



Molly Houses

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The term *molly* originally referred to a female prostitute, but in London in the early eighteenth century groups of men, noted for their effeminacy and sexual interest in each other, began to call themselves mollies and gather in semi-private venues called molly houses.

In addition to a handful of public cruising places in London, molly houses, which were mostly taverns or private rooms, served as important meeting places for men sexually interested in each other. These venues and the men who frequented them comprised one of the first modern homosexual subcultures. Molly houses provided mollies a space in which to act on homosexual desires and develop a sense of community.

Margaret Clap owned and ran the most notorious of these houses, which was located in Field Lane in Holborn. Sunday evenings were often its busiest night, when sometimes close to fifty customers filled her rooms. Men there often dressed in women's clothing, took on female personae, and affected effeminate mannerisms and speech.

In February 1726, Margaret Clap's molly house was raided, and more than forty people were arrested. This house and others like it had been under surveillance by agents from the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, an organization that had formed to rid London of sodomites, prostitutes, and breakers of the Sabbath. The arrests led to a series of trials, after which several of those arrested were hanged for sodomy.

At a trial in July of 1726, Samuel Stevens, the agent who had spent a number of Sunday evenings at Clap's house, described the sexual activities that took place there: "I found between 40 and 50 men making love to one another, as they called it. Sometimes they would sit in one another's laps, kissing in lewd manner and using their hands indecently. Then they would get up, dance and make curtsies, and mimic the voices of women Then they would hug, and play, and toy, and go out by couples into another room on the same floor to be married, as they called it."

Most historians agree that in this context "marrying" served as a euphemism for a sexual encounter of some sort, but the euphemism signaled a more dangerous threat to the dominant heterosexual order. As George Haggerty argues, by marrying, "these men mock[ed] the social forms of sexual relation" that they imitated and "undermine[d]" the institution that marginalized and condemned them.

At the time of the raid on Margaret Clap's house, more than twenty molly houses were known in London, many of which had been targeted and broken up by similar raids in 1726. Molly houses were generally located throughout the city north of the Thames, from the slums of Wapping to the wealthy suburbs in the west. Their emergence indicates the development of a new subculture, one that defined itself by homosexual desire, defiance of gender norms, and its working class demographic.

Even though same-sex sexual relationships are evident throughout the Renaissance in a variety of forms, the urbanization of English life in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries brought a greater number of young, single, working class men into one place and gave those with homosexual desires greater

opportunity to find each other.

This economic and social dislocation created a crisis in masculinity. According to Haggerty, "The increased social mobility and urbanization of the early years of the eighteenth century made masculinity itself the center of heightened cultural concern." This concern may help explain why mollies and the molly houses became the target of such intense persecution in 1725 and 1726.

Yet after this crackdown, the persecution waned. Mollies and other men who were caught having sex with each other were subject to similar persecution in 1699 and 1707, but the historical record from this time onward shows very few other such incidents on such a scale.

Historians of sexuality have been left to question the motives of organizations such as the Societies for the Reformation of Manners. In their mission to rid London of sodomites they obviously failed, for molly houses continued, as did public sex between men.

But Bray suggests that the persecution may not have been intended to rid London of sodomy entirely. Tolerating molly houses, but subjecting them to occasional persecution could very well have been a tool to control male sexuality. For Bray, molly houses served as a negative example of how men should behave sexually and "restricted the spread of homosexuality at the same time they secured its presence."

Ultimately, molly houses survived the attacks, laying the foundation for a new sexual identity to emerge in modern culture, helping mollies defy persecution and serve as a prototype for our contemporary homosexual identity.

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