



Europe: The Enlightenment

by John D. Stanley

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An intellectual, cultural, political, and economic movement that dominated European civilization in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment is a period known for its libertinage. Beginning in 1715 in France, it spread to every corner of Europe and made an enormous impact in North America. In Western Europe, the Enlightenment died with the *ancien régime* that had promoted its tenets. In Poland, Russia, and North America, however, it survived into the nineteenth century.

Enlightenment Principles

The principles enunciated by advocates of Enlightenment thought, the *philosophes*, emphasized didacticism, empiricism, humanitarianism, and secularism, as well as a belief in Reason, and the related doctrine of the unchanging and universal character of human nature. The *philosophes'* rationalism reduced love to "the contact of two epidermises," in Nicholas Chamfort's words.

The Enlightenment rejected Christian dogma and tradition. As Friedrich Meinecke noted, "the battle between heaven and hell was replaced by the battle between reason and unreason." Moral law remained the same at all times and among all peoples: truths were as valid in London as in Leszno. The new movement provided a radically distinct framework to discuss sexuality and great liberty for individuals to act upon their desires.

Fascination with Ancient Greece

The Enlightenment looked to the Classical era of Greece and Rome as a model for contemporary life. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), the homosexual founder of modern art history, regarded ancient Greece as an Arcadia of beautiful boys where male friendship was celebrated, nudity was encouraged, and the male form admired.

This fascination with ancient Greece also became clear in the popularity of Anacreon, a homoerotic poet of ancient Greece, whose works were translated into most European languages during this period. (For example, the greatest Polish writer of the Enlightenment, Adam Naruszewicz, made the first Polish translation of Anacreon in 1770.) This fascination with antiquity was not limited to the platonic: Richard Payne Knight published a work on Priapic worship among the ancients in 1786.

Sexual Frankness

The Enlightenment encouraged an atmosphere of frankness. Thus, the eighteenth century witnessed the production of numerous pornographic publications and works of erotic art. Notably, the most famous pornographic work of the period, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1749), features graphic descriptions of both



Top: Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia may have been the most powerful homosexual politician of the Enlightenment.

Above: A bust of Admiral Pierre-André Suffren de Saint-Tropez, one of the most colorful homosexual figures of the era.

The image of the bust of Admiral Pierre-André Suffren de Saint-Tropez appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

male and female homosexuality. Sex was also introduced into other genres as well: Casanova's memoirs (written in the 1790s but only published in a complete, unexpurgated edition in 1960-62) set a new standard for openness in sexual matters.

Moreover, in the rapidly growing cities of Europe during the Enlightenment, homoerotic ideals could be acted upon. In London and Paris networks of male prostitution prospered. The 1729 anonymous work, *Hell upon Earth: or the Town in an Uproar*, described public cruising, such as occurred at Upper Moorfields in England.

Another work of the same year, *Satan's Harvest Home: Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy in England* alerted readers to a new social menace, while, in tabloid fashion, providing salacious details. Similarly, the novels of Tobias Smollett offer realistic descriptions of sodomites. In *Roderick Random* (1747), the protagonist is almost taken in by the homosexual Earl Strutwell.

In addition, transvestism had not been so common since ancient Rome. The most famous transvestite of this era was the Chevalier d'Éon (1728-1810), whose life demonstrates the instability of gender boundaries in the eighteenth century.

Lesbianism was also documented, but primarily in pornographic and anti-clerical works, such as Diderot's *La Religieuse* (1796). However, there were actual individuals who informed the stereotypes. Marie Antoinette Josèphe Françoise Saucerotte, known as "Raucourt," (1756-1815) was among the greatest actresses in the Comédie Française. She survived the Reign of Terror to settle down with a woman whom she met in prison. However, there is no truth to the rumors that Catherine II of Russia and Marie Antoinette of France were lesbians.

Legal Repression

In contrast to the increased visibility of queer behavior, the legal framework remained severely repressive, despite the Enlightenment's emphasis on legal and penal reform. In England, the penalty for buggery was death. The Swedish penal code of 1734 prescribed decapitation for sodomy. The Austrian criminal code of 1787 severely penalized "inappropriate acts" and the distribution of pornography. In France, some men were burned at the stake as a result of a homosexual prostitution scandal in 1702.

The most famous homosexual condemned to death in this era was undoubtedly Étienne-Benjamin Deschauffours (d. 1726), a pimp for men who sought sex with other men, who was burned at the stake for child abuse and murder. Given this harsh legal regime, homosexuals were open to blackmail, as may be seen in the pages of the *Annual Register* from the 1760s.

Nevertheless, there are many prominent homosexuals from this period, including Gustavus III of Sweden (1771-1792), Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia (1712-1786), Count Giuseppe Gorani (1740-1819), and Grand Duke Giovanni Gastone of Florence (1671-1737).

Among the more colorful homosexual figures was Admiral Pierre-André Suffren de Saint-Tropez (1729-1788), who commanded the French fleet in the Indian Ocean. He encouraged homosexuality aboard the ships he commanded and enjoyed matching up older and younger sailors in "marriages."

Discussions of Same-Sex Sexual Relations

Marquis Charles-Michel de Vilette (1734 - 1793), Voltaire's protégé, was alleged by satirists to be a spokesman for French homosexuals; books promoting homosexuality were (falsely) attributed to him.

Enlightenment thinkers explained homosexuality outside the framework of theology. For example, Montesquieu (1689-1755), one of the most important *philosophes*, attributed it to national custom. In

general, the Enlightenment discussions of homosexuality were a confusing *mélange* making reference to disease, nationality, and even sin.

For example, Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697, with many subsequent editions) considered homosexuality the result of clerical celibacy. In the entry "On Sodomy" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), Voltaire proclaimed adult homosexuality to be an abomination. Nonetheless in his legal critique, *Prix de la Justice et de l'Humanité* (1777), he argued for decriminalization of homosexuality.

More radical was the great Danish historian and playwright, Ludvik Holberg (1684-1754): he argued for government indifference to what he regarded as fundamentally a private matter.

As a result of the Enlightenment's discourse on sexuality, a greater openness towards sexuality became apparent and the framework for discussing homosexuality was transformed from viewing it as a sin against the divine to a greater tolerance of the human.

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John D. Stanley is an independent scholar who has lived in Toronto since 1971 and specializes in the history of Poland, particularly during the Enlightenment. He received the Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has published in such journals as *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism and Canadian Slavonic Papers*. He contributed two articles to *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to World War II* (2001).