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### **Homosexuality in the Spanish Renaissance**

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The end of the Spanish Middle Ages is customarily dated from 1492, which to us is primarily the date of the European discovery of America by Columbus. To the contemporary Spaniard, the date had far different significance; it took some twenty years, and especially the discovery of precious metal in Mexico, for America to achieve major significance in Europe. For the Spaniard of 1492 the big event was the religious unification of Spain, through the prohibition of Judaism and the expulsion of

those that would not convert to Catholicism, and the conquest of the Muslim kingdom of Granada, the last, glorious Islamic holdout in western Europe. The prohibition of Islam, while not immediate, followed within ten years. For Spanish Jews and Muslims, of course, the big event of the time was the reverse, a catastrophe, *the* catastrophe: loss of religious freedom, with the options being religious conversion, or exile.

What is not usually recognized is the sexual component to these ostensibly religious events. According to national (Christian) myth of the time, the conquest of the country by the Muslim invaders of the eighth century—actually a speedy and mostly peaceful transition—was the consequence of the sexual depravity of its last Christian ruler, the semi-legendary king Rodrigo. The Muslims were demonized by the Christians as dissolute perverts, who religion was no more than a ruse to facilitate their sexual indulgence. Sexual pleasures made men weak, and thus the Muslims were vulnerable; male

chastity made for strong warriors. The fight to expel the non-Christian "invaders" was blessed by the Catholic God and His church. The moral strength of its warriors produced their physical strength and bravery, and the ultimate Christian victory was never in doubt, according to this mythology.

We thus had a nation—the first modern nation—in which the country's self-definition had a strong sexual undertone. According to the dominant, public ideology or myth, sexual virtue and chastity had produced the nation; lust had caused the enemy's defeat. A grateful god was rewarding Spain with new lands, and in them, miraculously, great quantities of silver and gold were there for the taking. To defend Catholicism was to defend heterosexuality was to be a patriot. The two legitimate choices were chastity and marriage for life—and the former choice was, in some sense, the most honorable one.

Hidden behind this ideology is the belief that sexuality was a matter of conscious choice. There was not a separate

class of men who were born with homosexual desires or orientation. Those who commit homosexual acts do so consciously; of free will they choose to do evil. A corollary of this is that male homosexual desire, and the potential for homosexual action, is widespread, if not universal. Just as everyone has the capacity to act correctly, everyone is subject to the attraction of sin. (Female-female sex attracted very little attention, either legal or ideological. What women did with other women was simply not very important to society. It did not threaten the established social and political order in the way that male-male sex did, distracting men from their familial obligations or rendering them militarily weak.)

Spain was surrounded by sewers of depravity. Corsairs based in North African ports captured and sold Christians to the original "fate worse than death"—to be sexual playthings for the wealthy. Italy was at least Christian, but it was also soft and degenerate. New World natives committed human sacrifice and sodomy. England had,

because of the monarch's lust, broken with the true church. (Remember that Henry VIII's first wife, whom he un-Catholicly divorced, was Catherine of Aragon.) The position of divorce in the civilization of the time was much like that of abortion today. Martin Luther not only repudiated his vow of chastity, he seduced and married a nun.

This summary of the Spanish national self-view in the sixteenth century is, of course, an oversimplification. Although almost all educated persons and many uneducated ones were familiar with it, the extent of private agreement with the public position is unknown. If, for example, there were no free speech or free press today, one might conclude that all Catholics opposed birth control, which of course is officially condemned by the Catholic establishment. Yet the proportion of Catholics who agree with this official Church position is apparently small.

The view just presented, that homosexuality is something inherently un-Christian and un-Spanish, would suggest that no homo-

sexuals and no homosexual behavior were found within Christian Spain itself: much like, let us say, the Soviet position that homosexuality was a symptom of the weakness of capitalist culture and was, therefore, non-existent in the officially purer Soviet Union. Readers of this article will not need to be convinced that this was not true, that homosexual desire, both male and female, existed in early Renaissance Spain just as it has in every other period. We will return to this shortly.

The very intensity of the condemnation of homosexuality is testimony of its attraction, an implication that was not lost on contemporaries. Unattractive activities do not need to be prohibited. The Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century was such a corrupt institution—financially, morally, and spiritually—that its opposition meant that homosexuality was, by contrast, uncorrupt, that it possessed a type of purity. In simpler terms: if the Catholic church opposed homosexuality, there must be a lot of good to be said about it. Keep in mind that Spain saw itself as the

leading Catholic country, *the* Catholic country. Ferdinand and Isabella were of course "*the* Catholic monarchs." If Spain is the most Catholic country, then it follows that homosexuality was seen, at least by some, as more attractive, more mysterious, more seductive than it was elsewhere.

It is worth suggesting that the homosexuality attributed to Spanish Muslims and Spanish Jews as well was to some degree a projection of and a creation of Christian Spain. The history has been only partially reconstructed, but in the better-documented, more recent periods, the evidence is there. Sixteenth-century Algiers, for example, is relatively well known to us. It was a place where homosexual behavior of all sorts could be practiced openly, where men and their (usually young) male lovers could circulate freely, where the ruler could have a male harem, and where homosexual sex in public was not only not condemned or punished, but applauded, according to the outraged testimony of European visitors. Yet this homosex-positive culture

was not something native to Algiers; it was overwhelmingly something brought there and maintained there by those born Christian. Ruler after ruler in Algiers were "renegades"—those who denied (*re-negar*) their religion and converted to Islam. They were former Christians who, fleeing from the police or for some other reason, moved to North Africa, converted, and set out to enjoy themselves. Furthermore, the preferred sexual partners, both male and female, were not the native Muslims, but captured and enslaved Christians. In a sense, Algiers was Europe's gay ghetto.

Even within the Iberian peninsula, prior to 1492, there is limited evidence that the same phenomenon was found. Those who wished to have the freedom to indulge in homosexuality would relocate to the Muslim kingdoms of the south. That this happened in turn reinforced the belief within Christian Spain that homosexuality was an essential, central part of Hispanomuslim culture. There was a great bonfire of Arabic manuscripts in 1500, and our knowledge of the

final period of Iberian Islam is very imperfect. Nevertheless, it may be the case that the Christian opposition to homosexuality contributed to a positive mythology of it in al-Andalus. In Sufi poetry, for example, to contemplate the beardless youth is to look upon God made flesh. Sufi poetry is a late development in Hispano-Arabic civilization.

One may wonder, then, to what extent there was any foundation to the official Catholic (Spanish) view of the dissolute sexual behavior of Jews and Muslims. What is unquestionably true is that Muslim culture lacked the Augustine and Pauline condemnation of sensual and sexual pleasures, such an inherent part of Christianity that we may not see it because of its very familiarity. (The link between sexual pleasure and monogamous marriage, for example, derives from the Christian tradition.) In contrast, in Muslim culture, prior to European influence on it in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pleasure was unquestionably good. Sexual desire was like thirst: totally natural, and meant to be

satisfied. Since male-female sex was unavoidably present in all strata of society—reproduction required it—male-male sex had (necessarily?) some association with refinement, with urban life, with the cognoscenti. Its appearance in poetry provoked no outrage. From this association it is an easy step to seeing male-male sexual activity as superior, as more enjoyable. This view remained, as in modern Christian society, restricted to a small elite.

In Sephardic culture the situation is very different. Their culture was more autonomous, set apart linguistically: non-Muslims knew Arabic, the dominant language of their culture, but non-Jews rarely knew Hebrew. It was in Muslim-ruled Spain that modern study of the (Hebrew, Old Testament) Bible began, where, for example, the two voices in Isaiah were identified. It was also where the first dictionary of Hebrew was compiled, and where the revival of Hebrew as a literary, not just religious, language began.

The scholarly, philologist rabbis who led the culture must have noticed the homo-

sexuality of Judaism's poet-king, David, and the male temple prostitution found in the Bible. In any event, in the pederastic poetry they and their contemporaries wrote, homosexuality is a more prevalent practice than Hispano-Arabic poetry suggests was the case in its culture. Homosexuality is also part of a religious and national metaphor; Israel's love for God was expressed as love for a male.

This homosexual tradition in medieval Iberian Judaism flourished when the cultural context was Hispano-Arabic. As the Hispano-Arabic territory shrank with each new century, Jews began living in northern, Christian Spain. Their favored status in society continued and was if anything enhanced; Jews were administrators, doctors, financiers, and persons on whom the king and his government usually depended. However, the pederastic poetry vanishes from view, and became part of an occult tradition.

This, then, is the background of the Spanish Renaissance. There was more toler-

ance in ports such as Valencia and Seville than in ideologically as well as geographically central Madrid; in Valencia a homosexual ghetto is documented. Yet in general, homosexuality was as strongly condemned as it has ever been anywhere. Isabel "the Catholic" closed the baths of Granada upon taking the city in 1492, not because she opposed cleanliness (though bathing was much more a Muslim than a Christian activity), but to hinder the sexual activity the baths facilitated. Executions of sodomites are documented as soon as 1494. Throughout the sixteenth century, public executions—usually burnings—were not unusual, and the danger never something one could forget. The legal (Inquisition) proceedings are one of the main sources of information about sexual behavior through early modern Spain. At the same time, this was a society without ID cards, without passports and border controls, and without communication any faster than a horse could travel. It was not hard to escape unpleasant consequences by moving to a different city, a different country, or even a different continent, and

the chances of being detected, identified, and returned to the place of origin were remote.

Those who felt drawn to homosexual sex had the following options. One was to emigrate. Emigration to North Africa has already been mentioned. Other options were to Italy, where Cervantes took refuge as a young man; by comparison with Spain, Italy was very tolerant. Even Portugal and Holland were less repressive. Many of the Jews who were forced to leave the country found a warm welcome in the eastern Mediterranean, in Ottoman territory, primarily in today's Turkey and Greece. Stories of the "dissolute" sexual behavior of New World Indians also reached Spain, and may have been a factor, in some cases, of decisions to relocate to the New World.

Another possibility which, like emigration, calls for more study is the seclusion found in monasteries and convents. It is well documented, for example, that in the early sixteenth century some who wished to continue to practice their Jewish religion, found more freedom to do so behind monas-

tery walls than anywhere else. The new, ideologically dissident religious order was the Carmelites, and the founders Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross have been symbols to sexually dissident Catholics. The former was considered, and considered herself, "mannish" even in her lifetime. In his mystical poetry, Saint John of the Cross takes the female role in union with the masculine God. Another order with the reputation, at least in some quarters, of enjoying sodomy, was the Mercedarian order, to which Tirso de Molina belonged.

Just as today, those whose work took them away from family and community supervision had opportunities to engage in behavior prohibited at home. One such group were mule-drivers—the "truck drivers" of the period. Also like today, the wealthy were of course able to arrange for privacy. Hunting expeditions were one opportunity for a select few to escape public view for days at a time. Later in the sixteenth century, gambling houses served as all-male assignation venues, and there are shadowy

reports of a network supplying young men to meet the demand from those able to pay.

With this, the rather meager evidence for actual homosexual activity is exhausted. However, the topic appears in Spanish literature in various subtle or less subtle ways. In the world of sixteenth-century pastoral and chivalric romance an atmosphere of freedom was established, and sex-variant characters, especially women in male roles, appear. Anonymous chronicles of famous homosexuals were published in the sixteenth century; these include Juan II, Álvaro de Luna, and the "Gran Capitán" Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba. Cervantes presents, through same-sex friendships, relationships with many homosexual overtones. The choice of classical authors for translation can be revealing: for example, Cristóbal de Mesa, friend of Cervantes and Tasso, translated into Spanish Virgil's *Eclogues*, the second of which is the (now) well-known story of Corydon. In drama, a wide variety of interpersonal and psychological problems were examined.

Female roles were sometimes played by boys. Female characters often used male disguise, and men in female dress are not unknown; Tirso de Molina is especially noted for the use of cross-dressing and female protagonists.

Homosexuality was also treated through the use of classical mythology. The most important, difficult, and innovative poet of seventeenth-century Spain is Góngora. In his masterpiece, the *Solitudes*, arguably the most famous poem in the Spanish language, the alienated young protagonist is described at the outset as more beautiful than Ida's epebe ("garzón"); the allusion is to Ganymede. The *Solitudes* started a furious controversy; the tormented conservative Quevedo repeatedly attacked Góngora as a sodomite and a Jew (two terms which were, by then, almost synonymous). An important follower of Góngora was Pedro Soto de Rojas, author of a lengthy poem on Adonis, of which only fragments are extant; another was the assassinated poet and courtier Villamediana, whose name a century

ago was always an allusion to homosexuality; another was the brilliant feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Hidden beneath the controversy over the poetry of Góngora is the medieval opposition between ascetic Castile and sensual, southern Andalusia. In the twentieth century the poetry of Góngora was rediscovered, and enthusiasm for him is a marker for homophile sympathies in the twentieth century.