The Special Issue That Shagged Me

Elisabeth Ladenson

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Volume 7, Number 3, 2001, pp. 371-376 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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Years ago, while teaching "if" clauses in French language classes, I used to give a short essay assignment that seldom failed to yield interesting results: the paper was to be titled "Si j'étais un homme" [If I were a man] or "Si j'étais une femme" [If I were a woman]. Although I never specified who was to address which topic, the students, predictably, chose to imagine being the sex they were not. Girls often approached the assignment as a forum in which to voice complaints about gender inequities (e.g., "If I were a man, I would fart and burp in public and treat everyone badly"), or, conversely, Emma Bovary–style, they imagined being the sort of men they wanted to be courted by but had apparently never encountered. (Among other things, the assignment provided an incentive to use the dictionary.) The boys, too, were sometimes prodded into romantic reverie by their grammatical task, but one recurrent response leads me to cite this pedagogical exercise in the present context. Every once in a while—it must have happened three or four times during my career as a language instructor—I would receive a variation on the following fantasy: "If I were a woman, I would never leave my room. I would spend all my time in front of the mirror, caressing my breasts."

The first time I read this response, from an ostentatiously heterosexual student who proudly displayed the insignia of his fraternity on all his clothing, I laughed. What made me laugh was partly the incongruous image his paper suggested: I could not help visualizing the boy's head, baseball cap and all, atop a voluptuous female body, as he fervently stroked his breasts before a mirror. I was amused by what I took to be an evident misapprehension on the student's part. I wanted to tell him that he had not really completed the assignment, that he had failed to imagine being a real woman but had instead conjured up a fantasy of "being a woman" in which he remained a man but had unlimited masturbatory

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access to a woman's body. Having tits isn't all roses, I wanted to tell him. I wanted to send him off to have a mammogram, make him leave his room and get hooted at on the street; I wanted him really to imagine what really being a woman might entail.

I also laughed at myself, though, for what I now realized was the absurd naïveté of my assignment. If I had thought that it would elicit not just a greater understanding of the conditional mode but also edifying self-examination from the students in terms of their collusion in an unjust gender system, here was Mr. Sigma Phi to let me know otherwise. Still, undaunted, the following semester I gave the same assignment, and when I received another fantasy along the same lines, it finally occurred to me that what was happening was more than just a smirky refusal on the part of certain male students to accede to my no doubt obvious intent to make them engage in perspective-broadening speculation.

Once I got over my amused irritation, I realized that these essays exemplified a central male fantasy about women and helped explain a phenomenon that remains somewhat underexamined: male erotic investment in lesbianism. These student papers provided something resembling a latter-day example of what Naomi Schor calls "male lesbianism à la Flaubert," which she distinguishes as "a more subtle, imaginary identification" with women from the more familiar male heterosexual fascination with lesbianism, à la *Penthouse*.

Of course, the students' papers, one might object, were not about lesbianism at all, since the boys were imagining only one woman (if that), and therefore the central fantasy was female autoeroticism (if that), not relations between women. My initial reading of the first paper, after all, was that the boy was unable to conjure up female interiority; he got stuck on the exterior, which he found exciting, and did not imagine "if I were a woman" in the way I had thought I was asking but, rather, answered the related but distinct question "if I had a woman's body (to play with)." But is this not precisely what is at stake in the male relation to lesbianism à la *Penthouse*, and perhaps à la Flaubert as well? For this very reason male fascination with lesbianism is of interest, however offensive and therefore unworthy of attention it might seem from an ideological standpoint that wishes at all costs to shake off the onerous heritage of male representations of female homoeroticism. If the central fantasy is "what if I had a woman's body to play with," it is not immediately clear why this should be a lesbian fantasy at all, since male heterosexuality in principle already involves access to women's bodies. The students in my French grammar classes may or may not have enjoyed unlimited opportunities to play with women's bodies, but Flaubert, at least (judging from his correspondence, in any case), seems to have been in a position to play hard to get.

The fantasy in question, though, is of playing with a woman's body *as a woman*. Since male heterosexuality is generally characterized as essentially phallocentric, this familiar fantasy of *female* and therefore nonphallic access to the female body seems anomalous, and more mysterious than dismissive references to inauthentic *Penthouse* representations of lesbians generally allow.

Thus the question that inspires this special issue is a convoluted variation on Freud's famous "What does a woman want?" Here the problem is, "What does a man want from women who want other women?" or, perhaps, "What does a man want from a woman that he can get only *as a woman*?" The answer, I am afraid, will not come, at least not in these pages, from the horse's mouth. Whereas Freud noted that the riddle of femininity could not be posed to women themselves, for "you are yourselves the problem,"[1] I encountered, in putting together this collection of essays, a different problem: I could not persuade any men to contribute.

Ironically, maybe even appropriately, then, this issue is characterized by a lack: it contains no essays by men on the subject of men and lesbianism. It might well be titled "Women on Men and Lesbianism." It seems germane to the task of introducing the essays that follow to trace the history of this project, which started out as a special session at the 1999 Modern Language Association convention in Chicago. When I conceived the idea of proposing the MLA panel, I particularly wanted to include at least one man, but after asking several male friends and colleagues who struck me as likely to be interested in participating, I gave up, since all were otherwise engaged. The other noteworthy aspect of organizing the panel was the variety of reactions I got when I told people the subject of the session I had proposed. I learned that the issue of men and lesbianism seemed to many people to be at once obvious and improbable, even unworthy of interest. One acquaintance, with disdainful irritation, speculated disapprovingly that the panel would attract lots of men. The implication was that men would show up for the wrong reasons, as though the panel were to be a live-action academic *Penthouse* spread. I was disconcerted by this response; I had not thought about that aspect of my project, but I decided that if the panel were not to include men, despite my best efforts, surely the audience should. As it happened, it did: the session was well attended, by a thoroughly mixed audience. I suppressed a desire to hand out questionnaires to the audience with a view toward compiling demographic material on sex, sexual orientation, and motivating interest in the subject. As a result, I cannot say how many heterosexual men had attended in hopes of witnessing some sort of intellectual mud-wrestling event (nor, certainly, do I know whether such hopes, if any, were met by our performance).

Since the panel had sparked a certain amount of interest, a special issue

on the subject was proposed. I approached a number of people who I thought might be interested in contributing papers; I was even more determined this time to include essays by men. In all, I invited six men to participate in the "Men and Lesbianism" project. I asked men falling (as far as I could tell) into the categories of gay, straight, and bisexual. All responded in similar ways: disconcertment, followed by tentative interest, followed by refusal. The interval between interest and refusal ranged from ten minutes to six months. The reasons given for refusal were less varied; all cited either insufficient time, due to other obligations, or else not having anything to say. Not until I had received the latter response a number of times did I realize (as I had with the own-breast-stroking boys in my French classes) that something was up. When academics cannot find anything to say about a subject, surely something is going on. The main reason that I could not find any men to write about men and lesbianism, it would seem, is that those working most closely to the field, that is, men working in queer studies, that is, for the most part, gay men, are also the group traditionally least inclined to take an interest in lesbianism. And straight men—themselves the problem, as it were—were not talking.

So it is up to women to tackle the subject of men and lesbianism. With the exceptions of Judith Halberstam's and my own, the essays in this issue exhibit, as did the MLA special session, a certain French bias. This is not entirely, I hasten to point out, because I teach French literature and therefore know mostly other people "in French." In fact, while trying to include men among the contributors, I also tried, with only slightly more success, to widen the disciplinary scope of the issue, but somehow it all kept coming down to the French tradition. This may well attest to weak powers of persuasion on my part, but it also, I think, has to do with the fact that most canonical representations of lesbianism come from French literature. If "the lesbian is the heroine of modernity," as Walter Benjamin asserted, it is because of Baudelaire, and Benjamin made this statement in reference to Baudelaire's lesbian poems, which are at the origin of modern representations of female homoeroticism—including, one could argue, lesbianism à la *Penthouse*.[2] As Benjamin observed of Baudelaire's lesbians, if their depiction seems contradictory (both celebratory and literally damning), it is not just because Baudelaire, florist of evil, routinely celebrates and condemns in the same gesture but, above all, because his lesbians are *not real*. Instead, for Benjamin, they are figures of modernity, much like Baudelaire's reading of Emma Bovary as a "bizarre androgyne."[3]

But the unreal, here as elsewhere, does not know its place; it tends to invade the real. One of the most notable examples of this effect, as Gretchen Schultz discusses in her essay on the Daughters of Bilitis, is that Pierre Louÿs's

late-nineteenth-century French soft-core pseudo-Hellenistic literary hoax, *Les chansons de Bilitis*, enjoyed an improbable afterlife in twentieth-century America, lending its heroine's name to this country's first lesbian organization. The other essays here are less directly concerned with the permeability of boundaries between male fantasies of lesbianism and lesbian self-representation. Schor's examination of "male lesbianism" à la Flaubert, as I have already noted, posits in nineteenth-century French male authors a specific imaginary identification with female homoeroticism that is distinct from the prurient voyeuristic model familiar from "lesbian" scenes in heterosexual pornography. Both Schor and Brigitte Mahuzier, in her essay on Rodin's store of Sapphic images, which she compares to Bluebeard's secret chamber, approach their subjects in the context of the standard appropriative male relationship to lesbianism. However, both argue that the man in question—Flaubert for Schor, Rodin for Mahuzier—escapes a purely voyeuristic relationship to female homoeroticism by identifying with the lesbian as subject rather than object. (Since I have already proposed the alternative title "Women on Men and Lesbianism," I may as well take the further step of speculating that these two essays suggest an underlying female fantasy of male lesbianism, but that is for another special issue to examine.) My own piece on Henry Miller's and Ian Fleming's representations of scarily alluring and repellent lesbians is meant to be a general meditation on the parameters of male fantasies of lesbianism in the popular (male) imagination. Finally, Halberstam's essay takes up the issue of men and lesbianism from the perspective of lesbian masculinity; it reads the figure of the drag king in the context of representations of male masculinity in the *Austin Powers* films and *The Full Monty*.

These essays approach the subject of men and lesbianism from very different angles; I hope that, separately and collectively, they demonstrate the worthiness of tackling a subject that has been reviled by some and celebrated, in a rather questionable manner, by others (Howard Stern comes to mind as having provided a spectacular example of the sort of male enthusiasm about lesbianism that tends to discourage inquiry). As images of lesbianism proliferate in our culture, it is important for us to track the legacies of male representations of lesbianism and of representations of lesbian masculinity that underly our own self-fashionings.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1965), 100.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 90. Translation slightly modified.
3. Charles Baudelaire, "*Madame Bovary*," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, vol. 2 (Paris: Pléiade, 1976), 81.