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“Among our own selves”:

Molly Houses and the Formation of Georgian England’s Queer Community

ABSTRACT: *This article focuses on the role of molly houses in the creation of an urban queer community in eighteenth-century London. “Molly house” was a term used in Georgian England to refer to taverns, coffeehouses, and inns used as meeting places by queer men. At a time when homosexual contact between men was punishable by death, molly houses provided safe spaces for queer men to congregate and express themselves openly. Using Old Bailey trial records, prisoner testimonies, and eighteenth-century accounts of molly houses, this article emphasizes the formative role these spaces played in the development of England’s queer community.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; British history; England; London; eighteenth century; molly house; Margaret Clap; identity; homosexuality; queer history*

Introduction

On a cold Sunday night in February 1726, a home in the London neighborhood of Holborn was raided. Forty men, several dressed as women, were arrested and hauled away to Newgate Prison. The home was owned by Margaret Clap, better known as “Mother Clap,” and had been staked out by London police and social reformers for well over a year. Several months earlier, in November 1725, the reform-minded constable Samuel Stevens had opened the door to this same private home and had been shocked by the sight of men dancing, carousing, kissing, and making love, not with “loose women” or Holborn’s local prostitutes, but with one another. Stevens described the spectacle inside the home as follows:

I found between 40 and 50 Men making Love to one another, as they call’d it. Sometimes they would sit on one another’s Laps, kissing in a lewd Manner, and using their Hands indecently. Then they would get up, Dance and make Curtsies, and mimic the voices of Women...Then they’d hug, and play, and toy, and go out by Couples into another Room on the same Floor, to be marry’d, as they call’d it.¹

The raid on Mother Clap’s home would set London newspapers ablaze with tales of men in drag, dancing and speaking effeminately, and engaging in sodomy and other profanities. While none of the men were “caught in the act,” so to speak, dozens were arrested and tried for attempted sodomy and gross indecency; several were fined, imprisoned, and pilloried. Three men were hanged at Tyburn Gallows, west of Newgate Prison. Mother Clap herself was fined and pilloried before disappearing from the historical record.²

Mother Clap owned and operated a “molly house,” an establishment that catered to the social and sexual needs of London’s eighteenth-century gay

¹ Samuel Stevens, “Testimony at the Trial of Thomas Wright, April 1726,” in Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London: GMP Books, 1992), 55.

² Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 66.

subculture. Most molly houses were a social club, brothel, and dancehall rolled into one; queer men gathered clandestinely to drink, socialize, and "be marry'd," a common euphemism among mollies for sexual intercourse.³ Prior to the eighteenth century, one could hardly speak of a "gay community" in England; that is not to say that gay men did not congregate before the eighteenth century, but material evidence and archival records of a definitive subculture of gay men did not emerge until the first few decades of the eighteenth century.⁴ The 1726 raid on Mother Clap's molly house brings to light the oppressive circumstances under which gay men gathered in the eighteenth century. Reforming societies, a draconian criminal code, and long-held social discrimination toward homosexual men and gender non-conforming individuals created an atmosphere of violence and suspicion that dominated the lives of England's queer community, necessitating a place to meet secretly and safely. Molly clubs, "with their rituals, mimicry, and satire" filled this role as a safe space, a "home" for England's urban gay community.⁵ In the eighteenth century, queer men gathered in molly houses for freedom of sexuality and gender expression, safety from social and legal violence, and to form a close-knit community through rituals and traditions that allowed them to both partake in and satirize heterosexual life.

Following a historiographical overview of the works of scholars of queer history in the Georgian era, this article explores three themes that assert the centrality of molly houses to the creation of an eighteenth-century queer subculture, namely, privacy, safety, and community. This article refers to the patrons of molly houses as "mollies," the term they used to describe themselves. "Molly" is thought to originate as a pet form of the name "Mary," or from "moll," a slang term for London's prostitutes.⁶ I use the term "queer," rather than "gay," to refer to the "men" who frequented molly houses, as I believe "queer" better encapsulates the varied sexualities and gender identities of the molly community. The use of the word "men" to describe *every* molly must also be taken with a grain of salt; while most mollies appeared to identify as men, even when dressed in drag, the mollies' use of "maiden names" and their variety of gender and sexual expressions make the presence of transgender and gender non-conforming mollies more likely than not.⁷

³ Samuel Stevens, "Testimony at the Trial of Thomas Wright, April 1726," 55.

⁴ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 32–52.

⁵ Annie Harrison, "[A] place to take off the mask': Georgian Molly Houses as Homes" (unpublished manuscript, 2018), 15, [online](#).

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "molly, n. 1;" Rictor Norton, "Homosexuality," in *The Georgian Underworld: A Study of Criminal Subcultures in Eighteenth-Century England* (self-published 2012), [online](#).

⁷ Trial of Thomas Gordon, July 5, 1732, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

I. Historiography

Difficulties arise when studying queer and gay identities across history. Modern scholars of queer history have relied almost entirely upon court records and trial testimonies to reconstruct a narrative of an era of queer life that was often clandestine, repressed, and unwritten. In large part, to study queer history is to study "archival silence."⁸ In *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, historian Marissa J. Fuentes utilizes a methodology that seeks to recreate the lives of enslaved women in colonial Barbados despite a dearth of archival and material records. By studying the perpetuation of violence through archival silence, Fuentes seeks to "stretch archival fragments by reading *along the bias grain* to eke out extinguished and invisible but no less historically important lives."⁹ Fuentes operates "from the premise that history is a production as much as an accounting of the past, and that our ability to recount has much to do with the conditions under which our subjects lived."¹⁰ Studying queer history requires a similar methodology, as the same archival silence that renders invisible the lives of the enslaved also clouds the lives of homosexual, gender non-conforming, and queer individuals.

Trial records and court records make up the bulk of what is known about England's eighteenth-century queer community. London's Central Criminal Court, better known as the Old Bailey, has digitized its collection of court proceedings dating from 1674 to 1913, thereby providing historians with a valuable window into the legal system of several past centuries. Rictor Norton, perhaps the foremost expert in the study of molly houses and the eighteenth-century homosexual subculture, extolls the value of the Old Bailey's court and trial records as providing ample evidence of a "collective gay identity in the 'molly houses' of eighteenth-century London."¹¹ Norton also describes the need to modernize and update queer studies, critiquing "the constructionist model of homosexuality" espoused by the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, who claimed "that the concept of sexual 'orientation' was invented in the late nineteenth century, mainly through medical discourse."¹² Norton instead favors an essentialist model of queer history, which advocates that the "'essence' or core of homosexual desire is innate, congenital, constitutional, stable, and fixed

⁸ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 146.

⁹ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 7.

¹⁰ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 12.

¹¹ Rictor Norton, "Recovering Gay History from the Old Bailey," *The London Journal* 30, no. 1 (2005): 39-54.

¹² Michel Foucault, paraphrased in Rictor Norton, "F-ck Foucault: How Eighteenth-Century Homosexual History Validates the Essentialist Model," presentation (expanded version), May 27, UCLA Mellon Sawyer Seminar "Homosexualities: From Antiquity to the Present," [online](#).

rather than fluid."¹³ To this end, Norton's research into the eighteenth-century homosexual subculture supports essentialist views of queerness by proving that queer communities and identities existed long before the codification of the modern term "homosexual."¹⁴

Masculinity and eighteenth-century conceptions of "manhood" are critical to understanding why molly houses at once disgusted, scared, and intrigued British society. Molly house gatherings – with their cross-dressing and bawdy behavior – reflected the heights of Georgian sexuality and decadence. These parties also posed a threat to British ideals of manhood and social order. Historians Michael Roper and John Tosh have theorized that historical concepts of masculinity have "always been defined in relation to 'the other';" in Georgian London, the presence of numerous private, domestic spaces where "sodomitical practices" were encouraged threatened the social stability of the Georgian home.¹⁵ Heteronormativity was more than just the statistical and societal norm; it was the bedrock of the British social order. In their collection *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, historians G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter argue that one should not study the eighteenth century as an "age of erotic pleasure" but as "a new era of sexual anxiety."¹⁶ The theme of "sexual anxiety" adds nuance to the persecution of homosexuals in the Georgian era, as the respective behaviors were not just considered an affront to traditional notions of masculinity and social stability, but were also a manifestation of the era as a period of sexual re-evaluation. I use the word "re-evaluation" as opposed to "revolution," since, as Rousseau's and Porter's collection reveals, the eighteenth century was a period of *both* sexual liberation and repression.

Historical research into Georgian domestic life is also relevant to understanding the appeal of molly houses to queer men. Molly houses were often private, domestic spaces where gay men and gender non-conforming individuals could express themselves authentically without social rebuke or legal reprisal. Like Norton, Annie Harrison uses several examples of mollies living at Mother Clap's to suggest that many queer men "felt comfortable enough in that environment to make it their place of residence as well as their place of entertainment."¹⁷ Scholar of Georgian domestic history Amanda Vickery reinforces the importance of the home as a reflection of social and personal identity that provided a safe space away from the watchful eyes of society. In *Behind Closed*

¹³ Norton, "F-ck Foucault," [online](#).

¹⁴ Norton, "F-ck Foucault," [online](#).

¹⁵ Michael Roper and John Tosh, "Historians and the Politics of Masculinity," in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991), 1.

¹⁶ G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 1-16.

¹⁷ Harrison, "[A] place to take off the mask," 14-15.

Doors: At Home in Georgian England, Vickery discusses contemporary perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and domesticity, as well as the role that fashion, art, and consumer goods played in the formation of culture. Vickery argues that gentlemen's social clubs, prominent "theatres of masculine performance," were vital in the creation of British male identity.¹⁸ In the Georgian social landscape, molly houses fashioned a community for queer men by meeting many of the same social needs that gentlemen's clubs met for heterosexual men.

The most relevant historiographical discussion this article touches upon pertains to the formation of an English gay subculture in the eighteenth century, a theory pioneered in the 1990s by historians like Randolph Trumbach and Rictor Norton.¹⁹ In his seminal work, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700–1830*, Norton lists five characteristics of a subculture:

- (1) social gatherings attended exclusively by members sharing the "significant factor;"
- (2) a network of communication between members which is not generally recognized by the larger society;
- (3) specialized vocabulary or slang, used to reinforce a sense of membership in the group or establish contact secretly;
- (4) self-identification with other members in the group, reinforced by common patterns of behavior which distinguish the members from society at large; and
- (5) a self-protective community of shared sympathy caused by being ostracized by society for being "different."²⁰

As Norton notes, England's eighteenth-century queer community meets each and every one of these requirements. The unique slang, or "cant," of the mollies is of particular interest to historians studying the formation of a gay subculture. Jes Battis describes queer slang in the eighteenth century as originating from the lexicon of a "shared vocabulary among thieves, prostitutes, and mollies," noting that these groups "often ran in the same circles;" thus, molly slang provided a secret, shared language for queer men in the eighteenth century to both speak privately and reinforce community ties.²¹ Historians have also focused on the rituals and traditions of the mollies (such as "molly-marriages," "mock childbirth," and "maiden names"), which satirized heterosexual norms and life milestones while also allowing queer men to participate in heterosexual life.²²

¹⁸ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 52.

¹⁹ Amanda Bailey and Randolph Trumbach, "Welcome to the Molly-House: An Interview with Randolph Trumbach: The Gay Male Subculture of Eighteenth-Century London," *Cabinet*, no. 8 (2002), [online](#).

²⁰ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 9–10.

²¹ Jes Battis, "Molly Canons: The Role of Slang and Text in the Formation of Queer Eighteenth-Century Culture," *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36 (2017): 131.

²² Harrison, "[A] place to take off the mask; Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*; Norton, "Recovering Gay History from the Old Bailey."

II. Freedom of Sexual and Gender Expression

The first purpose of molly houses was to provide safe, private spaces for sexual freedom and gender expression. Molly houses attracted queer men with the promise of privacy, intimacy, and sex, as well as the freedom to express their gender and sexuality in ways forbidden by Georgian society. Molly houses, with the freedom and privacy they provided for sex, contributed to the rise of an urbanized queer subculture by fostering a network of intimate connections between members of these clubs, as well as by providing gay hustlers and sex workers with a safe location to ply their trade. Historians have struggled with the extent to which molly houses functioned as brothels; while Mother Clap's establishment was apparently not used as a brothel, many mollies were known to work in the sex trade.²³ "Cruising," far from being a modern feature of gay sexuality, was rampant in eighteenth-century urban centers like London; theaters and public latrines were common places for cruising.²⁴ Cruising London streets, latrines, or taverns for sex would have been far from community building; molly houses, by contrast, provided pseudo-domestic spaces for queer men to have sex, privacy, and even intimacy. Mollies referred to sexual coupling as "marrying" or "being married," perhaps a plea for their relationships, whether sexual or romantic, to be legitimized as equal in worth to heterosexual unions.²⁵ Mollies dignifying their coupling as "marriage" echoes Georgian ideals of marriage as a divinely-ordained foundation of social order.²⁶

The scenes of raucous sex and sexuality in molly houses also upheld Enlightenment values of bodily autonomy and sexual and social liberation. As previously noted, the eighteenth century was a period of sexual anxiety, where the secularizing influence of the Enlightenment provided a new rational, ethical framework by which to explore sex and sexuality. While the Enlightenment was largely an upper-class movement, many mollies on trial for sodomy echoed the ideals of privacy and bodily autonomy. In the 1718 trial of John Bowes and Hugh Ryly, Bowes defended his alleged actions by defiantly retorting to their accuser, "Sirrah what's that to you, cant [sic] I make use of my own Body? I have done nothing but what I will do again."²⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, both men were acquitted. In William Brown's trial for attempted sodomy, Brown boldly proclaimed, "I think there's no Crime in making what use I please of my own

²³ "Trial of Thomas Wright, April 1726," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*, ed. Rictor Norton (self-published 1999, updated 2008), [online](#); Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 54–59.

²⁴ Norton, "Homosexuality," [online](#).

²⁵ Trial of Gabriel Lawrence, April 20, 1726, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

²⁶ Mike Rendell, *Sex and Sexuality in Georgian Britain* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2020), chap. 12 ("Sodomites").

²⁷ Trial of John Bowes and Hugh Ryly, December 5, 1718, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

Body."²⁸ As Norton notes, these men touched upon John Locke's theory that "every man has a property in his own person: this 'no body has any right to but himself' was something that could be asserted even by ordinary homosexuals."²⁹

In molly houses, sexual freedom extended to expressions of gender. Mollies were known for their habit of dressing in drag and affecting the manners and speech of women. Court proceedings relied heavily on charges of effeminacy and cross-dressing to both identify and convict queer men as violating public decency.³⁰ Cross-dressing was a social taboo in Georgian England; like other taboos, however, reports of mollies' scandalous behavior sold to an audience eager for a glimpse into London's underbelly. In his 1709 account of London's molly clubs, Ned Ward scandalized readers with tales of men cross-dressing and "giving birth" to wooden effigies, stories that challenged every Georgian social norm surrounding masculinity.³¹ James Dalton's 1728 narrative of London street crime includes tales of thieving mollies, drag queens calling themselves "Nurse Ashcraft" and "Fish Hannah," and mock "lying-in" ceremonies that culminated in the birth of a wooden "jointed Baby."³² These tales of cross-dressing and gender non-conformity were widely read precisely because of the social taboo against effeminacy in men. The Georgian public was in equal parts horrified and intrigued by the inversion of the social order with its strict division between "man" and "woman."

The individual who best captures the fluidity of gender that flourished among London's mollies was Princess Seraphina, born John Cooper. Called "Princess" by her friends and neighbors even when not dressed as a woman, Seraphina appears in the historical record, like so many mollies, through court testimony. Unlike many of her sisters, however, Princess Seraphina was the plaintiff. In May 1732, Seraphina was robbed at knifepoint by one Thomas Gordon, who threatened the Princess that, should she report him to authorities, he would in turn accuse her of attempted sodomy.³³ Gordon's implication was that Seraphina's obvious effeminate and feminine presentation left her vulnerable to blackmail. Seraphina, however, managed to secure Gordon's apprehension with the help of several bystanders. The aggrieved and headstrong molly took Gordon to court for the theft of her clothes, personal effects, and pocket money. The court transcript includes testimonies of character witnesses in support of both Princess Seraphina

²⁸ Trial of William Brown, July 11, 1726, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

²⁹ Rictor Norton, "A Defence of Homosexuality, 1718," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#).

³⁰ Trial of Julius Cesar Taylor, October 16, 1728, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

³¹ Edward Ward, *Satyrical Reflections on Clubs* (London: J. Phillips, 1710; originally published 1709), 284–300 (chap. XXV, "Of the Mollies Club").

³² James Dalton, *A Genuine Narrative of All the Street Robberies Committed since October Last, by James Dalton and His Accomplices, Taken from the Mouth of James Dalton* (London: J. Roberts, 1728), 35–40.

³³ Trial of Thomas Gordon, July 5, 1732, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

and Gordon, and while ultimately Gordon was found not guilty, the trial record is remarkable in the readiness with which Princess Seraphina's gender expression is discussed, as well as the lack of public and legal condemnation for her being a known molly who openly engaged in cross-dressing. It is through the testimonies of character witnesses that we learn of Seraphina's royal nickname. One witness referred to Seraphina with female pronouns and as "Princess," and when the magistrate sought clarification, the witness answered: "he goes by that Name." The use of both male and female pronouns reflects the fluidity of Seraphina's gender expression, with two local women, Mary Ryler and Mary Robinson, referring to Seraphina as a member of the community who nursed ill neighbors and gossiped with women at the neighborhood dressmaker. Notably, Mary Ryler and fellow witness Mary Poplet referred to Seraphina as both "he" and "she" throughout their recorded testimonies, with Ryler saying: "Sometimes we call her Princess, and sometimes Miss." Princess Seraphina's occupation as a "gentleman's servant" (most likely as a messenger between homosexual men) was openly discussed, with one of the defense's witnesses, Margaret Holder, openly declaring that Seraphina was "one of them as you call Molly Culls, he gets his Bread that way; to my certain Knowledge he has got many a Crown under some Gentlemen, for going of sodomiting Errands."³⁴ In other courtrooms, such an accusation would have constituted a charge of indecency or even intent to commit sodomy.³⁵ Princess Seraphina, however, despite losing her case against Gordon, remained free to express her gender identity on her own terms due, in large part, to the safety and security afforded to her by her membership in the molly community.

III. Protection from Social and Legal Violence

The threat of legal and social violence was ever-present in the lives of eighteenth-century queer men, and numerous examples of prosecution and punishment permeate the archival record. Contemporary testimonies make clear that mollies knew to conceal their sexual activity from the watchful eye of society and the law in the comfort and privacy of molly clubs. Patrons of molly houses were bound by both their intimacy with one another as well as concerns for their safety. Sodomy – even the accusation of "attempted sodomy" – was an offense often met by social ostracism, mob violence, and harsh legal reprisals, ranging from the pillory to the gallows at Tyburn. In the public sphere, queer men were not safe to outwardly express themselves for fear of physical violence and social exclusion. Riots triggered by political or economic turmoil were a common feature of Georgian London, and such riots often turned against brothels, prostitutes, religious

³⁴ Trial of Thomas Gordon, July 5, 1732, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

³⁵ Trial of Gabriel Lawrence, April 20, 1726, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#); "Trial of George Whittle, April 1726," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#); Trial of John Ashford, September 6, 1732, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

minorities, and homosexuals.³⁶ Mob violence was often random, yet it existed in a culture of homophobia supported by pamphlets and newspapers that published sermons and editorials condemning queer and effeminate men. In May 1726, several anonymous letters sent to *The Weekly Journal* echoed the prevailing social attitude toward homosexuality, claiming that mollies "exceed[ed] the very Beasts of the Fields in the Filthiness of their Abominations." These letters, written under the pseudonym "Philogynus" (or "lover of women" in Greek), referred to the common "Principles of Vertue, and Morality" and the biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah to condemn the crime of sodomy; the second letter, sent a week after the first, bemoaned Parliament's failure to take "prudent Measures to suppress such base and irregular Actions."³⁷ In his account of London street crime in the late 1720s, James Dalton referred to mollies as "Villains" with "damnable, unnatural, and beastly Appetites," and he included in his record a list of known mollies with the hope that the "Intelligence which is here given, will be a Means to have some of them detected."³⁸ British print culture actively sought the exposure and removal of mollies and sodomites from public and private life. In 1721, the *Ipswich Journal* denigrated the fifty "Abominable Wretches" who had been arrested during a raid on a molly coffee house in Leicester Square; the newspaper condemned the "Club of Sodomites" and their "beastly Actions...not fit to mention" in print.³⁹ Queer men were also susceptible to entrapment at popular cruising grounds. In 1726, Thomas Dalton attempted to cruise a man sleeping on a park bench in St. James' Park. The man, one Joseph Yates, guessed Dalton's intentions and feigned interest in Dalton, luring him to a local tavern where Dalton was detained until local authorities could be summoned. Dalton was arrested and found guilty of "assault with sodomitical intent."⁴⁰

At the time, English common law proceeded in the treatment of homosexuals according to the "Buggery Statute" of 1533, which condemned sodomy as a capital offense.⁴¹ Thus, in the case of a conviction, the charge of sodomy carried the death penalty. More frequently, however, the archival record lists charges like Dalton's, namely, of "assault with sodomitical intent." This charge, often labeled "attempted sodomy," was levied far more often than the actual charge of sodomy. Proving that penetration had taken place was difficult; charges of "attempted

³⁶ Roy Porter, *English Society in the 18th Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 100–101.

³⁷ "Letters from Philogynus, May 1726," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#).

³⁸ Dalton, *Genuine Narrative*, 36–37.

³⁹ Excerpt from *Ipswich Journal*, July 29, 1721, in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#).

⁴⁰ Trial of Thomas Dalton, August 31, 1726, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

⁴¹ Edward Bullingbrooke, *The Duty and Authority of Justices of the Peace and Parish-Officers for Ireland* (Dublin: Grierson, 1766); Henry Dagge, *Considerations on Criminal Law* (Dublin: Saunders, 1772).

sodomy," however, facilitated the prosecution of any man caught in an implied sexual situation with another man.⁴² While numerous trials for sodomy and related offenses fill the archival record, a majority of them resulted in acquittal due to a lack of sufficient evidence.⁴³ Most convictions required queer men to be "outed" by accusers who had their own motivations and firsthand knowledge of the accused's culpability. The role that insider information played in the conviction of sodomites is evidenced by the trial and conviction of Charles Hitchin, London's Deputy City Marshall, for the charge of sodomy. Hitchin was immediately replaced by his chief accuser and rival, the notorious thief-taker Jonathan Wild, who had spearheaded the accusations against Hitchin.⁴⁴ Male hustlers also targeted known homosexuals.⁴⁵ Laws directed against queer men meant that molly houses were essential in protecting the anonymity and physical safety of their patrons; like Mother Clap's, molly houses were often private residences and known only by a select clientele, providing queer men with greater protection from local authorities.

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, the power and influence of England's "Societies for the Reformation of Manners" reached its zenith. These reforming groups acted as vice squads and attempted to rid London of indecency and crime, frequently targeting brothels, gambling dens, and molly houses. In 1707, London's "Society for the Reformation of Manners" "entrapped nearly 100 sodomites," though many were not brought to trial.⁴⁶ While reforming groups succeeded in pushing homosexual expression even further underground, this had an unintended effect on the formation of a queer subculture. In *Mother Clap's Molly House*, Norton writes that the "attempt to suppress vice actually may have facilitated the expression of homosexuality," as London's queer community "coalesced under the pressure of this reforming environment," and the "publicity given to homosexuals by the Societies must have made gay men aware of the cruising grounds where they could pick one another up."⁴⁷ To avoid violence and legal persecution, queer men realized "that it would be in their interest to form associations to meet in less public places," giving rise to the numerous molly

⁴² Rictor Norton, "The Buggery Statute," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#); Trial of Thomas Dalton, August 31, 1726, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

⁴³ Trial of George Duffus, December 6, 1721, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#); Trial of Thomas Poddy, September 6, 1710, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#); Trial of William Mayly, January 14, 1715, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

⁴⁴ Jonathan Wild, *An Answer to a Late Insolent Libel* (London: T. Warner, 1718); Norton, "Homosexuality," [online](#).

⁴⁵ "Trial of George Whittle, April 1726," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#).

⁴⁶ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 51.

⁴⁷ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 52.

houses in 1720s London. As Norton summarizes, "self-preservation is a powerful impetus to the formation of a subculture."⁴⁸

Despite molly houses' apparent safety and secrecy, they routinely attracted attention. As the archives prove, molly houses were frequent targets of police raids and media coverage.⁴⁹ Gatherings of mollies, with their loud, flamboyant manners, obvious effeminacy, and unique slang, often drew the immediate attention of society and the law. Rather than hide themselves away, however, many mollies boldly came and went from molly clubs, using them as boarding houses and brothels.⁵⁰ Far from concealing themselves from the public eye, they displayed their effeminacy and cross-dressing loudly, valuing their freedom of expression ahead of personal safety considerations. As illustrated by the colorful life of Princess Seraphina, many mollies were known in their local communities by their preferred pronouns and treated as eccentric neighbors.⁵¹

IV. Forming Community in Molly Houses

Molly houses were essential to the development of England's queer subculture by providing spaces of community. The shadow of social and legal violence loomed large over the jovial atmosphere of molly clubs. The need for secrecy – dictated by strict social and legal repression – meant that sex between mollies necessitated the formation of extremely close-knit communities of lovers, ex-lovers, and friends. The need for communal spaces, particularly among men, transcended socio-economic notions of class in Georgian England. In the eighteenth century, London was home to hundreds of gentlemen's clubs, coffeehouses, and fraternal societies.⁵² Marked by the "new spirit of secular hedonism," these clubs gave heterosexual men a place to congregate, socialize, and escape from their domestic worries.⁵³ Or, as Amy Milne Smith notes in her study of gentlemen's clubs, these social groups may have been evidence of a "flight to domesticity" rather than an escape. Men who were seeking domestic "homosociality" "embraced the concept of domesticity in such a way as to provide for their own comforts while undermining the influence of the home."⁵⁴ For queer men, who would have felt repressed or unwelcome in these heterosexual masculine spaces, molly houses offered the same social intimacy as gentlemen's clubs.

By providing both physical safety and community, molly houses enabled queer men to support and uplift one another, and such emotional support permitted

⁴⁸ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 52.

⁴⁹ Dalton, *Genuine Narrative*, 32–43; "Letters from Philogynus, May 1726," in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Norton, [online](#).

⁵⁰ Norton, "Homosexuality," [online](#).

⁵¹ Trial of Thomas Gordon, July 5, 1732, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

⁵² Ward, *Satirical Reflections*.

⁵³ Norton, "Homosexuality," [online](#).

⁵⁴ Amy Milne-Smith, "A Flight to Domesticity? Making a Home in the Gentlemen's Clubs of London, 1880–1914," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2006): 818.

queer men like John Cooper to utterly transform into Princess Seraphina.⁵⁵ The story of Seraphina paints the portrait of a queer person representing themselves authentically with the support of various neighbors and friends. When Seraphina brought the man who had robbed her before a court that openly discussed her own lifestyle and manner of dress, it may very well have been the support provided by her social network, several of whom testified in her defense, which protected her from the scornful eye of the court. Mother Clap, the proprietress of London's most notorious molly house, was herself responsible for the acquittal of several mollies charged with indecency. Clap acted as a character witness for a molly named Derwin, and fondly, even jokingly, recounted the story of Derwin's acquittal to her patrons in the months leading up to her own arrest.⁵⁶ Although Norton notes Mother Clap's motives as being "more mischievous than mercenary," her support of Derwin went above and beyond the conduct of most molly house owners. While the historical record assumes Margaret Clap's heterosexuality, she was, in her own way, a pivotal member of the molly community. Regardless of her own identification, Mother Clap's legacy of supporting her patron from legal conviction underscores the affection and fellowship felt between members of the molly subculture.

In molly houses, the bonding and intimacy between mollies transcended mere sex to include a variety of unique traditions and rituals. Molly house traditions that contributed to the development of a uniquely queer space included drag, effeminacy, and cross-dressing; the use of "maiden" or "sister names;" as well as rituals that satirized marriage and childbirth. As investigative journalist Edward "Ned" Ward noted in his 1709 work *Satyrical Reflections on Clubs*, mollies frequently adopted female mannerisms and speech, gossiping amongst each other and "imitating all the little Vanities that Custom has reconcil'd to the Female Sex, affecting to Speak, Walk, Tattle, Cursy, Cry, Scold, and to mimick all Manner of Effeminacy."⁵⁷ "Maiden names," such as "Orange Deb," "Nel Guin," and "Flying Horse Moll," were commonplace among the sisterhood of molly houses.⁵⁸ These names reflect Norton's third and fourth criteria for a subculture. The use of slang and secret names reinforced a sense of membership in the group and allowed for self-identification with other members of the same subculture. "Molly marriages," which encompassed both one-night stands and long-term partnerships, solidified bonds between lovers and friends, establishing what today's queer community calls a "chosen family."

During his journalistic exploration of the molly house, Ned Ward was most struck by scenes of "mock childbirth." In his 1709 satirical assessment of London's molly scene, Ward salaciously reports that mollies, dressed as women and acting

⁵⁵ Trial of Thomas Gordon, July 5, 1732, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

⁵⁶ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 56.

⁵⁷ Ward, *Satyrical Reflections*, 284.

⁵⁸ Trial of Julius Cesar Taylor, October 16, 1728, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

as "midwives," cushioned the bellies of one of their "Sisters, as they commonly call'd themselves," and went through the motions of labor and childbirth.⁵⁹ After a period of melodramatic recreation, the molly's labor would culminate in the "birth" of the wooden effigy of an infant which was subsequently christened and baptized in a bizarre parody of church ritual and rural village traditions.⁶⁰ Norton theorizes that rituals of "mock childbirth" were a "variation of the scapegoat motif, wherein one person undergoes pain for the sake of the tribe," arguing that these rituals of "mock childbirth" bonded mollies by "blunting the end of heterosexual prejudice" through the production of a scapegoat in the form of the wooden infant.⁶¹

Through "molly marriages" and "mock childbirth" rituals, mollies both satirized and expressed a desire for belonging to heterosexual society by parodying important heterosexual milestones (courtship, marriage, and childbirth); the presence of these rituals "illustrates not only a satirization of heterosexual society, but a desire to take part in it as homosexual men."⁶² As bizarre as many of these rituals may appear, anyone who has attended a drag show in a modern gay club can attest to the enduring queer tradition of making fun of heterosexual life. By engaging with heterosexual life through parody, mollies were able to create a community of their own by fulfilling heteronormative social roles on their own terms. By playing the bride, the expectant mother, or the midwife, mollies bonded in more than their shared ostracism from society. Rather, the queer scene that formed in these molly houses was tied together by shared humor, traditions, dress, speech, sex, love, and a longing to belong to a familial community.

Like gentlemen's clubs and coffeehouses, molly houses acted as both formative and performative spaces. These social spaces allowed for the formation of subcultures of men through the performance of gender. In gentlemen's clubs, performances of masculinity permitted gossip and close friendships among heterosexual men, fulfilling the needs of "homosocial domesticity" through the production of a male-only pseudo-domestic space.⁶³ In social clubs, the stoicism and restraint demanded by society fell away, and men were free to "let their hair down." For queer men, molly houses fulfilled many of the same homosocial needs for male closeness, with mollies often boasting of a "sisterhood," and many indeed often bickered and fought like siblings.⁶⁴ Much has been made of how mollies performed *femininity* in molly houses, but when mollies "let their hair down" (or, in the case of many eighteenth-century patrons, their wigs), themes of *masculinity*

⁵⁹ Ward, *Satirical Reflections*, 285.

⁶⁰ Ward, *Satirical Reflections*, 285–286.

⁶¹ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, 97–100.

⁶² Harrison, "[A] place to take off the mask," 14.

⁶³ Milne-Smith, "Flight to Domesticity," 799.

⁶⁴ Ward, *Satirical Reflections*, 285.

were also performed and challenged. Mollies, always in on the joke, knowingly satirized heterosexual men by playing the role of the blushing bride or expectant mother. In these roles, queer men could refute the social ostracism they were facing by engaging with heteronormativity in a satirized, ritualized, and highly theatrical manner. The satirization of gender and traditional family milestones created an atmosphere of levity and humor where mollies could, for a short time at least, forget about the judgment and dangers of an intolerant, repressive society. Molly "sisters" often had working-class jobs, even wives, and lived an outwardly heterosexual lifestyle.⁶⁵ What if, then, these performances of effeminacy and gender-bending in molly houses were just as *expressive* as they were *performative*? Rather than places of disguise, what if molly houses were instead spaces where queer men and gender non-conforming people could reveal who they *really* were, removing the mask of society in the community of a chosen family?

Conclusion

Charting the formation of a queer subculture in eighteenth-century London grants us a deeper understanding of queer culture today. From drag queens, camp humor, and vulgar slang to raucous dancing and sex, one could be forgiven for believing that the scene in an eighteenth-century molly house was not all that different from a modern gay club. Norton goes as far as to say that "modern gay men recognizably come from the same stock as sodomites and mollies and endorsers."⁶⁶ England's queer subculture blossomed in the eighteenth century due to a myriad of economic, intellectual, and cultural factors, but the role of the physical space in which this community formed is far less nebulous. Molly houses were critical in forming spaces of sexual freedom, safety from violence and persecution, and close community bonds. The sisterhood of mollies was more than a network of survival; rather, it was a highly intimate emotional and social bond that, coupled with its unique slang, humor, and traditions, developed into a subculture all of its own.

In 1726, the disguised reforming constable Samuel Stevens, whose lurid account of Mother Clap's molly house was quoted in this article's introduction, was scandalized by the way mollies were dancing, singing, and making merry. While we will never know the full range of queer joy that flourished in molly clubs, we have a record of one of the songs to which men like Gabriel Lawrence, William Griffin, and Thomas Wright (all arrested during the raid on Mother Clap's and sentenced to death by hanging) may have drunk and danced. In his *Genuine Narrative* of street crime in eighteenth-century London, James Dalton, as "an Amusement to the Reader," included the lyrics to a song sung by mollies. This song, sung by "that charming warbler, Miss Irons," begins as follows:

⁶⁵ Trial of Gabriel Lawrence, April 20, 1726, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, [online](#).

⁶⁶ Norton, "Recovering Gay History from the Old Bailey," 5.

Let the Fops of the Town upbraid
Us, for an unnatural Trade,
We value not Man nor Maid;
*But among our own selves we'll be free.*⁶⁷

In eighteenth-century England, queer men, through the privacy, safety, and community provided in molly houses, exemplified the personal freedom that underpinned the Age of Enlightenment. Pressured by social intolerance and legal persecution, mollies, like modern queer men, created a space where they could express themselves authentically and create bonds of friendship, intimacy, and community, and where even for one night, *among their own selves*, they were free.

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⁶⁷ Dalton, *Genuine Narrative*, 42–43.