

Eros' ambiguity

An philosophical history of male love

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'[A]mbiguity is essentially a threat of disorder, and often provokes an intensification of the cultural struggle for order.' (Corbey 2005, 25)

Introduction

In *The Metaphysics of Apes*, Raymond Corbey notes that cultural anthropologists have often considered non-human primates to be privileged figures of otherness, assisting articulations of human identity. Thus studying our animal cousins and ancestors served to screen man's unicity from the rest of the animal kingdom (Corbey 2005). Moreover, non-human primates are profoundly ambiguous creatures, and one could say that the wide range of anthropological traditions reflects different ways of dealing with this ambiguity. Whereas cultural anthropologists resolutely relegated our hairy relatives to the animal kingdom by putting man on a pedestal, biological anthropologists have continually emphasized the many similarities between humans and (other) animals.

In this chapter, I argue that the history of homosexuality and bisexuality, and their tense romance with heterosexuality, provides us with a similar issue of ambiguity and identity¹. For one thing, homosexuality and bisexuality are profoundly ambiguous phenomena. The ambiguity of bisexuals consists in their having sexual relationships with both men (mostly boys and adolescents, historically) *and* women. Current (effeminate) homosexuals, by contrast, are ambiguous in the sense that they display both masculine and feminine traits, even though they only feel attracted to other men. In addition, historians have hypothesized that these homosexuals may have served as a dividing wall between men and women, especially in times of growing equality between both sexes. Therefore, one could say that the identity of heterosexuals is crucially dependent on the presence of (effeminate) homosexuals.

For reasons to be explored in this chapter, ambiguity has always met with resistance, whether in anthropology or in sex research. In the first section of my contribution, I will show that evolutionary psychologists have consistently disregarded the proportion of bisexuals in the homosexual population. Thus they simply ignore the fact that, historically, most men who engaged in same-sex sexual practices were

¹ For reasons to be revealed, I consider *homosexuality* as a recent kind of *same-sex sexuality*. The latter simply refers to someone having sex with a person of the same sex. *Bisexuality* refers to someone having sex with persons of both sexes. *Male love* is a rather neutral denomination I use to refer to both same-sex sexuality (including homosexuality) and bisexuality.

simultaneously married, i.e. they had sexual relationships with men and women. In the next section, I'll discuss another example of our uneasiness with ambiguity: the relentless pursuit of homosexuals throughout the ages, as well as the continuing contempt they meet in today's society. I also argue that the effeminate kind of homosexuality is nonetheless a vital link in the sexual scenery of many contemporary societies. In the third section, I will discuss the question why we find it so difficult to confront ambiguity, using "biphobia" and homophobia as case-studies. The benchmark of this final section is Mary Douglas' famous *Purity and Danger*.

1. Evolution versus history: the case of bisexuality

1.1. An evolutionary paradox

One of the more striking examples of ignoring bisexuality is the current Darwinian thinking about homosexuality. Male love is usually considered to be a paradox or a puzzle for evolutionary theory. Being heritable – scientists speak of "gay genes"² –, homosexuality is much more prevalent than typical mutation-based traits, such as klinefelter's syndrome. Moreover, it seems obvious that homosexuals are at a high reproductive disadvantage, simply because they can't have children. Now if it is true that homosexuality is heritable and common, and if it is true that homosexuals do not reproduce, then we should expect natural selection to eliminate the so-called gay genes soon. Yet we know that homosexuality already existed in the Graeco-Roman world, and the abundant evidence on animal same-sex sexual practices (Bagemihl 1999; Sommer & Vasey 2006) suggests our early ancestors probably engaged in male love, too. To account for this odd persistence, evolutionary psychologists have thought up a number of explanations.

One such hypothesis is based on a very famous principle of evolutionary theory, i.e. the principle of kin selection. Biologists have observed that some organisms tend to exhibit strategies that favor the reproductive success of their relatives, even at a cost to their own survival and reproduction. They explain the persistence of these strategies by indicating that some organisms "choose" to protect their close relatives, rather than raising children themselves. For these relatives share a significant number of genes with them, including, perhaps, the gay gene. Edward Wilson, the founder of sociobiology, suggested that homosexuality may have evolved by means of kin selection (Wilson 1978). By taking care of their nephews and nieces, homosexuals would enable the gay gene to proliferate through collateral lines of descent, *even though they themselves do not reproduce at all*.

Another hypothesis goes that homosexuality could have been preserved by natural selection as a trade-off for another, highly adaptive trait – a trait that would

² By 'gay gene' they refer to a hypothetical hereditary character that, along with all the other genes and the experiences one goes through, will make someone somewhat more likely to become homosexual (De Block & Adriaens 2004).

somehow be biologically connected to the supposed gay gene. What trait? Well, Italian researchers recently found that, generally, mothers and aunts of homosexuals have more children than mothers and aunts of heterosexuals (Camperio-Ciani *et al.* 2004). Thus they suggested that homosexuality may be a trade-off for the enhanced fecundity of female maternal relatives of homosexuals. Put otherwise: the high number of children being born to mothers and maternal relatives of homosexuals provides some kind of compensation for the fact that homosexuals themselves remain childless.

In their feverish search for hidden adaptive benefits, evolutionary psychologists invariably assume that data about the reproduction of contemporary North American and Western European homosexuals are representative of the entire evolutionary history of male love. In their view, homosexuality and heterosexuality are all-or-none traits: one is either homosexual or heterosexual, and if one is homosexual one cannot have children. They also claim that this dichotomy has been there from time immemorial. In short: evolutionary psychologists claim that sexual orientation has always been organized according to a disambiguated and dateless binary system without any transitional forms³.

1.2. History's solution

Unfortunately, evolutionary psychologists are wrong. It may be true that contemporary homosexuals have only one tenth as many children as contemporary heterosexuals (Miller 2000), but there is no good reason to think that this has always been the case. For one of the most surprising findings of recent historical and anthropological research on homosexuality is that the bulk of men practicing same-sex sexuality were bisexual. Indeed: while being married and raising children, they had sex with other men, mostly boys or adolescents (Murray 2000).

As strange as the idea of a homosexual marrying a woman may seem to some of us today, such marriages not only occurred in many ancient societies, they continue to occur in many contemporary ones, including the United States (Bagley and Tremblay 1998). Two examples illustrate this point. In Japan today, marriageable women often read gay magazines because they contain personal ads from homosexuals whose families and employers are urging them to marry and beget children: 'So long as those obligations [marriage and parenthood] are met, one's sexual activity is not anyone else's legitimate concern' (Murray 2000, 398). And in ancient Greece, Spartan boys (*eromenoi*) were drilled under the eagle's eye of their older lovers (*erastai*), so as to become good warriors. Spartan soldiers are said to have sacrificed to Eros (originally the patron of male love) before entering the battlefield, in the belief that their fate was closely tied to the intimate relationship they had with their fellow

³ For an extensive discussion of the history and evolution of same-sex sexuality, as well as an alternative evolutionary explanation of male love, see De Block & Adriaens (2004) and Adriaens & De Block (2006).

warriors (Murray 2000, 40). Most of the boys married, however, which amounted to having intercourse with their wives at least once a month. The remaining nights they spent with their *erastes* (who often acted as the newlyweds' Maecenas for some time after the marriage) or with their own *eromenos*. Indeed, only the *eromenoi* who married and raised children were allowed to become *erastai* themselves: 'Exclusive pederasty was negatively sanctioned, but pederasty was expected' (Murray 2000, 40). In short, recent historical and anthropological evidence suggests that male love frequently involved, and still involves, married men. For the majority of men engaging in same-sex sexual activities, such activities have always been complementary to, and not a replacement of, marital sexuality. Only recently has homosexuality been redefined as *exclusive* sexual activity with others of the same sex, which necessarily forecloses the biological possibility of having children. Today, (some) male homosexuals have sex only with men, and never with women, but such exclusivity is by no means representative of the history of male love.

On the contrary: homosexuality as we now know it is definitely a recent phenomenon. In Western Europe, the era of exclusive same-sex sexuality probably began in the early eighteenth century. Historian Randolph Trumbach, for example, has argued that before about 1700, many European men maintained sexual relationships with women as well as with younger boys: "Homosexual activity occurred between most men and boys. (...) Sodomy was therefore so widespread as to be universal. But it was always structured by age" (Trumbach 1998, 5). Unlike today, bisexuals (e.g. married men having sex with adolescents) were the majority, and "heterosexuals" the minority. While the religious authorities disapproved of male same-sex sexuality, public opinion saw nothing wrong with it, provided the older lover played the active part. But around 1700, a major shift in sexual morals started to set in: older men, who were called (and called themselves) *mollies* or *sodomites*, shifted roles and began playing the passive part that had, traditionally, been reserved for the adolescent (Crompton 2003; Murray 2000; Trumbach 1998). Moreover, some *mollies* and *sodomites* now desired *only* men: they neither married nor raised children. Such *exclusive* sexual preference is just one of the characteristics of this "wholly new" kind of male love⁴. Modern homosexual partners also lack

⁴ It was Foucault who claimed that the modern kind of homosexuality is a "wholly new" kind of male love. Historians now agree, however, that Foucault was wrong about this. As historian Louis Crompton notes: '[T]he idea of a sexual identity is not uniquely modern. Aristophanes expressed it plainly enough in the *Symposium*, and the Romans used it, in a limited sense, in their concept of the *cinaedus* ("faggot"), who was certainly a distinct sort of person. In Plutarch's philosophical debate, half the speakers share an identity as lovers of youths and the other half as heterosexuals, though they lacked the term, and the same dichotomy appears in a brilliant dialogue from seventeenth-century Japan. Even in medieval times, when the view of same-sex relations as sins and crimes predominated, a French poet could make his heroine speak of "men of that sort" (de ce métier), that is, of a certain kind of individual' (Crompton 2003, xiv). Thus one might argue that perhaps evolutionary psychologists are not chasing shadows after all. In fact it may not be unreasonable to assume that exclusive homosexuals have always existed, even though they have perhaps occupied wildly different

significant status differences, and they identify themselves with a gender that combines characteristics of both femininity and masculinity. The combination of these three characteristics (exclusivity, equality, and gender ambiguity) is indeed quite new in the history of human same-sex sexuality.

The eighteenth-century change in sexual scenery started out in Western Europe, mainly in England and Italy. In the subsequent centuries, it gradually carved its way in other parts of the world. In some countries, however, the old sexual system (with a bisexual majority) continued to exist a little longer. In Japan, for example, the changeover only took place between 1900 and 1950. And in Latin America, age-structured same-sex sexuality occurred up till the last decade of the twentieth century. In fact the age-structured system still exists, for example, in a number of Islamic Mediterranean countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Northern India (for a short discussion of cross-cultural differences in systems of sexual orientation, see Trumbach 2007a, 45ff).

That said, contemporary sexologists emphasize that even today, bisexuals outnumber exclusive homosexuals. When trying to map out male sexual behavior, pioneer sexologist Alfred Kinsey did not expect to find that at least 37 per cent of the male population had at least some same-sex sexual experience between the beginning of adolescence and old age. He also found that 18 per cent of his interviewees had at least as much same-sex sexual as heterosexual experiences in their lives, whereas only 4 percent of his population turned out to be exclusively homosexual (Kinsey *et al.* 1948). The general conclusion of his impressive research was that nearly half of the male population engages in both heterosexual and same-sex sexual activities. As he concludes himself:

‘Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex’ (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 639).

So one could say that most of history’s male lovers were in fact bisexuals, and that evolutionary psychologists have consistently failed to account for the widespread existence of bisexuality before *and* after 1700, believing the post-1700 exclusive homosexual to be representative of the entire evolutionary history of male love. In the next section, I will argue that, historically, bisexuals have as much been ignored as (effeminate) homosexuals have been despised. In the final section it will be argued

niches throughout history. As such, exclusive homosexuality would still deserve an evolutionary explanation.

that neglect and contempt can be considered as two different strategies to deal with ambiguity.

2. Ambiguity and identity: the case of homosexuality

2.1. History's oldest hatred

It is perhaps unnecessary to demonstrate that homosexuals have never been society's sweethearts. Throughout history they have been humiliated and taunted, degraded and derided, blackmailed and banished, burnt and beheaded, drowned, hanged, castrated, and blamed for numerous diseases and disasters (for an extensive historical overview of homophobia, see Crompton 2003). Even today, same-sex sexual contacts are punishable by law in more than eighty countries. In some of them, homosexuality is a capital offence. And the sad fate of several Iranian young men being hanged because of their sexual orientation shows that, unfortunately, these laws are still complied with.

The historical vicissitudes of homophobia have been documented quite well, yet few authors have asked themselves *why* homosexuals often had such a hard time holding their ground in society. Whence homophobia? Obviously, the three great Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) have always been less than favorable to male lovers. The author(s) of Leviticus, for example, fiercely denounced male homosexuality by claiming that 'if a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them' (Leviticus 20:13). According to Louis Crompton, this one verse has determined the fate of millions of male lovers. For Judaism turned out to be much more than the belief system of a tiny tribe in the eastern Mediterranean. It became the breeding ground and source of inspiration for one of the leading world religions: Christianity. As such, Crompton continues, 'the Levitical statute became the model for laws decreeing capital punishment for homosexuality in Europe and in as much of the world as came under Europe's sway, down to the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the moral authority of Leviticus has been determinative even in this day; American courts routinely cited it as an argument for retaining state sodomy laws' (Crompton 2003, 34).

However, claiming that one cruel verse is the sole responsible for history's homophobia is perhaps a little too easy. Crompton seems to forget that religious considerations are often used as a cover for plainly secular motives. In Daniel Dennett's vocabulary, religions are not constructed by means of skyhooks but by means of cranes (Dennett 1995). They embody a distinctive historical mentality – the fears, desires and worries of ordinary people in a specific place and time. And seemingly some of the trials and tribulations of that tiny Mediterranean tribe proved to be more universal and more tenacious than others. Christianity did not adopt all Thoraic enactments, for example, but they did adopt the prohibition of male homosexuality. In other words: the Levitical ferocity towards male lovers apparently

struck a powerful chord in the mind of many. So maybe we should inquire into the appeal and the persistence of homophobia, rather than into its origin.

At this point, a philosopher may come to our aid. In a late interview with *The Advocate*, Michel Foucault suggested that there is a sudden surge of homophobia at the beginning of the eighteenth century – a surge that, still according to Foucault, may be due to the decline of the *amicitia*. The *amicitia*, Foucault explains, was a particular, affective kind of friendship between males that often included same-sex sexual behavior. ‘Once [such] friendship had disappeared as a culturally accepted relationship, the question was raised: “But what are these men doing together?” At that moment, the problem [of homophobia] made its first appearance’ (Foucault 1984, 29). Male love was seen as some sort of plot, and the inability to understand it, to place it, made the public at large fearful and repudiating. To avert the fear, Foucault contends, these men were tagged with a new identity based on their sexual activities: the homosexual identity. Therefore, in Foucault’s view, the construction of the modern homosexual identity originated as a kind of social control.

Foucault’s untimely death prevented him from elaborating on this hypothesis. Yet one wonders if the obscurity surrounding homosexuality, i.e. the fact that people are unable to place it, would not enable us to understand the *entire* history of homophobia, rather than just one of its sordid episodes. Obviously, saying that same-sex sexual behavior only became a problem in the eighteenth century would be a gross historical error. As I already indicated, same-sex sexual behavior had by then been commonplace for thousands of years, and that in spite of a fierce Inquisition that had first reared its head in the thirteenth century. So again: why was homosexuality so consistently, and with ever-increasing vehemence since the rise of Christianity, regarded as subversive?

Before answering this question a further distinction has to be made. Indeed: not all male lovers met with the same contempt. Generally and historically, there are in fact four different sexual roles for male individuals engaging in same-sex sexuality: a passive boy or adolescent, an active adult male (usually married while having sex with boys and adolescents, and perhaps also with passive adult males), a passive adult male (mostly married while having sex with active adult males), and a passive adult male acting as a itinerant transvestite prostitute (Trumbach 2007a, 46ff). Historians have demonstrated that the first two roles (boy and active adult male) were seldom considered as problematical. Quite the contrary: by penetrating adolescents and passive adult males, the active adult male in fact proved his masculine dominance. In ancient Rome, individuals adopting the latter two roles were known as *cinaedi* and *galli*, respectively. Originally, *galli* were itinerant religious devotees who survived by begging, foretelling the future, performing religious rituals, and offering sexual services to active adult males. Being “prostitutes”, they cross-dressed and (sometimes) castrated themselves. *Galli* were at least tolerated, and probably even admired because of their religious role (Murray 2000, 298ff). The role of the *cinaedus*, by contrast, has been taunted and despised since time immemorial. Roman *cinaedi* behaved very womanly: they cross-dressed, wore too much jewelry,

and depilated and scented themselves. According to Clement of Alexandria, they even made typical noises: 'a noise in their noses like a frog, just as if they kept their spleen stored up in their nostrils' (quoted in Berman 2003, 173). The sexual passivity and effeminacy of the *cinaedi* was a thorn in the side of the prototypical Roman patriarch. Thus passivity in a same-sex sexual relationship was punishable by law: pre-Christian Roman rules stipulated that it should entail a loss of civic rights⁵.

In fact the eighteenth-century English *mollies* and *sodomites* strongly resembled the ancient character of the *cinaedus*⁶. *Mollies*, too, got totally absorbed in their effeminate roles. 'Modern sodomites or homosexuals were conceived to be men who really wanted to be women and took on many of the characteristics of women. They walked and spoke like women. They used women's names. They often dressed partly or entirely as women. But they did not desire women. Instead, they wished to have sexual relations entirely with males' (Trumbach 2007b, 78)⁷. And *mollies*, too, were always held in contempt, the more so because their gatherings slowly started to take the size of a full-blown subculture (for an extensive overview of homophobia in renaissance and enlightenment Europe, see Gerard & Hekma 1988).

Thus it seems that it is mainly *passive* and *effeminate* adult homosexuals that have never been accepted in Western culture. They are men and yet they do not desire women. They desire men. They are men and yet they do not dress like men. They dress like women. In short, the prototypical passive effeminate homosexual seems to undermine our habitual ways of classifying the world. As such, he upsets our snug and secure worldview, "inevitably" eliciting public repudiation. Indeed: along with Foucault, one could say that it is precisely the ambiguity of the effeminate homosexual that doomed his fate by occasioning disrespect, disdain and discrimination.

2.2. Homosexuality and heterosexuality

And yet one could say that effeminate homosexuals play an important part in the division of sexual roles in many contemporary societies. Their ambiguity in fact allowed them to take on a symbolic function in the changing landscape of sexual orientation in eighteenth-century Europe. In order to understand this symbolic function, we have to inquire into the reasons of that impressive eighteenth-century changeover – a changeover from a system of age-structured same-sex sexuality, to a

⁵ Both sexual roles, i.e. *gallus* and *cinaedus*, still exist today, for example in Turkey and Northern India. The contemporary Turkish equivalent of the Roman *gallus*, i.e. the *köçek*, is admired, while the *İbne*, the passive adult married male, is held in contempt.

⁶ The likeness between the *cinaedus* and the modern homosexual is not just outward. In fact the *cinaedus*, too, was considered as a genuine identity, for instance in the Aristotelian physiognomy (Murray 2000, 255).

⁷ In a satirical book on the history of the London clubs, Edward Ward pictured the meeting place of some *mollies*. According to him, these men 'adopted all the small vanities natural to the feminine sex to such an extent that they try to speak, walk, chatter, shriek and scold as women do, aping them as well in other respects' (Ward 1709, quoted in McIntosh 1968, 188).

rather new and uniquely human complex of desires, behaviors, and identities, which we now call “homosexuality”.

Whence this recent, exclusive kind of same-sex sexuality? Historians and philosophers differ in opinion about this issue. According to Michel Foucault, for example, it is the nineteenth-century medicalisation of same-sex sexual behavior that explains the genesis (or rather: the construction) of a homosexual identity. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault claims that the then authorities came to see the control of sexuality as an instrument with which to reach their goals of economic efficiency and political conservatism. The sciences, mostly psychiatry and sexology, developed discourses to monitor sexuality, and these discourses in turn gave rise to the medicalization of sexuality in general and of homosexuality in particular (Foucault 1978)⁸.

Many contemporary historians disagree with Foucault by pointing to a major anachronism in his hypothesis. While it is true, they argue, that the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” were coined by late nineteenth-century psychiatrists and sexologists, the shift to the current, modern kind of same-sex sexuality took place earlier, probably around the very beginning of the eighteenth century. Therefore, psychiatry and sexology cannot be held responsible for its existence. That said, it is not unlikely that they served to legitimate an already existing binary ontology of human sexual orientation. By setting up a thorough search for physical and hereditary causes of homosexuality – just like they did for other then modish “illnesses” such as neurasthenia and *railway spine* (Rosenberg 2006) – psychiatrists validated the view that homosexuality was a firm and stable disposition, rather than a flexible sexual strategy (De Block & Adriaens 2004; Adriaens & De Block 2006).

But if psychiatry and sexology did not create the modern kind of homosexuality, what did? Society did, says sociologist Mary McIntosh in a seminal paper entitled ‘The homosexual role’ (McIntosh 1968). In her view, homosexuality is not a medical condition, as psychiatrists and sexologists have suggested. If it would be a condition, people would be either homosexual or heterosexual, and Kinsey’s work has clearly shown that at nearly every age far more men have sex with both men and women, rather than with men only. Conversely, McIntosh suggests to consider homosexuality as a specialized social role that has been designed by a number of

⁸ The attentive reader has perhaps noticed that Foucault seems to endorse two different views. In his *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978) he claims that *nineteenth*-century psychiatry and sexology invented the modern homosexual. Eight years later, in the already mentioned interview with *The Advocate* (Foucault 1984), he had changed his view. For now he states that the role of the modern homosexual originated in the *eighteenth*-century public feeling being uncomfortable with male friendships. What happened? Of course Foucault is known for his changing viewpoints; when confronted with similar antics, he once exclaimed: ‘Well, do you really think I have worked hard all those years to say the same thing and not be changed?’. For this once, however, there might not be a contradiction. One could argue indeed that sexology and psychiatry simply reflected the public uneasiness about homosexuality. As such, these sciences served as an instrument of public opinion, rather than as an instrument of the authorities.

societal expectations. As to her, society expects those engaging in same-sex sexuality to be *exclusively* attracted to men, to be effeminate in manner and personality, and to be keen on seducing boys and young men (*Ibid.*, 185). Such expectations often act like self-fulfilling prophecies, thus establishing a real polarization between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

But why would a society create a homosexual role? Why would a predominantly heterosexual society need a homosexual minority? McIntosh leaves this question unanswered, except for the rather enigmatic claim that ‘the creation of a specialized, despised, and punished role of homosexual keeps the bulk of society pure in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps to keep the rest of society law-abiding’ (*Ibid.*, 184). Pure from what? McIntosh seems to suggest that the creation of “the homosexual” acted as a deterrent; it urged people to affirm their heterosexuality, just like the imprisonment of criminals should prevent people from doing wrong.

Historian Randolph Trumbach continued this line of thinking, particularly by concentrating on the issue of effeminacy. In his opinion, the early eighteenth century witnessed the beginning of a major cultural shift ‘in which a patriarchal morality that allowed adult men to own and dominate their wives, children, servants and slaves, was gradually challenged and partially replaced by an egalitarian morality which proposed that all men were created equal, that slavery must therefore be abolished, democracy achieved, women made equal with men, and children with their parents’ (Trumbach 1989, 154). Family structures changed from a system of patriarchy to a system of domesticity: forced marriages made way for companionate and romantic marriages, and brute offspring domination made way for a more tender care of children. Consequently, differences between men and women were gradually leveled, resulting in a completely new system of sexual interactions. And here the marginalized homosexual minority enters the game. According to Trumbach, *mollies* and *sodomites* appeared to facilitate the new relations of males with women and children – relations produced by a rising domesticity. They facilitated these new relations because they soothed the fears of the male “heterosexual” majority that the new intimacy might transform them into women or children. In short: society “invented” the homosexual as ‘a wall that guaranteed the permanent, lifelong separation of the majority of men and women, in societies where their relative equality must have been a perpetual danger to patriarchy’ (*Ibid.* 155). In Trumbach’s view, society created “the homosexual” in order to safeguard the masculine (sexual) identity of the male heterosexual majority⁹. Therefore, one could say that

⁹ Psychiatrists and sexologists will probably take offence at the idea that homosexuality is a creation (or an invention) of society. Trumbach, for example, repeatedly claims that ‘a minority of males were *socialized* as children into a role that was both male and female’ (Trumbach 1999, 91; italics mine). Such claim is square to the biologist’s creed that the flexibility of human behavior is limited, in particular by our biological equipment. However, Trumbach’s claim about the *etiology* of homosexuality is not central to his theory about the *social function* of homosexuality. One could meet the biological criticism by saying that society did perhaps not *create* the role of the homosexual. Rather, it simply *exploited* an

homosexuals are truly indispensable in today's society and that, ironically, homophobia threatens to mine the shaky structure of our sexual role play.

3. Confronting ambiguity: Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*

In order to make sense of the way people, whether scientists or laymen, have dealt with, and continue to deal with, the phenomena of both bisexuality and (effeminate) homosexuality, it would be interesting to have a look at the work of ethnologist Mary Douglas. In *Purity and Danger*, for example, Douglas (1966) inquires into the origin and meaning of rituals and taboos. According to her, taboos are not solely to be accounted for in prosaic medical terms. They are not simply hygienic measures, even though some of them might have sanitary advantages. *Halal* or *kosjer* food may perhaps prove to be less toxic, for example, but the rules regulating food consumption may have other origins as well. Put otherwise: 'Even if some of Moses's dietary rules were hygienically beneficial, it is a pity to treat him as an enlightened public health administrator, rather than as a spiritual leader' (Douglas 1966, 37).

According to Douglas, creating a taboo and the corresponding defilement rules and rituals, may be just one way to deal with ambiguity. Indeed: ambiguous entities or situations lend themselves easily to be transformed in powerful symbols. They are frightening and yet fascinating examples of the loopholes in our laws. Take faeces, for example. Like so many other bodily fluids, such as urine, menses, mucus and earwax, faeces are on the verge of the inside and the outside of the body. Hovering somewhere between our body and the world, they belong to neither of them. As such, faeces attest to an awkward ambiguity that turns over the way we categorize our world. Faeces, then, are not *unclean* (at least not in the first place) because they contain lots of bacteria, but because they are *unclear*. They refuse to be fitted in our comfortable and familiar worldview. Therefore, one could say that the taboo on faeces and, in general, on ambiguous entities and situations, originates in the typically human 'reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications' (*Ibid.*, 45).

Ambiguity is ubiquitous, so we should expect there to be lots of taboos. According to Douglas, however, there's a whole range of tactics to deal with ambiguity. Apart from subjecting the ambiguous entity or situation to rules of avoidance (and transforming it into a taboo), one can also reduce ambiguity by assigning the ambiguous to one of the two possible categories involved. For example: in trying to dispose of the ambiguity surrounding our phylogenetic family members, anthropologists have proposed either to range humans under primates (as *Pan Sapiens*) or to range primates under humans (*Homo Niger* and *Homo Gorilla* representing the chimpanzee and the gorilla, respectively) (Corbey 2005, 145ff). Finally, one can also control ambiguity by branding it as dangerous or even by

already existing group of male lovers, and put them to use in order to demarcate the line between men and women.

destroying it. Thus Douglas relates how 'some West African tribes' kill twin siblings at birth because they hold that two humans cannot be born from the same womb at the same time (Douglas 1966, 49).

Douglas doesn't mention a word about male love, but it is obvious that bisexuals and effeminate homosexuals can be considered as profoundly ambiguous beings, too. In this capacity they toy with some of our most cherished sexual structures and distinctions – distinctions we neurotically hang on to because we created them ourselves¹⁰. I already quoted Alfred Kinsey saying that 'it is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories' (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 639). Unfortunately, our mind seems to be unable to work without such categories. And whatever does not match with them makes us restless. For some reason, confronting the ambiguous cannot but result in its avoidance, its reduction or its elimination¹¹.

The history of male love testifies to this tactics. Effeminate homosexuals, for example, seem to defy one of our most evident and basal symbolical distinctions, i.e. the difference between man and woman. Effeminate homosexuals are men and yet they do not desire women; they are men and yet they do not act like men. Constituting some kind of "middlesex", a hybrid form between man and woman, they play the fool with our rigid classification systems. Historically, different strategies haven been adopted to deal with the ambiguity of these homosexuals. When they were thought to spoil the young, they were avoided; when they were thought to cause diseases and epidemics, they were branded; and when they were thought to break the law, they were persecuted and killed. To my knowledge, there are no societies that value effeminate homosexuals *because of* their sexual behavior or their sexual orientation. Of course, itinerant transvestite prostitutes, such as the ancient Roman *gallus*, the Turkish *köçek* and the Indian *hijra*, were often highly valued and needed in their respective societies. However, they were not valued because of the sexual services they rendered, but rather because of their religious position. Proof of this claim is that today's hijra's in India meet with more and more contempt as they cut back their religious (vis-à-vis their sexual) services (Murray 1999, 307-8).

Bisexuals are ambiguous not so much because they defy the difference between man and woman, but rather because they undermine the ongoing polarisation between

¹⁰ We created them ourselves because in the end so-called *natural* distinctions are never as clear as we would want them to be. As Douglas notes: '[I]deas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created' (Douglas 1966, 5). Some of our symbolic distinctions (man-woman, inside-outside,...) may have been preformed in the natural world, but then again the natural world does not tell us anything about *which* distinctions are important, let alone whether they are important at all. (I thank Paul Moyaert for this line of reasoning.)

¹¹ There is one important lacuna in Douglas' account of the ambiguous. For Douglas never asks why we have so much difficulty confronting ambiguity. Granted, ambiguity disrupts the existing order. But then the question is why we are so fond of our classifications. A detailed answer to this question is outside the scope of the present chapter, but psychologists have noted that there are perhaps good evolutionary reasons to consider social categories as natural kinds (see e.g. Barrett 2001).

homosexuality and heterosexuality. It was Alfred Kinsey who challenged the widespread assumption that 'there are persons who are "heterosexual" and persons who are "homosexual", that these two types represent antitheses in the sexual world, and that there is only an insignificant class of "bisexuals" who occupy an intermediate position between the other groups' (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 637). Both denominations, 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality', do not refer to discrete populations. They are not two fortresses in an otherwise dead and barren landscape. Rather, they are the tail ends of a colourful continuum of sexual orientation. Kinsey demonstrated that there are in fact more "bisexuals" than "homosexuals", thus turning this supposedly "insignificant class" into a powerful community. One could say that minimalization is perhaps a coping strategy that would deserve to be added to Douglas' list of strategies to deal with ambiguity.

The ambiguity of bisexuals has often been reduced, too, and particularly so by labeling them as "undecided". Implicitly and explicitly, bisexuals have often been conceptualized as those who just don't know yet what side to choose. Thus they were seen as either future homosexuals or future heterosexuals. Finally, one could also consider the (creation of the) concept of "bisexuality" *in se* as a coping strategy. As Mary McIntosh notes, '[sexologists] introduced the notion of a third type of person, the "bisexual", to handle the fact that behavior patterns cannot be conveniently dichotomized into heterosexual and homosexual' (McIntosh 1968, 182-3). By adding a third category ("a third fortress") to our classification, the ambiguity is neutralized and our serenity saved.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to bring Mary Douglas' analysis of ambiguity to bear to the history of male love. Douglas' analysis revealed that whatever does not harmonize with our cherished symbolic structures is doomed to be avoided, minimalized, ignored, or eliminated. Male love proved to be no exception to this rule. Before 1700, bisexuals definitely outnumbered "heterosexuals". Today, they still outnumber "homosexuals", and yet they continue to be ignored as a sexual population. In their turn, effeminate homosexuals have been avoided, branded, persecuted and even killed, even though they do hold an important symbolic position in many contemporary societies. Indeed: their ambiguity in fact allows them to act as a symbolic dividing line between man and woman, especially in cultures wherein the differences between both sexes increasingly fade away.

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