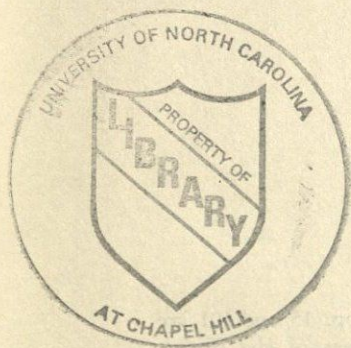


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# Homosexuality in Renaissance England

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## Chapter Two:

### The Social Setting

On the 4th of June 1599 the agents of the Bishop of London made a bonfire at Stationers' Hall. Its fuel was the books they had been collecting over the previous three days, since the banning of those troublesome 'satires or epigrams' which the Bishop of London was determined to be rid of once and for all, suspecting them (with reason) of a too lively interest in the very vices they claimed to be censuring. Marston's *Scourge of Villanie*, Guilpin's *Skialetheia*, Middleton's *Micro-Cynicon* — these and others like them had apparently come to the end of their notorious careers. But in the long run, as is often the case, a bonfire proved an ineffective form of censorship; the books survived, and after a decent interval — but now rather more circumspectly — others of the same kind began again to appear.<sup>1</sup> For the study of homosexuality in the English Renaissance it was a happy outcome, because among the vices and follies of the time they purported to be exposing homosexuality made a frequent and graphic appearance:

Behold at length in London streets he shows . . .  
His clothes perfumed, his fusty mouth is aired.  
His chin new swept, his very cheeks are glazed.  
But ho, what Ganymede is that doth grace  
The gallant's heels, one who for two days' space  
Is closely hired?<sup>2</sup>

And when himself he of his home can free,  
He to the city comes, where then if he  
And the familiar butterfly his page  
Can pass the street, the ordinary and stage  
It is enough and he himself thinks then

To be the only, absolutest of men . . .  
 Doublet and cloke with plush and velvet lined,  
 Only his headpiece that is filled with wind.  
 Rags, running horses, dogs, drabs, drink and dice  
 The only things that he doth hold in price.  
 Yet, more than these, naught doth him so delight  
 As doth his smooth-chinned, plump-thighed catamite.<sup>3</sup>

Descriptions similar to these two, which are by John Marston and Michael Drayton, can be found in the satires of Ben Jonson or Edward Guilpin, Richard Brathwaite, John Donne or Thomas Middleton.<sup>4</sup> On this point they are remarkably consistent: the sodomite is a young man-about-town, with his mistress on one arm and his 'catamite' on the other; he is indolent, extravagant and debauched.

Have we then so easily found what we are looking for, an eyewitness account of how homosexuality appeared in the society of Elizabethan and Jacobean London? The answer is a clear and unequivocal no. One obvious objection is that these are stock figures not identifiable individuals. Of the objections which could be made this is actually the least telling. Against it must be set the unavoidable problems involved in writing social history on the basis of such 'identifiable individuals'. How does the historian go about drawing general conclusions from them? Are they likely to be representative at all? These, at least, are descriptions of sexual life that their authors claimed had a general significance. And they resemble each other too much to be merely their own creations; in one sense they are communal products. The problem is rather that when one looks closely at them it becomes apparent just how little they are the stuff of social life and how much the product of purely political or literary influences. The word 'satire' raised certain precise — and distinctly uncouth — expectations. It was expected that a satirist would take a coarse delight in exposing obscenity and grossness. He was no detached observer; it was assumed that he would exaggerate and rail at his readers. In such circumstances, extravagant descriptions of sexual debauchery are not now likely to carry much weight. Nor is this the only literary convention which on close examination can be detected in these descriptions. The portrayal of wealth and dissipation — and specifically of luxurious clothing and the use of cosmetics — as symptomatic of sexual vice draws on a well-established tradition; Renaissance

satire as a whole makes the same assumption, as indeed did the medieval 'complaint' that preceded it.<sup>5</sup> A third literary influence, arguably the most pervasive of all, is that of Juvenal. All these writers would have acknowledged the classical satires of Juvenal as the model of what satire ought to be; without necessarily plagiarising him, his themes and his manner were something they were all conscious of and in some degree influenced by. And one of these themes was homosexuality. It leaves us with a problem; in trying to evaluate their own references to homosexuality, the danger is that what we are seeing is not Renaissance London but second-century Rome at one remove.

The satirists' portrayal of homosexuality in terms of sexual licence can, then, be amply accounted for by their literary background; it is not a convincing source for social history. But what of their related but more specific claim that homosexuality was the vice of the gentry? If true it would obviously be of the first importance as a piece of social observation. But before coming to a conclusion about this there are two reservations that should be born in mind. Firstly, although there is on this point remarkable consistency among these writers, it is not complete: on some occasions, when it suited their purposes, they are willing to claim precisely the opposite. An instance of this is Philip Stubbes's remarks on homosexuality in the Elizabethan theatre. The theatre of this time was frequented by virtually all social groups, and when — with a Puritan's distaste for drama — he set out to malign it with a charge of encouraging sodomy he had to accommodate this fact. Stubbes's description, then, necessarily weighs in against the whole audience, and not merely the gentry. When the play is over, Stubbes writes:

these goodly pageants being ended, every mate sorts to his mate, everyone brings another homeward of their way very friendly, and in their secret conclaves covertly they play the Sodomites or worse.<sup>6</sup>

Another author who, to suit his own purpose, did not claim that homosexuality was peculiarly the vice of the gentry was the author of *The Times' Whistle*, who was at pains to prove that homosexuality was something 'the whole land is thus plagued with' without singling out any one group.<sup>7</sup> In this respect Philip Stubbes and the author of *The Times' Whistle* had intentions different from those of the satirists as a whole; and when they

assembled their material they at the very least arranged it to suit their purposes. It leaves one wondering whether the other satirists were likely to have been any more objective.

The second point is that it is not the gentry as such but specifically the London gentry who are being disparaged. At first sight at least, it does seem plausible that there would have been more opportunities for homosexual contact in a large and complex city such as London, whatever conclusions one comes to on the question of which social groups were involved. It is also a conclusion some twentieth-century historians have arrived at by analogy with our own times: it is in the more tolerant environment of the inner cities that homosexuality has become a widely available alternative; could not the same have been true of seventeenth-century London?<sup>8</sup> Certainly London was already a great city in the Elizabethan period: by 1580 its population had reached 123,000, and was to rise to half a million over the following century.<sup>9</sup> But the analogy, although plausible, is misleading. London was not a world apart. Firstly it depended on a flow of immigrants from the countryside, who continued to be influenced by the way of life they had so recently left; and the inward flow was matched by an outward flow in the periodic exodus in search of work, particularly at harvest time when large numbers regularly left the city to work in the surrounding countryside.<sup>10</sup> The result is that at any point in this period many of London's inhabitants would only a short time before have been living in rural areas or smaller towns and quite likely would soon be doing so again. Nor was the situation different for the London gentry who, although they might be attached to London by an office at Court, would usually have their roots in a country estate.

In such circumstances it would be unwise to assume that sexual life was less subject to traditional moral codes in London than it was outside it. And indeed there is evidence to the contrary. The proportion of illegitimate births in the London parish registers of the period is no higher than in the contemporary registers of parishes outside London, and the same is probably true of the number of suicides.<sup>11</sup> In those respects the traditional moral codes retained their influence despite London's rapid urbanisation. It should not therefore come as a surprise that accusations of sodomy which appear in the rolls of the Middlesex Sessions of the Peace (the Quarter Sessions responsible for London outside the City itself) are not noticeably different from those in similar

records outside London; certainly there is no sign whatsoever of the figure to be met with so frequently in the pages of the satirists.<sup>12</sup>

But if there is no reason to think that homosexuality played any greater part in sexual life in London than it did elsewhere, why then did these writers — and with such consistency — claim otherwise? The explanation is in their attitude to London itself — or rather to one part of it: the Court at Westminster and the army of dependents it attracted. It was a political antagonism, the indignation of the 'Country' party, the opposition to the Court and all its works that was to have its triumph at the calling of the Long Parliament. It drew on the resentment of the gentry — in their own eyes the natural rulers of the counties — who were excluded from the golden circle of lucrative Court appointments provided, or so they believed, at their own considerable expense.<sup>13</sup> It was the Court — the extravagant, overblown, parasitic Renaissance Court — not homosexuality which was the focus of their attention. What homosexuality provided was a powerfully damaging charge to lay against it; at what should have been the stronghold of the kingdom there was only weakness, confusion and disorder. What could have fitted better?<sup>14</sup>

Is there anything left? When all the purely literary and political elements in these writings have been discounted, we might be left wondering whether they are of any use at all as pieces of social observation. The answer surprisingly is still yes, for despite all their bias and self-conscious artistry they were satires and not works of fiction; they were intended to hurt, and without a basis in reality they would have lost their edge. But where these writings are of most use as social description is in those aspects where their writers were least engaged: in the incidental details, which have little immediate bearing on what they were about and which they had least reason or desire to adapt to their purposes.<sup>15</sup> The procedure I have adopted is to disregard those elements in descriptions of homosexuality that can be attributed to literary influence or political bias; it is sometimes possible to return to them at a later stage when they are supported by other evidence, but as a working rule I have eliminated them in the first instance. As a result we are left with a collection of incidental comments about homosexuality, often tiny fragments but not a mere miscellany. This result is surprisingly coherent; these minor details are strikingly consistent both among themselves and in

relation to what we know of homosexuality in the period from other sources. And it is also possible to discern in them some of the distinctive characteristics of English society from the close of the Middle Ages to the last decades of the seventeenth century. If we are willing to sift it out, what we are looking for is there.

But this is not a task that can be attempted in isolation. Valuable sources though I believe these satires to be, they are most convincing when supported by other evidence unconnected with them; and we may come across this almost anywhere, in poetry and drama, in pamphlets and popular ballads, in the casual remarks of historians and theologians of the time, even in travel books; there are virtually no limits to the area where references to homosexuality are likely to crop up. But the source most likely to be turned to is in some ways the most difficult to interpret, the prosecutions for sodomy and buggery that appear in the surviving court records. Inevitably a good deal of time will be taken up with these valuable but easily misleading sources; and, before returning to the satirists to draw out some of the conclusions to be found there, we shall need to take a critical look at the way homosexuality appeared in these records, if we are to avoid the pitfalls they hold for the unwary researcher.

Why are court records so difficult to interpret? Certainly they appear to be a sober and objective record of the incidents that brought the individual before the courts, of the accused's name and frequently also of where he or she lived and the accused's occupation. After the obvious bias and downright distortions of a John Marston or a Thomas Middleton one is likely to turn to them with relief. However the relief will be short-lived, or ought to be, for they bring with them a host of problems.

Anyone who begins work for the first time on the indictments in the Assize records — probably the most approachable and succinct of all the judicial records — has before him or her that unpleasant moment, usually brought on by reading J.S. Cockburn's famous article in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*,<sup>16</sup> when it becomes apparent that these documents are in large part no more than convenient legal fictions. The clerk who prepared them was concerned above all to see that they should be in the correct legal form: if they were not the indictment could fall on a technicality. But the huge increase in the number of cases to be heard in the late sixteenth century and the widespread failure of Justices of the Peace to act as



prosecutors made it increasingly difficult for him to achieve this. The result was that the clerk made do as best he could, completing the indictment with a stock phrase or an invention tailored to fit the facts. The government apparently knew of the practice — apparently even expected and approved of it — and behind its façade the judge meted out a rough justice. The conclusion of Professor Cockburn — the foremost expert on the Assizes — was that no less than 'a majority of assize indictments, while technically satisfying the legal requirements, are factually worthless.'<sup>17</sup>

It is a serious problem — the first of several — but there are ways of minimising it. Professor Cockburn has himself drawn attention to the greater reliability of recognizances, bonds binding a named individual to appear to stand trial or to give evidence: for the local supervision to be at all effective, they obviously needed a greater degree of accuracy than the indictments. For similar reasons the Quarter Sessions papers, those of the local Justices of the Peace (who from 1563 were empowered to hear cases of buggery), are also likely to be more reliable than the Assize indictments. Moreover the Quarter Sessions papers may well refer to the same individual on a number of occasions, and the details recorded can be checked against each other. Also some of the more notorious cases produced contemporary pamphlet literature, which can be as good as or even better than the official records.

We need then to distinguish between those records which are likely to be reliable guides and those which are not; but is it in fact clear what they are guides to? The question is not as simple as it might appear. The primary purpose of court rolls and registers was to provide a record of the court's own procedure, i.e. a record of what the accused was supposed to have done and the action taken in the courts, which is not necessarily a record of what actually had occurred. The Gaol Delivery Register of the Middlesex Sessions of the Peace for 1613<sup>18</sup> contains the following terse entry: 'Albanus Cooke for buggery with John Townsend.' The corresponding indictment in the Sessions Rolls adds a little more: John Townsend, it tells us, was an adolescent and Alban Cooke was also charged with assaulting him.<sup>19</sup> But did he? The problem is not with the records themselves, as the Middlesex Sessions records are largely reliable; there is no reason to doubt that Alban Cooke was indicted as the record shows, but it also

notes that he pleaded not guilty and was acquitted. What then are we to make of it? It is no real solution to rely on whether or not someone accused of sodomy is found guilty: the verdict may have been wrong; he may have been convicted on only part of the evidence, or indeed acquitted on a technicality. And in many cases we do not even know what the verdict was. How then can we ever know with any reasonable certainty what had actually happened?

There is an additional difficulty for the researcher in that only a fraction of the notes made during the court proceedings have survived. There are gaps covering several years in virtually all the collections; and some of the most revealing documents, such as depositions, were never intended to be permanently preserved. Even where a series appears to be complete over a given period, we should always be alive to the possibility — which can on occasion be demonstrated — that individual cases have disappeared or were never recorded. The result is that, with a few exceptions, any statistical analysis is out of the question.

Court records are fragmentary in another sense also. It was the clerk's task to make a record that satisfied the requirements of the legal process: he was not concerned to make a full record of the facts of the kind we would like to see. The result is that the notes he did make are stark, brief, conventional and unrevealing. What are we to make of the following intriguing but baffling entry in the Order Book of the Western Assizes dated 11 March 1647?

Whereas Domingo Cassedon Drago a negro is to be removed by His Majesty's writ of habeas corpus out of the gaol of this county and is to be sent into the county of Essex, to be tried there at the next Assizes for a buggery by him committed; and whereas there is a poor boy named William Wraxall now remaining in the custody of Edward Graunte tithingman of Northwood, which is to be sent to the said Assizes for evidence against the said negro to prove the said fact; it is therefore thought fit and ordered by this court that the said boy shall be forthwith delivered over to the Sheriff of this county, who is desired to take such care that the said boy may be sent to the said Assizes with the said negro by some honest man who will be careful to produce the said boy at the trial of the said negro to prove the said fact.<sup>20</sup>

Who were these people? What had brought them here? Judging by his name, Domingo Cassedon Drago had come to England from one of the Spanish colonies, which raises more questions than it solves. And the 'poor boy' William Wraxall — how had he become separated from his parents, as appears to have been the case? How had they met? Was this a casual encounter that had gone disastrously wrong and landed Drago in court, or had they known each other for some time? There is no way we can answer these questions or others like them. We do not even know what happened to them in Essex, assuming that they were indeed sent there, as there is no reference to either of them in the Essex Assize files as they now stand.<sup>21</sup> The lives of these two humble people who lived so long ago are brilliantly illuminated for us for only a moment and then — nothing. It is intensely frustrating.

There is also perhaps something else about this document to unsettle us: of all the figures we might expect to see in seventeenth-century England, is it not surprising that the prisoner in the county gaol should have been black? A black face would have been an unusual sight indeed in England in 1647; did that, one might well wonder, have something to do with why Drago found himself in court? It is a question we shall return to, but it raises a more general point about the use of court records in writing sexual history that we shall need to consider here; is the impression they give at first sight misleading, of revealing the intimate sexual behaviour of the many ordinary men and women who appear in them? What determined what would appear before the courts and the details thought worth recording? Perhaps one should say rather who determined this, as such matters were for the courts themselves to decide. What we are seeing are the concerns and the attitudes of a social elite. Certainly legal records tell us a great deal about the workings of the courts in relation to the regulation of sexual behaviour, but are they a reliable guide to anything else? It would be a rash historian who lightly swept aside that question.<sup>22</sup>

Court records are a far more limited source for the history of homosexuality than they are likely to appear at first sight. Fragmentary, one-sided and a record of fact only in a very limited sense, they are always difficult to interpret; and they are often dangerously inaccurate. But even at their best all they can be expected to reveal is the sexual activity which brought the individuals into court. They have little or nothing to say about

their motives; they do not tell us how the figures involved saw themselves or the meanings they or others attached to their actions. And what use is a history of sexuality that goes no further than that? A history of homosexuality based wholly, or even largely, on such material would be at best a poor, soulless thing and at worst a travesty of the truth.

The solution to the problem lies in integrating this material into something that is likely to give a more realistic perspective. This can be partly achieved by combining it with contemporary literary descriptions of homosexuality, which although they have their own problems compensate for the unavoidable limitations inherent in court records. But alone this is not enough. It is also partly a matter of method. The kinds of questions we ask — and this is equally true of literary material as of legal records — need to be posed in a sufficiently broad setting. We need to read these documents, firstly, in the light of the prejudices, the myths and the common symbolism of the society to which their authors belonged; and, secondly, they need to be placed in the contexts and forms of its social life. The first was the concern of the last chapter, the second that of the present.

We must begin with the land. The economy of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was overwhelmingly rural, to an extent which is difficult for someone living in Europe or North America today to visualise. It was the land itself which placed limits on how large a local farming community could grow, and this more than any other factor determined the shape of the communities within which most people lived. Seventy-four per cent of the population are shown as living in rural settlements, in 'villages and hamlets', in Gregory King's survey of England in 1688. Within the limits of these communities — minute by modern standards — the great majority of people were born and lived out their lives. This is not to say that people necessarily spent all of their lives in the same village: some would leave in search of work; others would leave as part of larger movements of population in times of economic distress or social upheaval. But the fundamental character of the villages and rural settlements scattered throughout England was not altered by the extent to which their populations were able to move from one such settlement to another. It was only the gentry, five per cent or less of the population, who were able to live in a larger world. For the

greater part of the rest of the population a community of three, four or five hundred people determined the boundary of their world, the basic unit of social life.<sup>23</sup> If a history of homosexuality in this period is to record the experiences of more than a small minority of people, then it is there, within the borders of a village, a group of hamlets or a single parish, that we must look first.

It should not therefore come as a surprise when, as we try to piece together the place homosexuality occupied in society, its social expression appears hemmed in by the size of the villages and towns within which the great mass of people lived, despite the obvious dangers of a small and disapproving community. James Slater was a barber who appeared at the Hertfordshire Assizes in 1607 charged with sodomy; the relationship which had been his undoing had been with the son of a neighbour, despite the danger this must clearly have involved.<sup>24</sup> Similarly Matthew Heaton, a clergyman in East Grinstead, was prosecuted at the Sussex Assizes in 1580, if the indictment is to be believed, because of the homosexual relationship he had had with a boy in his parish.<sup>25</sup> However difficult, for the great majority of people homosexuality was not — could not be — a relationship with a stranger or a casual acquaintance: it was overwhelmingly something which took place between neighbours and friends. When John Wilson the vicar of Arlington in Sussex was ejected from his benefice in 1643, the charges brought against him included the claim that 'divers times [he] attempted to commit buggery with Nathaniel Brown, Samuel Andrews and Robert Williams, his parishoners'<sup>26</sup>. The terms of the charge are revealing in themselves, but there is also an interesting companion to them in the depositions made on the occasion the year before when John Wilson had been the subject of a complaint to the Justices of the Peace. The complaint had been about his political views not his unorthodox sexual behaviour, but it contains a revealing vignette of him passing a Sunday afternoon 'in company' at the house of one of his parishioners in July 1642 with some local farmers and agricultural workers, one of his own servants and a Puritan tailor, with whom he quarrelled about politics.<sup>27</sup> Gentry though he was, his social life was circumscribed by the size of the rural community within which he lived. Is it therefore surprising that the scope of his sexual life should have been circumscribed? The limits of the local community were a fundamental influence on the limits of social life, and what was true of social life in general

was equally true of sexual relations. It is where the relationship of society and homosexuality began.

The limits of the local community were, then, a major barrier within which the great majority of people lived their lives. But it was not the only one; there was also a second, less public but no less important: the household. Together with the local community it represented one of the two principal restrictions on the possible scope of an individual's life. But it is only since the late 1960s that we have been able to form an accurate picture of what the household in pre-industrial England was like. The key, largely unrecognised as such until then, lay in the wealth of data on the human facts of everyday life in the period after the Reformation preserved in English parish records. This data is partly in the form of registers of births, marriages and deaths, which are by and large very well kept for long periods, and partly in the form of lists of local inhabitants compiled at particular dates. Both registers and population lists, but especially the latter, have now been analysed as length by Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. The result has been to drastically revise opinions on this subject. It has also complicated them, in that the household in pre-industrial England as it now appears is both familiar and unfamiliar depending on what aspect one is looking at. In its structure it is still essentially the same now as it was then and has been so since at least the beginning of the sixteenth century, the earliest period for which extensive records are available: the norm then, as now, was a household consisting of two generations living together under the same roof without collateral relatives. And, as is also the case today, a member of the second generation was more likely to found a household of his own — it was men not women who founded households — than to inherit that of his parents; when the children of the family were ready to marry, they would generally leave to establish their own homes. The 'extended' family of several generations and branches living together in one household — accepted by earlier historians as the norm — was a myth, as far as Western Europe at least was concerned. The presence in the household of aunts and uncles, of aged grandparents and tiny children, which is the traditional picture — an image of emotional stability and peaceful order — seems now, in the light of the quite divergent conclusions to be derived from statistical analysis of population lists, to represent

views on what ought to have been the case rather than what actually was.<sup>28</sup> It should be said though that this does not preclude a household taking an extended form for some part of its existence. And 'household' is not synonymous with 'family'. Statistical analysis can tell us how many people on average lived in the same household and how they were likely to have been related to each other: what it cannot tell us is to what extent they thought of that unit in the same way that we do of the family today. Certainly the role of external influences — influences of clan, community or state — has changed significantly and had probably done so by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup> But conceived of in the immediate terms of the number and relationship of people living together under one roof, the sixteenth-century household as an institution did not differ substantially from its twentieth-century counterpart.

There are though some reservations to be made. Two in particular concern areas which will have an important bearing on the subject of this book. One concerns the authority of the head of the household. An important element in the make-up of the household was that it was a profoundly patriarchal institution, both in relation to the subordination of women and in the authority exercised by the head of the household over its servants. There is a graphic illustration of this in the number of reports of servants being maltreated — often brutally and for long periods — that abound in any Quarter Sessions' records; they are an eloquent testimony of how extensive was the effective authority of the master of the household. The second reservation is less dramatic but in the long run no less important; it concerns these servants themselves. By modern standards the population of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contained an immense number of servants: 13.4 per cent of the population in Laslett and Wall's survey of one hundred pre-industrial communities were servants, and — what is even more striking — there were one or more servants in no less than 28.5 per cent of the households looked at.<sup>30</sup> With figures of this size, this was clearly an institution that affected more than the gentry alone; the yeoman farmer, the blacksmith, even on occasions the humble drover or smallholder would quite likely have shared their homes with one or more servants. In view of how widespread this institution was among different social groups including both the wealthy and the relatively poor, it is highly improbable that such

an army of servants consisted of domestic servants in the modern sense. What then were they? Part of the explanation is provided by the statistics themselves. If the number of servants in a population is related to the number of children in the same population and its average age of first marriage, there is a recognisable correspondence. The proportion of servants in these communities is negatively related to the proportion of children in the same population, i.e. the more individuals who appear as children in a list the less the number that appear as servants and vice versa.<sup>31</sup> Also if the numbers of servants and of married people in the same age groups are compared, it is clear that it would have been rare indeed for a servant to have been married.<sup>32</sup> The explanation is that the servants in a household were the children of poorer households accumulating through their wages sufficient capital to establish households of their own, an event which would coincide with marriage. The rest of the explanation lies in the nature of a pre-industrial economy. Since the nineteenth century manufacturing has largely been a question of factory work, and we are naturally accustomed to thinking of the two as being connected. But this was not the case in seventeenth-century England. Before the coming of industrialisation, manufacturing was carried on as much in the house as in the workshop; and the dividing line between the two was often unclear. A mill or a forge, a tailor's shop or the work of a farm would often have been part and parcel of the life of the household, the labour for this being provided by the members of the household themselves: the householder, his wife and children. Where this was insufficient — as it often would have been — the solution was to take into the household the children of more humble homes, nominally as servants but occupying a similar position and doing the same work as the children themselves with whom they now lived. When eventually they were able to found households of their own, they would marry and leave — servants and children alike. In the meantime, unless they were formally apprenticed, they might move from house to house, but their social and economic position would be the same in each case. Whether spent in their parents' home or in the adopted home of a master, it was a stage of life which a great many people would have known.<sup>33</sup>

An institution of this kind clearly had important implications for the sexual life of the many unmarried men and women who



lived in a setting which was both their home and their place of work, whether as children of the household or its servants. This is especially evident when one considers how large a part of an individual's sexual life must have been affected. It was rare for a man to start a household of his own before his late twenties, and this might well have been delayed until his early thirties. The average age of marriage for a woman would have been rather earlier, generally in her early twenties.<sup>34</sup> While it is very difficult now to discover what the age of sexual maturity was,<sup>35</sup> clearly it would have been well before this; and the constraints of the household would have governed a significant part of many individuals' lives long after puberty. For an unmarried servant living and working under the close discipline of a master in the same setting and with the same people, the confines of the household might be expected to have put a severe limitation on the available sexual contacts. It is an expectation which analysis has borne out, although so far the research has been largely in terms of heterosexuality. G.R. Quafe has analysed the depositions in the Somerset Court of Quarter Sessions 1645-1660 arising out of the Justices' bastardy jurisdiction; the most common circumstance in the cases he looked at concerned sexual relations between a female servant and someone living in the same household.<sup>36</sup> E.S. Morgan's similar study of the Middlesex County Court in Puritan Massachusetts, although lacking in statistical data, came to similar conclusions.<sup>37</sup> But in such circumstances homosexual relations were no less subject to these restrictions than heterosexual ones. And for an unmarried servant homosexuality had certain advantages: it was less likely to arouse the interest of the local Justices of the Peace. While sodomy cases appear only rarely in Quarter Sessions records,<sup>38</sup> these courts took a lively interest in cases of premarital heterosexual intercourse. It is not difficult to see the reason why: one of the principal preoccupations of the Justices of the Peace was to see that illegitimate children did not fall on the poor rate. There was then considerable pressure on an unmarried servant to find alternative sexual outlets; homosexuality was one of these, an alternative made easier by the common practice of male servants sleeping together. Also the restrictions of the household being what they were, it was in any case a good deal easier for a male servant to have homosexual relations with someone living in the same household than it would have been to seek such a

relationship outside. An illustration of this, which probably came to court because of the coercion involved, is the prosecution of a labourer, Meredith Davy of Minehead in Somerset, at the Somerset Court of Quarter Sessions in 1630. According to the evidence of his master's apprentice, a boy 'aged twelve years or thereabouts' called John Vicary, with whom he shared a bed, Davy had been in the habit of having sexual relations with the boy on Sunday and holiday nights after he had been drinking; eventually the boy cried out and Davy ended up before the Justices.<sup>39</sup> Similarly John Swan and John Litster, who were charged with sodomy in Edinburgh in 1570, are described in the record of their trial as being smiths and servants of the same master.<sup>40</sup> In both of these instances, a familiar social institution is clearly recognisable.

Meredith Davy's relationship with the apprentice he had shared a bed with is more complex though than the simple accident of their living in the same household. The young apprentice would have had a lower standing in the household than Davy, who was an adult; and it was presumably this which encouraged him — wrongly as it turned out — to think that he could take advantage of the boy. It is an important point. In a household of any substantial size the distinction in their status would have been only one of a series of such distinctions; it was part of the nature of the household itself. The household was a hierarchical institution, in which each of its members had a clearly defined position. It was also a patriarchal institution, in which the pre-eminent position was that of the master; and the distinction in status between master and servant was in some respects a model for distinctions between the servants themselves. The patriarchal nature of the household was as powerful a factor impinging on the lives of the people who lived within it as was its restriction as a social unit. This is not to say that the sixteenth-century household was necessarily governed by a man. It is not male supremacy as such which is involved but rather what that implies. In the absence of a suitable male it could on occasion be headed by a woman. But its nature — if not invariably its form — was characteristically patriarchal, allowing some of the individuals within it — and one in particular — a considerable degree of power over the lives of the others.

It is not surprising then that it had a powerful influence on social relations and particularly — and this is my principal

concern here — on sexual relations, heterosexual and homosexual alike. The most common form, for example, in which bastardy cases appear in the courts is that of a female servant who has had sexual relations with the master of the household or the master's son.<sup>41</sup> There is also considerable evidence, although of a somewhat different kind — it is not a topic in which JPs showed much interest — of homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships being common between masters and servants, to the extent that this seems to have been a widespread institution. It figures in both the major homosexual scandals of the seventeenth century: that of Francis Bacon and that of Mervyn Touchet, second Earl of Castlehaven. Francis Bacon was apparently in the habit of having sexual relations with his male servants; this would probably have gone unnoticed had it not been for his prodigal generosity to them, which was the subject of a good deal of disapproving comment. The evidence is partly the malicious gossip reported by John Aubrey and Sir Simonds D'Ewes;<sup>42</sup> but the stories are borne out by a letter from Francis Bacon's mother to another son, Anthony Bacon, complaining about his brother's servants and especially his keeping 'that bloody Percy, as I told him then, yea as a coach companion and bed companion'.<sup>43</sup> Similar circumstances appear in the record of the trial of the Earl of Castlehaven in 1631. He was charged with sodomy and assisting in the rape of his wife, and at the trial several of his male servants gave evidence that he had been in the habit of having sexual relations with them. It was rare for a charge of this kind to come to the courts, and the evident prejudice against Castlehaven because of his Roman Catholicism makes one suspect the whole proceedings; it is also possible that the rape of his wife — by one of his favourites — may also have singled him out for unusual treatment. Whatever one may feel about the case as a whole however, there is no reason to doubt that he regularly had sexual relations with his male servants; their detailed evidence is sufficiently convincing.<sup>44</sup>

As well as these two *causes célèbres*, homosexual relations between masters and their servants were bitterly complained of by the satirists. In *The Black Book* (probably by Thomas Middleton) a sodomite is said to keep a 'page, which fills up the place of an ingle'.<sup>45</sup> 'Lustful catamites' are one of the 'private parasites' complained of in Richard Brathwaite's *Placentia*.<sup>46</sup> It is also something which appears on several occasions in the poems of John Wilmot:

Then give me health, wealth, mirth, and wine,  
 And, if busy love entrenches,  
 There's a sweet, soft page of mine  
 Does the trick worth forty wenches.<sup>47</sup>

And in his *The Disabled Debauchee* the speaker reminisces:

Nor shall our love-fits, Chloris, be forgot,  
 When each the well-looking linkboy strove t'enjoy,  
 And the best kiss was the deciding lot  
 Whether the boy fucked you, or I the boy.<sup>48</sup>

(A linkboy was a boy employed to carry a 'link', i.e. a light, to show the way along the street.)

It is also significant that when John Wilmot adapted Fletcher's *Valentinian* for the conventions of the Restoration stage he removed the passage in which Valentinian's favourite the eunuch Lycias is shown to be of noble birth, leaving the impression (which a Restoration audience would have been more accustomed to) that he was his servant and no more.<sup>49</sup> There are, though, difficulties in interpreting this material, John Wilmot in the Restoration as much as the earlier Jacobean satirists. This is partly because the literary references are so highly coloured by the concerns of these writers and partly because of the scarcity of material on this point in court records. John Wilmot was writing for an aristocratic audience; and as far as the Jacobean satirists were concerned homosexual relations between servants and their masters were only an incidental detail in their principal purpose, to libel the London gentry.

As for the courts, it was not something that concerned them greatly unless violence was involved;<sup>50</sup> a Quarter Sessions case with sadistic overtones which may have been of this kind is that of Richard Finch a London merchant, who was called before the Middlesex Justices in 1609 charged with abusing his servant Nicholas Wheeler and 'correcting him unreasonably with whipcords, being quite naked'.<sup>51</sup> But a case like this is rare: the courts were apparently unconcerned with sexual relations between masters and servants unless a scandal was involved or an illegitimate child was produced. The result is that the evidence is disproportionately weighted by a concern with the upper classes. But it would be seriously wrong to assume that servants were a common feature only in such households: there were far too many of them for that. In the population list for Ealing in 1599,

published by Laslett and Wall, of the 85 households in the village a staggering 34.2 per cent of them contained one or more servants, and that out of a total population of only 427.<sup>52</sup> The patriarchal household with its servants was an institution that touched the lives of an immense number of people. Whether two workmen in the household of the same master in Edinburgh, or a labourer sleeping with a young apprentice in seventeenth-century Somerset, or a London merchant having homosexual relations with his servants in the relative security of his own household, it was an institution that necessarily influenced the sexual lives of those who lived within it.

The household was the classic form of patriarchy, but it was not the only one. It was also an influential model, or perhaps rather one should say the clearest form of an element present throughout society. Probably the most obvious example of this is the relationship of pupil and teacher. The teacher stood to the child *in loco parentis*, with some of the authority over his children and servants due to the master of the household; and there is reason to think that the educational system, as well as the household, involved forms of institutionalised homosexuality. This was particularly likely at the universities, where an unmarried and supposedly celibate college fellow would customarily share his room with a number of young male students.<sup>53</sup> The likely consequences of this very much exercised the author of *The Times' Whistle*, as he explains at length in his passage on the evils of sodomy. With the marginal note 'I grieve at the vices which prevail at the universities' he protests:

How many towardly young gentlemen  
(Instead of ink, with tears I fill my pen  
To write it) sent unto thee by their friends  
For art and education, the true ends  
Their parents aim at, are with this infection  
Poisoned by them whose best protection  
Should keep them from all sin! Alack the while  
Each pedant tutor should his pupil spoil!

Because 'this vice is so inveterate', and 'grown to so strong a custom', he gloomily concludes that it is hardly likely to be discouraged.<sup>54</sup> A similar complaint was made by John Marston, whom the author of *The Times' Whistle* had probably read and who blamed the homosexuality apparent at the universities on

Papist missionaries returning from Catholic seminaries abroad:

Hence, hence, ye falsed, seeming patriots.  
 Return not with pretence of salving spots,  
 When here ye soil us with impurity  
 And monstrous filth of Douai seminary.  
 What though Iberia yield you liberty  
 To snort in source of Sodom villainy?  
 What though the blooms of young nobility,  
 Committed to your Rodon's custody,  
 Yee Nero-like abuse? Yet near approach  
 Your new St Omer's lewdness here to broach,  
 Tainting our towns and hopeful academies  
 With your lust-baiting most abhorred means ...  
 Had I some snout-fair brats, they should endure  
 The new found Castilian calenture  
 Before some pedant-tutor in his bed  
 Should use my fry like Phrygian Ganymede.<sup>55</sup>

It is not wholly clear what part of the educational system Marston is referring to, whether the universities alone or whether he had schoolmasters in mind also; but there is evidence that homosexuality was institutionalised not only at the universities but also in grammar schools and even in the village schools. The limited effect which complaints about this had is revealing of how deep-rooted the institution was. In 1541 Nicholas Udall, who was headmaster of Eton at the time, was involved in a scandal because of the homosexual relationship he had had with one of his former pupils. The events are somewhat mysterious, but the affair seems to have come to light during an investigation by the Privy Council into the theft of some school plate in which the boy had been involved. A similar scandal, with — as we shall see — a similar outcome, involved the schoolmaster of Great Tey in Essex, a certain Mr Cooke who was presented in the ecclesiastical court in 1594 as 'a man of beastly behaviour amongst his scholars' and one who 'teacheth them all manner of bawdry'. In each case the complaints about homosexuality had little effect. The Privy Council were obviously concerned about Udall's possible role in the theft, and he was dismissed as headmaster and spent a short time in prison; but it is indicative of the degree to which homosexuality was effectively tolerated in the educational system that neither Udall nor Cooke suffered any permanent loss. Cooke

failed to appear to answer the charge, and nothing further seems to have occurred; Udall continued his career with his reputation apparently undamaged. In neither case did a charge of homosexuality in this context do any permanent harm.<sup>56</sup>

A third area where homosexuality appears to have been institutionalised and tacitly tolerated was homosexual prostitution, and there is substantial evidence that this was an important part of the sexual life at least of London well into the second half of the seventeenth century. There is an incidental reference to this in one of John Donne's *Satires*, particularly significant in that the minor details of these are always unusually sharp and reliable. The profligate young man who is the subject of Donne's first *Satire* (published in the early 1590s) is taken to task by the speaker because, among his many other vices:

... thou ... dost not only approve  
 But, in rank itchy lust, desire and love  
 The nakedness and bareness to enjoy  
 Of thy plump muddy whore or prostitute boy.<sup>57</sup>

The familiar sight of the 'prostitute boy' in Renaissance London is the origin of the distinctive equivalents John Florio gives for 'catamíto' in his 1611 Italian/English dictionary:

Catamíto, one hired to sin against nature, an ingle,  
 a ganymede.<sup>58</sup>

He apparently took these to be equivalent terms. There is also reason to think that homosexual prostitution existed in elaborate and developed forms as well as the more straightforward. Alongside the casual prostitution of the streets and public places — which is the least this could have referred to — there is evidence of more sophisticated forms and in particular of the existence of homosexual brothels. John Marston included a condemnation of 'male stews' (i.e. male brothels) in his *Scourge of Villanie* published in 1598,<sup>59</sup> and Clement Walker's *Relations and Observations* contains a mention in passing of several newly built homosexual brothels in London in late 1649.<sup>60</sup> Neither Clement Walker nor John Marston, however, describes in any detail what these brothels were like; and we should probably not think of them as brothels in the strict sense of the word, visualising commercial establishments more or less exclusively concerned with homosexual prostitution. If the parallels with heterosexual

prostitution are a guide — and there certainly are such parallels<sup>61</sup> — these are more likely to have been taverns (which could earn notorious reputations) where prostitutes were able to entertain their clients. Such taverns, together with young male prostitutes walking the streets and alleys of Elizabethan London, probably offer the principal way we should envisage homosexual prostitution in the London of the time.

There is though a further form of homosexual prostitution which it is possible to distinguish, and there are parallels with heterosexual prostitution here also: the young man living in a household, nominally with the status of a servant but having a relationship with the master of the household with strong overtones of prostitution. This might be a matter of no more than a few days, as in John Marston's description of the sodomite whose personal servant — apparently a page — is really a prostitute who has been 'closely' i.e. secretly hired:

But ho, what Ganymede is that doth grace  
The gallant's heels, one who for two days' space  
Is closely hired?<sup>62</sup>

It might also be a matter lasting weeks, months, or even years. This is presumably part of what Middleton, Brathwaite and Wilmot, quoted earlier in a different context, had in mind; their pages and 'private parasites' seem to have been prostitutes, albeit established in the household, as much as they were servants. It also partly explains the ambivalent position of some of the young men in the households of Francis Bacon and the Earl of Castlehaven: it is not clear whether these young men were servants or a kind of domestic prostitute, and perhaps one would be wrong to try and make a sharp distinction between the two. The relationship between client and prostitute — as indeed between teacher and pupil — had obvious analogies with the basic and influential relationship of master and servant; in the domestic prostitute the two are hardly distinguishable.

Another — but more specialised — form of prostitution existed in connection with the London playhouses. This is not surprising. The Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre acquired a reputation for homosexuality, as Philip Stubbes graphically claimed.<sup>63</sup> It was also a claim made by Edward Guilpin in similar terms in his *Skialetheia*, which describes a sodomite as someone 'who is at every play and every night sups with his ingles';<sup>64</sup> and it



is repeated in Michael Drayton's *The Moone-Calfe*, where the theatres are denounced as one of the haunts of the sodomite.<sup>65</sup> Given the prevalence of homosexuality in the theatrical milieu and the importance of prostitution in London generally, it is understandable that homosexual prostitution should have taken root in a distinctive way in the theatres. In particular, it seems that at times an actor's relationship with his patron could have overtones of homosexuality and prostitution: such at least is the implication in Lucy Hutchinson's famous comment on the change in the Court after the death of James I:

The face of the Court was much changed in the change of the king, for King Charles was temperate, chaste, and serious; so that the fools and bawds, mimics and catamites of the former court grew out of fashion and the nobility and courtiers, who did not quite abandon their debaucheries, yet so revered the king as to retire into corners to practice them.<sup>66</sup>

'Fools and bawds, mimics and catamites' — the expression is difficult now to construe, but it clearly has overtones of the theatre and of prostitution. 'Fools' here are obviously jesters, but the theatrical reference is sharper in its parallel 'mimics'. A 'mimic' was a burlesque actor; the usage is now obsolete but was current in the early seventeenth century and is here the only reading of the word that fits easily.<sup>67</sup> As regards prostitution, the parallel between 'bawds' and 'catamites' suggests that 'catamites' is being used with the same connotation as in John Florio's dictionary. And there is evidence that it was not only in the relations of actors and their patrons in the court circles that homosexuality was involved; the actors had distinctions in status of their own; some of them indeed were only boys. When in Ben Jonson's play *Poetaster* the elder Ovid learns that his son is to become an actor, his response is: 'What? Shall I have my son a stager now, an ingle for players?'<sup>68</sup> The parallel with the homosexuality of the household is striking — both as between master and servants and between servants of different status. Changed and elaborated though it was, there is still discernible here — as in other forms of homosexuality in the society of the time — the powerful influence of a basic model: the patriarchal household of master and mistress, servants and children.

What is missing is any social expression of homosexuality based

on the fact of homosexuality itself. To a late twentieth-century observer accustomed to the idea of a distinctive homosexual subculture amounting to a minority community it is a striking absence. It is not that we lack the material to reconstruct the ways homosexuality and society were related; there is abundant evidence in the period we have been looking at, stretching from the close of the Middle Ages into the second half of the seventeenth century, of the forms of social life in which homosexuality appeared. What we look for in vain are any features peculiar to it alone. And the social forms it did take, within the confines of small rural communities and the patriarchal structure of the household — a structure discernible also in a series of parallel relationships throughout society — had their origin elsewhere. But there was a common element. What determined the shared and recurring features of homosexual relationships was the prevailing distribution of power, economic power and social power, not the fact of homosexuality itself. It is a crucial realisation. At first sight the place homosexuality occupied in the society of Renaissance England is apt not to seem very dissimilar to that of our own: many of its institutions and problems are easily recognisable; and the ways of making love do not change over the centuries. But as we piece together its relationship to the rest of society and as — rather later — we begin to discern institutions for which there is now no conceivable parallel whatsoever, that sense of familiarity wanes and the full dimensions of the change which has occurred begin to become apparent.

But are there not some more immediate questions that along the way have gone unanswered? An analysis of this kind — of society as a whole, of its structures and characteristic forms of life — does not tell us how it appeared from the viewpoint of someone living within it. In particular it does not tell us how the problems of a homosexual relationship would have appeared to the people whose daily lives were affected by it at the turn of the sixteenth century. And without this are we not in danger of missing something perhaps very important? That unsettling question is reinforced by what by now will probably have become unavoidably and disturbingly apparent: an analysis of this kind, if that is all we are to have, is going to leave us with some very strange paradoxes indeed. Is it not surprising that the writers quoted in the first chapter of this book should have spoken of sodomites in terms so far removed from their everyday

experience, as the companions of witches and werewolves, as agents of the King of Spain, when for most if not all of them their actual experience of homosexuality would have been primarily in terms of someone who lived in the same village or town or even under the same roof? And how are we to square the profound, the metaphysical fear of homosexuality they express with its complex elaboration throughout society in a variety of forms? How is it to be reconciled with the tacit acceptance of homosexual prostitution and of institutionalised homosexuality in the household and educational system? Clearly something very important is missing, and the approach adopted so far is not going to produce it. We need to ask a different question.