

SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Occasionally, women dressed as men married other women; some were discovered, sometimes becoming legendary; others may have passed unnoticed.

The context within which female sexuality was understood was shaped by a range of legal, medical, and customary ideas and expectations. Popular and elite medical texts, broadsides, and ballads presented women as relentlessly desiring. Their lust, more than men's, was the hardest to control. This discourse was a source of profound misogyny, used against women both individually and collectively. However, it might also have been a means by which women could claim sexual passion. Descriptions of reproduction, relating male and female physiologies more closely than was to be the case in the later eighteenth century, presented conception as the result of both male and female orgasm. In some cases at least, this made married men keen to learn how to please their wives. It may also have meant that unmarried men connected the pursuit of female sexual pleasure with the dangers of conception.

As the records of rape and sexual assault suggest, it could be hard for women to assert control over their perceived sexual availability. Rape was rarely pursued in court and was difficult to prosecute; as a legal concept it had traditionally been associated with property offences. Discussions of the crime in the later seventeenth century suggest that it was becoming more clearly perceived as a sexual offence, involving lack of consent.¹ More broadly, women questioned about sex in court rarely speak of themselves as consenting partners. This was, of course, their main defence; but it may also bear witness to a culture in which active female desire was problematic and unacceptable.

The lack of effective contraception was a crucial determinant of female sexual experiences. Despite the lack of evidence for any widespread use of contraception, illegitimacy rates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England appear to have been surprisingly low: it has been argued that a good deal of heterosexual sexual activity before marriage involved non-penetrative sex.² Young men and women, waiting for the chance to marry, engaged in kissing, petting, and 'love play' on their own or in front of friends and family. Once a firm marriage contract had been made, though, many felt sexual intercourse was permissible and accordingly, many women examined for bastardy claimed a promise of marriage.

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5.1 To mark him for her own: Joane Waters, 1611

For most women and men sex and marriage began with love play, fondling, and 'bundling'. Joane Waters, a widow pregnant with her dead husband's child, was sued at the London consistory court in 1586 over a marriage contract she was alleged to have made with John Newton, a London actor. George Ireland, who deposed in Newton's favour, testified that the couple had made a written contract,

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and that their public love play (in front of William Duke and John's sister as well as George Ireland) demonstrated Joane's readiness to marry John, although she at first refused to marry 'till she was delivered of the child she then went with being her late husbands child deceased for avoiding scandal'. Joane herself denied discussing marriage or reading the contract, but the couple were married in August, 1611.

Consistory Court of London Deposition Book, LMA DL/C 219, fo. 417 (17 Feb. 1611). The case is discussed at greater length and with a longer extract in Loreen L. Giese, 'Theatrical citings and bitings: some references to playhouses and players in London consistory court depositions, 1586-1611', *Early Theatre*, 1 (1998), pp. 113-28.

[George Ireland, of Gray's Inn, gentleman, where he has lived for 3 years, previously of Brasenose College, Oxford for 3 years, aged 22, who has known the plaintiff for two years and the defendant since the feast of St Bartholomew.

[To the second article he deposes and says] that . . . as he now remembereth about a fortnight before Michaelmas last past tharticulate John Newton and Joane Waters by means of the said Duke as this deponent taketh it met together at the sign of the Crown and Goat in West Smithfield London being a tavern, whither this deponent came into their company hearing that they then were there, for that he was well acquainted with the said parties, where he saith he saw the said Joane Waters and John Newton together in very loving and extraordinary kind manner, making love and showing great kindness each to other by drinking one to another and kissing and embracing together very lovingly and he verily believeth that the said Waters was then very much affected to him the said Newton in the way of marriage for that she the said Waters did then with her lips suck his the said Newton's neck in a manner of kindness whereby she made three red spots arise whereupon the said Newton asking her what she meant by it she answering said that she had marked him for her own. And after much kindness and conference then and there passed betwixt them she the said Waters requested him the said Newton to go home with her saying that he should be very welcome, which this deponent thinketh he did. . . .

5.2 Promising her marriage: Mary Marvell, 1656

When illicit sex was detected, many women claimed to have been drawn into it by a promise of marriage. Mary Marvell's examination, in the Commonwealth period when the sessions, rather than the church courts, had jurisdiction over sexual offences, is also revealing about patterns of sociability between men and women.

Essex Quarter Sessions Bundles, Essex RO, Q/SBa 2/97.

The examination of Mary Marvell of Great Braxted in the said county single-woman taken the tenth day of October 1656 before Jeremy Aylett esquire one of the justices of the peace of the said county



Figure 8 Courting couple

From the Pepys Ballads, vol. IV, no. 119. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge

Idealised, romantic wooers like these feature over and over again in cheap print. In practice, as some of the documents here (and Figure 9) show, courtship was not always so decorous.

Who saith about Thursday was a month one Alexander Hall cordwainer was with this examinant at the White Hart in Maldon, and promising her marriage prevailed with her to lie with him as his wife. Then next morning she came with him to her mistress Joan Rouse's house in Great Braxted to whom the examinant is a servant, and there he the said Alexander took his leave of her. The next Lord's day he met her the said Mary beyond Kelvedon and forthwith they came to Larkin's house an alehouse keeper in Braxted aforesaid. And that night the said Alexander and the examinant lay together again as husband and wife, he promising still to make her his wife.

5.3 Sex by appointment: Mary Bathron, 1656

In contrast to the previous examination, at the same sessions Mary Bathron admitted to sex with a man who had made her no promises.

Essex Quarter Sessions Bundles, Essex RO, Q/SBa 2/97.

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Figure 9 Couple with cupid

From the Pepys Ballads, vol. III, no. 138. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge

This image appeared in a series of ballads with different words for the cupid: here, it illustrates 'The Ranting Whores resolution: wherein you find that her only treasure, consisteth in being a lady of pleasure'.

The information and examination of Mary Bathron alias Bathrope taken . . . upon the 31th of October 1656

This informant saith that about a fortnight after Michaelmas last was a twelvemonth not long before the wedding of Jeremy Right of Debden, she was in company with Henry Searle of Debden at the house of John Eliott. And that he the said Henry Searle followed her, when she went home from thence and that about six of the clock in the evening of the said day the said Henry Searle had the carnal knowledge of her body, in a ditch, between two closes near Debden Hall and that she was with child by him of a bastard child, of which she hath been since delivered.

This informant further saith that several times after by appointment she met him the said Henry Searle who had the carnal knowledge of her accordingly viz. two several times in the granary of Debden Hall.

And further she saith not.

5.4 A servant and her master's friend: Suzan More, 1608

For many women, their first sexual encounters would happen while they were in service; and while many courted fellow servants, others might be propositioned, harassed, or assaulted by their masters and their master's married friends. Suzan More appeared in the London consistory court in 1608 as witness in a prosecution of Thomas Creede for fornication and bastardy. Although only 25, she had a long and varied employment history, and was then working as a servant to a bookseller whose wife she helped make points. Thomas Creede was a married friend of her master's, a printer in the Old Exchange from 1593 to 1617; he printed some of Shakespeare's plays and in 1608 was printing, amongst others, treatises against temptation. The case was prosecuted by John Scales, a friend of Suzan's, rather than being presented by churchwardens as a disciplinary complaint. Suzan More's testimony is an account of the stated facts of the accusation against Thomas Creede, detailing his courtship of her, their relationship, and his response (and that of his wife) to her pregnancy; she also counters the allegations ('interrogatories') he made in his defence, that her master, Randall Birke, was the real father of her child, and that Suzan had cleared his name publicly. Anna Birke, Suzan's mistress, also testified Thomas had tried to seduce her, telling her 'she had a sweet pair of lips and if she were a good wench she would let him have some part with her husband'; other witnesses deposed that Suzan had named Thomas as the father in her labour. There is no mention of the child, who may have been stillborn, died shortly after birth, or been put out to nurse.

Consistory Court of London Deposition Book, LMA, DL/C 218, pp. 138 ff. (18 June 1608).

[Suzan More, servant of Hugh Jackson, stationer, of the parish of St Bride's Fleet St, where she has lived for six weeks, and previously in the house of Edward Handby for ten weeks or thereabouts and previously with one Randall Birke in the parish of St Giles without Cripplegate for about a year and previously in Holy Trinity Minories with one Mrs Long for three months or thereabouts and previously with one Arthur Goodgame of the parish of St Laurence Pountney for about one year and previously with one Mrs Lambert of the parish of St Margaret New Fish Street for a year or thereabouts and previously with Mrs Lynsey widow in the parish of St Peter Cornhill for about 2 years and previously in the town of Cambridge since her birth, where she was born, aged 25, she has known John Scales for 7 years and Thomas Creede since Easter 1607 and before as she says.]

[To the first, second, third, fourth and fifth articles she says and deposes] that the week before Easter last was twelve months she this deponent dwelling with one Randall Birke a bookseller without Cripplegate whose wife using the trade of pointmaking which she this deponent could do, she saith there came one day the articulate Thomas Creede who used to come often thither, he the same Thomas Creede being a printer and Randall Birke a bookseller, and she saith that he the same Thomas Creede began one day to talk with her this deponent first asking her name and she telling him Suzan he then said he had a sister of that name, and therefore quoth he you

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Figure 10 Couple on bed

From the Pepys Ballads, vol. IV, no. 95. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge

Another much-used woodcut representing courtship and sex: this one is from 'The Hasty Bridegroom'. The bed is a typically solid, ornate one: beds were often the most significant and valuable pieces of household furniture, and they were rarely reserved exclusively for a married couple.

being so like my first wife as you are and your name Suzan I must needs love you, then asked her this deponent if she would go drink some time with him which she this deponent denying as she saith he asked her this deponent's mistress Mrs Birke leave for her this deponent and desired Mrs Birke to go with them herself, which she often denied, yet at last through his importunity both Mrs Birke and she this deponent went with him to the King's Head in Red Cross Street where they drunk wine with him, and then Mrs Birke and she this deponent returned home again and he the same Thomas Creede brought them home and she saith that sundry times after that he the said Creede would come thither and procure her this deponent to go with him to drink wine.

And she saith that about Midsummer last she this deponent going with him to the Sun Tavern in Aldersgate Street he gave her this deponent so much wine as she was drunk and sick withall and then he the same Creede had her this deponent to one Widow Grimes' house by Picket Hatch an alehouse and had her up into a chamber where she this deponent as she

saith lay down on a bed to sleep and she saith at that time he the same Thomas Creede had the carnal knowledge of her this deponent's body, and she saith that after that time he the same Creede did sundry times entice her to go with him to taverns and she this deponent sometimes denying he would be very angry and then he would set others, sometimes tavern boys and sometimes the boys of the forenamed Widow Grimes to come and stand over the way against her this deponent's mistress's house and shop and ask her this deponent to come to them and she saith that twice after that first time she this deponent met him the same Thomas Creede at Widow Grimes house, both which times he the same Creede had the carnal knowledge of her this deponent's body, in so much as she this deponent being with child she this deponent acquainted him with it and then he said unto her this deponent thus, if you had gone from your master and left his house and would have been at my disposition as I told you I would have had you to have done then I would have provided for you and you should have wanted nothing but seeing you have continued still there at Birke's go fetch you another father for your child if you will for I mean not to father it, I will shift it off well enough and my wife will help to clear me of this matter and to shift it off as she hath shifted me of such matters as this is before now. And she saith that after that he the same Creede procured her this deponent's master and mistress and her this deponent to go to a tavern to supper in or near Old Fish Street, and she saith he the same Creede meeting with her his deponent and her fellow maidservant in Birke's house (named Blanche) by Cripplegate he gave each of them a cake and desired them to meet him at Islington the next day and he would give them a pig. And she saith that night he and his wife supped likewise in that tavern in Old Fish Street and then her this deponent's said master fell sick and that of the plague and so she this deponent did not go to Islington.

And she saith that after that when she this deponent perceived for certainty that she was with child she sent the maidservant being the kitchen maid in Birke's house named Blanche unto him to desire him but to provide a house for her and she would not farther trouble him, whereunto he the same Creede answered that Birke and she should not gull him so. And she this deponent told then her said master and mistress and they understanding thereof being much grieved sent for him the same Thomas Creede to a tavern, whither he the same Creede came and his wife after him, and there at that tavern the same Creede's wife at the first did so terrify her this deponent with words as she this deponent could not tell what to do, she saying that if she this deponent laid her child to her husband she would make her this deponent repent it all the days of her life. But at last she this deponent telling her Mrs Creede all the circumstances afore by her this deponent now deposed, she the same Mrs Creede began to speak her this deponent fair and persuaded her to go into the country to her friends, and so she gave her this deponent 10s. to get her away and she went with her this deponent to the Cambridge

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carriers and did see her placed in the wagon, but she this deponent being not able to endure the uneasy going of the wagon, it being in the great frost time last, she this deponent returned back again when she came at Ware and coming to London could not get a place to lie in of a great while but lay abroad in the streets.

At last she saith she got to lie in a poor woman's house in Gravel Lane in Houndsditch, where she lay two days without meat or drink, and then she saith there was one More a poor man of her this deponent's name, that had some little acquaintance of her this deponent, understanding of her this deponent's being there came unto her and persuaded her this deponent to procure him the same Creede to be called before some justice and then he would take some order for her this deponents keeping, but she this deponent was (as she saith) unwilling to take such course yet he the same More unknown to her this deponent procured a warrant from Sir Stephen Sones and called Thomas Creede before him and likewise her this deponent. And she saith that there she this deponent being examined privately by Sir Stephen she this deponent told in substance and effect as much to him as now she hath deposed whereupon he the same Thomas Creede was bound over to the sessions. And she the same Creede's wife being then there seemed to make very much of her this deponent, bidding her this deponent to come to her to her house and she should have such as she had to do her good until she were delivered and then when her time should come to be delivered, send for me, quoth she the same mistress Creede.

And she saith by reason of her kind words she this deponent within a week after went to the same Creede's house, where first he, espying her this deponent, began to speak very churlishly asking her in a furious manner wherefore she came thither and she this deponent told him that if his wife had not bid her she said she would not. And then his wife came to her this deponent and spake something roughly to her, but yet called her this deponent Suzan by her name and willed her this deponent to get her a place to lie in and when you are delivered, quoth she, my word will go for a bastard I warrant you.¹ And these premises or at least some of it she this deponent hath confessed and acknowledged to some of her friends and she saith that she thinketh there is a common fame and report in the parishes articulate of this matter by her deposed of by reason of his the same Thomas Creed's own speeches and his wife's together with his continual visiting and familiar behaviour to and with her this deponent at taverns and at her said master's house [And otherwise she knows nothing to depose].

[To the 6th article she says] that he the same Thomas Creede told her this deponent after they had been the first time at the tavern as aforesaid together that if he had given her this deponent's mistress but a pint more

1. It's not clear whether Mrs Creede means here that she would testify that her husband was the child's father, or deny it, as had earlier been threatened.

he said he could have done what he had would with her. And Blanche Howell mentioned in this article coming one day home to Randall Birke's house with some extraordinary behaviour and her face red that she this deponent perceived she had been drinking wine, through her this deponent's insistence confessed unto her this deponent that she had been with Mr Creede and he had willed her to bring home her master's child which she then had and then meet him at Goodwife Grimes' house but she this deponent would not suffer her to go at that time [. . .]

[To the interrogatories of Thomas Creede]

[To the 4th . . . she answers] that she is a poor servant little or nothing worth but liveth by her service . . .

[To the 11th she answers as deposed above] and saith it was in the daytime and in an upper chamber in Widow Grimes' house he having a suit of fustian on when he came to her and she this respondent a violet coloured waistcoat and a stuff kirtle and he had the same clothes on every time that they met at Widow Grimes' house aforesaid his fustian suit being cut with a small cut and she saith she knoweth his name to be Thomas Creede by his own confession.

[To the 15th . . .] saith she had no wages but wrought her points by the gross and was paid by the gross for them viz. 5s. 4d. a gross. . . .

[To the 23rd she answers] that Sir Stephen Sone said indeed that it were good there should be a strange midwife to bring her this respondent to bed but he said expressly thus not provided by you Mistress Creede nor yet by Birke and therefore there was such a midwife as that neither she this respondent nor either of the other women Creede's wife or Birke's wife ever knew or saw provided and sent for. . . .

[To the 24th she answers] and saith that so soon as she this respondent fell in labour and travail of childbirth both Mrs Creede and Mrs Birke were sent for but she this respondent was delivered before they came . . .

5.5 The master's son: Elizabeth Hodson, 1633

Elizabeth Hodson appeared at the Staffordshire quarter sessions in 1633 whilst pregnant; after giving birth, she submitted a petition for relief, saying that her master, 'a man of great wealth', refused to help her. It was not unusual for servants to find their daily work interrupted with sexual propositions from their masters, or to have to leave their services pregnant by them, their sons, or their friends; see also the previous document, and the testimony of Susan Lay in Chapter 10.

Staffordshire Quarter Sessions Rolls, Staffordshire RO, Q/SR 213/19.

The information of Elizabeth Hodson taken at Eccleshall Castle . . . on the 2 November 1633. . . .

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She saith that she dwelt with John Johnson of the parish of Chebsey, father to the said Thomas Johnson whom she accuseth to be the father of the child that she now goeth withall, and farther saith that the Saturday sevensnight after Stafford fair and being the third day of May she coming into her master's stable with a candle for the men to dress their horses by, and the said Thomas Johnson aforesaid put out the candle and worked his pleasure with her, and after that had to do with her in the kitchen in his father's house, and another time in the hall chimney, and saith that he promised to marry her.

5.6 Showing her privities: Joane Cranckland, 1605

Joane Cranckland, single mother of a bastard child in a Somerset village, was sexually troublesome to the local authorities. Showing one's privities in public was something men were generally more likely to be accused of than women; the words and acts attributed to her record a kind of sexual aggressiveness that represented many of the great fears of female sexuality. For both women and men, such visions might have been at once menacing and enticing.

Consistory Court of Bath and Wells Deposition Book, Somerset Archives, D/Dcd 34 [n.p.] (1605).

[Thomas Burr ridge alias Mills of Raddington, Somerset, husbandman . . .]
. . . [he deposes and says] that this jurate being one of the churchwardens of Raddington . . . did present together with the said Hill, and on the report of John Hill, Edmund Hill, and John Stockham the said Joane Cranckland that she shewed to them her privities twice in one day, And that upon the report of the said Richard Chubberie alias Hill, he did . . . present¹ the said Joane Cranckland that she made a jest that the said John Stockham could not bridle his nature at the sight thereof, And that she having a base child in her house of the age of eight years of thereabouts caused the said child to lie down and shew how a woman did lie when a man had his pleasure of her. And also that upon the report of Mr Toby Davies parson of Chipstable, she should report and say² that when she answered the matters at Wells, there was a man that took up her clothes as high as her knees.

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5.7 Kind wanton letters: Maria Thynne, c. 1606

Maria Audley, a gentlewoman, married Thomas Thynne in 1602; he inherited Longleat in Wiltshire in 1604. There was some family displeasure at their marriage. Maria's letters tease Thomas with her failure to submit to the expected role of submissive

1. Complain to officials.
2. I.e., she said.

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wife. This is a brief extract from a much longer letter, one of many discussing household arrangements in Thomas's absence, but also revealing the kind of passionate marriage that often left little traces in records.

Maria to Thomas Thynne, c. 1606. Reproduced by kind permission of the Wiltshire Record Society from Alison Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women: Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne 1575-1611*, Trowbridge, Wiltshire Record Society, vol. 38, 1982.

My best beloved Thomken, and my best little Sirrah, know that I have not, nor will not forget how you made my modest blood flush up into my bashful cheek at your first letter, thou threatened sound payment, and I sound repayment, so as when we meet, there will be pay, and repay, which will pass and repass, allgiges ultes fregnan tolles,¹ thou knowest my mind, though thou dost not understand me. Well now laying on side my high choller,² know in sober sadness that I am at Longleat, ready and unready to receive thee, and here will attend thy coming. . . .

. . . I salute thy best beloved self with the return of thine own wish in thy last letter, and so once more fare ever well, my best and sweetest Thomken, and many thousand times more than these 1000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 for thy kind wanton letters
Thine and only all thine Maria

5.8 Without an unchaste thought: Dame Sarah Cowper, 1700-1

Dame Sarah Cowper's diary records a somewhat different attitude towards married love from that of Maria Thynne. Cowper, a merchant's daughter born Sarah Holland in 1644, married the Whig MP and lawyer Sir William Cowper in 1664. She had four children before the age of 26, but by 1700, at least, the couple were barely on speaking terms, and Sarah Cowper, who described herself as a Protestant of the 'truest blue', spent many hours alone reading. Cowper's diaries, recording a combination of spiritual reflections and daily events and grievances, and her commonplace books, cover the years 1700-16. In these extracts, written in 1700 and 1701 when she was 57, she reflects on her sexual virtue and the chastity she prided herself on maintaining within marriage, with a satisfaction that was apparently not echoed by her husband.

Diary of Dame Sarah Cowper, vol 1, Hertfordshire Archives, D/EP/F29, pp. 13, 60-1.

[9 Oct. 1700] In the evening Sir William fell into a wrangling discourse wherein he compared, or rather would level me with a liar and a whore, saying, pride was a worse sin than either, and a chaste woman that over-valued herself was in greater fault. However I shall not be persuaded, but the virtuous have some reason to value themselves, and to expect esteem

1. Distorted Latin probably meaning something like 'you will frequently rise up'.
2. Pun on choler, collar, colour.

Rape
between

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from others, and I spared not to tell him, that my manner of living with him, did deserve all the praise, love and respect, that he could give me. But my comfort was if I missed of that, I had a sure promise: Do that which is good and thou shall have praise &c.

[10 Feb. 1701] Came a penny post letter without a name, the contents were to dissuade me from appearing to be a friend to the Lady Te. – for that she kept ill company as would bring her to shame and ruin. Now knowing by experience, that sometimes such as suffer the wrong, bear also the blame, the only friendship I hath shown hath been charity: when occasion hath been offered, to speak favourably of her: Many times when young women are ill used they commit indiscretions that yet may not come within the verge of a crime, and I hope that to be the worst of her case. This subject occasions me to reckon myself a mirror of chastity, even beyond the most entire Virgin. For to conceive four children without knowing what it is to have an unchaste thought or sensual pleasure and being but 26 when the last was born have ever since then remained pure – is a thing scarce to be matched by a married woman, and a reflection that without vanity may justly delight me.

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5.9 Whorish ways: Susannah Bell, 1694

Susannah Bell's story appears only briefly and faintly in the written records of early modern London. She was claimed to have been married to an alleged bigamist, Ralph Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth was sued by his later wife, Maria Seely, at the London consistory court in 1694, and in the proceedings a letter from him to Maria Seely was produced, in which he defended his previous marriages as being clandestine or unconsummated. The extract describing Susannah Bell is from this letter to Maria Seely. We know nothing more of her.

Consistory Court of London Allegations, Libels and Sentence Book, LMA, DL/C 146, fo. 531 (11 May 1694).

... now as to Susannah Bell: she knowing her infirmity ought not to have married; her infirmity is such that no man can lie with her, and because it so she has ways with women as well, as with her old companions men, which is not fit to be named but most rank whorish they are ... the said Susan belongs to a company of clippers and coiners, as she herself was telling me and relating the great benefit of it, which was one main thing, which frightened me from her. ...