of the future. Collaboratives involving faculty and graduate students around a theme could be established without becoming a permanent part of institutional structure; they could last as long as people were excited about them, and they could change their self-definition as interests changed. This flexibility means that such collaboratives would not determine faculty hiring—but a particular candidate's fit with existing collaboratives, or ideas for new ones, could rank alongside departmental criteria for appointment.

As I raise my head above the swamp of day-to-day administration it is hard for me to see the horizon of Utopia, so my vision is rather modest (and strongly influenced by the broader vision of colleagues, especially J. B. Shank), but perhaps, for that reason feasible.

Melissa Sanchez

I'm going to be a bit self-contradictory here, in that I want to argue against—or at least alongside—the interdisciplinarity we have all been endorsing by remarking on the real value of disciplinary expertise. I absolutely think that scholars from different disciplines must learn from one another, and that drawing on the methods and archives of disciplines beyond one's own compels one to think in subtler, more specific, and more creative ways. But, like Ruth, I'm not sure that institutional reorganization would be the most effective way

of encouraging such work. I hesitate to “think big,” in the way that Will is inviting us to, for two reasons.

First, there are the practical limitations of genuinely interdisciplinary training. To engage in inter- or multi-disciplinary work, one must be trained in the methods, history, and norms of any given discipline. And because there is only so much one can know, there is only so much interdisciplinarity we can responsibly accomplish. I feel that I’m just now getting a grasp on the relatively small fields of early modern studies, feminism, and queer theory. I’m still a bit at sea when it comes to some of the larger conversations about the future of English as a discipline: digital humanities and new media are just two of the important new theories and/or methods on which I could use an introductory course. And I have to admit that any interdisciplinary work I myself attempt tends to be fairly instrumental, and therefore limited in its engagement with other methods and fields of expertise.

And this leads to my second hesitation, one that Ruth has also voiced: institutional limitations. We might take American Studies as an example of these limitations. On the one hand, American Studies departments and programs are exemplary in their cultivation of interdisciplinarity, as they require both undergraduates and graduates to take courses across traditional departments and to engage methods from studies in art, literature, history, and the social sciences. On the other hand, such programs necessarily exclude as much as they include—historically, geographically, methodologically—and they thereby risk reinstating precisely the U.S.-centric perspective that they endeavor to contest.² Comparative literature is another example of a field that often pursues interdisciplinarity by replacing one set of boundaries with another—in this case, working across languages and national traditions but squarely within literary analysis and theory, and usually within a squarely European tradition. A number of other examples readily come to mind—“Women’s Studies” has been frequently critiqued for its biases and exclusions, and “Literature” departments must find some way to distinguish literary writing from other forms, to take just two instances. My point is not to critique particular models of institutional organization. Rather, I want to make the fairly pedestrian point that it is not only institutional limitations that place us in particular departments or programs, with all of their attendant disciplinary borders and norms, but also intellectual and epistemological limitations.

Thinking about “our” field, I worry that any attempt to imagine an institutional configuration that would allow “us” to be more interdisciplinary in our

research and teaching would only substitute one set of arbitrary boundaries and limitations for the ones we all have rightly questioned in traditional departmental designations. I put “our” and “us” in scare quotes because, while the four of us see ourselves as working on roughly the same historical period and around a common set of interests in gender and sexuality in that period and today, I would guess that we would have a hard time agreeing on what we might name a department or program that could house us all, much less what that program would require of undergraduate and graduate students, what types of faculty it would seek to hire, and what sorts of events it would promote and support. In terms of period, would we be called premodern, early modern, or medieval and Renaissance scholars? Or would we focus on method and be called gender and sexuality studies scholars? How would this differ from current programs in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies? Or would our department be called something like History of Sexuality (perhaps analogous to Penn’s History and Sociology of Science department)? Would we hire primarily in art, literature, and history, or would we include the social sciences? How would this field relate to scholars who consider themselves queer theorists but not historians of sexuality? Or queer theorists and historians of sexuality, but not feminists? And what do we do with the other forms of identification and embodiment—race, nation, globality, class, and rank, to name just a few—that shape sexual fantasy and practice?

One could ask many more questions, but by pointing out these practical and institutional limits to a utopian university devoted to interdisciplinarity, I don’t mean to suggest that the current typical organization of departments and programs is ideal, or that we can’t rethink pedagogy and training at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I might propose that the first step in genuine and responsible interdisciplinarity would be for we scholars to recognize and accept our own disciplinary (or historical or methodological) biases and choices, along with the limitations they pose. This may well lead to a reconfiguration of institutional affiliations and disciplinary training, with our current programs and departments going the way of the trivium. I have no doubt that it would enable new methods, perspectives, and insights into gender and sexuality in the past and present. Such a new institutional and intellectual order would also reveal blind spots we haven’t noticed yet, and would (as Ruth notes) itself require critique and revision—if not wholesale dismantlement. This sounds pessimistic, but I’d say that the sense that we will always be at least a bit off in our approach to knowledge is itself exciting to me. Such pessimism al-

lows us to resist narratives of improvement or progress in favor of looking at intellectual history, and our place in it, in terms closer to Benjamin's immediate, specific, ruptural messianic time. Our new insights, from this perspective, would not so much build incrementally towards truth as retrospectively transform the significance of the past (including past scholarship) each time we reassemble its fragments. But maybe even this contingent view of academic work can't escape an implicit narrative of progress, much less the ironic smugness of a Socratic confession of ignorance?

Mario DiGangi

For the past ten years, I have served first as the deputy executive officer and then as the executive officer (chair) of the PhD Program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center. Separating doctoral from undergraduate education, the Graduate Center houses all of the university's PhD programs on a single campus. This arrangement serves to foreground the interdisciplinary opportunities available at the graduate level: PhD students in English are free to take courses in other programs, to pursue interdisciplinary certificates in fields such as Renaissance Studies, and to invite professors from other disciplines to serve on their dissertation committees.

In thinking about how sexuality scholarship might inspire us to reimagine the university, I was struck by the realization that very few of my own dissertation students (those for whom I have served as either supervisor or reader) have taken formal advantage of these interdisciplinary opportunities. Most of the dissertation committees on which I have sat have been comprised wholly of English faculty; this is as true for projects on early modern sexuality as for those on other subjects. It might be the case that in a very large program such as mine (which offers fifty graduate seminars each year) students feel that they can get "interdisciplinary" training without venturing outside of English: interdisciplinarity in this instance would index the theoretical influences from other disciplines that have shaped English studies over the last few decades. With limited funding, pressure to complete their degrees in a timely way, and facing dire hiring prospects, students might also choose to avoid having to demonstrate competence in the reading, writing, and research protocols of another discipline, though arguably such interdisciplinary training might be cited as an advantage on the market.

Perhaps this is simply to say that the training of those who will shape the future of our disciplines (or interdisciplines) will always involve a complex ne-

gotiation of what is possible and what is practical. As a graduate student in the late 1980s, I cobbled together an approach for reading homoeroticism in early modern texts from the work of scholars in various disciplines, such as Alan Bray (history), Michel Foucault (philosophy), David Halperin (classics), Gayle Rubin (anthropology), James Saslow (art history), and Eve Sedgwick (English). At the time, it seemed necessary to work across disciplinary boundaries, because so few models of sexuality scholarship existed in any one discipline. That era, characterized by the cross-fertilization and possibility born of scarcity and novelty, was perhaps the true “utopian” moment of academic sexuality studies. But my own experience of that moment had as much to do with a sense of precarity as of excitement and adventure. At the time, it was far from clear if, and in what form, “lesbian and gay studies” would take root in traditional disciplines. More pointedly, in the years before English departments began to advertise for positions in “lesbian and gay studies” or “queer theory,” my peers and I experienced a good deal of anxiety about our employment prospects.

Today, my early modern students seem as likely to be hired to teach in areas of secondary expertise such as composition, digital humanities, or film studies as in Shakespeare. Training in interdisciplinary fields has opened up certain professional opportunities for new graduates, but also perhaps reconfirmed the narrowing of other, more traditional, options. For me, then, any utopian thoughts of reorganizing the university across disciplinary lines would have to be weighed against the effects that such changes might have on academic labor and resource distribution. Would such reorganization require more or fewer positions for academic administrators? How would such reorganization affect the availability of tenure-track positions for students with various kinds of training and expertise? And what might be lost, as well as gained, from modifying how we trained graduate students to be competitive for such positions?

Will Stockton

I would like to conclude by turning back to the horizons of our fields. I am thinking of “horizon” as a term indexing both utopian hope and real limit, a zone of possibility and a boundary in which we confine our inquiry. Considering that queer studies seems regularly beset by concerns about evanescence—especially with respect to histories of identity—I would like to invite you to talk about new and recent work that effectively broadens our horizons. What papers given at the conference or work recently published seems to you to point

a way out of, around, into, or back into (pick your preposition) contemporary problems, questions, or stalemates? I would also like to follow up on the remarks about disciplinarity and its discontents by asking to what extent queer or sexuality studies has shaped your temporal horizons as a period specialist. In my first question, I used the phrase “early modern” to trope both the Renaissance and late-medieval periods, but of course one may protest such a teleological nomenclature. To what extent do you see your own work operating under the rubric of the early modern? To what extent do you see yourself working in the Renaissance or the Middle Ages? And to what extent does a focus on sexuality and queerness shape these temporal frames?

Mario DiGangi

In his essay in this issue of *JEMCS* James M. Bromley uses a method he calls “cruisy historicism” to analyze the performance of gender and eroticism in Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humor*, a play that I had also examined at length in *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (67–72). Cruisy historicism, Bromley hopes, might help us avoid “the false choice between historicist and presentist approaches.” By considering the overlap between Bromley’s historicist approach and my own, I want to suggest that one strategy for moving beyond polemical divisions in early modern sexuality studies would begin with the recognition that critics who practice different forms of historicism might nonetheless share similar scholarly and political goals.

In *Homoerotics*, I offer *Every Man Out of His Humor* as evidence for the thesis that early modern culture distinguished socially orderly from socially disorderly forms of male homoeroticism. Jonson’s character Fastidious Briske, I argue, embodies a male homoeroticism rendered disorderly through the “effeminate” display of extravagant clothing, courtly manners, and an attractive page. Bromley objects that to contextualize Jonson’s play (as I and others do) within the genre of Renaissance satire involves the assemblage of “an archive that provides empirical confirmation of univocal early modern condemnation of lavish apparel and public sexuality.” Bromley convincingly argues that by focusing on those aspects of the play that seem the most empirically demonstrable—since satire functions by ridiculing recognizable social practices—historicist readings fail to recognize that the play might permit a more generous and expansive response to Briske as a figure of social and erotic fantasy, attachment, and emulation. Bromley does not reject historicism, in that he reads Briske with an awareness of how sartorial extravagance could

have signified more positively in late sixteenth-century London. At the same time, he makes the presentist argument that Briske's significance as a figure for urban cruising can be mobilized in contemporary arguments for the "forms of attachment" and "utopian fantasies" fostered by queer public culture.

Bromley's method, which aims to invent queer "cultural memory out of practices and fantasies that are shifting, mobile, ephemeral, improvisational and yet difficult to archivally validate," seems quite distinct from my own approach, which uses Renaissance satire to contextualize and "archivally validate" a reading of Jonson's play. Nonetheless, like Bromley, I aim through my reading of the play to expand the horizons of queer criticism by bringing to light positive forms of eroticized attachment that had been occluded by previous scholarship. In my argument, Fastidious Briske's transgressions served as a foil to the culturally-valued forms of early modern homoeroticism that Renaissance scholars consistently overlooked or misrecognized because of their fixation on transgressive sodomy. Moreover, my argument about the existence of orderly homoerotic relations in early modern England was explicitly motivated by a presentist political desire to challenge, in the age of AIDS, the "homophobic association between homosexuality and the abject, whether in the guise of criminality, sin, shame, death or disease" (*Homoerotics* 15). Despite my inability to recognize at the time what Bromley regards as the more generative queer possibilities represented by Briske himself, the scholarly and political agendas motivating our historicist approaches appear to have much in common.

Performing a historicist reading does not mean ignoring the possible relevance of premodern texts to the gender and sexual formations of the present. In different ways, both Bromley's approach and my approach illustrate how historicist readings might be produced in the service of contemporary ethical and political goals. Early modern sexuality scholars would have an easier time avoiding "false choices" such as altericism versus continuism if, in addition to acknowledging our methodological differences, we took greater account of the ethical, theoretical, and political agendas we had in common.

Ruth Mazo Karras

The big issue facing premodern queer studies seems to me to be its Euro-American orientation. To what extent are we as an academic community working with categories and concepts that not only can be applied in a wide variety of settings but are generated from that variety, and to what extent is the very nature of the field Eurocentric? A conference that defines itself as focusing

on early modern England, of course, inevitably will have a European focus, and there certainly needs to be room in scholarship for such work. However, just as some of the papers (Carolyn Dinshaw's and mine, for example) stretch the chronological boundaries of the early modern, some of them reach beyond England (Katherine Crawford's in particular) and indeed even beyond Europe (in the case of Madhavi Menon).

The concept of "queer" was developed as a way of reclaiming an insult, by people who wanted to escape the categories of "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual." It has also proven extremely useful for scholars who wish to study sexualities and desires that trouble or challenge dominant paradigms. But the term is, unquestionably, Western. One can identify groups, behaviors, texts, and desires that, if they existed in early modern England or in the contemporary United States, would be queer. Whether they are necessarily queer in their own context is another question. Loving relationships between co-wives would be one example; if normalized or even idealized, in what way are they queer? Even if queer is a useful classifier in a variety of spatial and temporal contexts, we always need to consider what terminology, internal to the culture at hand, it elides. "Heterosexual," for example, is an unhelpful category for many scholarly purposes, but at least it is a term commonly used in contemporary American culture, and it sometimes more explanatory than "straight" (or "unqueer"). The South Asian term "hijra" may be queer in its challenge to dominant gender paradigms, yet queer theory may not provide the most useful terminology for discussing hijras in comparison with transgender or transsexual individuals in other cultures.

As both Melissa and Mario have discussed, there has been considerable recent debate about the value of unhistoricist approaches. If we were going to treat the premodern period in Western Europe solely in terms of its own categories, we would have to write in Latin or in archaic forms of modern languages; it is inevitable that our terminology accompanies us. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the language used by the people or texts we study. Geographical difference raises, much more acutely than chronological difference, ethical questions about privileging the scholar-outsider.

Will, you've asked us to talk about the extent to which queer or sexuality studies has shaped our temporal horizons as period specialists. The history of sexuality makes it very obvious how arbitrary the boundary between the medieval and the early modern is, as the scholarly response to Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* (1990) demonstrated (see Park). Indeed, we might benefit from

considering the biggest turning point in women's sexuality to be in 1960 with the approval of oral contraceptives by the FDA. Rather than use the term "early modern" to cover the medieval as well, I adopt the term "premodern" as more capacious. The term is not without its own problems, as it situates our work not only in opposition to, but as the undifferentiated "before," something else; however, terms such as "medieval," "Renaissance," and "early modern" have parallel issues. "Premodern" certainly travels better across geographies than "medieval" or "Renaissance," although once again it is important to attend to the time in which the people we study think or thought themselves to be living.

Melissa Sanchez

These two inquiries—what recent work broadens our horizons and how does a focus on sexuality and queerness shape our own temporal frames—speak productively to each other. The papers at the Huntington conference all pushed me to reassess my views about the relations among queer studies, early modern studies, the history of sexuality, and historicist method, and I think that the conference brought together many exciting voices in the field. Most of the papers are part of forthcoming books, and I'm looking forward to getting my hands on them once they're in print! In addition, Ania Loomba and I are currently editing a volume entitled *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies: Gender, Race, and Sexuality*, which brings together a good deal of exciting work on the challenges that we continue to face in our studies of these topics. One of the aims that Ania and I had when we formulated this volume was to focus on specific questions of theory and method that have been debated recently in queer studies of the period, and that have also long been central to feminist criticism. How do we define what "feminist" work is? Why does a study of early modern texts contribute to feminist thought more generally? How do some of the fractures that have always been part of feminism—particularly those around race and sexuality—shape the work that we do as early modern critics? How can early modernists engage with feminist theory and politics more generally, and how can we demonstrate our contributions to contemporary feminist thought?

This last question, or pair of questions, points to the larger issue of field formation and critical identity that Will's prompt addresses in terms of queer theory and sexuality studies: what is the relationship between queer theory and early modern studies? At the conference, Madhavi Menon made the

thought-provoking statement that she considered herself a queer theorist, not an early modernist (at least, that is what I remember). This statement emerges, I think, from her challenges to current field formation in the introduction to *Shakespeareer*. It also gets at the heart of a question that I frequently find myself asking, which is how did the study of earlier literature become understood primarily as “literary criticism” and that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature become classified as “theory”? How do we decide how to self-identify as scholars, and to what extent is it our own choice? Why is it that we in early modern studies frequently draw on the work of scholars working in later historical periods (to loop back to Will’s question about recent work, two books I’ve learned a lot from recently are Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds* and Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*), while it is less common for the reverse to be the case? In other words, to what extent is field formation itself implicitly understood to observe lines of periodization, even if fields like queer theory focus on a problematic rather than a period?

I like to think that the work we do on early modern literature, history, and culture can be central to queer theory. And more broadly, like many—perhaps all—of us who spoke at the Huntington conference, I am convinced that the division between history and theory, empirical and conceptual work, is ultimately a false divide. Yes, different methods require different skills and specialized knowledges, and a focus on historical specificity is at odds with a pursuit of theory in a universalizing sense. But if the debates both within and between feminism and queer theory over the past few decades have taught us anything, it is that theory is expanded rather than impoverished by attention to specificity—of location, experience, and history. We could say of queer and sexuality studies what Mrinalini Sinha has said of feminism and gender studies: “to bring a global perspective to gender means to give theoretical cognizance to the multiple contexts in which it appears. . . . But, more important, it has potential for raising a new and different set of questions about a past whose full import for the present has yet to be realized” (370). How and why we realize this past and understand its import for the present have been the subject of a lot of debate lately. But I think that the very fact that we are having these debates points to at least one area of agreement: that the early modern past is neither dead nor past, and that our work is far from done.

NOTES

1. For a review of the way historians have interpreted the Wife of Bath, see Karras 319–33.
2. See Wiegman 197–238 for analysis of this dilemma—at once political, conceptual, and institutional.

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