

IN THE LESBIAN ARCHIVE

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The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England

Valerie Traub

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi + 492 pp.

The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology from Ariosto to Stonewall

Edited by Terry Castle

New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xxi + 1,110 pp.

*I*n *An Archive of Feelings* Ann Cvetkovich investigates the emotional politics attendant on the construction and maintenance of archives that attest to lesbian public cultures. The resulting meditation on the nature of the lesbian archive, and what is at stake in constituting and preserving it, has implications for the study of women's queer desires and identifications that range far beyond her focus on contemporary North American life. For Cvetkovich, the social spaces and emotional and political practices that sustain organizations such as the New York-based Lesbian Herstory Archives queer the very nature of the archive as a way of organizing knowledge. "Queer archives," she contends, "can be viewed as the material instantiation of Derrida's deconstructed archive; they are composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science." Such collections both expose and seek to redress the material and ideological power relations that secure the production and circulation of certain knowledges and ensure the elision of others from the public record. For queer archives, Cvetkovich notes, "in the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories,

memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge.”¹ Thus her own book becomes an archive and a work of archive making, documenting a set of cultural domains that might otherwise be at risk of being archived only in the memories of their participants and in the kinds of ephemera that elude traditional collections.

Cvetkovich’s exemplary practice in constituting and reading an archive of lesbian public cultures in late-twentieth-century North America both offers a resource and poses a challenge to scholars concerned with constituting and analyzing archives of lesbianism in times and places where such a self-consciously public formation of queer identities, and the consequent urge to generate a lasting record of them, was neither possible nor pertinent. In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* and *The Literature of Lesbianism*, Valerie Traub and Terry Castle adumbrate two very different approaches to the task of producing and interpreting a historical archive of lesbianism. What they share is a complicating and queering of the notion of the lesbian archive beyond anything Cvetkovich ventures, as they both—necessarily, given their historical range—extend the scope of their projects to include material not produced by women self-identified as lesbian and/or queer, and reveal the international, cross-period, multidisciplinary work of bricolage required to bring into being the archive of premodern lesbianism.

For Cvetkovich, the archive is complex and problematic as a concept and a social space, yet lesbianism—complemented and supplemented by queerness—presents itself relatively straightforwardly as an object of study. As an anthology that does not merely represent an archive but also performs heuristic and analytic work, *The Literature of Lesbianism* is concerned, in part, with how such a stance became historically possible. Castle’s introduction examines—and the selection of texts in the anthology both exemplifies and nuances—a process that she describes as the “cognitive routinization” of lesbianism (18), the way in which the idea of love between women has, in what is related here as a progress narrative, “become part of the shared *mentalité* of modern life . . . embedded in literary and cultural history” (7). This anthology is an archive not of lesbian experience or history, then, but of lesbianism as the theme of shared cultural conversations that, in Castle’s account, have become increasingly plural, inclusive, and familiar.

To the extent that the principal object of inquiry in *The Literature of Lesbianism* is lesbianism as “rhetorical and cultural topos” (6), the anthology clearly shares fundamental intellectual terrain with Traub’s study, which uses *lesbian* to refer to “a representational image, a rhetorical figure, a discursive effect, rather than a stable epistemological or historical category” (15). Yet Traub’s critical

engagement with the interaction of continuity and change in the elaboration of historical narratives of lesbianism requires the drawing of a more complicated map of this shared terrain, a map that both reveals certain specificities of the cultural articulation of lesbianism that Castle celebrates, and complicates her confident narration of the ascendance of lesbianism into mainstream literary culture. Committed to producing a Foucauldian genealogy of lesbianism's articulations, rather than a history of its development, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* uses the notion of lesbianism less as an organizing category for its archival investigations than "as a strategic anachronism as well as an ongoing question" (16).

Annamarie Jagose's succinct outline of the recurrent methodological concerns that shape thinking about the historicity of lesbianism is pertinent here. While both Castle and Traub are careful to distance themselves from what Jagose characterizes as the search for "the conditions of possibility that have governed the emergence of 'lesbianism' as a meaningful category of identity," Castle's project typifies "the reliance on the historicizing gesture as that which might secure for female homoeroticism a lineage and hence a value all its own."² In contrast, Traub's contribution to the ongoing project—in which Jagose is herself concerned—of elaborating a genealogy of lesbianism entails paying scrupulous attention to history without invoking it as the solution to the "problem of lesbian representability."³ As a strategy for rethinking "the paradox of practicing impossibilities" that, for Traub, constituted "the dilemma of lesbian representation in the early modern period" (6), genealogy underpins *The Renaissance of Lesbianism's* insistence that we reconfigure our understanding of lesbianism's historicity. In arguing, for example, that the invention of the tribade helped lay out the formation of sexuality that was inherited by modern regimes of sexual identity, Traub contends that this process did not take place without change. To recognize historical continuity and filiation is not, in other words, necessarily to invoke sameness—an important point and, one might think, an obvious one, yet it has not sufficiently informed critical thinking about the history of sexuality.

In making her case, Traub opposes herself to "the (re)essentializing account currently making a resurgence in lesbian studies" (220), a phenomenon for which she substantially blames *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Castle's influential argument for the pervasive and durable presence of female homoeroticism in modern Western culture,⁴ and to which one must assume Traub would also see *The Literature of Lesbianism* as contributing. The canon-creating quality of an anthology perhaps inevitably endows it with a tendency to generate a transhistorical and essentializing account of its topic, an account that stabilizes and solidifies the most fugitive subject, and *The Literature of Lesbianism* certainly risks being

seen as a monument to its subject. Yet Castle forestalls any hasty categorization of her as an essentialist historian of lesbianism by insisting at the outset that we cannot begin any historical inquiry by assuming that we know what lesbianism is; rather, our point of departure has to be a recognition that “it is precisely the category itself that is in need of historical examination” (5). What an anthology does in practice, however, is not so much to examine the overdetermined processes that generate the category as to set forth its multiple literary manifestations and refractions. The sheer diversity and variety of texts included in it cannot help but complicate any attempt to claim the anthology as the bedrock of an essentialized and monumentalized lesbian literary tradition.

Traub’s rigorous antiessentialism is most strikingly marked, in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, by her insistence on italicizing the terms *lesbianism* and *lesbian*, a defamiliarizing gesture designed to “remind readers of their epistemological inadequacy, psychological coarseness, and historical contingency” (16). In its foregrounding of contradiction and contingency, this retention of a powerful terminology whose limitations are visually marked is of a piece with Traub’s larger interpretive methodologies in the book. Beginning, as Castle did in *The Apparitional Lesbian* and as Jagose has done in *Inconsequence* (indeed, Jagose and Traub both acknowledge their mutual indebtedness in books published in the same year), by asking why tropes of (in)visibility have become so central to cultural discourse on lesbianism, Traub reframes the intellectual reach of the trope of lesbian invisibility, shifting it away from the purely visual metaphor that dominates Castle’s and Jagose’s engagement with it in order to increase her own analytic purchase on the problem of lesbian representation. *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* demonstrates that rethinking this problem is not a matter of simply replacing absence with presence, of substituting the in-your-face for the invisible, through an analytic reenactment of the historical process narrated by *The Literature of Lesbianism*. Rather, Traub argues that “the early modern representation of *lesbianism* is governed by tensions between visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility, significance and insignificance” (33), and one of her book’s key contributions to the study of sexuality is its elaboration of subtle tools and methods for exploring the cultural manifestations of these tensions.

As the term’s insistent use throughout her book signals, Traub is concerned above all in undertaking such explorations with *representation*, and her interest lies as much in its forms and modalities as in what is represented. This is true not only in terms of her concern with studying women “as both subjects and objects of emerging erotic knowledges” (10) but also in her interpretive strategies, those of a

literary critic trained to read for textual detail and formal specificity. Indeed, this training leads Traub to dismantle the opposition between representation and its object as she stresses the formative role of the interpretive procedures that permit us to construe particular scenarios as erotic, rather than presume that the erotic straightforwardly preexists representation (10). This is a classic constructivist position, but one arrived at via literary methodology rather than by an overfamiliar rehearsal of the canonical texts of queer theory—by reading the figures of the tribade and the chaste feminine friend, the sexualized and idealized embodiments of same-sex love between women, not as historical subjects of desire but as tropological and rhetorical effects (20). Thus eroticism becomes primarily a category of analysis instead of an object of scrutiny (21).

If the historical reach of their projects, ranging in time and space from Renaissance Europe to contemporary North America, requires Traub and Castle to take up questions about the conceptualization of lesbianism that are not envisaged in Cvetkovich's rethinking of the lesbian archive, it also impels them to formulate different working concepts of the archive of lesbianism. Where Cvetkovich remarks that "the history of any archive is a history of space, which becomes the material measure and foundation of the archive's power and visibility as a form of public culture,"⁵ Traub and Castle demonstrate that archives can also be much more fragmented, dispersed, profuse, and ephemeral without therefore ceasing to exist or to serve as sites of cultural memory. The archive of premodern lesbianism is not housed in a single space or institution; it is called into being by the work of selection, compilation, analysis, and interpretation performed by the scholars under discussion here, as well as by the many others who have preceded them and enabled their work. Indeed, Traub and Castle are both notably generous and thorough in their citation of what can now be clearly seen as a large and diverse body of scholarship on the literary and cultural histories of lesbianism. This archive's lack of a visible material and spatial foundation may, from one point of view, testify to its fragility and marginality as a manifestation of public culture, of which Castle's dedication of *The Literature of Lesbianism* to Jeannette H. Foster, a pioneering recorder and archivist of lesbian literary culture whose magnificent bibliography, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, has been out of print for nearly a decade, serves as confirmation.⁶ From another point of view, though, the dispersed and decentered nature of the archive of early modern lesbianism tells a story about the ubiquity of lesbianism and about its thorough imbrication in the forms and practices of more obviously archived literary cultures. The Janus-faced labor of tracking and assembling the lesbian archive thus confirms Jagose's

influential insight into the utopic nature of lesbianism as it signifies culturally—at once everywhere and nowhere, central and marginal.⁷

If the archive of early modern lesbianism lacks a local habitation and a name, it is in no sense immaterial. Reviewing *The Friend*, Alan Bray's posthumous historical study of male same-sex unions and their implications for a wider understanding of loving bonds between men, Traub commends the methodological clarity and "tough-mindedness" with which Bray "draws significance out of what is, and what is not, available in the archive." The consequence of this questioning attention to the silences and boundaries of the archive, as well as to what it contains, she argues, is that "the archive is reconfigured: it is not a storehouse or treasure chest waiting to be opened but a palimpsest of fragments, on the ragged edges of which hang unexpected meanings."⁸ This work of reconfiguration, and the attendant decoding of the unexpected meanings generated by its fruitful and multifaceted recombination of the rags and fragments of the literary cultures of lesbianism, is the patient labor of Traub's important book, which is already conscious that because "female homoerotic desire and contact" are "often represented at the moment of [their] passing," they "can be glimpsed only by attending to textual edges and margins" (18). Self-reflexive about its engagement with "questions of evidence, method, strategy, politics, and identification in the writing of history,"⁹ *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* simultaneously offers itself as an archive, undertakes a groundbreaking labor of archival inquiry, and meditates on the limitations and overdeterminations of such an endeavor. Conversely, Castle's anthology, in keeping with the traditions of that genre, offers itself more conventionally not as a treasure chest but—to employ an equally venerable metaphor for the archiving that editing an anthology entails—as a "beautiful garland" (49) that acknowledges its own preferences, limitations, and omissions.

What materials and procedures, then, constitute the archives of lesbianism that *The Literature of Lesbianism* and *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* draw on, compile, organize, and preserve? The archive embedded in the latter is the more capacious and inclusive, embracing, among other materials, demographic research; elite male-authored literary texts in several genres; paintings; court records; prescriptive and informative writings in several fields, including, notably, medicine and law; women's letters, plays, and poems; funeral monuments; bawdy songs and verses; anatomical illustrations; Venetian operas; and court masques. Over the course of this compendious book, these diverse materials are interwoven with increasing intricacy as Traub revisits and reinterprets sources and genres. For example, in chapter 6 she traces the seventeenth-century transformation of the myth of the nymph Calisto as an index of the process named "the historical perversion of *lesbian* desire," whereby

the previously unproblematic figure of the chaste femme friend is contaminated by the opprobrium attached to the supposedly “unnatural,” even monstrous tribade. As part of this discussion Traub returns to the female homoeroticism of kissing, previously examined in chapter 4, by way of her chapter 5 reading of Luce Irigaray’s theorization of female orality, and adds operas, frescoes, and early modern anatomical drawings to the mix.¹⁰ This recursive, cumulative procedure typifies the book’s critical mode, and though it sometimes makes it hard to keep track of the central arguments, it greatly enriches the texture of Traub’s engagement with early modern culture. As well as the innovative theoretical and methodological ambitions represented by this strategy, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* provides a thorough, but by no means exhaustive, overview of the materials for an investigation of the representation of early modern lesbianism—for example, surveys of legal and medical material in chapter 1—which will surely provide starting points for other students and scholars.

Given its focus on the *literature* of lesbianism, Castle’s anthology predictably draws on a narrower range of sources than Traub’s, covering terrain that, in generic and formal terms, overlaps with the territory of literary anthologies in general. Unlike Traub, Castle explicitly excludes material that she sees as more in need of contextualization and explication, or as not offering the pleasures of the literary (52)—although her headnotes to the selections do offer magisterial contextualization and explication. But such pleasures are not understood narrowly, for as well as poems and extracts from prose fiction, Castle includes less obviously literary texts, some of which may in fact seem more problematically in need of contextualization and explication than she allows: from early modern pornography; through Anne Lister’s diaries, which, though not composed in any sense as literary artifacts, were informed by their author’s engagement with what might be called the classic literature of lesbianism; to lesbian blues lyrics of the 1920s. In juxtaposing such materials with key texts of lesbian literary culture, which have also received the endorsement of the larger literary canon, including the poems of Katherine Philips and an extract from Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Castle implicitly uses the lesbian archive both to extend and to complicate the meaning of literary pleasure.

By juxtaposing some of the classic works of the lesbian literary tradition with less familiar material, *The Literature of Lesbianism* points to some fascinating stories waiting to be told, and thus to new directions for scholarship; especially in the book’s first section, covering the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is a clear sense of connections waiting to be made among the excerpted writers. Likewise, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, as well as advancing its own arguments,

sketches some fruitful areas for more locally detailed research. More significantly, comparing these two books suggests how much research remains to be done to substantiate, challenge, or nuance the contrasting claims they make about the historical fortunes of lesbianism. Both books, for example, necessarily position themselves in relation to questions of periodization that have played salient, though different, roles in recent debates about women's history, gender history, and the history of sexuality. Drawing on histories of women's lives that have emphasized the overwhelming continuity of male dominance and female subordination, Bernadette J. Brooten, for example, contends that women's enduring positioning in relation to this power dynamic has rendered the history of love between women more static and continuous than the histories of either heterosexuality or male homoeroticism.¹¹ In contrast, while Traub and Castle both acknowledge the importance of taking the long view, they each locate a crucial turning point in the history of female homoeroticism in the early modern period, though they understand the meanings and consequences of the posited rupture very differently.

The Renaissance of Lesbianism sees "the mid-seventeenth century as an inaugural period in the construction of the erotic meanings of modernity: a moment when particular negotiations of significance and insignificance, articulation and negation, brought to the fore the terms by which erotic identity would be conceived" (231). Specifically, this inauguration of a new conceptualization of the erotic is effected by the collapsing in on each other of the previously mutually exclusive categories of tribade and chaste friend, a historical process that Traub describes as "the perversion of *lesbian* desire," and that she stresses is not particularly beneficial for women who desire women. In contrast, Castle offers a progress narrative, in which what she calls the Sapphic version of female homoeroticism—a rhapsodic celebration of its sublime pleasures—triumphs over the cynical, satirical Roman approach to it "as civil society itself moves toward a gradual social, political, and psychic accommodation with its homosexual elements" (27). This observation leads Castle to a period-specific narrative of change that contrasts strikingly with the emphasis of Traub's account, as Castle finds the vilification of the tribade softening, perhaps under the influence of "something gentler, more encompassing and exploratory" (27) contributed by women writers, just at the moment that Traub detects the implication of the chaste femme "in the same nexus of transgression that formerly was attributed solely to her monstrous counterpart, the tribade" (257). These two very different scholars seem, then, to be surprisingly in accord on the nature of the historical change, though they offer contrasting readings of its significance—a tension that demands to be more fully debated by others in the field.

In their historical range, intellectual and political ambition, and sheer physical scale—*The Literature of Lesbianism* runs to 1,110 pages, while *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* is a handsomely produced, large-format volume of 492 pages—both books testify to the confident maturity of lesbian studies as a field of inquiry. Traub's book may be seen as crowning a remarkable phase of engagement with the literary and cultural dimensions of female same-sex eroticism in the early modern period, and as drawing out the implications of that engagement for the study of the intersections of gender and sexuality in the textual cultures of that time. Since 1999, books like Elizabeth Susan Wahl's *Invisible Relations* and Harriette Andreadis's *Sappho in Early Modern England* have deepened and extended our understanding of the textualization of lesbianism.¹² As the titles of their books announce, Wahl and Andreadis work on smaller and more period-specific, though by no means unambitious, canvases. Wahl's *Invisible Relations*, which sets out to uncover the circulation of "cultural myths about female homosexuality" in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century France and England (42), resembles Traub's book insofar as it owes something to both cultural studies and new historicism in its embrace of a host of sources, including legal and medical as well as literary works—many of them excerpted in Castle's anthology. Addressing primarily women's textualizations of female homoeroticism, Andreadis's *Sappho in Early Modern England* shares the conviction that Castle articulates in her introduction of the profound significance of Sappho's poetry and memory for the writing of women's desire for each other in the early modern period.

These valuable accounts are complemented by studies that treat the topic of love between women more obliquely but nevertheless shed considerable light on the relations among homosexualities, heterosexualities, and chastity—all categories of central concern in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*—as they articulate sex, gender, and desire. For example, Theodora A. Jankowski's *Pure Resistance*, Kathryn Schwarz's *Tough Love*, and Ruth Gilbert's *Early Modern Hermaphrodites* all share textual examples with Traub and/or Castle.¹³ Gilbert and Traub approach such famous stories as Montaigne's narratives of women "using unlawful appliances to remedy the defects of their sex" or changing suddenly into men—stories excerpted in Castle, from whom I quote here (81)—with very different intellectual goals and analytic strategies. Yet Traub's "lesbianism" could readily take the place of "hermaphroditism" in Gilbert's insistence that her object of study "raise[s] a series of ontological and epistemological questions" and generates vital stories not only about "sex, gender, and sexuality" but also about "order, knowledge, nature and culture. . . . In other words, stories about the fears and desires of the early modern period."¹⁴ These stories, as *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*

makes clear, can force us to reconsider much of what we thought we knew about that period; lesbian critique, as Traub contends, can “reclaim, ironize, and re-deploy the meaning of the Renaissance itself” (9).

In an afterword *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* meditates on its own disciplinary status and investments and concomitantly on the implications for the study of lesbianism of the various (inter/cross)disciplinary projects and methodologies that are available. This reflection on the means by which Traub has pursued her goal—“to more accurately historicize lesbianism and also to use history to contribute to the contemporary theorization of lesbian identity and the problem of lesbian representation” (353)—also, of course, reveals the extent to which her own project is grounded in political and ethical engagement. Likewise, Castle concludes the introduction to *The Literature of Lesbianism* by articulating her hope for the collection: that it will help the representation of love between women to receive as much serious attention as other kinds of love and desire (48). Indeed, despite the fundamental differences in their stances toward the ontological and epistemological status of the subject of lesbianism, and the methodological differences consequent both on these and on the varying requirements of their generically diverse projects, Traub and Castle evidently share the view that thinking about what they designate “*lesbianism*” and “the lesbian ‘idea,’” respectively, requires—and advances—thinking about nature and culture, sexuality and gender. Both writers are engaged in deeply ethical, political, and socially committed projects and have a strong sense of the social and cultural significance of what they do as literary scholars of lesbianism and its archives. Though Traub’s book is firmly embedded in academe, while Castle aspires to address a more general audience, each helps shape a newly visible archive of premodern lesbianism that represents both a monument to existing scholarship and a considerable provocation to further work.

Notes

1. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 268, 8.
2. Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8.
3. Ibid.
4. Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
5. Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 245.

6. Jeannette H. Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad, 1985).
7. Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
8. Valerie Traub, "Friendship's Loss: Alan Bray's Making of History," *GLQ* 10 (2004): 343.
9. David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2.
10. The key text for this theorization is Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
11. Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 24.
12. Elizabeth Susan Wahl, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Harriette Andreadis, *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics, 1550–1714* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
13. Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginitly in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Kathryn Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Ruth Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).
14. Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites*, 1.

