In the years since the publication of Jonathan Goldberg’s *Queering the Renaissance* (1994), a large amount of scholarship on queerness and sexuality in Renaissance literature has appeared in print or been delivered at conferences and colloquia. In this book, we seek to both reflect on and make a unique contribution to this body of scholarship. In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, one of the books that has transformed our field as scholars of Renaissance sexuality and which we cite here *pars pro toto*, Valerie Traub says that in writing her book she assumed “neither that we will find in the past a mirror image of ourselves nor that the past is so utterly alien that we will find nothing usable in its fragmentary traces” (2002: 32). To some extent, we share Traub’s aims, and we certainly admire her work, but we would question her emphasis on the category of use. The emphasis on evaluating the texts and objects of the past by their use to us now has the effect of restricting both the materials that are studied and the ways in which they can be studied. As Heather Love has recently remarked, “[t]he premium on strategic response in queer studies has meant that the painful and traumatic dimensions of … texts (and of the experience of reading them) have been minimized or disavowed” (2007: 3-4). In other words, because the implicit goal of much queer scholarship has been to serve the aims of contemporary gays and lesbians, texts that are not useful in this regard have been marginalized.

In this collection, we seek to read and respond to Renaissance texts in a way that is queer and that may well be strategic, but that is not straightforwardly so: we feel that it is up to individual readers to develop and pursue their own textual relationships, to determine their own hermeneutic strategies.

In some ways, we could say that our aim is to free queer scholarship from the tyranny of historicism and to do so from both ends. That is, we want to combat the restrictions of a historicist approach in our engagement with Renaissance materials – restrictions that show up in the by-now ritualized statements that “of course, there was no homosexuality back then” and “it is wrong to speak of sexual identity back then” – and the restrictions of a utilitarian approach to our findings. This second kind of restriction is typically expressed as some version of the question “but is it good for the gays?” One of the best responses to this
restriction comes from Ellis Hanson’s discussion of Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* (1981). Hanson argues that in Russo’s book the primary concern is to label representations of gays as positive or negative, and therefore there is “no concern for aesthetics or cinematic form, no discussion of the complexities of desire and identification, no appreciation of political nuance, no understanding of homoeroticism beyond the representation of gay characters” (1999: 7). Hanson goes on to ask, “Why valorize verisimilitude over fantasy in works of art?” (8). In producing essays that look both at sexuality in literature and at sexuality and literary texts, we have striven to rise to what we see as the implicit challenge in Hanson’s discussion. While history is important to us, we do not use it as a way of ending discussions and ruling out interpretations; we refuse to let our backward gazes be restricted either by the fetishizing of historical accuracy or the needs of contemporary gays and lesbians – needs that have in any case too often been assumed to be monolithic and easily summarized. While historical research has shown us that the past is difficult to know, queer theory has shown us that the present is equally so.

We certainly do not claim to be the first to make these arguments about historicism. They have been prevalent since the beginning of what is still quaintly called the new historicism. Indeed, some of the contributors to this volume have already made similar claims in print. For instance, in his *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon*, Graham Hammill considers sex “not simply as one aspect among many to be read, discussed, and historicized but rather as a horizon of interpretation and thinking” (2000: 1). Looking at the works of these three famous Renaissance figures, each of whom has been understood and claimed as being in some sense not only gay but even foundational for contemporary gay identity, Hammill refuses to submit his arguments to a reified notion of history. One of the most valuable insights in this complex and densely-argued book is that, as he says at its beginning, “the reduction of sex to historical information does not constitute historical interpretation” (2). As Hammill suggests, sex is typically considered to be an essentially knowable thing, certainly not unchangeable but at least susceptible to being understood at any given point. In his work, he breaks free of this attitude – which we could call “sexological positivism” – and argues that Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon were all able, to a greater or lesser extent, to think of ways of being sexual and of being embodied that exceed the social limits of what can be thought.

In *Homoerotic Space: The Poetics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*, Stephen Guy-Bray similarly argues that what we know about history should not be used to limit what we can know about literature. (The “space” of his title is a literary one.) Taking as his starting point the medieval and Renaissance legal description of sodomy as “*Illud peccatum horribile inter Christianos non nominandum*” (this horrible crime not to be named by Christians), Guy-Bray points out that the maxim can be taken to suggest that sodomy is “something that can be discussed
by people who are not Christians or even by Christians as long as they do so in Latin” (2002: 4). Thus, even the ban on the discussion of a particular topic creates both an awareness of that topic and the possibility of violating that ban. In elaborating this argument, Guy-Bray draws on the work of Michel Foucault, who writes in *The History of Sexuality* that “we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse … but … a multiplicity of discursive elements. … [D]iscourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (1980: 100-101). While Foucault is usually understood to have argued that an epistemic break separates the sexual regimes of the last 150 years or so from earlier eras, Guy-Bray reminds us that Foucault’s sense of the workings of history was more complex than that of many of his epigones.

A third example: In *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, Madhavi Menon argues forcefully against the contemporary tendency to enshrine difference as the basis for all historiography. As she writes, difference has become “not only the product of historical inquiry, but also its enabling premise. Without historical difference, there would be no history” (2008: 9). While conventional historians insist on seeing difference as the most prominent feature of our scholarly encounters with the past, nowhere has the emphasis on difference been heavier than in the field of sexuality studies. Yet Menon points out that this insistence on difference in historical perspective, which she calls “heterotemporality,” recalls the conventional insistence on difference in sexual activity. That is, the desire to see past sexualities as in some ways the same as our own, a desire that she names “homohistory,” is condemned in a way similar to same-sex desire itself. Homohistory “is described as a projection of the present onto the past,” and like homosexuality “is then coded as being narcissistic and ‘premature’” (2). In her investigation both of Shakespeare’s plays and of contemporary uses of those plays by literary critics and filmmakers alike, Menon draws attention to the things we could see and the discussions we could have with a critical practice that was not hampered by heteronormativity.

We have cited these examples in part because the three authors in question are all contributors to this volume, but as any scholar working in Renaissance sexuality is aware, there have been many challenges to heterotemporality. And these challenges have not only come from Renaissance scholars: there have been many excellent discussions of sexual historiography from scholars working in other areas, and perhaps particularly in the field of medieval studies. Our claim in this book is thus not that we are doing something entirely new. Rather, in

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collecting these essays we have sought to bring together and draw scholarly attention to a range of ongoing interventions – both methodological and chronological – in Renaissance sexuality studies. Considering literature written as early as the first half of the sixteenth century and as late as the second half of the seventeenth century we demonstrate a wider sense of the Renaissance than is normally the case. Methodologically, these essays evince different attitudes towards the archive, “theory,” and close reading itself. Yet however various the texts they discuss and the critical methods they employ, the contributors to this volume share a desire to investigate what a homohistory of Renaissance literature might look like. This book is thus simultaneously an intervention in historiography and in literary history. Building on the work of our contributors and of the many scholars whose work has influenced us – and not seeking to replace the conventional emphasis on historical difference with an emphasis on historical sameness – we collectively seek to adumbrate a literary historiography that takes both sameness and difference as themselves objects of study.

In light of this aim, our subtitle is clearly more than a simple statement of the fact that we are casting a backward gaze on Renaissance texts. Recalling Love’s point that certain attitudes and feelings are designated as unhelpful or useless in the work of queer studies – and that we should rather honour these attitudes and recognize them as valid responses to many of the texts we study – we also mean that we are “backward” in the sense of not being up to date. We will even say that we are proud to be backward, rather than people who think only of the present moment and what we presume or guess to be our needs in that moment. Unlike Love, however, we also take the “feeling backward” of her title in a sexual sense. We hope that our engagements with Renaissance texts will not only be focused on sexual questions but that these engagements may themselves be sexual as well. Our backward gaze can be compared to the look directed over the shoulder at the attractive stranger who has just passed by. We want to see the texts we discuss as both alluring and strange, rather than as objects to be placed in an easily comprehensible narrative of sexual teleology. In so likening the backward gaze of scholarship to the backward gaze of cruising, we are of course thinking of Roland Barthes, who famously insists in *The Pleasure of the Text* that both reading and writing are erotic. Speaking of his own practice as a writer, Barthes says, “I must seek out this reader (must ‘cruise’ him) without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader’s ‘person’ that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire” (1975: 4). We want our subtitle to draw attention to the possibilities afforded by this coming together of textual and sexual pleasures.

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2 On Love’s articulation of queer historical connectivity and its possible consequences for Renaissance historiography, see also Stockton (2008) and Stanivuković’s chapter in this volume.
The subtitle additionally evokes the story of Orpheus, the greatest of all poets. As is well known, when Eurydice was killed, Orpheus went to the underworld in search of her. Having moved the god of the underworld with his song, Orpheus was permitted to take Eurydice back to the world of the living on the condition that he not look back at her. Of course, he did look back at her and she died again. Here the backward gaze is the action that ruined everything. Yet Ovid’s version of Orpheus’ story does not end here. After Eurydice’s second death, Orpheus introduced the love of boys into Thrace, for which the Thracian women, apparently uninterested in sexual innovation, tore him to pieces. His severed head and his lyre float down the Hebrus:

\[ \text{medio dum labitur amne,} \\
\text{flebile nescioquid queritur lyra, flebile lingua} \\
\text{murmurat exanimis, respondet flebile ripae.} \\
\text{iamque mare inuectae flumen populare relinquunt} \\
\text{et Methymnae potiuntur litore Lesbi.} \] (Ovid 2004: XI.51-5)

as they float in midstream the lyre produces a mournful tune, the lifeless tongue murmurs mournfully, and the banks respond mournfully. And now they are carried to the sea, they leave their native river, and reach the Lesbian shore near Methymna. (Ovid 2004: XI.51-5, our translation)

While Orpheus’ backward gaze initially appears to be a colossal blunder, it leads to a story that testifies to the ability of poetry to survive the death of the poet. What is more, the emphasis in this second part of the story is on homoeroticism: Orpheus’ looking back at Eurydice becomes his looking at the backs of boys, and this looking eventually leads him to Lesbos. The story, at least in Ovid’s recension, thus presents Sappho, the greatest of all female poets, as the successor to Orpheus; looking at boys becomes looking at girls both in terms of sexual practice and in terms of poetic subject matter, as so many of Sappho’s poems tell of the beauty of young women. Furthermore, while the body of the poet is important in this episode from the Metamorphoses, Ovid is certainly not writing a story of poetic succession presented metaphorically as sexual reproduction, as he does not suggest that Orpheus is in any sense the literal ancestor of Sappho. The connection between these two great poets of the ancient world is rather physical without being either genealogical or sexual. Finally, while the backward gaze is obviously ruinous in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is important to stress that it is not so in the story of Orpheus as a whole: indeed, the reduction of Orpheus’ story to the story of his marriage is only too typical of the blindness towards the production of queer art that was for so many years typical of literary scholarship.
The themes we have been discussing in the previous paragraph are all important to the story’s original context in the Metamorphoses. Orpheus is introduced at the very beginning of Book X directly after a story in which the seemingly insoluble dilemma of two girls in love (the story of Iphis and Ianthe) is solved by turning one of them into a boy. Then Ovid tells the story of Orpheus’ marriage, the death of Eurydice, his journey to the underworld, and his second loss of Eurydice. After telling the story of Orpheus’ turn to the love of boys and after placing him in a grove associated with homoeroticism (it is the grove in which Cyparissus, the man beloved by Apollo, was killed), Ovid has Orpheus tell the stories of Hyacinthus, Pygmalion, Myrrha, Adonis, and Atalanta. In other words, in this long speech (it occupies most of Book X) Orpheus tells stories that focus on transgressive sexuality, on people who do not conform to gender roles – the female Atalanta is a great athlete, while the male Adonis is wooed rather than wooing – and, in the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, on the relation between art and sexuality. What is most important to us in all this is that the literal backward gaze that ends the heterosexual relation becomes at once the metaphorical backward gaze that demonstrates the connection of past literature to the present (since Orpheus’ backward gaze at these narratives of transgressive sexuality provides a context for his love of boys) and the sheer variety of the forms of sexuality. In our own backward gaze at the literature of the Renaissance we claim Orpheus as our precedent and our model.

The Range of Chapters

At the start of our collection’s inaugural chapter, Will Fisher orients our gazes backward, to 1994, the year that Jonathan Goldberg’s volume of essays, Queering the Renaissance, was published. For Fisher, this collection is indeed a landmark contribution to contemporary literary studies, but he also sees it as a continuation of a queer historiographical project begun more than a century beforehand. In Fisher’s own formulation, “when the concept of the Renaissance was introduced” by nineteenth-century continental writers such as Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt and then, in Victorian England, by Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds, “it was imagined as a queer terrain.” Especially in the literary and sexological writings of Havelock Ellis, the artistry and queerness of figures like Marlowe did the ideological work of countering late nineteenth-century scientific theories that cast homosexuals as degenerated invertes, as evolutionary throwbacks. For if homosexuals of the past were in no small measure responsible for civilization’s cultural apex, then, by this logic, it would be unreasonable to criminalize and stigmatize their present-day counterparts.
As it was in 1994, Fisher suggests, the project of queering the Renaissance in Victorian England constituted a form of activism. It remains so today.

Like Fisher, Goran Stanivuković begins his contribution to this collection with a discussion of watershed publications in twentieth-century queer Renaissance historiography, especially Alan Bray’s *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* and his essay on sodomy and male friendship in *Queering the Renaissance*. But unlike Fisher, Stanivuković surveys the historiographical field since this scholarship’s publication, arguing that despite the productive influence of Bray’s work on a generation of literary historians and queer theorists, it seems an apt time to move “beyond sodomy” and its representations in Renaissance culture and literature, and in doing so to explore non-somatic forms of queer contact. Such a method, in Stanivuković’s hands, encourages conjecture over fact, possibility over certainty, as he demonstrates in a discussion of the relations among a line from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 (“Consum’d with that which it was nourish’d by”), a Latin motto (*Quod me nutrit me destruit*) found on a portrait reputed to depict Marlowe in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and Renaissance emblem literature. For Stanivuković, Shakespeare’s likely citation of Marlovian queerness in Sonnet 73 and his more often acknowledged reconfiguration of *Edward II* in *Richard II* enables scholars to theorize queerness as a literary method of intertextual allusion. This method expands the queer archive beyond examples of sodomy, as queerness is not sutured to the physical contact of (male) bodies.

In at least two ways, James M. Bromley’s contribution is a companion piece to Stanivuković’s chapter: both focus on queerness and Marlowe, and, because Bromley’s interest is the erotic practice that does not culminate in sexual penetration, it too could be regarded as moving beyond sodomy, an act defined in Renaissance legal discourse as penetrative. Whereas Stanivuković, however, moves beyond the somatic, Bromley pursues instances of erotic bodily contact in *Hero and Leander*, his particular project being to upend the privilege afforded to narrative and sexual consummation by highlighting the non-penetrative and non-ejaculative pleasures that the body’s surfaces provide characters in the poem. The episode in which the sea-god Neptune enjoys the contours of Leander’s naked body as he swims across the Hellespont to rendezvous with Hero grants readers a glimpse of an erotic pleasure not tied to, or ending in, penetration and ejaculation. In Bromley’s reading, this sequence advances an ethical non-monogamy: Neptune, ultimately, does not desire to possess Leander solely; rather, he cares for Leander in his journey even as he enjoys the surfaces of his body. As a narrative about the pleasures of non-consummation, this vignette also potentially operates as a script or model by which Marlowe’s readers might pattern their erotic lives.

In her chapter on the community of women who attend upon the goddess Diana, Jennifer Drouin likewise claims for literary representation a not
insignificant role in the erotic lives of its queer audiences. Led by the goddess of chastity, of childbirth, and, in Drouin’s analysis, of lesbianism, this “band” of chaste, but by no means sexually inactive, women constitutes, in the drama of Lyly and Shakespeare and Fletcher, “a lesbian separatist ‘public’” or taste-based association whose membership is voluntary and whose organization is political, but not officially institutionalized. For Drouin, this intertextually consistent representation of female homoeroticism could have helped Renaissance lesbians to conceptualize their own sense of erotic self and may have even enabled them to “organize … real world public[s].” In articulating these hypotheses, Drouin builds upon, and brings together, the groundbreaking work conducted at McGill University under the auspices of the MaPs project (“Making Publics, 1500-1700”) and the rich archive of female homoeroticism that had remained “invisible” for so long, in part, because so much work on Renaissance queerness in the Victorian period and then in the twentieth century, as Fisher reminds us, was focused almost exclusively on male homosociality and homosexuality. The (theoretically) “safest” space for Renaissance lesbianism, in Drouin’s estimation, was the (imagined) public of Diana’s band.

Julie Crawford returns afresh in her chapter to topics that proved immensely fruitful for a host of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship on male homosociality and homosexuality, counsel and secretarship. She does so to recover what this criticism has largely failed to recognize: the secretarial service that women performed for other women. Combining readings of Shakespeare’s plays (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Othello, The Winter’s Tale, and Twelfth Night) and Lady Mary Wroth’s two-part prose romance, the Urania, with archival evidence of women sharing beds and secrets with one other – of women writing letters, reading books, and serving as faithful, quasi-privy-councilors for each other – Crawford illuminates “the erotics and the politics of female same-sex ‘knowledge transactions’” in Renaissance culture and literature, as well as the powerful critique of male tyranny that these consiliary transactions articulated. Like Drouin, Crawford regards female intimacy as a form of political dissent, but Crawford uniquely comprehends this critique taking shape in the heart of public life at court, between a pair of women sharing beds, counsel, and secrets.

Focusing on George Cavendish’s mid sixteenth-century prose account The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey, Laurie Shannon approaches the matters of service and homosociality in Tudor government from the vantage of the male public figure’s material spectability – his measureless supply of household “stuff” and his flock of “tall” supernumeraries. Her particular interest is the insight Cavendish’s biography affords into an economy of service – one which also included Wolsey, who, although enveloped by his own retinue of male supernumeraries, chiefly desired, according to Cavendish, to serve the pleasures of his monarch – that pertained in the period before the Tudor queens ascended
the throne. For Shannon, the salient features of this supernumari
tist economy are its desire to consume more “things” (male bodies, household goods, and even
animals) and its treatment of these “things,” even Wolsey himself, as entirely fungible once their usefulness has been exhausted. In the late-Elizabethan
text, as Shannon suggests in a brief discussion of Thomas Deloney’s *Jack of Newberry*, such infinite plentitude signals a nostalgia for an Henrician golden
world of insatiable appetite and limitless “stuff.”

Vin Nardizzi likewise concentrates on the representation of an historical public figure, Hal in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*, and specifically on the depiction of the prince’s erotic life in these plays. For Nardizzi, of particular interest is the language consistently employed to imagine the heir apparent/monarch’s erotic and political “minglings,” first with Falstaff and then later with the French princess Catherine: the idiom of plant grafting. Grafting works best, Nardizzi discovers in the prescriptive literature on this horticultural technique, when the stock and the scion of plants exhibiting some measurable difference (but not too much difference) are joined or “married” together. Because the prince never has an exact equal in the realm whom he can wed or with whom he can associate as a friend, the plays of the *Henriad* present the princely scion’s minglings with figures of grafting, establishing, Nardizzi contends, a structural equivalence between his socially transgressive graft with Falstaff and his dynastic union with Catherine. Although differentiated by their capacity to produce genealogical fruit, both instances of grafting nonetheless cast the prince as a sodomitical mixer.

Writing on Marvell’s “Ametas and Thestyris Making Hay-Ropes” and “The Definition of Love,” Stephen Guy-Bray elaborates on the interplay between difference and sameness that Nardizzi attends to in the prescriptive literature on Renaissance grafting. For Guy-Bray, the prevailing sexual taxonomy since the late nineteenth century, based as it is on whether our sexual partner is of a different sex, proves increasingly inadequate for describing sexuality in our own cultural moment as well as in the Renaissance. Indeed, Guy-Bray suggests that queer historiography should pursue the task of detailing the role of “different kinds of difference” in the articulation and experience of sexuality, then and now. Guy-Bray’s contribution to this line of inquiry concerns the figure of the “couple,” the unit that is one thing and that is also made up of two different things. Developing Slavoj Žižek’s sense of the *parallax*, or the “gap which separates the One from itself,” in the context of Marvell’s mixed- and same-sex couples, Guy-Bray shows how these poems meditate on the complex relation between difference and sameness at the level of both form and content, at the level of the poetic couplet and the erotic couple. In Guy-Bray’s analysis, form and content thus prove as indistinguishable as do difference and sameness.

Graham Hammill also explores figurations of the couple in mid seventeenth-century poetry. However, the couples that he studies are comprised of women—
Katherine Philips with Rosania and then Lucasia, both of whom belong to Philips’s literary coterie, the Society of Friendship – and they orient the collection’s gaze back to a matter central to Crawford’s and Drouin’s chapters, female association. For Hammill, Philips’s poems about her friendly relations with these women participate in mid-century debates about the role of private and public interest in the establishment of the state: “How, [Philips] asks us to consider, does censoring society emerge through affective friendship? And how do sovereignty and the art of government offer models of passion and embodiment by which to understand and locate affective friendship?” In pursuing these questions, Hammill first examines Philips’s Rosania poems, which present the friend as a tyrannical sovereign, and then her Lucasia poems, which conjure a form of society founded on principles of free choice, self-governance, and the management of the senses. The politics of Philip’s verse, Hammill contends, merit for her a place in the history of sexuality, for in them she affords “a unique vision of erotic interest” that “deepen and revise the terms and logics of mid-seventeenth-century political thought.” Hammill thus demonstrates how writing a history of Renaissance sexuality requires sensitivity to the form and content of political models.

Will Stockton extends Guy-Bray’s and Hammill’s endeavors to theorize sexuality and the couple in the context of seventeenth-century literature. Yet whereas Guy-Bray focuses on poetic form and content in Marvell and Hammill attends to political forms in Philips, Stockton employs a critical application of psychoanalysis, especially Lacan’s sense of the “sexual relation,” to Adam and Eve in Milton’s Paradise Lost. For Stockton, the first couple’s sexual relation, the capacity of its members to find satisfaction in the other, is doomed to failure from the start. Adam asks God to grant him a male fellow, a “Steve” rather than an Eve; for her part, Eve desires her reflection in the lake. More exactly, in Stockton’s analysis, both Adam and Eve wish for a relation that Lacan might dub “soullove,” a “love ‘beyond sex’ … a love for the soul,” for neither partner in this couple expressly wants a sexual relation with a sexed body. Instead, both desire their un-gendered images. In making this claim, Stockton not only contributes to the scholarly revaluation of prelapsarian affect and desire in Paradise Lost, but also significantly revises the perception of the Lacanian sexual relation as a concept founded on a heteronormativity and sexual difference. In Stockton’s hands, Lacan helps scholars re-read Milton, and Milton re-read Lacan.

In the Afterword to this collection, Madhavi Menon issues a challenge to scholars writing about queer Renaissance historiography: to imagine themselves as queer theorists whose scholarship on “queer theory before the nineteenth century” can and should be read by colleagues specializing in other fields. Each of this collection’s contributors, we hope, has taken up this challenge, in his or her own uniquely queer way.
References