

[Fletcher on Ferguson, 'Same-Sex Marriage in Renaissance Rome: Sexuality, Identity, and Community in Early Modern Europe'](#)

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Gary Ferguson. *Same-Sex Marriage in Renaissance Rome: Sexuality, Identity, and Community in Early Modern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 232 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5017-0237-2.

Reviewed by Catherine Fletcher (Swansea University) **Published on** H-Histsex (March, 2017)
Commissioned by Katherine Harvey

During his travels to Rome in 1581, the French essayist Michel Montaigne recorded in his journal the curious story of a same-sex marriage ceremony that had taken place in the city a few years before. A group of men had gathered at the church of San Giovanni a Porta Latina, on the fringes of Rome. It was a rather neglected place, inhabited by a Portuguese man, Marco Pinto, who may have been the church's caretaker, and some young "hermits" (also his sexual partners). San Giovanni was a site for regular meetings of a group of men who had sex with men, and they had planned for July 20, 1578, a wedding for two of their members, and a banquet. The planned marriage did not in fact take place, for one of the grooms was ill. Worse was to come: the plan was discovered and the men arrested. Eight of them would be burned at the stake.

Montaigne's account of these events was suppressed or bowdlerized by some early copyists, but was included in the 1774 edition of the *Journal de voyage*, albeit with an editor's footnote describing the affair as a "sacrilegious and monstrous impiety" (p. 13). This provides the starting point for Gary Ferguson's splendid microhistorical investigation, a piece of archival detective work that challenges prevailing views about sexual identity in early modern Europe. Alongside Montaigne, Ferguson draws on other accounts of this affair: letters from diplomats, fragments of the trial, and the records of the Confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato (who offered comfort to condemned prisoners). He identifies the eight condemned men: the Portuguese Marco, six Spaniards (Gasparo, Francisco, Girollimo, Antonio, Bernardo, and Alfonso), and Baldassare, from Venetian Albania. The surviving fragments of the trial record reveal that a further three men were arrested but avoided execution; others seem to have evaded the authorities. A newsletter to the Fugger bank reported that the original trial documents were burned, "in order to erase all memory of them" (p. 85). The precise detail of what happened on the day itself remains obscure: it was perhaps, Ferguson suggests, ludic; perhaps serious; perhaps both; and certainly collective and community-oriented.

The case is also fascinating for the intersection of this sexual community with other marginalized groups in Renaissance Rome. Most of the men we meet were migrants. Their interrogators were keen to discover whether they had sex with any Jewish youths; a newsletter sent to the Duke of Urbino referred to the Spaniards as *marranos*, a pejorative word for converted Jews. The facts of these links between communities on the city's periphery are difficult to discern, but as Ferguson points out, here is "a fleeting glimpse ... of a sexual culture cutting across religious divides and of commonality, and even an apparent solidarity, between two marginalised groups" (p. 104).

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The importance of this book lies in its two major challenges to existing historiography. As Ferguson acknowledges, in early modern Europe there was a fairly fixed pattern of sexual roles for men who had sex with men: younger and/or lower-ranking men would typically take a passive role in sexual encounters and older men the active (i.e., penetrative) one. Over time, as he got older, a man would switch from one role to the other; in ideal circumstances he would marry, and have access to a wife as sexual partner, at which point he might well stop having sex with men. However, the men in the San Giovanni group were not—or not all—bound to particular roles. Some were what is now called “versatile,” happy to switch sexual places with their partners. Moreover, writes Ferguson, “for at least some of the men, it is clear that a permanent homosexual desire was a defining characteristic, not only of their sexual life but also of their life more generally” (p. 157).

His study further challenges the periodization of queer subcultures. These are most commonly linked to the growth of urban centers in eighteenth-century Europe (the molly-houses of London or their equivalents in Paris, which Ferguson introduces as a point of comparison in part 3 of the book). Whether the label “subculture” quite fits the group of men who gathered at San Giovanni a Porta Latina is a matter for debate, but Ferguson shows convincingly that their community had some of the features of one.

These findings raise important questions for future research on the question of sexual identity in early modern Europe. First, if Ferguson is right to argue for the presence of a subculture of sorts in sixteenth-century Rome, did such subcultures exist in other European cities? What is the significance of the ethnicity of the men involved: is there anything “Iberian” about their sexual identities or behavior? How common are the examples of sexual versatility in this case study? Is Rome the exception? (Or is it Florence, on which Michael Rocke’s ground-breaking research into sex between men in Renaissance Italy was based, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* [1996], that is exceptional? The gender politics of Florence, as Montaigne himself noted, were not typical of Europe as a whole.)

For many readers, the interest of this study will lie in its resonance for modern-day campaigns around same-sex marriage, an issue that Ferguson addresses in his closing chapter. The uncertainty about the nature of the marriage planned at San Giovanni does not make this case an easy example either for proponents of the right to marry or for the critics who have raised concerns that the campaign for marriage rights often marginalizes those whose relationships do not fit the coupled model. Perhaps because of its acknowledgment of the ambiguities, however, it is compelling reading that should make scholars, students, and activists think again about the history of sexuality.

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