

# Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies

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Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 9

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12-12-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Santor, Emily Beth (2016) "Sodomy: Defining Femininity and Masculinity," *Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/relics/vol2/iss1/9>

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Sodomy: Defining Femininity and Masculinity

Emily Santor

Since its evolution, heteronormative Western culture has been greatly concerned with defining femininity and masculinity. This concern is so strong that the practice of sodomy has been used to aid in this quest for binary clarity. However, using sodomy as a road marker for perceived sexuality does not account for the wide range of human sexual experience, and the negative social justice implications incurred with using sodomy to denote femininity and masculinity are too great to ignore. Sexual practice is too unambiguous, too creative, and too subjective to be thought of or discussed in these reductive terms. The categories of hetero- and homo- sexuality and the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity are false cultural constructs that negate themselves even as they are enforced. Through sodomy, it becomes clear how seemingly heteronormative practices inadvertently dismantle the rationalizations they have built around disregarding and denigrating apparent homosexuality.

Sodomy has been used to distinguish femininity from masculinity through the positionality of the sexual act. Jonathan Goldberg, in his book *Sodometries*, describes how some individuals view “sodomites [as] men who behave like women.”<sup>1</sup> The association of homosexuality with effeminacy and the use of such a comparison to demean homosexual men reveals some of ingrained misogynistic attitudes that can be found in patriarchal, heteronormative societies. Generally, “in contemporary Western culture, the prevailing and predictable sexual narrative depends upon the man having the role of a penetrator, dominating women.”<sup>2</sup> In this paradigm, women - the ‘feminine’ party – exist only on the submissive receiving end of penetrative sexual acts. Anal sex, in which men are on the receiving end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Goldberg, p. 202

<sup>2</sup> Burke, p. 134

act, upsets the binary categories implied (and supposedly enforced) by this masculine-top/feminine-bottom stereotype of sexuality. These assumed dominance/submission dynamics have been used to justify associating homosexual men participating in sodomy with the ‘feminine/submissive’ persona or role. As crudely put by queer theorist Guy Hocquenghem, “[s]een from behind we are all women.”<sup>3</sup>

This trend – seeing homosexual men as feminine because they allow themselves to be penetrated/-dominated – has caused plenty of social injustices over the years. The upsetting of expected sexual gender roles in the anal sex act caused the dominant social hierarchy to target the act itself. For example, sodomy laws, which made anal sex acts illegal, were created explicitly to “criminaliz[e] homosexual activity.”<sup>4</sup> By doing so, these laws “effectively criminalized all lesbians and gay men.”<sup>5</sup> With these laws in place, those against gay rights were able to use the argument that homosexuals were criminals to justify their political agenda. As one scholar summarizes, “sodomy laws were an ideological cornerstone in the legal edifice of antigay discrimination.”<sup>6</sup> These laws represented more than strong opinions about gay sexuality; they rigidly reinforced the idea that homosexuals were ‘others’, and therefore unwelcome in society. One major logical flaw of this legal discrimination argument is that sodomy laws “also prohibited oral or anal sex between...married as well as unmarried [heterosexual] couples.”<sup>7</sup> If homosexual couples were being legally punished for participating in sodomy, then, under the law, so should all citizens participating in similar sex acts. This obvious discrepancy between the rights of homosexual and heterosexual individuals is a blatant example of how sodomy’s

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 133

<sup>4</sup> Chauncey, p. 509

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 510

conception and application – as well as what the act of sodomy suggests about a person - have been employed to sustain the systemized oppression of homosexual individuals.

In addition to being socially unjust, using the practice of sodomy to define femininity and masculinity frankly does not stand up under logical scrutiny. In fact, the ideas of masculinity and femininity themselves cannot truly be used as accurate categories to describe men and women, respectively. Masculine homosexual men and feminine homosexual men exist in equal measure regardless of whether they choose to be ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ in a particular sex act. Some heterosexual men also enjoy receiving anal sex – a practice known as ‘pegging’. For example, one woman noted that her “dear husband is 100% man throughout, but he loves when [she] peg[s] him.”<sup>8</sup> In this example, this heterosexual couple tries to re-affirm hetero-norms but unintentionally defies them at the same time. While this woman attests that her husband falls on the masculine end of the spectrum, he also enjoys participating in an act that, as previously discussed, has been employed to justify labelling homosexual men as effeminate. Just as men – homosexual and heterosexual alike – can be masculine or feminine, women too can present with more masculine or feminine personalities independent of their preferred sexual practices. In these sexual practices, women can take on the dominant position in many different sexual situations, anal-related or otherwise. For instance, there are heterosexual acts involving women being penetrated who are simultaneously in the dominant position (e.g. sex positions colloquially known as ‘cowgirl’, ‘reverse cowgirl’, or ‘reverse missionary’, to name a few). Taking into account the unlimited range of sexual practice and experimentation, the carefully drawn lines pairing femininity and submissiveness innately with being the receiving party sexually are fragile and easily crossed.

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<sup>8</sup> Burke, p. 145

The infinite possibility of sexual interactions between feminine/masculine - hetero/homosexual men and women and the subjectivity of how an individual perceives their part in these acts renders the association of sodomy with femininity completely useless. Sexual activity does not determine whether one is a 'manly' man or not, and neither does it have any bearing on the effeminacy or lack thereof in homosexual men. In essence, ascribing gender roles based on sexual activity is a futile practice that, for the sake of social justice and the search for enlightened reason, ought to be abandoned.

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