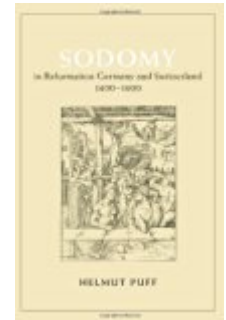


Helmut Puff. *Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland 1400-1600.* London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. ix + 311 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-68506-9.



Reviewed by Mitchell Lewis Hammond

Published on H-German (October, 2004)

In his *Spirit of the Laws* of 1765, Montesquieu observed that only three crimes--those of witchcraft, heresy, and "that against nature"--were punished with fire. Montesquieu refrained from defining this third crime any further, noting that he found it "to be often obscure and uncertain."^[1] But with his circumlocution, Montesquieu followed the rhetorical conventions of the previous four centuries for references to sodomy, sometimes called the "mute sin," as well as the "sin against nature." The reluctance even to mention sodomy meant that it was, in a sense, unspeakable, a widely-held fear identified by euphemism and shrouded in ambiguity. This conundrum lies at the heart of Helmut Puff's *Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland 1400-1600*, an ambitious book that combines the social history of same-sex relationships with a study of the language of slander and social control. Using court records, confessional manuals, and Reformation-era pamphlets, Puff presents a striking and original analysis of sexuality and persecution in the early modern period.

This work contributes to the broader project of reframing the problematic of knowledge, power, and sexuality first formulated in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Foucault postulated that a moralizing Christian discourse against sodomy, defined as a sexually aberrant act, was replaced in the nineteenth century by the medicalized concept of a homosexual person who desired people of the same sex. As with other aspects of his work, Foucault's foundational critique has withstood scrutiny better than his attempts at historical narrative. Recent scholars in literary and queer studies, such as Jonathan Goldberg, have shown that sodomy, as it was conceived from antiquity through the early modern period, actually embraced a wide range of meanings, so much so that the term itself verged on incoherence. But Puff argues that even though it is not always clear what was meant by "sodomy," it is still possible to analyze the social life of the concept, its manifold discursive uses, and their social consequences. Puff thus attempts to bring the insights of literary scholars into dialogue with social and cultural historians such as John Boswell and David Halperin.

Part 1 of the book is devoted to the origins of a rhetoric of persecution around the term sodomy, which Puff locates in Catholic confessional literature from the later fourteenth century forward. One of the strongest aspects of the book is Puff's explication of the elasticity of the concept of "sodomia," and the constellation of related terms that were in use during the later Middle Ages. Characterized as "the sin against nature," "sexual heresy," or "florenching" (a reference among Germans to depravity south of the Alps), sodomy could be a crime of either men or women, and it was often associated with religious heresy. Even the landmark imperial law code, the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* of 1532, condemned same-sex sexual behaviors as "heretical" acts (p. 19). Sodomy was also cause for concern and ginger rhetoric for preachers and confessors who wished to educate without exciting the immoral imagination of the laity. Puff draws from trial record evidence to argue that homo-erotic activity, if not routine, was nevertheless a prevalent aspect of everyday life in the male cultures of tavern, farm, and guild.

The book's focus narrows in part 2, which discusses the use of sodomy as a trope of defamation in the pamphlets of the early Reformation (1520-55). The rhetoric of sodomy sharpened in these writings, in which Luther and other reformers caustically slandered Catholic leaders as sodomites, simultaneously discrediting them and mapping sodomy as the bestial polar opposite of marriage. Although it remained shadowy, sodomy emerged as a clearly sexual vice in the propaganda of an emerging Protestant community that rallied, in part, around a defense of matrimony. Not surprisingly, the papal household was singled out for special scorn, as in the anonymous pamphlet *Julius exclusus* of 1520, which depicted the deceased popes Leo X and Clement VII admitting their acts of sodomy in hell. Noting that "few Catholic pamphleteers joined in the chorus of sodomy allegations," Puff credits Protestantism with constructing, on the level of the *imaginaire*,

marriage as a social ideal and sodomy as Christianity's foe (p. 177). This rhetoric of sodomy, still vague but more rigid than that prior to the Reformation, was incongruent with the realities of life in the sixteenth century, in which young people increasingly postponed marriage and found themselves in homo-social milieus.

Puff's careful investigation of the rhetorics of sodomy will be of considerable interest to scholars beyond literary studies and the history of sexuality. Rather less attention is devoted to homo-social relationships in early modern society but this is not surprising, given the difficulty of finding archival source material for this topic. The book's appendix, which provides dates and archival citations for scores of sodomy trials in Germany and Switzerland, is a remarkable resource that will encourage research in this direction. At the same time, the link between Protestant invocations of sodomy in hyperbolic slander and confessionalized perceptions of homo-social practices is not fully convincing. Apart from innuendos against popes and prelates, reform-minded writers discussed the sin of sodomy less than earlier Catholics had. Puff accounts for this by asserting that Reformation teachings about sexuality were characterized by "abstract didacticism" and that reformers sought to impose "a rhetorical regime of sexual vagueness" (pp. 174-175). But one could also conclude that the reformers focused their energies on other threats to marriage, such as the Lutheran campaigns against prenuptial coitus in the 1570s and 1580s that have been documented by Terence McIntosh.^[2] The fact that fewer Catholics than Protestants published works that discussed sodomy may say more about Catholics' disposition towards printed polemic than about their views on sodomy.

More research in the social history of same-sex relationships in early modern Europe may shed light on these issues. However, Puff's engagement with both the rhetorics of persecution

and their social consequences is a valuable contribution to a timely topic.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in the introduction of R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 1.

[2]. Terence McIntosh, "Confessionalization and the Campaign against Prenuptial Coitus in Sixteenth-Century Germany," forthcoming in *Confessionalization and Europe 1555-1648*, ed. John M. Headley and Hans J. Hillerbrand. My thanks go to Professor McIntosh for the opportunity to see an earlier version of this essay.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Mitchell Lewis Hammond. Review of Puff, Helmut. *Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland 1400-1600*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9891>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.