

A Lesbian Historiography of the French Revolution

Allison Wheeler⁶⁰⁰

aewheeler99@gmail.com

Abstract

Flings between the Queen of France and an actress at the Comédie Française, philosophical pornographic pamphleteers, and secret sapphic societies that threatened male supremacy formed a small yet rich historiography of lesbianism in 18th-century France. "A Lesbian Historiography of the French Revolution" analyses the works of various historians such as Susan S. Lanser, Jeffrey Merrick, and Bryant T. Ragan Jr concerning these topics. By analysing the shifting attitudes towards lesbianism, investigating the legal ramifications of homosexuality, studying novels and pamphlets from the time, and profiling those accused of lesbianism, historians have uncovered a rich history of lesbianism before and during the French Revolution. Though homosexuality was decriminalised during the revolution, lesbianism's close association with the second estate was used to condemn both members of the nobility and homosexuality.

Keywords: French Revolution, The Enlightenment, Lesbianism, Homosexuality, Marie Antoinette

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There is a small yet rich historiography discussing homosexuality among women leading up to and during the French Revolution. Lesbianism was a hot topic of debate before and throughout the French Revolution. Most historians argue there was a distinct shift in attitudes towards lesbianism during the Revolution, echoing Valerie Traub's idea of "cycles of salience"; that is, the proposition that the lesbian is of most cultural significance in times and places on the verge of significant change or revolution.⁶⁰¹ Historians approach the subject of homosexuality among women during the French Revolution by studying shifting attitudes towards lesbianism during the Enlightenment and Revolution, interrogating the legal ramifications of homosexuality, analysing novels and pamphlets from the time, and profiling various women who were accused of or openly admitted to lesbianism, mainly Marie Antoinette and Madame de Raucourt.

A note on language; lesbian is used to identify the subject matter, not force an identity onto past subjects or imply that lesbianism has always existed in its current state.⁶⁰² Women engaging in homosexuality would not have self-identified as lesbians or any distinct sexual identity during the French Revolution or prior. Tamsin Wilson argues that naming is at the heart of lesbian studies, but focusing on precise language hinders historical narratives.⁶⁰³ Susan Lanser argues that lesbian is no more historically contingent than "family," "marriage," or "slave."⁶⁰⁴ No matter how rigid one is with language usage, all history involves a degree of interpretation.

Though recent scholarship argues that the term lesbian was used in the eighteenth century, similar to its current use, most argue that other terms were more commonly used to discuss homosexual activity between women in the eighteenth century. The most common term describing homosexual activity among women in eighteenth-century France was "tribade," from the Greek word "to rub."⁶⁰⁵ The earliest definition for the word tribade, found in Richelet's dictionary of 1680, defines tribade as one "who mates with another person of her sex and imitates a man."⁶⁰⁶ This definition implies a difference between the women who were "active" and "passive" participants in sex. A lesser-used term for homosexual activity among women was "anandrine," meaning "anti-male." These various terms give the modern historian an understanding of how homosexuality among women was viewed during the eighteenth century.

In the Introduction to *Homosexuality in Modern France*, Bryant T. Ragan and Jeffrey Merrick argue that the material conditions of women in 18th-century France inhibited homosexual activity among women. Gay men could achieve economic freedom, which freed them from their families' influence. Women bound to their fathers or husbands could not achieve this freedom.⁶⁰⁷ Lesbianism has always been contingent on the material conditions of women.

Bryant T. Ragan's "The Enlightenment Confronts Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, looks into how people viewed homosexuality leading up to the French Revolution and how the Enlightenment shifted views about homosexuality. Philosophes spoke openly about homosexuality because the church had restricted speech on homosexuality.⁶⁰⁸ During services, priests would not name homosexuality, fearing naming the sin would tempt people into sin.⁶⁰⁹ Philosophes pushed forward various ideas about homosexual behaviours in men and women, sometimes using the same language and sometimes differentiating between the two acts. Philosophes discussed the naturalness of male and female

⁶⁰¹ Susan S. Lanser, *The Sexuality of History Modernity and the Sapphic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

⁶⁰² Jeffrey Merrick, and Bryant T. Ragan Jr., *Homosexuality in Modern France*, ed. Bryant T. Ragan and Jeffrey Merrick (Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

⁶⁰³ Tasmin Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 49.

⁶⁰⁴ Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*, 15.

⁶⁰⁵ Carla Freccero, "The Queer Time of Lesbian Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19.

⁶⁰⁶ Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*, 105.

⁶⁰⁷ Merrick and Ragan, *Homosexuality in Modern France*, 7.

⁶⁰⁸ Bryant T. Ragan, "The Enlightenment Confronts Homosexuality," In *Homosexuality in Modern France*. ed. Jeffrey Merrick, and Bryant T. Ragan Jr., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

homosexuality and acknowledged that same-sex behaviour was a common part of human history. Philosophes may not have supported homosexuality as a whole but did not believe the church could determine what was and was not virtuous.⁶¹⁰

Though Ragan's piece looks at homosexuality more broadly, he discusses in detail the philosophes' opinions about homosexuality among women. Philosophes' opinions on lesbianism varied wildly; some saw it as harmless, while others found it threatening or even titillating. Some even suggested lesbianism was less harmless than the act of sodomy.⁶¹¹ Men were also excited by lesbian sex with many fantasy novels including lesbian sex acts.⁶¹² Mirabeau wrote various sex scenes between women from a male perspective. Mirabeau interestingly suggested that during lesbian sex, the thought of men enhanced the women's pleasure.⁶¹³ Pornography created during the French Revolution differs from our modern understanding of pornography. Unlike today's pornography exclusively meant to arouse the reader, eighteenth-century pornography propagated radical philosophical statements while depicting titillating sexual acts.⁶¹⁴ Some philosophes searched for a physiological cause or a psychological cause. It was a commonly held belief that enlarged clitorises were a cause of lesbianism. Porn pamphleteers propagated the idea that women would use their enlarged clitoris to penetrate their partners. Ideas about enlarged clitorises went along with the idea that lesbians were not only women attracted to women, but women who wanted to be men. Other philosophes argued lesbian sex could enhance women's femininity rather than masculinize them.⁶¹⁵ Some even pushed forward the notion that lesbianism resulted from an unnatural separation between the sexes, like nuns in a convent and wives of soldiers who were left alone for extended periods.⁶¹⁶ Despite individual philosophes' opinions on homosexuality, their debates and pamphlets made homosexual activity among women more known to the general public.

Finally, Ragan details Randolph Trumbach's idea of a four-gender paradigm consisting of man, woman, sodomite, and sapphist. This new sexual model emerged around 1700-1720 and propagated the notion that a woman was someone who solely engaged in sex with men, while the sapphist exclusively had sex with another sapphist.⁶¹⁷ The four-gender paradigm was the beginning of distinct sexual identities, particularly for sodomites who began to see themselves as distinctly different from other men.⁶¹⁸

Susan Lanser's book *History of Sexuality* dives deep into various aspects and conversations about female homosexuality in revolutionary France, particularly in her chapter "Sapphic Sects and the Rites of Revolution." Due to homosexuality's close association with the second estate, many revolutionaries viewed lesbianism as an aristocratic institution that was not fit for the new republic, coded as anti-male and anti-progressive.⁶¹⁹ Lanser argues that revolutionaries saw tribadism as the "epitome of the secretive, regressive, aristocratic, woman-powered counterrevolutionaries."⁶²⁰ Lesbians were not just individuals engaging in homosexual activities but members of a secret society that threatened male supremacy. Whether the lesbians of the French Revolution were or were not revolutionary, there was no place for them in the new virtuous republic.⁶²¹ The heightened tensions of the French Revolution led to the "sex panic of the 1790s" that resulted in changing political attitudes around gender and sex.⁶²² Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality, it could be possible that familiar policing of lesbian activities was heightened during the revolution.

⁶¹⁰ Bryant T. Ragan, "The Enlightenment Confronts Homosexuality," 11.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 16.

⁶¹² Ibid., 20.

⁶¹³ Ibid., 15.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁶¹⁹ Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*, 215.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 214.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 215.

⁶²² Ibid., 216.

Louis Crompton challenges the commonly held belief that the law ignored lesbians in "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity."⁶²³ Crompton shows evidence of lesbian persecution throughout European history, countering the commonly held belief that only gay men were victims of capital punishment. Prosecution of women for homosexual activity existed in France for centuries before the French Revolution. The earliest secular law persecuting lesbian activity in France appeared in 1270.⁶²⁴ Evidence shows that lesbianism was punished by death multiple times during French history. By the eighteenth century, there was only evidence of men being arrested and punished for sodomy. The lack of arrest records against lesbians in eighteenth-century France does not necessarily indicate an acceptance of lesbianism or an absence of lesbianism. Instead, the scarcity of arrest records shows that women's lack of mobility restricted their ability to participate in lesbian activities.⁶²⁵ Men were arrested because they were actively seeking other men in public. Women did not have this same freedom. French authorities confirmed that at the time, despite the lack of arrest; the law could prosecute women for lesbianism. Indeed, French legal authority Pierre-François Muyart de Vouglans wrote in 1754 on lesbianism, "This crime, which derives its name from that abominable city, which is mentioned in Holy Scripture, is committed by a man with a man, or by a woman with a woman...The law... ordains that those who fall into this crime should be punished by being burned alive. This penalty which our jurisprudence has adopted, is equally applicable to women as to men."⁶²⁶ Crompton's article illuminates the differences between the homosexual history of men and women. The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1791 liberated gay men more than lesbians but helped prevent legal persecution in the future.

In "Bourdet vs. Quentin de Villiers: Tribadism and Propriety in French Legal Discourse, 1783–1784," Jeffrey Merrick covers accusations of tribadism in the divorce proceedings of Jean Philbert Quentin de Champlost and Louise Bourdet. Champlost's lawyer used charges of tribadism in court and the press to slander Bourdet's name.⁶²⁷ There is no evidence to suggest this was a valid claim, but the fallout from the lawyer's accusation reveals attitudes about lesbianism leading up to the Revolution. The magistrates of the Grande Chambre suppressed the accusation "as contrary to good morals and public decency."⁶²⁸ The magistrates feared the discussion of her charges would accidentally endorse tribadism. Interestingly, the lawyer's accusation did not employ common beliefs about the enlarged clitoris or sexual segregation leading to sapphic activities.⁶²⁹ Merrick's article does not strictly relate to the French Revolution. However, it gives insight into the attitudes about homosexuality leading up to the revolution and how negative connotations were used to demonise all women, not just those who actively participated in homosexuality.

Literary studies dominate lesbian history.⁶³⁰ The French Revolution is no exception, especially for anglophone scholars.⁶³¹ Lesbian literature flourished in Britain and France throughout the eighteenth century.⁶³² A central question of lesbian literary studies is what gives a text its lesbianism. Is lesbianism found in the author, subject matter, or reader?⁶³³ The lesbian literary analysis of the French Revolution does not cover the lesbian reader as it is too difficult to trace readership during the 18th century. There is a

⁶²³ Louis Crompton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791," *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, no.1-2 (1981): 11.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶²⁷ Jeffrey Merrick, "Bourdet vs. Quentin de Villiers: Tribadism and Propriety in French Legal Discourse, 1783–1784," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 52, no.3 (2019), 283.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶³⁰ Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*, 110.

⁶³¹ Merrick and Ragan, *Homosexuality in Modern France*, 4.

⁶³² Caroline Gonda, "Writing Lesbian Desire in the Long 18th Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 110.

⁶³³ Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*, 133.

greater possibility of finding lesbian writers, but this subject has not been covered. Therefore, the lesbian literary analysis of 18th century France covers lesbian subject matter.

Caroline Gonda argues in "Writing Lesbian Desire in the Long 18th Century," that lesbian desire was a hot literary topic during the long eighteenth century. A novel would not have used labels like "sapphist" or "lesbian" as readily as satirical pamphlets, and its depiction of lesbian sex often reinforced that homosexual intercourse was unnatural.⁶³⁴ Still, eighteenth-century literature offered windows into an imagined world of "(im)possibilities."⁶³⁵ Gonda goes on to discuss that lesbianism did not only exist in the imagination of men or novels but was a genuine practice for the women of France. Bed-sharing was common in eighteenth-century France and likely led to many homosexual encounters between women. Gonda suggests that the spread of pornographic pamphlets helped spread sexual knowledge about homosexuality to women.

Susan Lanser dives into literary analysis in her article "Au Sein de Vos Pareilles: Sapphic Separatism in Late Eighteenth-Century France." Various books from the time suggested that tribades were members of secret societies which sought to overthrow male supremacy. The most famous text on secret female societies is *Confessions D'une Jeune Fille* from 1778. The book follows Mademoiselle de Raucourt as a member of an all-female community as she initiates a young girl, "Mademoiselle Sapho," into the anandrine sect through an elaborate initiation process.⁶³⁶ Lanser argues the revolutionary manifesto featured in *The Confession D'une Jeune Fille* reads like a lesbian feminist separatist social contract.⁶³⁷ The idea of tribades as a member of secret societies would be used to condemn women during the French Revolution.

Leading up to and during the French Revolution, many women were famous for their sapphic reputation with a varying degree of truth to it. Marie Antoinette is featured in almost every article discussing female homosexuality and the French Revolution. However, most historians make it clear that there is no definitive proof that Marie Antoinette ever engaged directly in homosexual behaviours. Instead, historians focus on how rumours of homosexuality demonise the Austrian queen or how her homosexual legacy has inspired generations of women-loving women. Marie Antoinette was aware of the rumours from the beginning, writing to her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, "They have been liberal enough to accuse me of having a taste for both women and lovers."⁶³⁸ Hester Piozzi wrote in her diary, "The Queen of France is at the head of a set of monsters called by each other Sapphists."⁶³⁹ Whether this is true or not, Piozzi employing "sapphist" as an external identity is fascinating. After the brutal murder and mutilation of Princess de Lamballe during the September Massacres, a mob took her head on a bloody pike to where Marie Antoinette was staying, hoping they could force her to "kiss the lips of her intimate."⁶⁴⁰ Rumours of Marie Antoinette's homosexual behaviours were used to condemn her in the minds of the French public.

Elizabeth Colwill's "Pass as a Woman, Act Like a Man: Marie-Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, discusses the pamphlets that spread sapphic rumours about Marie Antoinette. Reports of her lesbian affairs began early with pornographic pamphlets showing Marie Antoinette with various partners and in multiple positions.⁶⁴¹ Lists of Marie Antoinette's rumoured lovers, female and male, filled French newspapers. The Princess de Lamballe and Comtesse de Polignac were most commonly associated with the queen and her sapphic

⁶³⁴ Gonda, "Writing Lesbian Desire in the Long 18th Century," 115.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶³⁶ Susan Lanser, "Au Sein de Vos Pareilles' Sapphic Separatism in Late Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Homosexuality* 41, no.3-4 (2002): 107.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶³⁸ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 128.

⁶³⁹ Gonda, "Writing Lesbian Desire in the Long 18th Century," 111.

⁶⁴⁰ Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 131.

⁶⁴¹ Elizabeth Colwill, "Pass as a Woman, Act like a Man," In *Homosexuality in Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick, and Bryant T. Ragan Jr., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54.

activities.⁶⁴² Colwill argues that accusations of lesbianism were levelled at Marie Antoinette and many other noblewomen to weaken their power.

Terry Castle's book, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, contains a chapter on "Marie Antoinette Obsession." Castle's chapter focuses on Marie Antoinette as a literary figure in nineteenth and twentieth-century lesbian literature, arguing that "the homosexuality of Marie Antoinette is in fact a kind of communal topos in lesbian writing of the early twentieth century: a shared underground motif or commonplace." Castle describes various books that feature Marie Antoinette as a "potent ancestor spirit." Notably, Marie Antoinette was featured in what is considered the first lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. The "Marie Antoinette Obsession" ends with her being described "as a kind of lesbian Oscar Wilde: a rallying point for sentiment and collective emotional intransigence."⁶⁴³ Castle's chapter successfully argues whether the rumours of Marie Antoinette's lesbianism were true; her reputation has inspired generations of lesbian literature.

Mademoiselle de Raucourt, an actress at the Comedie de France, is the second most discussed lesbian after Marie Antoinette. Jeffery Merrick's chapter in *Homosexuality in Modern France* opens with a quote from *Memoires Secrets* in 1784, "Tribadism has always been in vogue among women, like pederasty among men, but these vices, have never been flaunted with as much scandal and show as today."⁶⁴⁴ Long before the revolution, Mademoiselle de Raucourt's reputation was notorious among the people of Paris.⁶⁴⁵ Raucourt was known for dressing in men's clothes and made no secret of her relationship with women.⁶⁴⁶ She was best known for playing queens on stage and would soon be a favourite of Marie Antoinette. Raucourt's name appeared frequently on the various lists of Marie Antoinette's lovers.⁶⁴⁷ The actress did not support the revolution. Her earlier work would confirm royalist sympathies, and she would be later imprisoned during the Revolution.⁶⁴⁸ Raucourt's unapologetic tribadism showed that one could live a life of sapphic pleasure in late eighteenth-century France, but not without scandal.

Through analysing shifting attitudes towards lesbianism, investigating the legal ramifications of homosexuality, studying novels and pamphlets from the time, and profiling those accused of tribadism, historians have uncovered a rich history of lesbianism before and during the French Revolution. Lesbianism is not a creation of the modern world but a subject with a long history surrounding it. Whether it is a history of men's fantasies or a genuine lesbian relationship, lesbianism has always existed in some form or another.

⁶⁴² Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 127.

⁶⁴³ Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 149.

⁶⁴⁴ Merrick, "The Marquis de Villette and Mademoiselle de Raucourt: Representations of Male and Female Sexual Deviance in Late Eighteenth-century France," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*. ed. Jeffrey Merrick, and Bryant T. Ragan Jr., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

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