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Robert Boyle's Sexuality

Adriano expressed interest in Robert Boyle's repression of his sexuality, so as I read about Boyle's life and family, I looked in particular for information about this topic and situations that could be used to dramatize it. I have then written a short scene incorporating these episodes from Boyle's life.

Robert Boyle had an unusual attitude toward sexuality. Early in his life, while traveling through Europe, he had a conversion experience.

"In 1639, Boyle and his brother Francis embarked on a continental Grand Tour under the guardianship of the French scholar Isaac Marcombes. At some point during these travels, Boyle was frightened almost out of his wits by a violent thunderstorm which moved him to terrified contemplation of death and his own lack of preparation for it, bringing on such a depression that he (rather paradoxically) contemplated suicide. His cure for this was to dedicate himself to the study of religion, a resolution to which he conscientiously adhered for the rest of his life." (Literary Encyclopedia)

Most of Boyle's early writings deal with theology and ethics instead of natural philosophy. He studied many of the Greek and contemporary philosophers, and he took their ideas and expanded upon them to fit his conception of a man's relation to God. One of his ideas was that worldly love should be turned from objects of carnal desire and directed instead toward God.

"Boyle has written [*Seraphic Love*] as a corrective to what he regards as his friend's preoccupation with carnal love to the neglect of God. Boyle writes... 'The letting out our love to mutable objects doth but enlarge our hearts, and make them the wider marks for fortune, and capable of being wounded in more places...' The unintended irony and hence the pathos could hardly be thicker.

But as the next part of the sentence suggests, these sentiments cannot be dismissed as priggish and nothing more. Boyle continues, ‘for although love may, as well make us participate the joys, as resent the infelicities of the parties loved, yet even the least unhappy persons do in so fickle and so tempestuous a sea, as we all find this world, meet with so many more either cross-winds, or stormy gusts, than prosperous gales....’ Carnal love has its ‘joys’ he says, but its sorrows are greater because it involves a man intimately in the life of his beloved, thus making him subject to the hand of fortune as it works not only in his life, but in hers as well. So in such a world as Boyle has experienced and conceives his to be where, as has been shown, fortune is more hostile than benign, carnal love conduces to more pain than pleasure.... The only remedy to the stings of fortune that carnal love, like all other worldly things, would bring, was resort to and love of God.” (Jacob 83-84)

It is unclear whether Boyle speaks from personal experience here or from an abstract appreciation of how love of another can cause sorrow. He wrote *Seraphic Love* at the age of 21, certainly old enough to have been in love or been rejected in love. Yet no records exist of any women with whom he had a romantic relationship and I have not attempted to create such a situation. Yet what effect does Boyle’s attitude toward sex have on the rest of his life? Malcom “Oster has argued that the aversion to sexual encounters... can be linked to Boyle’s choice of science as a career” (Hunter 17). Oster “summarizes various of Boyle’s letters to imaginary correspondents on sexual matters... attacking the use of make-up, for instance, or asserting that breasts were meant for feeding infants rather than to be exposed for the purposes of flirtation. He goes on to argue that these texts reflect Boyle’s reaction to a sexual awakening on his part, reinforcing an impulse to solitariness going back to his childhood and explaining his choice of science as a career” (23). Hunter, however, goes on to refute this claim, objecting first “because it is reductionist, implying that science was a compensation for sexual inadequacy on Boyle’s part” (24). In addition, Hunter cites a text contrasting “the delights of philosophy with the trivialities of fashionable conversation... Oster says [Boyle opposed] *natural*

philosophy [to this fashionable conversation], but Boyle does not: in fact, what Boyle held up by contrast was ‘the Company of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca... who teach me to vanquish Fortune, to subdue Nature & master my owne Passions; & whose Company I never leave but Wiser or Better’” (24). Whatever effect Boyle’s sexual attitudes had on his eventual career choice, they are clearly developing during his tour of the continent, as he writes of them soon after his return to England.

What events could have shaped Boyle’s attitude toward his own and others’ sexuality? The religious teachings of the time, combined with his conversion provide one potential explanation. Another possibility arises when one considers “one of the very few sexual encounters of Boyle’s life” (Stanford Encyclopedia). After spending almost two years in Geneva, Robert and Francis Boyle traveled with Marcombes over the Alps to spend the winter of 1641-2 in Florence.

“Writing about himself in the third person as Philaretus (sometimes P., or Filaretus) he says:

Nor did he sometimes scruple, in his Governor's Company, to visit the famousest Bordellos; whither resorting out of bare Curiosity, he retain'd there an unblemish't Chastity, & still return'd thence as honest as he went thither. Professing that he never found any such sermons against them, as they were against themselves. The Impudent Nakednesse of vice, clothing it with a Difformity, Description cannot reach, & the worst of Epithetes cannot but flatter. But tho P. were noe Fewell for forbidden Flames, he prov'd the Object of unnaturall ones. For being at that Time not above 15, & the Cares of the World having not yet faded a Complexion naturally fresh enuf; as he was once unacompany'd diverting himselfe abroad, he was somewhat rudely presst by the Preposterous Courtship of 2 of those Fryers, whose Lust makes no distinction of Sexes; but that which it's Preference of their owne creates; & not without Difficulty, & Danger, forc't a scape from these gown'd Sodomites. Whose Goatish Heates, serv'd not a little to arme Filaretus against such Peoples specious Hypocrisy; & heightn'd & fortify'd in him an Aversenesse for Opinions, which now the Religieux discredit as well as the Religion.” (Stanford Encyclopedia)

This story of attempted rape in Florence may help explain Boyle’s aversion to sex. His protestations of disgust and claims of retaining “an unblemish’t Chastity” sound

defensive, especially in writing, but given his general attitude are probably accurate. I have not used this story directly, but instead have taken the setting and changed the story in order to take advantage of another interesting fact about Boyle's tour of the continent.

Robert Boyle's father was Richard Boyle, the first Earl of Cork, one of the richest men in England at the time. He had made his fortune somewhat controversially in Ireland, and sought to secure his social position by marrying his children into the more socially secure English nobility. In 1638 he secured a marriage for his son Francis, closest in age to Robert, to Elizabeth Killegrew, one of the queen's maids of honor (Canny 57). After their marriage, "the couple were then ritually bedded by the king and queen but, on Cork's insistence, the sixteen-year-old Francis, who was considered too young for the physical strains of marriage, was quickly separated from his wife and sent to travel in France with Robert his younger brother" (Canny 57). Indeed, Francis had been ill for most of the summer of 1639, and Richard Boyle sought to delay the wedding because of "fear for his son's health which he thought would be impaired by sexual intercourse at such a tender age" (89). Francis was 16. When the king and queen insisted that the marriage take place in October, the Earl of Cork "safeguarded his son's health by separating him from his bride within four nights of marriage and sending him, in company of his younger brother Robert, on the Grand Tour" (89). The contrast between Francis' desire to return to his wife and Robert's philosophical objection to sexuality provides the focus for my scene.

I was able to work one final element only partially into the scene. Boyle's growing interest in science is often attributed to his presence in Florence at the time of Galileo's death. The fact that his experiences with prostitution occurs in Florence,

together with his fifteenth birthday falling two days after Galileo's death made the coincidence too tempting to pass up. Another potential character to insert into a scene is John Milton. Milton was connected to the Boyle family: Robert Boyle's eldest sister, Alice, moved to London after her husband's death in September 1642 "where, in the household of their exiled aunt Lady Ranelagh, [her] children were instructed by John Milton who was employed as their tutor" (Canny 48). Milton traveled to the continent in 1638 (Chambers), and the potential exists to create a scene with Milton and Robert Boyle. Perhaps Milton and Mascombe, the two tutors, knew each other. However, I was not able to fit this tangent into my scene.

Robert Boyle spent much of his childhood away from most of his family, but together with Francis. The potential for an interesting relationship exists there. I've written a scene about their different attitudes toward sexuality. Comments are appreciated: the scene is still a work in progress.

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Scene

Characters: Robert Boyle (age 15), Francis Boyle (age 18), Isaac Marcombes (age 34), Corrado Poliziano (age 38)

(Florence, January 10 1642. The home of a friend of Marcombes. A table is spread with the remains of supper. The room is well lit with candles. Robert sits at a desk, a book open in front of him, as well as papers, a pen and inkpot. Also on the desk is a small telescope. He writes notes on the papers as he reads. The door opens and Francis enters)

Robert: *(looks up)* Marcombes and Poliziano are out looking for you. *(Francis hangs up his coat and doesn't answer)* You missed supper again. *(Francis walks over to the table, sits down and starts scrounging food)* Where were you?

Francis: Doesn't concern you.

Robert: *(pause)* You get to clean that up.

Francis: Oh good. Another reason to come back early next time.

Robert: You said you were going to be back by five. We waited for you. The chicken got cold.

Francis: God spare us!

Robert: Francis! Don't take the Lord's name in vain.

Francis: Oh, spare me. You sound just like Marcombes.

Robert: Marcombes is right.

Francis: Uh huh.

Robert: *(pause)* Where'd you go?

Francis: *(looks at Robert for a bit)* You're too young to understand.

Robert: *(stands)* You were at the bordello again, weren't you?

Francis: And what would you know about that, huh?

Robert: I saw you there last week.

Francis: Oh, so you were there too?

Robert: I... I was just curious!

Francis: (*smirks*) Curious, huh? Well, well. Good for you. I am a bit surprised though.

Robert: I didn't do anything like that! I just went to see what it was like.

Francis: Watching, huh?

Robert: Stop it! (*pause*) It's disgusting, that's what it is.

Francis: No. Actually, it's not.

Robert: Have you no shame? You just sit there, flouting your sins. You're married, remember? Or did you forget Liz? That girl you keep--

Francis: (*stands*) Yes, I'm married. Joined in blissful matrimony for two years, two months and seventeen days. And how much of that time did I spend with my wife? Huh? A month? Did she come with us here to Florence? Or to Geneva? Was she permitted to travel with her husband? No! Four days! Our revered father allowed us three nights together. Three damn nights. According to him, sex isn't good for a young man's health. And two years without it is! I'd like to see him try that. Fifteen children, pff. (*sits back down*) You don't know what it's like, Robert. Sometimes I wish I hadn't ever married Liz. Then I wouldn't know what it's like. I'd be able to pay attention to Marcombes. Maybe actually learn something instead of just sitting there with a hornet in my head. But... Oh, God!

Robert: (*pause*) You shouldn't swear, Francis.

Francis: (*lunges for Robert*) Insolent prick! Come here!

Robert: (*dodging*) Just think what you could do with all that energy if you just turned to God. Human love is nothing compared to the love you should bear for God.

Marcombes: (*entering, followed by Poliziano*) What are you two doing now? Chasing each other around Corrado's dining room? For shame! And where have you been, Francis? We've been looking all over for you.

Francis: Um...

Marcombes: Well?

Francis: I took a walk.

Marcombes: Hmph. (*stares at Francis for a moment, then turns to Robert*) I've got some sad news, Robert. I'm sorry to end your birthday this way, especially after how excited you were with the telescope earlier, but... Galileo died yesterday.