# **Historic Royal Palaces Podcast****LBGTQ+ History - Queer Possibilities at Our Palaces**

## **Show Notes**

LGBTQ+ people have always existed in the history of our palaces, yet the stories of this community have often been obscured or misunderstood.

When we explore queer histories, we gain a much fuller picture of societies in the past, from when our palaces were first built, right on through to their more recent history.

In this week’s episode, Curator Matthew Storey is joined by Assistant Research Curator Holly Marsden, and Dr Kit Heyam, to discuss some queer stories connected to our palaces, and how best to understand them in their historic context.

Explore more LGBTQ+ histories from our palaces [on our website](https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/lgbt-royal-histories/).

Read Matthew’s [article](https://www.hrp.org.uk/blog/frederick-wright-or-kathleen-woodhouse/) about Kathleen Woodhouse.

Read Molly McClain's [article](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25482827?seq=1) on Stuart women.

Find Kit Heyam’s books [on their website](https://kitheyam.com/).

In this episode we use a range of different gender pronouns to discuss historical people, including those used in the original sources and those used by historians today.

Content warnings:

Homophobia, including the murder of queer people

Transphobia

Non-consensual medical examination

Suicide

## **Transcript**

### Matthew Storey [00:00:04][The podcast opening theme music begins. It is steady and regal. Matthew speaks on top in a warm and excited voice from the studio.]

Hello and welcome to the Historic Royal Palaces podcast, the podcast which explores the history and stories of our six palaces and the people whose lives have been shaped by them. I'm Matthew Storey, a curator here at the palaces, and today we're celebrating Pride Month, a month of celebration for the LGBTQ+ community that highlights queer lives and experiences around the world, in culture and in history. We'll be sharing some stories from our palaces that speak to queer experiences and the history of gender and sexuality.

Understanding queer history is a multi-faceted process. The words we use and the way we think about gender and sexuality today, like so many things, are of course different from the past. But when we examine historical perspectives of queer desire and gender norm conformity, we add so much to our understanding of history.

[The theme music fades out as Matthew introduces Holly Marsden and Kit Heyam who join him in the studio.]

My colleague, Dr. Holly Marsden, joins me today, who recently finished her PhD on Mary II and is currently an Assistant Research Curator at Historic Royal Palaces, looking into the Stuarts at Kensington Palace. We're also joined by Dr. Kit Heyam, a writer, heritage practitioner, trans awareness trainer and academic, who has published a fantastic book called ‘*Before We Were Trans: A Global History of Gender Nonconformity’*. Thank you both for being here.

[Kit Heyam has a Northern English accent from Leeds. He speaks in an inviting and excited voice.]

Kit Heyam [00:01:24]

Thanks for having me. It's lovely to be here.

[Holly Marsden has a Southern English accent. She speaks slightly slower than Kit.]

Holly Marsden [00:01:27]

Thank you, I'm so excited to talk about the histories of our palaces today.

Matthew Storey [00:01:31]

I should mention now that as well as bringing you some fun stories today, there will also be some heavy themes and antiquated language coming up in this episode, as is inevitable when discussing LGBTQ+ histories. Do please check the show notes for content warnings.

Now Holly, for our listeners who may be less familiar with the term queer history, can you just explain to us what it means and why it's an important area of history to examine.

Holly Marsden [00:01:54]

 Of course, so the term queer has a very complex history, and I understand that people may have negative or difficult relationships with the word. But in recent years, ‘queer’ has been reclaimed by LGBTQIA+ people to acknowledge a wide range of identities and practices that could be in flux or undefined and which relate to sex, sexuality and gender. The term also refers to academic disciplines like queer studies and queer history. These disciplines were really born out of a need to uncover previously untold human stories and fight against the normative doctrines of historical storytelling.

The histories of queer people are relevant to history in general. They give us a really full picture of history. Queerness isn't new, and people have been identifying and practicing outside of heterosexuality and gender conformity for centuries. It's really important here also to acknowledge that Western approaches to histories of sex, sexuality, and gender differ from many cultures across the globe, which have centred and celebrated queer identities and practices.

There are so many queer stories connected to the buildings under the care of Historic Royal Palaces. They are lived-in human spaces, and I can't wait to share some of these stories with you today.

Matthew Storey [00:03:10]

Yes, I think one of the most amazing things about the places we look after at Historic Royal Palaces is just the number of incredible human stories we can find about them. So, Kit, these histories are rich and complex because people have had such a broad experience of sexuality and gender in the past. And that's something I really like about your work and the way you approach it. Can you explain a little bit more about that?

Kit Heyam [00:03:35]

Sure. So, I think one of the really important aspects of the approach I take to queer history is trying to understand people on their own historical and cultural terms, rather than imposing the terms or the ways of thinking that we might bring from modern Western culture.

I think that's really important, not just from a historical perspective in terms of getting the facts right, but also from an ethical perspective, in terms of treating those human lives with the respect that they deserve and not assuming that we can know someone better than they could know themselves. What's really important about that though, is understanding that this doesn't just apply to minoritised identities like *‘gay’* or ‘*trans’* or ‘*queer’*, but also to identities like ‘*straight’* or ‘*man’* or ‘*woman’*. Because the way we understand sexuality and gender today, the way that we understand what it means to be a man or a woman, even today, is so different from what someone in the past would have thought about that.

The other thing that's really important to approaching queer history, I think, is being open to all of the possibilities that we can see in a history. So rather than assuming that someone is straight or cisgender, so not transgender, until proven otherwise, approaching history with a truly open mind and thinking: what is the full range of possible experiences that this story from history represents and not holding queer histories to a higher standard of evidence. For example, you often get histories of love letters, perhaps, between two people of the same sex, which historians interpret as friendship, whereas if exactly the same letters were written between two of the opposite sex, it would be interpreted as romantic.

Why would we hold those two to a different standard? That's a question I'm really interested in asking.

Matthew Storey [00:05:27]

Thank you, Kit. I love that term ‘queer possibilities’ and the way it suggests an openness in the way we approach people in the past. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Kit Heyam [00:05:39]

When I talk about queer possibilities, I mean being open to the full spectrum of possibilities that a particular historical record might represent. So, if, for example, we see a person who's lived a life different from the gender they were assigned at birth, what is the ***full*** range of reasons they might have done that?

They might have been motivated by their job or their sexuality. They might also have been motivated by their internal sense of self. And if we don't have any evidence to suggest that any of those things are the right answer, we need to make sure that our interpretation takes account of the possibility that any of those and ***all those* *things***could be what's going on.

Matthew Storey [00:06:22]

I think that's so important. That's something I think is really relevant to your work as well, Holly, especially looking at the late Stuarts, which is where your research is based.

Holly Marsden [00:06:32]

Yes, definitely. As you mentioned, I predominantly look at women in the early modern period, the late Stuarts. And I use a term coined by the scholar and historian Judith Bennett to address the kind of grey areas, the possibilities of relationships, identities, and practises between women that can't exactly be defined. This term is the*‘lesbian-like’*, and it's almost used to identify lesbian coded experiences without specific terminology. So, there were words to describe women loving women at this time, such as ‘sapphics’ or ‘tribades’, but the point of ‘lesbian-like’ is to allow possibilities outside of specific definitions.

As Kit mentioned, there were entirely different approaches to sex and sexuality and gender in the past, and this rings true across the whole of society and is actually really prominent in the royal context. And monarchs such as Mary II and her sister Anne are examples.

I really try to approach my research without assuming cis-heteronormativity too, which means straight until proven otherwise and the gender you're assigned at birth until proven otherwise. I completely agree with Kit also; a higher standard of evidence is a problem and is often needed to somehow prove queer experience or practices in the early modern periods.

Matthew Storey [00:07:54]

 I mean, that's exactly it. We know people have been queer throughout history, so we should approach looking at history with that knowledge. But as we mentioned, I mean, ideas of gender and sexuality have changed through time, and that's really important to understand.

So, shall we go back a long way? Let's start by looking at the medieval period. And Kit, your research is focused on a very famous royal example. Can you tell us about Edward II?

Kit Heyam [00:08:21]

[Audibly smiling] So, Edward II is a ***delight*** to talk about. He was the subject of my PhD and my first book, and he was on the English throne between 1307 and 1327, and has become most famous for his torturous relationship with his favourite, Piers Gaveston. Edward and Gaveston met when they were teenagers, and their relationship became a problem before Edward was even king. In 1305, Gaveston was cast out from Edward's household and then a couple of years later exiled from the realm of England. When Edward's father, Edward I, died and Edward became king, the first thing he did was to recall Gaveston from exile, and he immediately started to shower him with favours.

So, Gaveston was made Earl of Cornwall, he became Regent of England when Edward went overseas to marry his French queen Isabella. He had extraordinary positions of privilege at Edward's coronation ceremony. And what's striking is that writers at the time start very quickly to comment on the love between the two men and how excessive that love is. So, they tell us, for example, that when Edward gets back from France having married Isabella, a huge crowd of nobles arrives to greet the boat as it comes into port. And among them is Gaveston, and Edward and Gaveston run to each other and embrace. They tell us that at Edward's coronation banquet, he pays much more attention to Gaveston than he does to his new queen.

And on the face of it, that fact might not be surprising, you know, he's known Gaveston since they were teenagers. Isabella on the other hand is 12 years old, and they've just met. So you wouldn't think it would be an issue that he would be paying more attention to this man. But what's striking is that contemporary chroniclers really do think something unusual is going on. There's one chronicle known as the life of Edward II written by someone very close to the royal court, probably a clerk, which says that ‘I do not remember having heard that one man so loved another’. He also brings in examples from the Bible and classical mythology. And then he says, ‘but we do not read that ***they*** went beyond what was usual’. And the implication is Edward and Gaveston very much going beyond what was usual.

People also started during Edward's reign to talk about the possibility that these two men were in a sexual relationship. The earliest account of this is a poem written just after Gaveston's death in 1312, which says, in the beginning of Edward's reign, ‘much lechery was habitually practiced’. And that might not sound like much, but the fact that it’s in the past tense, at the beginning of his reign. Before this man died, there was a lot of lechery. The implication from the past tense, and the fact that it’s saying in the beginning of his reign and before this man died, there was lots of lechery, the implication is ‘now this man's dead, it will be different’. So, there was something sexual going on between these two men.

Matthew Storey [00:11:16]

And I think that's important to understand because as a same-sex royal favourite, he would have had a sexual hold over the king, but also as a man, he would have been able to take on a great deal of power. So that's going to cause a lot of anxiety in a very competitive court environment.

Kit Heyam [00:11:35]

Yes, exactly. This is precisely the problem. If Edward had had a mistress who purely had power in the private sphere, this would not have been a problem. The problem with a male favourite is that you can promote him to public positions of power as well. When the nobles decide they've had enough of Gaveston, and five years into Edward's reign, they murder him, it is ***just as much, if not more***, about the political consequences of that relationship as it is about the sexual consequences. If Edward had just had a relationship with him and not given him all those favours, things could have been very different.

Matthew Storey [00:12:12]

You see this throughout royal favourites as well. All these relationships are tied up with power, in a very real sense. Land, positions, titles, and money make these relationships so difficult for the people who are looking at them from the outside.

Holly Marsden [00:12:34]

[Amused] People loved the drama of the court favourite, didn't they? They loved the gossip, the drama. It's so, I guess, enthralling at the time.

Kit Heyam [00:12:42]

 Exactly, and that's really key to the reasons that Edward and Gaveston's story is told so often over the centuries after his death.

Matthew Storey [00:12:51]

Because that's the thing, it becomes this story that people have returned to many times. So, whether that's in the late 16th century with Marlowe's play, *‘Edward II’*, or then Derek Jarman taking up that play and doing an incredible film adaptation of it, which was speaking to the experiences of gay men in the era of HIV and AIDS and that climate of homophobia. I've even seen operas based on this story! It's something that we return to time and time again. How do you feel about the way this story's been reinterpreted?

We can look at, say, Edward II's death. I don't know how much graphic detail we want to go to in this because it's very distressing, but the way that death has been understood throughout history is really interesting.

Kit Heyam [00:13:47]

Yes, so this story comes up a few years after Edward's death that he's murdered in a very unpleasant way with a red-hot poker. I should say this probably isn't how he died, he was probably just smothered. But the story emerges a few years after his death.

What's interesting about that story though is when we look back on it now, it looks like a homophobic narrative. It looks like punishing someone for having a relationship with a man in a way that the punishment really horribly fits the crime. But in the original accounts of this story, that's not how the reader is being asked to respond. The original accounts paint a picture of a king who is really afraid of being killed, a king who is experiencing pain, who we're asked to feel sympathy for. It's actually only later on that people pick it up and use it as a homophobic narrative. And I think this tells us something really important about the history of sexuality. That even in a context where a sexual relationship between two men is condemned, religiously and socially, people are still being asked to have a really human-to-human response to this man dying in a really unpleasant way. I think that tells us something really valuable about how human beings have always been able to feel for other human beings.

Matthew Storey [00:15:06]

And Kit, in your work, how have you seen how Edward and Gaveston have been looked back on?

Kit Heyam [00:15:13]

What's striking is the lengths historians often go to try to explain away the romantic and sexual possibilities about Edward and Gaveston’s relationship. Historians have tried to reframe it as a sworn brotherhood because in the Chronicles, it says Edward called Gaveston his brother. There's not very much evidence for this apart from that, and even if it was a sworn brotherhood that doesn't mean they weren't also in a romantic and sexual relationship.

Historians have also pointed to the fact that Edward had children with his wife Isabella as evidence that he wasn't having a relationship with Gaveston, which, [amused] as we know from many, many people today, does not really compute in the way that people relate to their sexuality! And historians have tried very hard to frame it***just*** as a friendship, even when, as I say, we have all these contemporary sources saying: these two men loved each other. We have people during Edward's lifetime saying that he was sexually misbehaving and hinting that this had something to do with Gaveston. And increasingly in the centuries after his death, chroniclers get more confident about saying this more explicitly.

I think with all this evidence, we need to ask ourselves why we would try so hard to say this was ***definitely not*** a romantic and sexual relationship.

Matthew Storey [00:16:32]

I- it ties up to very dated ideas of morality as well. People didn't want the historical figures they were looking at to be behaving in ***such*** an immoral way so they would find any way to explain the person they were researching ***out*** of a queer context. And I think now –where we aren't bound in the same way, we can properly look at that history, and what the evidence is telling us.

If the story of Edward II is closely connected to the Tower of London, then we have another story from lower down in medieval society that takes us outside of the walls of the castle and palace and gives us an insight into how medieval people might have viewed gender and sexuality.

John or Eleanor Rykener appears in just a single document from 1395 held in the London Archives. The document recounts an appearance before the Mayor and Alderman of the City of London on the 11th of December 1395, of John or Eleanor Rykener and John Britby, who were caught having sex in the City of London. The document records that John called themselves Eleanor, was wearing women's clothing, and that John Britby had paid him for sex. What's remarkable about the document is that it records John or Eleanor's detailed description of their life. They describe how they had been taught and encouraged to wear feminine clothing and to engage in sex work in the manner of a woman by two women.

While describing other occasions that they had engaged in sex with men, Eleanor also describes how they had recently been staying at Oxford, living in women's clothing, calling themselves Eleanor and working as an embroideress. They also describe having sex ‘as a man’ with nuns and married and unmarried women. They mention working very near the Tower of London in the lanes behind St Katherine's Church, where they had sex with three chaplains. So, Kit, you are a medievalist. How do you view Rykener’s story?

Kit Heyam [00:18:31]

I think it's worth saying, first of all, that a lot of medievalists use the first name Eleanor primarily for Rykener and use she/her pronouns. And that's based, I think, on the fact that what's striking here is that Rykener is not just presenting as female to engage in sex work. They're actually living a female socialised life in a lot of ways. That job of an embroideress is a female-coded one; the community in which they live is a female one. That, for me, makes this story a really important part of trans history.

As I said before, I wouldn't call Eleanor trans because she didn't use that word for herself, but I would call this story trans history because of the trans possibilities that it contains. I think what's also really interesting is that the court records themselves use pronouns kind of interchangeably for Eleanor, and that tells us that medieval people were quite okay with decoupling gender from the body, and thinking of it as something flexible and fluid within a person's life. We have a lot of assumptions, I think today, that we've moved in a progressive direction from the past to the present in terms of understanding of sexuality and gender and in terms queer rights. I think this story really nicely challenges those assumptions.

Matthew Storey [00:19:48]

I remember the British Library's ‘*Medieval Women*’ exhibition, they showed this document and [excitedly] it was almost like looking at the Rosetta Stone of queer history. It was so exciting to actually see how Eleanor's life had been written down, to see that record, and to see it actually be put into the context of ***women's*** history of the medieval period. I felt that was so important.

Holly Marsden [00:20:13]

I think this story really importantly highlights that we don't have to delineate between women's history and queer history and that there's complete overlap and it shows us an example of a woman's experience at this time, and there are opportunities for trans experiences and women's experiences that can happen at the same time.

Kit Heyam [00:20:34]

That's an important move, I think, in terms of validating the trans possibility of this history.

Matthew Storey [00:20:38]

Because the account, as Eleanor is so confidently telling it, and as it's recorded, tells you a lot about the experience of women in the Middle Ages. I mean, how mobile she is going between Oxford and London, the kind of work she's engaging with, whether that's sex work or working as an embroideress, and the people she's meeting who are influencing her and guiding her and teaching her as well. It is a fascinating snapshot of a particular life.

As is so often with stories of people in the past who were not part of the elite society, this is the only account we have of Eleanor's life, is this snapshot, this court appearance that then we don't see again, we don’t know what happened next, and that's so often what you come across when you're not just looking at queer history actually, but when you’re looking at anybody who just momentarily had an interaction with authority in a way that would be recorded in an archive – and then that snapshot is what we have. Then they are lost to history forever. We don't know what happens next.

But what's actually often so fascinating about looking at royal history in particular is how well recorded the lives of individuals are. It's one of the most extraordinary things actually about royal history is the range of sources we have.

I think let's jump in time and talk about the Stuart era. Holly, can you tell us more about some of the queer stories from the Stuart Court that you've researched and the kind of evidence we have for them?

Holly Marsden [00:22:14]

Definitely. You're absolutely right that there is a wealth of evidence for queer stories in the courts. So, one set in the court of Charles II highlights the nuance and different ways same-sex desire was understood and practiced in the 17th century. But it doesn't feature Charles, his wife, or even his mistresses, who were infamous, but his two young nieces, princesses Mary and Anne, who both later became regnant queens of England.

As young girls, Mary and Anne starred in a masque patronised by King Charles and this was called *‘Callisto’*. And young girls of the court and featured musicians acted in a re-imagined storytelling of the myth of Diana and Callisto, and this was written by John Crowne.

Interestingly, the original sexual assault scene was omitted for a light-hearted scene of seduction between two of the girls, which kind of shows that Charles – or the court, or society at the time viewed female sexuality as somewhat entertaining and maybe titillating. But the masque had a very clear political function, which was often the case with court masques or plays like this. And this was served by the actresses who were quoted to be covered with jewels, and these girls were on show for suitable marriage matches. And this is where Princess Mary was definitively linked to her future husband, William III of Orange.

Matthew Storey [00:23:40]

And I think what's really interesting is how it's taken a ***seriously*** queer ancient myth. And I'm think it's probably worth just reminding our listeners what that myth was.

So as I understand it, you have the nymph Callisto, a chaste nymph of Diana. She's supposed to be a virgin. She's desired by the god Jupiter, who takes on the form of the goddess Diana in order to seduce Callisto. So, you have a male god taking on a female form in order to seduce a woman. Because Callisto is one of Diana's nymphs, she readily accepts this seduction because of her trust and relationship with Diana. So, it's a massively queer story that they are putting on stage in front of the Stuart Court. It's quite incredible.

Holly Marsden [00:24:30]

It absolutely is. And Mary was Callisto, so that centres her in that storyline.

Matthew Storey [00:24:36]

So Mary is at the centre of this very queer narrative being played out in front of the Stuart Court. But of course, if you look at her letters and correspondence, there's a queer relationship in her private life as well.

Holly Marsden [00:24:52]

Yes, so from the age of about 13, Mary wrote around 80 romantically charged and very, very dramatic love letters to Frances Apsley. And she was the daughter of a royal administrator, five years older than Mary, and her maid of honour as princess. So Mary's letters from the late 1670s survive, but unfortunately, we don't have Frances' replies. But in these letters, Mary and Frances engaged in role play, which kind of aligned with contemporary Baroque literary practices, and this is really explored by a historian called Molly McClain, which I really recommend her article.

Mary's ‘Clorine’, as she called herself, wrote to Frances' ‘Aurelia’, and they play-acted the heterosexual dynamic of marriage. And the surviving letters show Mary frequently declaring her love for Aurelia, who was absolutely devastated when Frances stopped corresponding with her. And this happened after Mary married William and subsequently moved to the Netherlands to be Princess of Orange.

Matthew Storey [00:25:56]

And Holly, these letters are private correspondence. Does this allow us to see intimacy through the words of these women?

Holly Marsden [00:26:03]

Definitely. Mary and Frances really wanted to keep the letters private. The nephew of Mary's painting master, whom she trusted greatly, and she took him with her to the Netherlands when she moved there, was called Richard Gibson. His nephew, the painter William Gibson, was the only person entrusted with the transportation of their correspondence.

The correspondence itself often contained symbols, ciphers, or handwriting intentionally difficult to read. Towards the end of their letter writing, Mary even commented that she did not trust pen and ink with what she wished to say, begging Frances to keep the contents of the letter a secret. Part of the secrecy was also because of the gossip they were exchanging with one another, especially when Mary was in the Netherlands. So, they often referred to other people in the English court who were in scandalous stories only by their initials.

Matthew Storey [00:26:55]

And did you mention there are codes in the letters as well, which are uncracked?

Holly Marsden [00:27:00]

Yes, there are a few codes in the letters, and I have yet to crack them, but that is a future aim of mine. I'll be working on that.

Matthew Storey [00:27:07]

Watch this space.

Holly Marsden [00:27:08]

So interestingly, her sister Anne also exchanged letters with Frances, and Anne is famous for her relationship with Lady Sarah Churchill, and they also adopted play names. And this is also documented in the very famous film ‘*The Favourite’*. So, this was a really fashionable way of exhibiting and understanding desire during a time when sex manuals sometimes circulated that permitted sex between women as good practice for heterosexual marriage.

It's important to note the differences in approaches between male and female sex at the time. So, sex between women was not criminalised. If a penis wasn't present, it was not considered as sex necessarily. But what these letters really demonstrate is that Mary understood the language of sex, and Mary and Frances, their correspondence aligns with Anne's use of the courtly favourite. This shows the language of sex and hierarchy and politics at play at the Stuart Court. But within this context, the ‘*lesbian-like’*, as I mentioned before, can really describe Mary and Anne and the network of women around them. They occupied very gendered spaces a lot of the time, so spent a lot of their time around other women. They were dressed by women, they were made up by women, they were bathed by women. It should also be said that it can't definitively be known if Mary or Anne held completely romantic or sexual feelings for their same-sex contemporaries. But Bennett's theory really allows for this possibility, and I should mention that these letters are incredibly sexually loaded. Some of the quotations are absolutely raunchy.

Matthew Storey [00:28:52]

I think I remember in one of them that Mary, when she's pregnant with William III's child, writes to Frances saying, ‘the child is a bastard because you are my true husband’. And I mean that is a very, very passionate, very strong language indeed.

Holly Marsden [00:29:10]

Absolutely, they're incredibly passionate. So, we can see that Mary has a ‘very great kindness’ for Frances, which she could ‘not remember the beginning of’. And this depended on her ‘utter devotion’ to the person she refers to as her ‘husband’. After she moved to the Netherlands, she reassured Frances that, ‘I do love you as much as I always did’, and was ‘very, very happy that Frances had writ to me with the same freedom we have ever had’.

Their affection towards each other is echoed in a more overtly sensual way.

So Mary demands that ‘if you do not come to me sometime today dear husband, that I may have my belly full of discourse with you’ and professes that ‘I am more and more in love with you every time I see you’.

But it's interesting to think about this correspondence being framed in marriage terms. So the devotional language was kind of embraced and accepted under the guise of heterosexual marriage.

And interestingly, at this time, Mary's husband, William - rumours began circulating of his homosexual relationships with his favourites, but William was mocked for his relationships with favourites. And this is because he and Mary could not have children. Pamphleteers and satirists kind of took this infertility and blamed it sometimes on William for having homosexual relationships.

Matthew Storey [00:30:34]

 I think we've got to something really quite crucial here, which is the relationship between same-sex love and desire and gender identity at this time and how, when you're looking at the history— especially in the Early Modern period, how intertwined those are. And that's something you've written really interestingly about in your book, Kit, how these two histories can go hand in hand, and how there is a close understanding between sexuality and gender identity.

Kit Heyam [00:31:07]

Yes, and actually the way we understand sexuality and gender identity as separate aspects of a person's identity is only a really recent Western construct. It belongs to the mid-20th century when gay rights groups realised that their campaigns could be more effective if they presented themselves as normal and gender conforming and entrenched that split between gender nonconformity and sexuality. So, when we're looking back on the Early Modern period, actually, one of the aspects of what it meant to be a man was to be attracted to women, and one of the aspects of it meant to be attracted to men.

Matthew Storey [00:31:44]

And so, by being attracted, if you're a woman, to other women or a man to other men, that was a form of gender nonconformity as well?

Kit Heyam [00:31:55]

Yeah, exactly. And Holly, I know you've got a really interesting story about this.

Holly Marsden [00:31:58]

 Yes, so a young singer actually in ‘*Callisto’*, in the masque, also exhibited queer desire and love. Court testimonies and contemporary accounts document that the marriage between this renowned singer, Arabella Hunt, and her spouse James Howard, was annulled in 1680 after only six months, due to claims that James had falsely presented as a man.

So similar to the Rykener case, trials and court testimonies are really all we have to understand the life of James. The trial stated that James was a woman named Amy Poulter who was married to an Arthur Poulter at the time of the marriage to Arabella, but Arthur was then deceased by the time of the trial. I'm going to use James to refer to them here as this is how they chose to present to Arabella and at the trial.

The court testimonials highlight that James allegedly wooed Arabella dressed as both a woman and a man. The trial was incredibly invasive and included midwives physically examining James's genitals to determine sex, which was then deemed to be female.

Although we will never know how James personally identified, it is important to highlight the queer and trans possibility of this story. Tragically, after the trial and annulment, James passed away. Arabella stayed in court positions, and her later life at court included lots of time singing compositions to Queen Mary who allegedly asked to hear a very, very sexy and sensual ballad called ‘*Cold and Raw’* instead of a tiresome composition by Henry Purcell.

Matthew Storey [00:33:36]

I love this story because I actually knew the story of Arabella Hunt singing ‘*Cold and Raw’* long before I knew she was a figure in queer history. [Mathew laughs] So, it's a really funny story so it's probably worth telling.

One day Queen Mary wants some music so she gets some of her favourite musicians together; Arabelle Hunt, John Gosling, a male singer, and the great composer Henry Purcell. And there they are singing Purcell's wonderful songs. And Queen Mary then goes, ‘Arabella, could you sing that popular song they're all singing in the streets’, which is ‘*Cold and Raw’*, a tale of a young country girl who resists being seduced by a young lord. And it's got a great catchy tune. The story is that Arabella sung this and Purcell, his music snubbed, just sitting at the harpsichord, and not a little nettled. And then he gets his revenge, because when he writes his next birthday ode to Queen Mary, he actually puts the tune of ‘*Cold and Raw’* into it, and then puts different words like “may her blessed example”. And so it's a way of Purcell going, ‘I see what you ***really*** like, Your Majesty, I'm going to give you this!’.

That was a story I heard as a child. And what I love is that it was only years later I realised that one of the protagonists, actually ***two*** of the protagonists in the room that day had incredible queer stories as well. Because of course it happened a bit earlier in Arabella's life, when she's eighteen in 1680, she marries James Howard at a church in Marlborough, which I think I've read somewhere had a ‘no questions asked’ policy on marriages.

Holly Marsden [00:35:25]

It did, yeah.

Matthew Storey [00:35:28]

So it's perhaps significant that they chose ***that*** church to be married in.

What's interesting is that the annulment case doesn't actually seem to have done any long-term harm to Arabella's career. She has an incredibly successful career afterwards. She is called, in 1700, there was an ode written to her that says she ‘reigns alone as Queen of Music by the people's choice’. But what you see is that actually, even in the 18th century, the queerness of her marriage is erased. So, one of the main sources of her life is John Hawkins' ‘*General History of Music’*, which was published in 1774, so long, long after her death. And it says, ‘she had the misfortune to be married to a man who, for reasons that may be guessed at, ought to have continued for the whole of his life in the state of celibacy’. And that's all that's said about this. In the 1770s, so already you've got an erasure of the queerness. But when you look at that court record, the queer possibilities are incredible.

Because of the way that James is courting Arabella both in masculine and feminine clothing, and the way Arabella claims in the annulment trial that James was ‘of double gender’ suggesting that they may have been, in the terminology we'd use today, intersex. This is at a time when there is, in the late 17th century, real fascination actually with intersex bodies. So that ties into that history.

 The team of midwives and that appalling, invasive examination establishes – in the eyes of the court, at any rate, that James is ‘a natural woman in all her parts’, to use the language of the time, and that also that James claims that it was all a joke and they had courted Arabella not seriously, but ‘irrationally and unduly, in a frolicsome, jocular, and facetious manner’. And that, again, ties us into performance cultures of the time, with gender presentation on the stage. And, I mean, I don't know if Kit, you can give some context of that.

Kit Heyam [00:37:39]

Yeah, I think what is so fascinating to me about this story is the multiplicity of it, both in terms of its trans history and the multiple motivations for gender nonconformity that we clearly have. Is this about expressing a sense of self? Is this about living an authentic intersex life as far as that's possible? Is it about performance culture, as you say? Is this the only way as a person assigned female at birth that I could possibly have a relationship with a woman? It could be about all of those things. And also, that this is trans history, ***and*** lesbian history, ***and*** intersex history all at once. And I think what's really important when we're talking about queer histories: we don't have to play these types of queer history off against each other. We don't have to fight over whether it belongs to one category or another. Actually, multiple types of people can feel community and solidarity with a historical story like this, and the more we can recognise that, the more we can tell stories of queer history that everyone can empathise with.

Matthew Storey [00:38:43]

When I've worked on this story of Arabella and James with colleagues at Historic Royal Palaces to present this story and this history to our visitors and our audiences, I've always encouraged them to take as open a view of the histories as possible. To really embrace, to go back to a phrase we looked at earlier, the queer possibilities of it because I think for our audiences and our visitors, that empowers them to understand queer histories in the past, and to start asking those really ***fascinating*** questions that are all here in that history.

Holly Marsden [00:39:24]

I think it's also so important to be open with it, like you said, to relate to as many people as possible. I think that it's so important that anyone can walk into our palaces and feel like they can personally connect to a story and we can see that in Arabella and James' story.

Kit Heyam [00:39:43]

 I think another important thing that this history makes us think of takes us back to the point I made at the beginning about how we shouldn't pretend we know people better than they know themselves. What happens to James is that his society tells him he should be limited by his body. So, a team of midwives non-consensually examine his genitals, tell him ‘you're a woman and you have to live in this particular way that is how women should live’. And that struggle to not be determined by what other people think about your body is a struggle that many people, especially trans people and women, still face today.

Holly Marsden [00:40:19]

I think it's also important to highlight that misogyny is kind of all over this history. The fact that women's sex – sex between women, was not even seen as actual sex, is indicative of how women were treated and how women experienced life. And I think that's still something that we see today, right? That people, women's sexuality is somewhat invalidated. And they completely invalidated James and James's identity by writing them off as a woman.

Matthew Storey [00:40:54]

And of course at the same time invalidated James and Arabella's relationship by declaring their marriage impossible and declaring them both never married and free to marry other people. That relationship was literally annulled, declared never to have happened.

 Holly Marsden [00:41:09]

It's really interesting to think about Arabella in this story too, not much evidence exists or remains from Arabella’s feelings towards this or why she began the process of annulment. But it's quite interesting to thinking about her positioning in this story.

Matthew Storey [00:41:30]

It would be amazing to know more about what her motivations were, what her thoughts were, and that just doesn't come through in the language of the court case as it survives.

Thinking about evidence and especially court cases, which are so often one of our main sources, rightly or wrongly, for queer experience in the past, I'd like to take us to the 20th Century and to look at a more modern story related to the Tower of London and the First World War. [Matthew’s tone becomes more serious, the pace of his speech slows].

This is a story that I researched a few years back. I found a reference to the life of Frederick Wright or Kathleen Woodhouse in a book on queer military history and then I followed up in newspaper reports of the time to get more detail of the story. Frederick Wright, who wished to be known as Kathleen Woodhouse, was a First World War soldier and a member of the Royal Fusiliers, the regiment headquartered at the Tower of London since 1685. What we know about their life comes from these newspaper reports of two appearances they made at Highgate Magistrates Court in June 1916. They had been arrested after causing a disturbance in their boarding house in North Finchley, and as they should have been with their regiment at this date, they were also charged with being a deserter from the Royal Fusiliers. The newspaper reports reveal that they disliked soldiering and soldiers and anything at all manly. They wore feminine clothes in court and asked to be called Kathleen Woodhouse. They had registered in their lodging house under that name and expressed a desire to enter into employment as a companion for a lady, a respectable occupation for a woman at that time. Distressingly, although their clothing was initially admired, they were laughed at in court, and the chairman of the court required that they return to the military.

We haven't yet been able to find out what happened to them next. Intriguingly, Kathleen did mention that after the war, they planned to return to living as a man, although I suspect they may have said this just to avoid further trouble, which is a tactic they use ***repeatedly***.

You can see that in all of their interactions with the court, with the police, they are ***desperately*** trying to avoid a court appearance and a return to the military. The newspaper records also give us interesting insights into their life, how they lived, and their domestic arrangements. And one thing I find really interesting is that their lodgings contained a photo of a music hall artist who posed as a woman, suggesting that Kathleen felt an affinity to broader queer cultures.

So again, this is a story that opens up a lot of possibilities. And Kit, with your work on trans histories, how do you see this story?

Kit Heyam [00:44:33]

[Kit speaks in a softer voice with sympathy.]

I think one important thing in looking at this story is to think about the context of why Kathleen gets so much less sympathy in the newspaper reports and the court than we might see Edward II getting in those early accounts of the murder. The First World War is a time when gender boundaries were being really strictly policed. To be a proper man is to adhere to conscription and go and fight. There's anxiety about the fact that women are taking on factory roles and therefore breaking a little bit out of the box of conventional femininity. So, there's a real need to reassert those strict gender boundaries. And I think it sounds like Kathleen is really falling foul of that. I think the other thing strikes me is the importance of thinking about the multiple possible motivations that Kathleen had for her gender nonconformity. It's clear that living as a woman enabled her not to have to fight at the front, and that may have been one motivation. It's equally clear that we shouldn't dismiss all of the possibility that living is a woman is what made sense to her and felt comfortable for her, ***just because*** it had that side effect.

Matthew Storey [00:45:52]

And we know also from a newspaper reports that Kathleen was estranged from their family. Two sisters are mentioned who want nothing to do with them ‘because of [their] effeminate ways’. So there was a high price to be paid, actually, for living as a woman.

Kit Heyam [00:46:10]

Again, I think that's evidence that there were other ways to get out of fighting at the front, right, which didn't involve living as a woman. It's significant that even at that high price, that's the route that Kathleen chose.

Matthew Storey [00:46:23]

And you do get a sense when you look at the newspaper reports, the way Kathleen talks about their clothing, a real sense of - [defiantly] this is the way she feels authentically herself. That, for me, comes very strongly from this evidence. It makes it a really difficult and quite unhappy story to tell.

[Matthew speaks with emotive reflection] I remember as I was uncovering more details about it I both felt... glad in some ways that I could give attention, I could share the story of someone who would otherwise just not be mentioned, especially not in a place like the Tower of London. That felt very positive. But at the same time, the distress that comes out in that story is really real and very difficult indeed. Another aspect that comes out when you read in these newspaper reports is how Kathleen had, either earlier that year or the year before, attempted to die by suicide. And again, that suggests that she might have been forced into the army because of that suicide attempt, which was at the time illegal, and I think that story really does bring home to me how when we're looking at the lives of queer people in the past, we are dealing with real people and that can lead us to look at some really difficult, difficult things and it really, I think, hits your ***empathy*** as a historian as well, when you are just looking at that level of distress and difficulty in the past.

It was one of the most human stories I've looked at and one of the most difficult ones I've researched. But yeah, I'm so glad to have done it. I wrote a blog post a few years ago, which is on the Historic Royal Palace's blog, where you can read more about Kathleen's story and I am glad that I allowed her voice to be heard and to be shared.

I think because this is a 20th century story as well, you can see in it the history of contemporary prejudices, as well as transphobia, homophobia, as well as misogyny that we have as part of our society today.

Kit Heyam [00:48:59]

Yes, the way that Kathleen is charged with giving false information, the way that the newspapers refer to her disguise, we're moving into a period in the 20th Century where the body is the source of truth and realness about someone which in the earlier periods we've been talking about was not straightforwardly the case.

And when you talk about misogyny, yes, this is really clearly an example of someone being at the mercy of 20th Century strict gender policing. And we definitely still see the impacts of that on people today.

Matthew Storey [00:49:34]

We're coming towards the end of our episode now and we've discussed some fascinating examples of queer history from our palaces. Perhaps this is a good time to ask – I mean this is a big question for you both, but how can these histories relate to us today? Kit, would you like to go first?

Kit Heyam [00:49:53]

Yeah, I think there's a couple of really important things about these histories. One of them is that a lot of the arguments against queer and especially trans rights today are based on the idea that this is something ***new***, that it has no history, and therefore either it's a new trend and we shouldn't take it seriously, or it's new threat and we should make laws to protect people from it.

These histories show us that that's not the case, and especially importantly, they show us that we haven't always thought that the body is how we should determine someone's gender. The other thing that's really important about this is this isn't just a liberating history for queer and trans people, I think it's liberating for everyone. The fact it shows us that the way we think about gender and sexuality now is not the way we've always thought about them, and therefore it doesn't always need to be the way that we think of them. We don't have to be limited by our bodies, by our genders, by the categories that we've been told to live with today. And this is a really exciting possibility I think.

Holly Marsden [00:50:52]

I think it's so important for Historic Royal Palaces to look and centralise these stories because they are relatable for many, many visitors to our palaces. And people who come to our palace may not relate with being a really, really famous singer like Arabella Hunt or a queen like Mary II, but they could relate to feeling desire for people who identify with the same gender as them or just feeling love in general. I think it's really important to highlight stories which people can feel a real human connection to and which also highlight the inequalities that queer people are facing today.

I think it is also important to highlight that studies of queer and trans histories aren't always celebrated. Recently, the course that I did for my Masters, which was a queer history course at Goldsmiths University of London, has been discontinued. There is an ongoing battle with higher education facilities to be able to study these histories. So, it's even more important for heritage spaces like ours to be centralising these stories and to be telling stories that people can relate to.

Matthew Storey [00:52:17]

I think it also highlights for me that the way we view sexuality and gender today isn't fixed, isn't necessarily the end point, but if it has changed so much over history, who knows how it's going to change in the generations ahead. And I think that is a really fascinating thing that looking at the past can suggest to us what are the queer possibilities of the future, as well.

[The stately theme music fades in]

Thank you, Kit and Holly, so much. It's been incredibly valuable to talk about queer possibilities and to bring this research to so many more people. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast today.

Kit Heyam [00:53:01]

Thanks so much, I've really enjoyed this conversation.

Holly Marsden [00:53:08]

Thank you so much for having me. I love being on the podcast, and this is such an important and wonderful topic to discuss for Pride Month.

Matthew Storey [00:53:17]

I couldn't agree more, it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you like this.

And thank you listeners, as well, for continuing to support us so that we can keep telling important stories from our palaces. We hope you enjoyed hearing about this topic from our incredible experts and happy Pride to all our listeners who are celebrating. If you like learning about these types of topics, please let us know by leaving us a review and tell us what you'd like to hear. We really appreciate all your feedback, loyal listeners.

[The theme music fades out.]

[End of episode]