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Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities

Jonathan Goldberg

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This book is about representations of sodomy. While most of the texts it considers are literary-works by Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser, among others-it is framed by political considerations, notably the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Bowers v. Hardwick that denied any constitutional act to private consensual acts that the court termed 'homosexual sodomy' and the rhetoric attaching sodomy to Saddam Hussein in the initial U.S. war in Iraq.The book takes as axiomatic Foucault's description of sodomy as 'that utterly confused category.' Without collapsing questions of historical difference, it works to articulate relations between the early modern period and our own, between a time before the homo/heterosexual divide and the modern regimes that assume it. In this book, sodometries (a Renaissance word for 'sodomy' chosen for its nonce-word suggestiveness) are sites of complications around definitions of sex and gender. Because 'sodomy' is not a term capable of singular definition, representations of sodomy are never direct. Sodomy exists only relationally.Three social domains for textual production are explored in this book: the sixteenth-century English court as the location of high literariness; the theater, especially as a site for controversy around cross-dressing; the New World as the place where the slaughter of native populations (and, in New England, of Englishmen as well) was carried out in the name of ridding the hemisphere of sodomites. These lethal impulses are read as foundational for a U.S. imaginary still operative in many powerful quarters.The analyses of literary texts engage the most advanced work in early modern literary criticism (that done by feminist and New Historicist critics) and proposes a queer perspective that necessarily complicates and enriches such inquiries. Besides offering detailed readings of literary texts not often read in terms of the history of sexuality (Shakespeare's history plays, for example), the book also examines narratives of the conquest and colonization of the Americas.

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