

SEXUALITY IN HISTORY – Early Modern Period

Contents

OVERVIEW
SEXUALITY IN EARLY MODERN WESTERN EUROPE
COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA
NORTH AMERICA IN THE COLONIAL ERA
AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE
EAST ASIA: CHINA
EAST ASIA: JAPAN
SOUTH ASIA: THE MUGHAL EMPIRE
SOUTHWEST ASIA: THE OTTOMANS

OVERVIEW

No sweeping changes like a set of new religious doctrines reshaped sexuality on a global basis during the early modern period. And a number of regions largely confirmed the existing framework in dealing with sexual issues. However, in some individual regions fundamental changes occurred, some of which might ultimately have wider influence.

Exploitation and local consorts. Probably the most important overall development was the increased opportunity for sexual exploitation associated with Europe's military and commercial expansion. European traders and conquerors were mostly men, and they often took on local sexual consorts (whether or not they were married back home). This pattern developed early in places like India and some African port cities.

Latin America. The pattern became far more general in Latin America, where gender imbalance combined with power imbalance to give Spanish and Portuguese adventurers both reason and opportunity for informal liaisons. Some were probably voluntary, with women who sought advantage or developed genuine attachments, but more were forced. The result was a rapidly growing mixed-blood population and a durable pattern, in Latin America, of high rates of illegitimate births.

Christian impact. Latin American sexuality was also shaped of course by Christian missionaries, who found many faults with existing sexual patterns. Particular energy went into ending a traditional tolerance for "third sex" people, whom Europeans condemned as homosexuals. Other pressures were applied against premarital sex. Latin America emerged with something of two sexual cultures: one, concentrated in the largely European upper class, defended Christian values and attacked the real or imagined habits of ordinary people; the other, the mixed populations particularly, developed their own sexual approach.

Atlantic slavery. The final major locus of sexual exploitation involved Atlantic slavery. Within Africa, the slave trade promoted higher rate of polygamy, for 63% of the slaves exported were male. But among slaves themselves, exploitation by planters, or their offspring, was widespread. Some slaves were also used as breeders. This was yet another major category of sexual disruption in the early modern period. Whites combined exploitation with exaggerated anxieties and images of Black sexuality, portraying women as naturally wanton, men as lustful, sometimes with unusually large sexual organs: these fears would affect race relations along with the actual behaviors.

Regional developments

Western Europe. Three developments within the West (Europe but also the British colonies of North America) introduced significant change. Protestantism renounced the Catholic valuation of chastity, urging marriage and sexual pleasure within marriage. At the same time a European-style family took shape, with unusually later ages of marriage and, therefore, the need for considerable sexual restraint in early adulthood. Finally, toward the middle of the 18th century, the Western system simply broke down for some young people, as premarital sexual activity increased in what has sometimes been called the first modern sexual revolution.

China and Japan. This was not a major period of sexual change in China, though on the whole the Confucian impulse toward moderation gained greater attention. The final Qin dynasty also sought new regulations over sexuality, even trying to ban homosexuality in the 18th century, though without much effect. Actual patterns, including concubinage in the upper classes, continued much as before.

Japan was another matter. Japanese Confucianism did not highlight sexual restraint. As Japan became more urban and commercial under the Tokugawa shogunate, erotic art and theater gained ground. The use of geisha houses expanded, and while these mainly featured entertainment individual geisha might form sexual relationships with a patron. Homosexuality was widely tolerated.

Mughal India. Mughal rulers, Muslim and initially fairly tolerant, professed some shock at Hindu erotic art, and there was some destruction. On the whole, however, Mughals accommodated to traditional Indian sexuality, among other things building elaborate harems designed to provide sexual pleasure; officials kept track of the women who had proved particularly pleasing. Among ordinary people, in contrast, Muslim traditions combined with Hindu in developing an increasingly protective approach toward respectable women, expected to remain in *purdah*, confined to activities in and around the house.

The Ottomans. Ottoman rulers, similarly, largely maintained prior traditions. Earlier erotic literature in Arabic or Persian continued to circulate widely. Homosexuality was tolerated. Sultans themselves developed elaborate harems, broadly similar to those in India, taking advantage of military expansion to recruit women from various regions.

European critiques. As Europeans gained greater contact with places like India and the Middle East (and even as they often enjoyed their local consorts), they generated a growing literature lamenting the sexual decadence of Asian societies. Harems came in for particular comment, as a sign of depravity, but so did homosexuality. This was a theme – however misguided or hypocritical – that would gain growing importance as European power increased.

SEXUALITY IN EARLY MODERN WESTERN EUROPE

The early modern period, 1450-1750, did not introduce the kinds of systematic changes in approaches to sexuality that the rise and spread of the world religions had done. This is a period known primarily for changes in global relationships with the new inclusion of the Americas, for growth in trade, and for the formation of a range of new empires, both land-based and overseas. Several of these developments affected sexuality, but not in sweeping ways. Attention focuses primarily on changes in regional patterns, along with important continuities from the past.

Two developments in Western Europe did have significant implications for sexuality: the rise of Protestantism and the emergence of what has been called the distinctive “European-style family”. The relationship between these two changes was potentially somewhat uneasy. Furthermore, at the very end of period by the mid-18th century, another set of changes emerged that in many ways were particularly dramatic and unsettling.

Protestantism. Beginning with Martin Luther, Protestant reformers explicitly rejected one of the key features of Catholic sexuality: the special spiritual valuation of celibacy. Luther himself pointedly married a former nun, and ministers in all the Protestant denominations were free to marry. Monasticism was abolished in virtually all the denominations as well, in explicit recognition that denial of sexuality was unnecessary and potentially misleading. In a letter Luther indeed termed celibacy a state in which “one is prey to devouring fires and to unclean ideas.”

Luther's reading of the Bible and his own pastoral experience led him to recognize that human beings were physical creatures who must be able to provide for their bodily needs. Christians need human relationships, of which marriage is a prime example – and the relationship between man and woman must have a physical element. Sin, for Luther, was more a matter of unbelief than a set of particular behaviors. Through faith, God's love can flow from a lover to his beloved, and through faith their mutual desire is justified. Marriage, including the mutual sexual desire of the spouses, is in center of faith. As Luther again wrote to a friend: "Kiss and rekiss your wife. Let her love and be loved....A married life is a paradise, even where all else is wanting."

Anglican Protestantism similarly led to growing attention to the validity of sex in marriage and the importance of mutual sexual satisfaction. By the 17th century marriage manuals in Britain increasingly emphasized the need to provide for the sexual pleasure and general happiness of wives. This did not lead to detailed formulas – sex was still a somewhat difficult topic – but the change in tone was clear. And the same shift applied to Calvinism and the smaller sects.

Caveats. Other aspects of Protestantism, however, maintained or even heightened the regulatory impulse. Sex within marriage might be fine, but it always had a dangerous linkage to the possibility of sin; and sex outside the marital context must be fought if anything more vigorously than Catholics believed. In Calvin's Geneva, for example, a rule required an engaged couple to marry within six weeks – for otherwise the temptation to premarital sex was too strong. Adultery, homosexuality, and in principle masturbation were opposed as vigorously as ever. And Protestants promoted a general public culture that discouraged much attention to sexual expression; the somber dress of the good Protestant highlighted the general need to control display and desire. Even within the family context, the recognition of mutual pleasure was sometimes conditioned by an emphasis on the reproductive function of sexuality.

Nor did Protestants shake a lingering belief that women's sexual behavior required particular attention. European males by the late 17th century, and maybe some women too, still subscribed to the idea that women were the temptresses, requiring supervision and control.

Finally, the fact that Protestant eliminated some of the Catholic avenues for the salvation of sinners – largely doing away with confession and ritual penance, placed greater emphasis on stern enforcement of family morality. This tone, rather than the significant revision of the approach to sexuality itself, often dominates impressions of the main Protestant approach.

The European-style family. From the later Middle Ages onward, West Europeans (whether in ultimately Protestant or Catholic regions) increasingly adopted a new pattern for family formation, and potentially a very demanding one. In the European style family, marriage age came late for most ordinary people – about 27 for men, a couple of years earlier for women. Presumably, the goal was limitation of the birth rate to prevent undue burdens on family property: this is why the change particularly focused on delaying permissible sexuality for women, with their special role in fertility. Nor did the change apply particularly to the aristocratic upper class, who had long maintained a higher birth rate in any event and where women continued to marry young.

Delayed marriage – plus the fact that a significant minority, lacking property, never married at all – placed a premium on controlling the sexuality of young adults. Strictures against premarital sex were not new, but they now applied to a wider age range. Christian morality was invoked. Young people were discouraged from individualized contacts: heterosexual groups formed, allowing people to get acquainted but under some collective supervision. And parents tried to remain watchful when a couple was permitted to begin more individualized courtship. Shaming may have increased, as another form of group pressure. Outright law played a role as well: in Calvin's Geneva an unmarried couple caught having sex could be sentenced to a short jail term. Finally, in many villages a custom developed through which groups of people would gather around the house of a newlywed couple after their first night, expecting bloody sheet to be displayed to indicate that sex had occurred and that the bride had been a virgin.

In practice the regulatory system sometimes broke down. While rates of illegitimate births were fairly low – about 3% of all births, on average – they did occur (and the rate was almost certainly higher than in societies that promoted an earlier marriage age). Even more commonly engaged couples frequently defied official standards, soon before the ceremony. Rates of "pre-bridal pregnancies" increased, showing up as

births that occurred around 7 months after a marriage. And there were other outlets: Western popular culture was often bawdy, and jokes and stories about promiscuity and license may have relieved some pressure.

But the demands of the European-style family, added to conventional Christian regulatory concerns, lent a severity to European discussions of sexuality that clearly played a role in many actual sex lives – again, particularly outside marriage, but potentially within it as well – and that would also condition European responses to sexual patterns they saw, or thought they saw, in other societies.

Conception cycle. One other feature of European family behavior deserves note: a clear seasonal pattern in sexual activity. Rates of child birth increased notably in February and March, and again in the early fall; which meant that many couples had more procreative sex in May-June and again in later summer than they usually did, restraining themselves during other months. The reason? Probably, a desire to concentrate births in time periods when women's work was less important – notably, before planting season – and therefore when the disruption of child birth would be less costly. Here was another indication of how economic calculus could play against desire in the lives of ordinary people.

The First Sexual Revolution. For a growing number of people – but not all – the European sexual system began to break down toward the middle of the 18th century, in what may aptly be termed an initial modern sexual revolution. Quite simply, more young people began to have sex at an earlier age, and before marriage: the evidence was stark, a rise in the rates of illegitimate births. As one disapproving Bavarian official put it a bit later, around 1800: “both sexes are so inclined to debauchery that you can scarcely find a girl of twenty who's not a mother.” This was a shocked exaggeration, but there was a kernel of truth.

Several factors contributed to this change, which would feed into larger patterns of modern sexuality that are taken up in later chapters. New consumer goods, and particularly more colorful cotton cloth, helped feed attention to personal attraction, highly relevant to courtship or sexual contact. Rapidly rising population levels – reflecting better nutrition and some decline in traditional plagues – put pressure on land, meaning that more parents could not assure their offspring of inheritance; in turn, this gave some children less reason to defer to parental advice against early sex. At the same time, new jobs in domestic manufacturing gave some young people a certain amount of spending money without waiting for inheritance – again, a basis for new behaviors. Some young women as well as young men seem to have indulged in these new patterns willingly, seeking their own pleasures, but it is likely that dislocations reduced women's usual protections, making them more easily duped or victimized.

The change in sexual appetites and behaviors was just beginning, and it drew a sharp moral response. But this shift was the first sign that some of the old staples of the Agricultural Age were beginning to erode, that traditional standards were becoming harder to enforce. Here was a final, and unexpected, West European contribution as the early modern period drew to a close.

Study questions:

1. Why did Protestants change their views about celibacy?
2. Why does traditional Protestantism often seem particularly moralistic?
3. What was unusual about the European-style family? What were the implications for sexual behavior?
4. Why might the first sexual revolution have contradictory implications for young women?

Further reading:

Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin's Geneva, 2v. By John Witte and Roger Kingdon (William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800. By Lawrence Stone (Penguin Books, 1990).

The Household and the Making of History; a subversive view of the Western past. By Mary Hartman (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Making of the Modern Family. By Edward Shorter (Basic Books, 1975).

COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA

In terms of global sexual patterns, probably the most important overall change in the early modern period involved the growing, and often forcible, intrusion of Europeans into other parts of the world, bringing new sexual appetites and new moralism in a confusing combination. And nowhere was this more significant than in Latin America as it came increasingly under Spanish and Portuguese control.

Exploitation. A pattern of sexual exploitation began with Columbus, who, while praising certain qualities in the natives he encountered, also found them inferior in many ways – including their near-nakedness. He seized some Caribe women in the West Indies as slaves, giving one to a friend who later wrote: “I captured a very beautiful Caribe woman...when I had taken her to my cabin, she was naked, as was their custom. I was filled with my desire to take my pleasure with her. She was unwilling, and so treated me with her nails that I wished I had never begun...I then took a piece of rope and whipped her soundly...She seemed to have been brought up in a school for harlots.”

It is unclear whether Columbus exported some natives as sex slaves, but without question the use of force or disproportionate power continued on the part of European settlers for many decades. The practice was exacerbated by the fact that Spanish conquerors were predominantly male, and it would take some time for a more normal gender balance to develop. Exploitation was also encouraged by a European belief that the natives themselves were licentious. It was true that some sexual activity before marriage was accepted among some indigenous groups, as a means of deciding if a possible partner was suitable for the long term; but Europeans greatly exaggerated their claims. The common image involved a mixture of moral condescension and a tendency to eroticize indigenous women – a potent mixture. Thus a Portuguese adventurer claimed that native women readily allowed him to inspect their “private parts” while displaying no embarrassment. Obviously, some unions formed out of genuine mutual attachment, but there was no guarantee. One Spanish adventurer may have sired as many as 30 children, with a number of women, during a 7-year stay. Some Europeans boasted of their sexual conquests, like the Spanish conqueror Cortes, in Mexico, who quickly took a native mistress and became known as the “fucker” (*shingon*) with “golden balls” (*huevos d’oro*).

Illegitimacy. One result of this sexual pattern was the rapid expansion of a mixed indigenous-Spanish, or *mestizo*, population, which ultimately outnumbered any other sector. Another was a high percentage of illegitimate births, that endured well beyond the colonial period, though force was no longer necessarily involved in the coupling. Sex and marriage had a looser relationship among many Latin Americans that was true in most other cultures.

Despite efforts by missionaries and others, concerned about European behavior, outright sexual violence remained a common problem. Efforts to take rapists to court rarely succeeded, and often simply brought greater shame to the victim – a problem in many societies, to be sure.

Moral regulation. At the same time, Europeans also sought to impose their version of morality on indigenous peoples, though clearly with mixed results. The widespread native custom of tolerated “two-spirit” peoples was widely distorted as indulgence of homosexuality – described by one Spaniard as “a devilish thing”, and the practice was widely suppressed. Clothing styles were another target, and though many indigenous people did not fully adopt European dress they were pressed to cover themselves more completely. A common European belief held that native Americans had no shame, and the new overlords were eager to correct this.

Marriage habits caused great concern, ironically, given the exploitative behavior of many colonists. Conventional Catholic standards combined with the sometimes distorted beliefs about indigenous habits. Some indigenous groups had allowed women to leave their husbands fairly readily if dissatisfied for any reason, but new colonial laws sought to end this practice. The behavior of girls was carefully watched. A girl simply found in a cabin with a man, however innocently, might be punished. Missionaries’ emphasis on sin could leave a deep mark on the young, as with one woman who wept after a man had simply touched her hand, worried that she had lost her virginity.

A social/cultural gap. Ultimately, a durable divide opened up, in a highly stratified society, between the upper classes, largely of European origin, and the rest of the population. Beliefs in native licentiousness

combined with awareness of high rates of illegitimacy to create a widespread sense that lower-class sexual behavior was out of control. The fact that upper-class men continued frequently to sire illegitimate offspring did nothing to dent the bias. Recurrent moral reform efforts would dot Latin American history, with mixed results beyond reinforcing established prejudices.

Finally, in various social groups, a culture of virility developed that placed high premium on male sexual prowess – as basic element in *machismo*. Boast of sexual adventures were common, regardless of their accuracy.

Study questions:

1. Why were rates of illegitimacy so high in colonial Latin America?
2. What traditional practices elicited particular criticism from Spanish colonists?
3. What was the basis of ongoing criticism of lower-class sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Sex and Sexuality in Latin America: an interdisciplinary reader. Ed. By Daniel Balderston and Dorina Guy (New York University Press, 1997).

Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America. Ed. By Zeb Torotici (University of California Press, 2016).

Sex and Sexuality in Early America. Ed. M.D. Smith (New York University Press, 1998).

Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest. By Matthew Restall (Oxford University Press, 2003).

NORTH AMERICA IN THE COLONIAL ERA

The entry of French and British colonists into North America bore many similarities to what was happening to the south, particularly in terms of moral critique of native practices. But interbreeding was more limited in the north, in part because the indigenous populations were smaller, and while there were undoubtedly cases of sexual exploitation the longer-term legacy was limited. At the same time, along the Atlantic coast, British colonists established communities that replicated many of the patterns that had been taking shape in Western Europe, including a version of the European-style family and an intense Protestant sexual morality.

Indigenous contacts. Among some early colonists, particularly trappers and traders who moved into the interior, liaisons with native women were common. One Englishman wrote that “the English traders are seldom without an Indian female for his Bedfellow, alleging these Reasons as sufficient...First...that it preserve their Friendship with the Heathens...and this Correspondence makes them learn the Indian Tongue much the sooner.” A French missionary lamented that his colleagues who had relations with local women “all became libertines”, regarding indigenous women as fair game.

Some of these relationships were surely forced. But some indigenous leaders gave women as gifts to the intruders. Some women simply complied out of hopes for gain or from genuine attachment. But many native Americans were truly shocked by Europeans’ aggressive sexual behavior, which made European moralism seem all the more strange and inappropriate. Again, these complexities closely resembled those in Latin America, with the key difference that the numbers of Europeans and indigenous people involved was much smaller, and the demographic impact therefore far less great.

Critiques. Moral condemnations also paralleled patterns to the south. French missionaries played a leading role in attacking indigenous acceptance of a “Third Sex”, again assuming that this was simply homosexuality, and deeply wrong. Styles of dress were a problem, though in colder latitudes the issue loomed less large. Other commentators deplored what they saw as widespread premarital sex among the indigenous peoples: “a most evil custom among the savages.” Perceived differences in sexual behavior contributed to the general sense of native peoples as inferior and suspect.

In the British colonies, however, missionary interest and activity were far lower than in Latin America (or French Canada), so active efforts to interfere with indigenous customs loomed less large. In many cases,

the populations tried to avoid too much contact. Interference would become a greater issue in the 19th century, when United States and Canadian authorities took it upon themselves to impose “civilization” on native peoples through compulsory schooling and other means.

Colonial families. Along with colonial-indigenous interaction, the formation of larger communities of Europeans in the English colonies along the Atlantic coast began to import sexual values and behaviors that set the basis for a well-defined sexual culture that would generate a significant legacy for American and Canadian culture going forward. Here was where the importation of patterns established across the ocean had the most lasting impact in North America.

In the first place, the colonists assumed that the family patterns in which they had grown up continued to make sense in the new locale. The European-style family was widely reproduced, with one modification: marriage age, particularly for women, could be lowered a bit (probably to an average of about 23), simply because, with more abundant land, the need to guard against too many children was less pressing. And indeed, American families into the later 18th century had somewhat higher birth rates than their European counterparts, and the emphasis on the importance of reproduction certainly ran high – among other things because, in the new society, children’s labor was so important. Only in the later 18th century, with greater crowding along the seaboard, was this pattern reconsidered.

American Protestantism. Protestant sexual morality was the other leading import. New England Puritans, bringing over the British version of Calvinism, issued the most severe warnings about sexual morality, that would ultimately resonate well beyond their region. To be sure, Puritan severity has often been exaggerated: like Protestants generally, Puritans had no compunctions about sexual pleasure within marriage, at least in moderation and usually in association with efforts at reproduction. It is also important to note that other coastal regions, less touched by Puritanism, developed other approaches. Southern planters, mainly Anglican, felt freer to indulge in sex, at least with women below their social class – including enslaved people. The scion of one leading Virginia family thus wrote in his diary that he had abused a maid but that, after brief regret, he forgave himself.

Punishments. Puritans unquestionably established vigorous efforts to regulate sex outside of marriage, combining dire moral preachments with legal penalties – most obviously for adultery, but also premarital sex and other acts. Adulterers could be placed in stocks for public shaming, and required to wear an identifying scarlet letter for some time (A for adulterer, more commonly F for fornicator), to denote their offense. But young people were also urged to keep their impulses in check. Courting couples were closely watched, and though for convenience they might sleep together when visiting, they were supposed to remain fully clothed, with the notorious “bundling board” placed between them to assure continence.

Behaviors. Along with striking rules and penalties, the noteworthy aspect of the Puritan hold was the infrequency with which penalties had to be levied. Of course in some cases this surely reflected successful concealment; but community members kept a careful eye on each other, so in all probability the low level reflected widespread self-discipline and compliance. This, after all, was what shame was for, to prevent more than to punish. Thus imposition of the dreaded adultery letter was actually quite rare.

Few punishments were levied for homosexuality, suggesting perhaps a level of informal tolerance for discreet behavior. Bestiality was another matter. In 1677 a Massachusetts man was executed for having sex with a horse, and there were scattered other examples. On a milder note, in 1660 one Samuel Stearns of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was charged because he “had Sarah Bronson on his lap and did kiss her,” though he was later released. Overall, the big deterrent was shaming (directed particularly but not exclusively at women both before and during marriage), and it was probably effective in most cases.

Puritanism also encouraged a fairly restrained public culture, beginning with deliberately somber dress. While informal materials about sex did circulate, the overall tone was controlled.

Validity of desire. Again, however, Puritanism was open to the importance of sex and passion within marriage; the most extreme stereotypes are off the mark. They spoke of a “duty to desire”, and while this certainly included the importance of reproduction it extended to satisfaction as well. Some people in New England were actually censured by their church for having deprived their partners of sex for three months

or more. And even some of the sternest leaders could write love letters to their wives with phrases like “being filled with the joy of thy love” (John Winthrop, 1618). As in Europe in the same early modern period, the pattern – in terms both of values and behaviors – was complex.

Finally, during the late 18th century, some Americans began to participate in the same kind of sexual revolution that was occurring in Europe. In a society that was becoming more urban and commercial, some of the old controls loosened, and some young people began to indulge in sex at a somewhat earlier age, and in advance of marriage.

Study questions:

1. What were some of the common criticisms of native American sexual habits?
2. Why might indigenous women partner with European colonists?
3. What were the differences between sexual patterns in the Atlantic colonies from those in Western Europe?
4. Why could shaming prove widely effective?
5. What were the main differences, in sexual patterns, between most of North America and Latin America during the colonial period?

Further reading:

Sexual Revolution in Early America. By Richard Godbeer (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

Intimate Matters: a history of sexuality in America, 3rd ed. By John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

The Protestant Temperament: patterns of child-rearing, religious experience and the self in early America. By Philip Greven (University of Chicago Press, 1977).

AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Africa, and the millions of people seized in Africa and sent to the Americas, constituted the final major instance of European impact on sexuality during the early modern period. European religious involvement in Africa was slight at this point, involving only a few conversions in coastal towns. There was little critique of indigenous African sexual habits in the early modern period, and no direct interference with established customs. European men who did operate in the coastal towns did frequently take local lovers and sometimes sired children with them, even though in some cases they had wives back home. This was of course becoming a familiar European pattern, but the numbers involved were not large and there was no major repercussion beyond the coastal enclaves.

The slave trade did however affect marriage patterns in West Africa. And sexuality was undoubtedly one of many areas where brutal conditions deeply influenced the sexual experience of slaves themselves, while generating some complex stereotypes among the users of slaves.

Polygamy. Within Africa, the main result of the slave trade was a rapid expansion of polygamy, though this was not entirely new. At least 63% of all the slaves seized were young and male, valued for their labor potential, and given the numbers involved this created a massive gender imbalance in West Africa itself. Polygamy was a widespread response, creating family economic units that could utilize and support the excess women. The main focus was economic, but obviously there could be sexual implications as well, including a greater male need to demonstrate dominance.

Sex by force. For enslaved Africans in the Americas, and particularly women, sexual exploitation became common. White masters assumed that they had full rights over their female property. Some of the women involved might acquiesce in hopes for better treatment for themselves and their children, but outright force was common. And while attention centered on unmarried younger women, wives of slaves were occasionally coerced as well. Rape of enslaved women, sometimes in front of family members, was a means of demonstrating dominance. At least in a few cases, female slaves were also forced into prostitution to make money for their owners.

Motivations. Some male planters kept records of the number of slaves with whom they had sex, taking pride in their overall rates. Exploitation in some cases was enhanced by the familiar gender imbalance among colonial Whites. In French Louisiana, for example, young White men, unable to marry until they came into property, routinely took one or more Black mistresses, making no secret of their liaisons. Some planters explicitly organized the sexual initiation of their sons through use of enslaved women. In other cases, as with Thomas Jefferson, a White planter might take an enslaved mistress after the death of their own wife. Among many owners, enslaved women were seen as a particular source of pleasure. A common motto among Whites in colonial Brazil intoned, “White women for children, mulatto women for sex, Black women for work.”

In North America, exploitation of enslaved women was also motivated by a simple desire to expand the labor force, particularly after the effective end of the Atlantic slave trade early in the 19th century. Women were forced into frequent childbearing, with both White masters and selected enslaved men (compelled, in this case) participating essentially as breeders.

New imagery. The sexual context of Atlantic slavery gave rise to potent imagery concerning the sexuality of African Americans themselves, the product of a mixture of appetite and fear. African American women were seen as inherently lustful, or as one description held, “hot constitution’d”. They “made no scruple to prostitute themselves to the Europeans.” This imagery perversely reflected the result of coerced sex – and the contrast with the rules protecting the virtue of respectable White women -- and also the fact that, in slave auctions, women for sale were often stripped for inspection. In some cases, White women, resentful of what they saw as temptation of their husbands and sons, contributed to the critique as well.

Imagery extended to enslaved men, in complex ways. On the one hand, the fact of slavery could seem to emasculate the men involved, particularly when they could not defend their women. On the other hand, there were active fears of African American male sexuality, including stories about the exceptional size of their sexual organs. This imagery prompted characteristically violent punishments for real or imagined assaults against the purity of White women – a theme that would carry on well after slavery itself was abolished. The imagery also prompted explicit efforts at further emasculations. On some of the larger plantations in the American South, for example, young adult males were not allowed to wear trousers, given a skirt instead as a means of emphasizing their sexual inferiority.

Perceptions of those enslaved. Sexual tensions within the enslaved community ran high. Men sometimes sought to punish their wives when they had been assaulted by White “masters”; this may have been the most common reason for domestic violence within enslaved families. Many women themselves lived in fear. As Bethany Veney, an escaped slave, put it: “My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother’s emotions as she clasps her newborn children...and when that child is a girl...from her own experience she sees its almost certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slave owner.”

Disease. One other feature of the sexual results of Atlantic slavery and colonialism deserves attention: the spread of higher rates of venereal disease, readily transmitted back to Europe by sailors and military troops (where for a time it was known as the “French pox”.) The term “venereal disease” was introduced in the 16th century, as doctors, particularly in France, began to study the problem more closely. Sexually transmitted diseases were not entirely new, but from the early modern period onward they became an increasing concomitant to certain kinds of sexual activity.

Study questions:

1. What were the effects of the gender ratio among those seized as slaves – both in Africa and in the Americas?
2. What were the various motives for the sexual exploitation of enslaved women?
3. Why were there so many contradictory elements in the imagery applied to enslaved men? How might this affect men themselves?

Further reading:

The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation. By W. H. Dunaway (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Many Thousands Gone: the first two centuries of slavery in North America. By I. Berlin (Harvard University Press, 1998).

Slavery Unseen: sex, power, and violence in Brazilian history. By Lamonte Aidoo (Duke University Press, 2018).

EAST ASIA: CHINA

Major parts of Asia, though heavily involved in the trade patterns of the early modern period, were not substantially affected by global influences when it came to sexuality. This was certainly true for China, which carefully limited contacts with European traders and missionaries. Several important developments affected Chinese sexuality at this point, but they were internally generated, particularly from efforts to expand the functions of the imperial state.

Key traditions. Several characteristic sexual patterns had already been established, and simply expanded during the early modern period. This included the extensive array of concubines available for use by the emperors – to assure the production of sons as well as to provide pleasure – and, at more modest levels, for other upper-class men as well. The expansion of Chinese cities had also furthered the development of houses of pleasure, some of which provided a variety of entertainments as well as sexual services. As before, some courtesans could gain considerable prestige. The emphasis on footbinding as a feature of female beauty also continued to gain ground particularly in the cities, affecting the preparation of girls for marriage and sexual attraction.

Greater moral emphasis: chaste women. Confucian morality won growing attention in a number of ways, though the impact on actual behavior is hard to estimate. A growing literature assessed the periodic decline of imperial dynasties in sexual terms: a dynasty began to falter when the emperors themselves abandoned discipline and became increasingly licentious. The same could occur within families. This admonitory approach extended to increasing praise for “chaste” women (less attention was given to male behavior). Thousands of women were given public commendations by the state for their strict morality, through court testimonials (*jingbiao*) and even government-financed plaques and stone archways: “faithful maidens” and chaste widows gained the greatest honors. Correspondingly, attacks on widows who tried to remarry increased, for they were not remaining faithful to their husbands. Criticism of other women who failed to measure up became more intense.

Rape. The Qing dynasty attempted to refine some of the legal framework for sexuality. Definitions of rape and the evidence needed to prove it became more precise, making it in fact more difficult for women to press charges because it would require public admission of loss of virtue and because the punishments for false accusation became more severe. It was often argued that suicide was the best recourse for raped women, and the government began to cover funeral expenses and even establish plaques to commemorate the devotion to honor.

Over the span of several dynasties laws concerning same-sex male behavior were also refined, mainly to assure that liaisons would not involve violations of social boundaries or lower the status of upper-class men. There was no disapproval of same-sex activity in itself – another earlier tradition maintained.

Adjustments, not major change, describe the main features of Chinese sexuality in the early modern period. Despite the array of actual behaviors and arrangements, the rather stern Confucian tone was noteworthy, along with the various signs of gender differentiation in moral commentary. There is little question that the imperial state took more interest in sexual issues than any other premodern government.

Study questions:

1. How did Confucianism encourage commentary on sexual behaviors?
2. What were the main ways the imperial state became involved in sexual matters? What might the motives have been?

Further reading:

Sexualities in China: histories of power and pleasure. Ed. By Howard Chiang (University of Washington Press, 2018).

Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History. By Susan Mann (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

EAST ASIA: JAPAN

Historical work on sexuality in Japan usually emphasizes the extent to which Confucianism, though increasingly important in political culture and education, had less impact on sexual behavior and public culture than was the case in China. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, after 1600, some new regulatory steps were taken, but they were less sweeping than in China; and while women's behaviors drew scrutiny, the emphasis on chastity was less elaborate.

Concubines. As in China, many earlier traditions persisted. Emperors and other men in the upper classes continued to deploy a number of concubines, as elsewhere both for sexual purposes and to assure the generation of sons. The complex approach of Japanese Buddhism persisted as well, in some cases linking sexual and spiritual expression.

Theater and art. The most striking changes during the early modern period overall involved public culture, often reflecting the growth of cities. New theater forms, including Kabuki, emerged in the 16th century, frequently emphasizing bawdy scenes. Many plays were organized by former prostitutes seeking to leave the profession. Ultimately the government banned female performers, but males, sometimes portraying women, maintained many of the same themes, including representations of sexual passion and "love-suicides". From the 17th century onward, erotic art burgeoned – known as *shunga*. These woodblock prints, produced in the thousands, won a wide audience, and though they were banned by the government as obscene, in 1772, they continued to circulate underground. Here was a Japanese tradition that would persist into modern times. The presence of children in shunga art suggests a strikingly uninhibited quality in sexual culture.

Geishas. The geisha tradition became more elaborate. Here, women became skilled in various performance arts, not usually involving sexuality; their talents in music and dance, however, greatly exceeded the training of the respectable wives whose roles centered on motherhood. Some geisha would develop a sexual relationship with a male patron, but the institution overall differed considerably from outright prostitution.

Prostitution. Government measures to regulate, and tax, actual prostitution expanded. Prostitutes were confined to particular urban districts, forbidden to leave except for ceremonies when a family member died. Their activities were rigorously controlled, with little individual freedom. The official organization of Japanese prostitution was another tradition that would persist into later periods. In relevant port cities during the early modern period, prostitutes did service Chinese and European traders – resulting in the arrival of syphilis into Japan early in the 16th century. Here too, regulation intruded: specific brothels were designated for foreign use (and with higher rates established for the Europeans).

Public Baths. The tradition of public baths, often steam baths, had started earlier in Japanese history, sometimes associated with Buddhist monasteries and often aimed at medical treatments. The institution expanded in the early modern period, reflecting a degree of comfort with nudity. The Tokugawa government tried to make sure that the two sexes were separated in public bathing, but many houses set up only a board between the designated areas, which allowed considerable voyeurism.

Social divisions. Pronounced divisions opened up between the strict sexual codes applied to the samurai warrior class, as part of military discipline, and the behaviors of groups both above and below them. Samurai might be executed if caught in adultery. Here, Confucian morality was brought to bear. Among other groups, in contrast, extramarital affairs were more common, and even illegitimate children might be accepted.

Study questions:

1. What were some differences between Japanese and Chinese sexuality in the early modern period?

2. Why have foreign (particularly Western) observers often had trouble interpreting practices like the geisha houses and public baths?
3. Why and how did erotic art gain particular currency in Japan?

Further reading:

Geisha. By Liza Dalby (University of California Press, 1998).

Forbidden Art: erotic images from Japan's Edo period. By Helsinki City Art Museum (Helsinki City Art Museum, 2002).

Selling Women: prostitution, markets and the household in early modern Japan. By Amy Stanley (University of California Press, 2012).

Sex and the Floating World: erotic images in Japan, 1700-1820. By Thomas Screech (Reaktion Books, 2009).

SOUTH ASIA: THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

The Mughal period, beginning in the 16th century, introduced some new developments into Indian sexual history, though almost entirely at the upper-class level. The sexual practices of the emperors and their families drew wide attention, but ultimately the most important theme involved the interaction between the new Muslim rulers and India's established public culture.

Hindu art. Early Mughal rulers, firmly Muslim, though tolerant in most respects, were shocked by the open eroticism of some Indian art. Several major statues were defaced or destroyed. At the same time, both Hindus and Muslims largely agreed on the importance of sexual pleasure within the family, and women might use a variety of perfumes and cosmetics to make themselves attractive within the home.

Hindu erotic art continued to flourish despite some official concern, particularly in a new style of love poetry. The poet Upendra Bhnja (1670-1730) offered an ornate celebration of lovemaking. Songs in the Bengali languages celebrated lovemaking outside of marriage, and praise for beautiful women abounded. Older stories about lovemaking between gods and mortals were also revived and circulated. Paintings also reflected some of these themes. In other words, the imposition of Muslim rulers did not generate substantial change. Even for women, though limited in public interactions (true for both Muslims and Hindus), public marketplaces provided some opportunities for social contacts and flirtations: this is where the Emperor Jehangir met his great love, for whom he would ultimately build the Taj Mahal.

Same-sex linkages drew little comment, again in keeping with earlier tradition. Homoerotic art continued to flourish.

Imperial household. Mughal emperors themselves established elaborate harems with up to 5,000 women. However, most of these women were servants of various sorts or other members of the royal family. Only about 5% were sexual partners (admittedly, still a considerable number). Harems were carefully guarded by eunuchs. Doctors occasionally visited to oversee health conditions, but their contacts were scrupulously regulated. Emperors were the only males (eunuchs aside) who could freely enter a harem. Imperial sons were kept rigorously away.

Daughters of the emperor were carefully regulated in principle, destined for marriage only with other Mughals. Their portraits were painted using other women as models. On the other hand, several daughters were both talented and clever, and managed to arrange some liaisons – though lovers if caught could be punished severely. Officially, however, the image of chastity for women in the imperial family was vigorously maintained.

European comment. A growing number of European traders visited India during the period, and they were both intrigued and confused by what they saw. They characteristically exaggerated the sexuality of the emperors, failing to understand the varied duties of members of the harem. Their tales began to convince a European public of the sexual degeneracy of the subcontinent under Mughal rule, reflecting but fueling the European sense of moral superiority. Thus the Italian Niccolao Manucci wrote that

“Muslims were very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and almost their only pleasure.” Or a British observers who noted more simply, the emperor “keepeth a thousand women for his own body.”

Study questions:

1. Why did Muslim rule introduce so few changes to Indian sexual culture?
2. Why did imperial sexual practices confuse Europeans? Was their confusion historically important?
3. How and why were imperial harems so carefully guarded?

Further reading:

Sexual and Gender Representations in Mughal India. By Syed Zehra (Manak Publications, 2011).

SOUTHWEST ASIA: THE OTTOMANS

The harem. The advent of the Ottoman Empire in part of the Middle East and southeastern Europe did not introduce major changes into sexual practices in the region. Ottoman sultans maintained elaborate harems, with women from many ethnic groups as military conquests expanded into far-flung regions. Individual women in the harem, guarded of course by eunuchs (numbering several hundred in all), could develop considerable informal political influence. A major section of the Topkapi palace, in Istanbul, was set aside for the harem, housing both the women and their offspring (while young). As in India, only a small fraction of harem women serviced the sultan, others performing various service duties – often destined later to marry other members of the Ottoman elite.

Same-sex relations. Ottoman discussions of sexuality made little distinction between women and boys as potential objects of desire. The key divide was between those who penetrated and those who were penetrated, the latter seen as slightly inferior. But whether men would choose women or boys was largely a matter of personal preference, much as, as one scholar has put it, deciding between beer or wine. Nor was it assumed that an individual man would always make the same choice. The current Western distinction between homosexual and heterosexual simply did not apply. The beauty of young men was widely discussed, disapproved by only the strictest Islamic scholars. One of these conservative authorities actually lamented the fact that men who lacked a younger partner were sometimes criticized as having no taste. (The boys involved, who might range into their 20s, were usually from a lower social class, sometimes outright slaves. As in classical Greece, it was upper-class men who most widely participated in this sexual culture.)

Public culture and regulations. Various erotic poems and other literature, often composed earlier, under the Arabs, continued to circulate widely. Overall, the Ottomans maintained the Islamic emphasis on the validity and importance of sexual pleasure, along however with regulations to guard against premarital sex (for women) or adultery. Punishments for adultery may have become harsher – there are records of death by stoning; but often the guilty were simply whipped, after which efforts were made to promote family reconciliation. Women who accused their husbands of infidelity but who could not prove their case were allowed to divorce, but were not supposed to remarry.

Western critiques. As with the Mughals, by the 18th century Western visitors began to increase in number and often widely attacked what they saw as the decadence of the Empire, and particularly the sultans themselves with their harems. This theme would increase later, in the 19th century, and would

ultimately not only affect European perceptions but also prompt some internal change. It is also important to note that during the 18th century, south of the Empire, a new Wahabi sect and regime developed which held to a much stricter version of Islam and criticized both Sunni and Shi'a neighbors for their lax standards and behaviors.

Study questions:

1. How did the Ottoman approach to same-sex relationships compare with the classical Mediterranean?
2. Why did the harem attract so much attention from Western visitors?
3. What Islamic themes were particularly important in overall Ottoman sexuality?

Further reading:

Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800. By Khaled el-Rouayheb (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The Imperial Harem: women and sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire. By Leslie Pierce (Oxford University Press, 1993).