

‘A Divine Attraction between Your Soul and Mine’: George Whitefield and Same-Sex Affection in Eighteenth-Century Methodism

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***Abstract:** This article considers the blurred lines between male friendship and homoeroticism in 18th-century Methodism. It considers possible cases of transgressive male sexual acts among Methodist preachers, evaluates contemporary claims made about the sexual proclivities of leading Methodists, and considers the social location of 18th-century Methodism as a dangerous underworld of deviant religiosity whose centres of activity were often perched on the edge of sites of social exclusion. The ‘effeminacy’ of George Whitefield and the lack of heterosexual passion in his life are offered as a mode of examining the homosociality that existed within the heteronormative world of 18th-century Methodism.*

The eighteenth century is now generally considered by historians to evidence a change in attitude toward transgressive male sexuality. Differences of interpretation coalesce around those who stress crime and punishment in relation to ‘sodomy’ (a term which had a broad meaning encompassing a range of sexual behaviours), and those who stress gradual toleration of such behaviour.¹ Then there is the question of whether the period sees a shift from considering transgressive male sexuality in terms of particular actions to understanding them in terms of self-identity and the origins of a sub-culture.² Those who stress criminality focus on the legal system with its penalties for particular acts performed by putatively debased persons seen as perverse and deserving of social rejection and legal penalty. The fact that the churches developed their present attitudes toward same-sex attracted people in the eighteenth century context of the criminalisation of sexual acts is significant because it means the air of ‘criminality’ was associated with same sex activity (at least for men – lesbian relationships

*I am grateful to Jasmine Dawson, William P. Gibson, and Peter S. Forsaith who looked over drafts of this article and offered valuable advice.

¹ T. Hitchcock, *English Sexualities, 1700-1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), ch. 5.

² W. Gibson and J. Begiato, ‘The Church, Sodomy, and Same Sex Desires,’ in W. Gibson and J. Begiato (eds), *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century: Religion, Enlightenment and the Sexual Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 195-196.

seem to have been given a free pass, legally speaking). Now that same-sex relationships no longer bring criminal penalty, the conversation has opened up in other directions. Those who stress a move toward ‘self-identity’ point to the underground ‘molly culture’ in which same-sex attracted men met together in secret to socialize and perform clandestine same-sex weddings that parodied heterosexual unions before consummating those unions.³ The broad consensus is that in the premodern world there existed ‘homosexual’ behaviour but not ‘homosexual’ identity.⁴ According to William Gibson and Joanne Begiato, ‘For the most part, the prevailing view in the long eighteenth century was that male same-sex activities were a form of lust, the result of loss of self-control, rather than a specific personal identity.’⁵ In such a world, any devout Methodist with feelings of same sex attraction would be unlikely to have felt free to act on such feelings. Netta Murray Goldsmith has estimated that of an English population of five million in 1700, 5% or 250,000 may have been same-sex attracted.⁶ Though only a crude estimate, made in the absence of reliable statistical data, one could legitimately extrapolate such a figure from today’s figures. A large scale popular movement such as Methodism must have had its share of same-sex attracted members.

That the Methodist preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770), the greatest evangelist of his era and a meteoric celebrity in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world may have been same-sex attracted would be for some a startling claim.⁷ This article will not make that claim, but it will argue that if one were looking for an example of a prominent religious figure of the

³ R. Norton, ‘The Gay Subculture in Eighteenth-Century London,’ *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook* <http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/molly2.htm> accessed 23 August 2017. Norton discusses the emergence of ‘molly culture’ but resists the idea that it should be seen as the ‘birth’ of gay subculture.

⁴ K. Philips and B. Reay, *Sex before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Polity Press, 2011), 61.

⁵ W. Gibson and J. Begiato, *Sex and the Church*, 198.

⁶ N.M. Goldsmith, *The Worst of Crimes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 10.

⁷ Similar claims have been made of Abraham Lincoln and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. C.A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (Free Press, 2005); C. Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014). Marsh’s biography has been criticised for its inaccuracy and the claim that Bonhoeffer and his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge were lovers seem directly contradicted by Bethge’s own testimony. See C. Gremmels, W. Huber, eds., *Theologie und Freundschaft* (Munich: Kaiser, 1994), p. 15f. cited at *The Bonhoeffer Centre.org* http://thebonhoeffercenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=37%3AAschlingensiepen-on-metaxas-and-marsh&catid=21&Itemid=263 accessed 23 August 2017

eighteenth-century who may have been same sex attracted, one could not go past Whitefield. The language of affection, and particularly of male-to-male affection, needs to be taken into consideration in undertaking such an investigation. Such language may have conveyed different meanings in the eighteenth century than it does today. To long for the love of a dear male friend may simply have been an expression of platonic affection.⁸ For a man to hold hands with another man while walking in the fields would not necessarily convey any homoerotic intent. Bed sharing between men was not unusual but was more of a practical necessity than anything libidinous. George Whitefield bathed with a male student friend while at Pembroke College, Oxford, but perhaps this was common enough not to have raised eyebrows.⁹ Philips and Reay in *Sex before Sexuality* have suggested that the ‘dividing lines between homosociality, homoaffectivity, and homoeroticism should not be drawn too crudely.’¹⁰ Sodomy, male friendship, affection, and effeminacy are not necessarily coterminous sites of inquiry.

Peter Forsaith has investigated the ‘molly culture’ in Oxford during the time that founding Methodists George Whitefield and John Wesley were there.¹¹ He notes how, in 1732, Wesley came to the defence of Thomas Blair incarcerated in the Bocardo prison on charges of ‘sodomy’ (a term used quite indeterminately in the eighteenth century to refer to a range of deviant sexual acts). While not defending his actions they raised concerns with the

⁸ See the discussion in ‘Men of Feeling: Natural and Spiritual Affection in the Lives of the Preachers,’ ch. 3 of P. Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 83-126. Also see G.E. Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) for a study of the emotional intimacy between men during the eighteenth century.

⁹ B.S. Schlenther, ‘Whitefield’s Personal Life and Character,’ in G. Hammond and D. Ceri Jones, eds. *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

¹⁰ Philips and Reay, *Sex before Sexuality*, 79.

¹¹ P. S. Forsaith, ‘Moorfields, Mollies, and Methodists: The Coincidence of Two Divergent Subcultures in Eighteenth-Century England,’ an unpublished paper presented at the 12th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 2007. <https://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/2007-2-forsaith.pdf> accessed 23 August 2018. I have also consulted the unpublished expansion of this earlier paper, P.S. Forsaith, “‘Too Indelicate to Mention’: Transgressive Male Sexualities in Eighteenth-Century Methodism.’ I am heavily indebted to these papers for much of the material in this article.

Vice-Chancellor about the inhumane treatment of Blair.¹² In addition to visiting the convicted Blair in prison, Wesley also helped him with his defence when it came to trial. There are eight references to Blair in Wesley's diary for a single year.¹³ In December of 1732, the Rev Thomas Wilson expressed disapproval of Wesley's support for Blair asserting that it had damaged the reputation of the Oxford Methodists.¹⁴ Forty-six years later, in 1778, Wesley's actions were still being remembered and ridiculed in satirical literature.¹⁵

Men having sex with other men was common enough in English colleges as to be a more or less expected occurrence. Around the same time as Blair's arrest, the Rev John Pointer, chaplain of Merton College for forty years, was forced to leave after a student complained that the chaplain had plied him with drink and 'offered some very indecent things to him. He [had] been long suspected of Sodomitical Practices, but could never be fairly convicted of them.'¹⁶ Robert Thistlethwaite, Warden of Wadham College (known colloquially as 'Wadham Sodom'), was dismissed under similar circumstances to Pointer only a few years later which proved to be only the tip of the iceberg.¹⁷ In 1715 it was claimed that 'among the chief men in some of the colleges sodomy is very usual and...it is dangerous sending a young man that is beautiful to Oxford.'¹⁸

James Oglethorpe, who established the mission to Georgia in which Whitefield and the Wesleys both participated, brawled with a 'Linkman' in 1722 while mixing with disreputable company in a 'Night-House of evil Reput'.¹⁹ 'Link-boys' were teenagers who would escort

¹² C.L.S. Linnell (ed), *The Diaries of Thomas Wilson, D.D.*, entry for Wed 12 Nov 1732 (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 81.

¹³ V.H.H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 184-85.

¹⁴ Linnell (ed), *Diaries of Thomas Wilson*, 81.

¹⁵ 'With Tears you cleans'd Bocardo from all Sin / And Lodg'd in Stews to lay the fiend within.' *Perfection, A Poetical Satire* (London: J. Bew, 1778), 8, cited in Gibson and Begiato, *Sex and the Church*, 215.

¹⁶ Linnell (ed), *Diaries of Thomas Wilson*, Thurs 30 Nov 1732.

¹⁷ G. Midgley, *University Life in Eighteenth-Century Oxford* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 89-90.

¹⁸ Diary of Dudley Ryder, 1715, quoted in Hitchcock, *English Sexualities*, 64.

¹⁹ *London Daily Journal* 25 April, 1722, cited in Forsaith, 'Too Indelicate to Mention,' 7. Charles Wesley noted Oglethorpe's reputation for philandering, S.T. Kimbrough, Kenneth G.C. Newport, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley M.A.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008, 2 vols), vol. 1: 1-45.

people home from the theatre or coffee house carrying a light to assist their passage but had a reputation also for being ‘rent-boys’ who hired themselves out for sexual favours. Peter Forsaith raises the question of whether the gold coin at the centre of the dispute may have been some kind of commercial exchange for services rendered.²⁰ At the very least, such incidents shows that there were people close to the Methodist movement, such as Oglethorpe, and Methodist leaders themselves, who were familiar to some extent with a world marked by transgressive sexual acts.

It is easy to forget that the label of ‘Methodist’ was originally a derogatory one carrying the suggestion of a socially dangerous underworld of deviant religiosity often seen as a threat to the stability of the existing religious establishment. The term has changed meaning over time as indeed have terms related to same-sex attraction. Contemporary assumptions about what it means to be gay should not be applied indiscriminately to the eighteenth century. The word ‘gay’ carried no connection to same-sex attraction in the eighteenth century and ‘homosexual’ did not even appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1892. The concept of ‘sexual orientation’ was quite absent from eighteenth-century understandings. As noted earlier, transgressive sexual acts between persons of the same sex were understood in terms of the criminal code. A ‘sodomite’ was one who had committed an act deemed to be both immoral and illegal but was otherwise understood to be a member of wider society and not one who belonged to a particular subculture or who had a particular sexual orientation. Some have identified a remarkable degree of tolerance of same-sex practices throughout Christian Europe right through to the medieval period.²¹ Mary McIntosh has argued that for much of the history of the West, homosexuality was considered as performing a ‘social role’ rather

²⁰ Forsaith, ‘Too Indelicate to Mention,’ 7-8.

²¹ J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

than as being an ‘orientation.’²² The ‘notion of exclusive homosexuality’ only emerges in England in the eighteenth century.²³ Tim Hitchcock concludes that ‘the majority of eighteenth-century men who committed sodomy did not think of themselves other than as ordinary, everyday members of their society. They did not belong to a sub-culture, nor did they have a distinctive self-identity’.²⁴ So in Whitefield’s Britain a ‘sodomite’ was not defined by his ‘nature’ or ‘orientation’ but rather by the ‘acts’ he performed, acts which increasingly came to be regulated by criminal law.²⁵

At the same time it is clear that there were those who participated in an active ‘molly culture’ on the fringes of British society and important centres of Methodist activity were perched on the edge of such sites. Wesley’s London Headquarters at the Foundery was situated near Moorfields, the city’s largest cruising area, containing within its precincts the notorious ‘Sodomites walk.’²⁶ An active ‘molly culture’ existed also in Bristol near St James and the Horsefair where Methodism was headquartered in the south-west.

As ‘enthusiasts’, the Methodist movement as a whole was regarded by many as socially transgressive in the Augustan age of ‘polite society’ threatening, as it did, the integrity of the national church. So Methodists occupied coterminous social space with other marginalized groupings. This proximity to the areas of molly activity may signal no more than that these low areas of town functioned both as the seat of the vices against which the Methodists were urging people to flee from the wrath to come, and also as a sanctuary for the ecclesiastically dispossessed.²⁷

²² M. McIntosh, ‘The Homosexual Role,’ in K. Plummer, ed. *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 33. McIntosh’s article was first published in *Social Problems* 16:2 (Fall 1968): 182-192.

²³ McIntosh, ‘The Homosexual Role,’ in Plummer, *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, 36-38.

²⁴ Hitchcock, *English Sexualities*, 63.

²⁵ The Offences against the Person Act of 1861 made ‘sodomy’ a crime and this would remain law until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967.

²⁶ R. Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830* (Stroud: Chalford Press, 2006), 125.

²⁷ Forsaith, ‘Too Indelicate to Mention,’ 18.

In *Evangelist of Desire*, Henry Abelove has investigated the erotic, and to a limited extent the homoerotic elements of eighteenth-century Methodism.²⁸ He concludes that, while there was a sexually-charged religiosity at the heart of Methodist piety, ‘there is virtually no verbal evidence of sodomy in any of the early Methodists’ confessional diaries, journals or letters.’²⁹ This may be so, but the absence of self-disclosure does not prove the absence of transgressive acts on the part of some. The Whitefieldian preacher John Church, who served as minister of an Independent Chapel in Banbury and the Obelisk Chapel in South London was well known for his affairs with younger men and even officiated at ‘molly marriages.’ He was welcomed back into his pulpit after being released from prison after being convicted of sodomy.³⁰ His mentor Jeremiah Garrett, who, like Whitefield, became a preacher in the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, had been treated in hospital for sexually transmitted diseases and was described as a ‘notorious sodomite.’³¹

One needs to interpret coded language when reading primary source material, especially since transgressive sexual acts were usually considered ‘unspeakable.’ Where direct language is disallowed, euphemisms abound. A Methodist preacher could be dismissed from the Connexion for having committed ‘an unnatural act’ or a sin of the flesh ‘of great enormity’ and some degree of reading between the lines is permissible even for the most thorough of historians.³² John Lenton’s study of Wesley’s preachers notes that thirteen were expelled for immorality without specifying what kind.³³ There are, however, several instances which might suggest same-sex offences. Wesley found the ‘repeated acts of

²⁸ Abelove, *Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). Brett McInnely takes issue with Abelove’s reading of Wesley’s motives in *Textual Warfare and the Making of Methodism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 161.

²⁹ Abelove, *Evangelist of Desire*, 67.

³⁰ Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 363.

³¹ Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 363.

³² See the helpful data in J. Lenton, ‘Men Who Left the Wesleyan Methodist Ministry, 1791-1932: A Database in Progress,’ in D.J. Hart and D.J. Jeremy (eds), *Brands Plucked from the Burning: Essays on Methodist Memorialisation and Remembering* (Evesham: Wesley Historical Society, 2014), 168-196.

³³ J. Lenton, *John Wesley’s Preachers* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 291, 297.

immodesty' committed by James Perfect, 'that noisy, boisterous, self-conceited wretch,' who left the itinerancy in 1785, as too delicate to be named in feminine company.³⁴ Andrew Inglis was dismissed in 1795 for a 'shocking crime' and William Dieuaide in 1797 for 'reprehensible acts.'³⁵ Nathaniel Ward left Wesley's Connexion to join the Whitefieldian / Huntingdon Connexion and in 1791, the Countess of Huntingdon was warned by Thomas Young that Ward had 'too near approached a Line of Conduct, unnatural in itself and too indelicate to mention'. Young ends with the citation of Romans 1:27 (AV) with its reference to men who, 'leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.'³⁶ The preachers of the Birmingham District noted that the circumstances needed explaining to the Conference but that Kingston's 'conduct in this matter had been very vile.'³⁷ More explicitly, Charles Bradbury described as a 'Methodist preacher,' though not among Wesley's official list of itinerants, was accused at the Old Bailey in 1755 of 'that detestable crime not fit to be named in a Christian country, called sodomy.'³⁸ The charges were brought by an apprentice who claimed that he had been sodomised by Bradbury on several occasions including in the chapel. He was found not guilty but Forsaith suggests that 'the evidence of a young apprentice [may have been] discounted against that of a respectable master and teacher.'³⁹ John Lad, described as 'a Methodist Preacher' was executed at Peckham in April 1786 for 'an unnatural crime.'⁴⁰ John Kingston,

³⁴ Wesley, letter to Sarah Baker, in J. Telford (ed), *The Letters of John Wesley* vol. 8 (London: Epworth, 1931), 275.

³⁵ J.C. Bowmer, J.A. Vickers (eds), *The Letters of John Pawson* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1994), vol. 1: 149, 152n; J. Telford, *Letters* 8:68.

³⁶ T. Young to Lady Huntingdon, 11 April 1791 (Cheshunt Archive, Westminster College, Cambridge), cited in Forsaith, 'Too Indelicate to Mention,' 15.

³⁷ Minutes of a meeting of the preachers in the Birmingham District held July 1, 1807, cited in Forsaith, 'Too Indelicate to Mention,' 16.

³⁸ *oldbaileyonline.org*/ [ref t17550910-42], accessed January 2013, cited in Forsaith, 'Too Indelicate to Mention,' 16.

³⁹ Forsaith, 'Too Indelicate to Mention,' 16.

⁴⁰ R. Norton, 'Newspaper Reports, 1786,' <http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1786news.htm> accessed 23 August 2017.

who entered the Methodist ministry in 1791, was expelled by the 1807 conference on charges of sodomy and embezzlement.⁴¹

The Calvinist controversialist Augustus Toplady, who may have had theological reasons for wishing to blacken John Wesley's name, suggested in 1771 that Wesley 'once had a boil on a part that shall be nameless and which ... was ripened and cured by an application of *shoe-maker's wax*...' which was a coded accusation of a gay relationship with one of his preachers, the ex-cobbler Thomas Olivers, since 'shoe-maker's wax' was a slang term for a penis and 'shoe-blacks' were known to sometimes offer services as rent-boys.⁴² Though Toplady's accusation is probably groundless Wesley did have a very close relationship with Olivers, who managed Wesley's publishing enterprise and was his travelling companion. Both men shared the same grave plot, Olivers being interred with Wesley in 1799 eight years after the latter's death.⁴³ Phyllis Mack suggests that at least some male Methodist converts were in love with John or Charles Wesley. She found 'no letters from women to the Wesleys [that] convey the same 'intensity of romantic friendship' as those written by John Hutchinson to Charles Wesley.'⁴⁴ In 1752 he urged Wesley, 'write to me often and love me more, let no new convert be my rival...and admit no one to have a greater share in your affection than your poor ungrateful young man.'⁴⁵

Forsaitth suggests that John Wesley's attitude toward transgressive male sexualities may have been relatively lenient and that this greater openness had both a theological and a social basis.

Calvinism was not so lenient in adjusting to those who fell from grace while John

Wesley seems to have been more pragmatically aware of human failings, and so to

⁴¹ J. Lenton, 'Men Who Left the Wesleyan Methodist Ministry,' 186.

⁴² *Gospel Magazine* 1771/2, cited by P. Forsaitth, 'Too Indelicate to Mention,' 9. See also Gibson and Begiato, *Sex and the Church*, 212-13.

⁴³ Gibson and Begiato, *Sex and the Church*, 213.

⁴⁴ Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, 76-77.

⁴⁵ J. Hutchinson to C. Wesley, 31 Oct 1752, cited in Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, 76-77.

have been able to deal with them more flexibly. These might include divergent sexualities, although at the time these were not only scandalous but criminal offences and viewed as significantly sinful. It may be that his formative years spent in single-sex male environments (school and university) gave him some understanding of divergent human behaviour. Publications such as his ‘Thoughts on the sin of Onan’ [i.e. masturbation], which although largely an abridgement and translation of another work might be expected to pillory anything other than marital, reproductive sex, do not mention such issues as same-sex activity.⁴⁶

Advocates of same-sex marriage in the Methodist Church of Great Britain have appealed to Wesley along these lines but one should be careful of anachronism for the sake of a cause, even if the cause be deemed worthy. The view of Wesley as theologically disposed to greater leniency toward transgressive male sexuality should not be overstated. It is clear that he shared the abhorrence of such actions that was common among eighteenth-century clergy. In his *Word in Season: Or Advice to an Englishman* written in 1745, sodomy, along with the effeminacy of the English gentry, was among the reasons given for God having allowed the nation to have been brought to the brink of destruction through the Jacobite invasion of that year.⁴⁷ He considered Frederick II of Prussia, the worst ‘fiend incarnate’ that had ever been... ‘surely so unnatural a brute never disgraced a throne before... A monster that made it a fixed rule that no woman and no priest enter his palace, and that not only gloried in the constant practice of sodomy himself but, but made it free for all his subjects! What a pity that his father had not beheaded him in his youth and saved him from all this sin and shame.’⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Forsaith, ‘Too Indelicate to Mention,’ 16-17.

⁴⁷ J. Wesley, *A Word in Season: Or Advice to an Englishman* (London: 1745), 3-4; *Works* [Jackson edition] 11: 183-84.

⁴⁸ J. Wesley, *Journal*, 7 May 1789, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 24 Journals and Diaries VII (1787-1791)*. ed W.R. Ward and R.P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 132; *Journal* entry 26 Aug 1784, *The Works of*

We come now to consider George Whitefield against this backdrop of divergent sexuality in Methodism. While it is always dangerous for historians to attempt psychological portraits of long-dead people, some biographical background is necessary in considering Whitefield's personality. Whitefield was raised by a single mother, Elizabeth Edwards, after his father, Thomas, died when he was two years old. She ran the Bell Inn in Gloucester, a place Dallimore says 'could hardly have failed to abound with evil...all manner of humanity must have found [it] their stopping-place and the tavern must often have witnessed the sights and sounds of drunken degradation...many of the lowest of mankind made a hostelry a place of debauchery. It was in this environment with its unavoidable familiarity with the ways of sin that...Whitefield spent the first sixteen years of his life.'⁴⁹ Whitefield's own *Account of God's Dealings*, we are given a portrait of a sensitive young boy who when teased by his playmates is reduced to tears and runs home to seek solace in prayer.⁵⁰ Elizabeth Whitefield married again, when Whitefield was eight years old, to Capel Longden, but the marriage was not a happy one and ended in separation.⁵¹ As a young man, Whitefield was passionate about the theatre and was often cast in the role of a girl. Dallimore suggests that his physical appearance particularly suited him for such roles.⁵² Such gender swapping was a common enough feature of theatrical performances of the period. But Whitefield was particularly good at it perhaps because he had an effeminate way of carrying himself. He expressed a sense of shame about this later, in a manner appropriate for a Methodist preacher.⁵³

John Wesley vol. 23 Journals and Diaries VII (1776-1786). ed W.R. Ward and R.P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 328-29.

⁴⁹ A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century*. vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trist, 1970), 48.

⁵⁰ G. Whitefield, *A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend George Whitefield, A.B., from His Infancy to the Time of His Entering into Holy Orders (1739)* in George Whitefield, *Journals* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 33-72.

⁵¹ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1: 52-55.

⁵² Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1: 51.

⁵³ J.P. Gledstone, *The Life and Travels of George Whitefield, M.A.* (London, 1871), cited in Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1: 47.

In his *Short Account*, Whitefield recalled that in his teen years he fell into ‘an abominable secret Sin, the dismal Effects of which I have felt, and groaned under ever since.’⁵⁴ This ‘secret sin’ was deemed to be masturbation in Josiah Tucker’s anonymously published polemical work ‘Genuine and Secret Memoirs of the Arch-Methodist George Whitefield (1742).’⁵⁵ As a young man he ‘made great proficiency in the school of the devil’ and ‘affected to look rakish’ until he was ‘in a fair way of being as infamous as the worst of them.’

Upon his religious conversion in 1735, Whitefield disavowed his earlier love for the theatre, falling in step with the Puritan approach to the stage as wicked. At the heart of the Puritan and Methodist critique of the theatre was its effeminacy. William Pryne (1600-1669) had railed against ‘effeminate mixt Dancing, Dicing, lascivious Pictures, wanton fashions, Face-Painting, Health-drinking, Long haire, Love-lockes, periwigs, and women’s [hair] curling’ as perilous distractions.⁵⁶ Men affecting high voices and dressing in drag in order to portray women’s roles came under attack as a threat to masculine identity. Theatrical effeminacy was associated with ‘feeling,’ perceived as a feminine attribute over against ‘reason’ as the preferred masculine trait.⁵⁷

Whitefield’s biographer Harry Stout observes sees in Whitefield’s struggle with his love for the theatre...

...the first intimation of a person uneasy with his own masculinity as it was defined in the eighteenth-century codes of virility, and Spartan muscularity. Always protected by mother and elder siblings, Whitefield never possessed the physical courage and fearlessness so highly favored by the George Washingtons or British generals of his

⁵⁴ Whitefield, *Short Account*, 17.

⁵⁵ [Josiah Tucker], *Genuine and Secret Memoirs Relating to the Lifer and Adventures of that Arch-Methodist George Whitefield* (Oxford, 1742), 37-41.

⁵⁶ Cited in Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 23.

⁵⁷ Cited in Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 23-24.

age. He made many male friends, but his dealings with them were always affectionate and cordial, never intimidating. Descriptions of Whitefield's slight build, 'comely' appearance, and 'fair countenance' suggest one who adapted easily – perhaps too easily – to female parts. Later in life, he openly admitted his fears of physical confrontation, and, in moments of danger such as ship crossings or mob persecution, he confessed that his wife was braver than he. Only on the childhood stage or in the pulpit could he be fearless.⁵⁸

Stout's analysis needs to be set alongside studies of eighteenth-century notions of masculinity as undergoing adjustment to fit a newly emerging 'polite society' in which 'reason' and 'feeling' were less binary categories. Men were encouraged to express their feelings and to spend time in the company of women as a means of entering polite society. The rough masculinity of the sailor and the brawler was to be set aside in favour of the cultured sensibilities of the gentleman.⁵⁹

It is possible that the struggle Stout characterises as one between the theatre and Methodism masked a deeper and more foundational ambiguity regarding sexual identity and that the 'inner personality' that was suppressed but never annihilated was an unwanted same-sex attraction driving the young Whitefield to adopt ascetic practices such as celibacy as a control measure. Like his contemporary, the radical politician John Wilkes, who had a squint in one eye, Whitefield's cross-eyed appearance was often the butt of public ridicule. In the social physiognomy of the eighteenth century, a squint was thought to be a sign of duplicity

⁵⁸ H.S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 7.

⁵⁹ For example, P. Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), first published in 2001.

and sexual excess.⁶⁰ In spite of his cross-eyes stare he was known to be a handsome man. Charles Wesley considered him as personally attractive and that his sight defect was more than overcome by the comeliness of his other features.⁶¹ John Gillies, in his 1772 memoir of Whitefield, provides this description:

Mr. Whitefield's person was graceful and well proportioned: his stature rather above the middle size. His complexion was very fair. His eyes were of a dark blue colour, and small, but sprightly ... His features were in general good and regular. His countenance was manly, and his voice exceeding strong; yet both were softened with an uncommon degree of sweetness. He was always very clean and neat, and often said pleasantly that a minister ought to be without spot.' His deportment was decent and easy, without the least stiffness or formality; and his engaging polite manner made his company universally agreeable. In his youth he was very slender and moved his body with great agility...⁶²

One of the most frequently remarked upon features of Whitefield's behaviour was the remarkable emotional outbursts he displayed in both private and public spheres. Throughout his life he was given to fits of tears, displaying emotional outbursts unusual in a religious world that prized 'masculine' qualities such as the capacity to restrain emotion with reason and self-control.

⁶⁰ S. West, 'Wilkes' Squint: Synecdochic Physiognomy and Political Identity in Eighteenth-Century Print Culture,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33:1 (Fall 1999): 65-84. Stout refers, without citation, to Jon Butler's view that a cross-eyed stare was seen by some as a sign of supernatural influence. Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 41.

⁶¹ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1: 364, fn. 3.

⁶² J. Gillies, *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.*, London, 1772, Dublin, 1811, cited in Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1: 364-65.

At Pembroke, when despite a failure to produce required academic work his tutor treated him kindly, Whitefield ‘burst into Tears’. In his conflict with [John and Ralph Erskine] he ‘could scarce refrain from bursting into a flood of tears’. On other occasions they could be tears of joy: ‘My eyes gush out with water . . . but thanks be to God, they are tears of love.’ Wesley commented that often when preaching, Whitefield’s ‘head [was] as waters and his eyes a fountain of tears’. [Cornelius] Winter was unnerved by Whitefield’s recourse to unrestrained emotions: the times when he ‘exceedingly wept, stamped loudly and passionately, and was frequently so overcome, that, for a few seconds, you would suspect he never could recover.’⁶³

Eyewitnesses of Whitefield’s preaching often commented on his ‘effeminate’ manner and his ‘womanish’ behaviour. Tears in the pulpit, highly emotionally charged language, dramatic reenactments of biblical scenes, and appeals to the affections, later to become standard among revivalist preachers, were something quite new in the eighteenth century. While such characteristics on display in the pulpit could be seen as upsetting the heteronormativity of rational discourse and as dangerous and subversive of the social order they may also be seen as reflecting the polite sensibility of the era. In *Weeping Britannia*, Thomas Dixon’s history of crying in Britain, George Whitefield’s tears are set alongside the tears of Oliver Cromwell, Margaret Thatcher and many others to demonstrate that the ‘man of feeling’ has been a more enduring British trait than the stiff upper lip.⁶⁴ According to Carter, an earlier view of tears as indicating feminine weakness or even duplicity was replaced in the eighteenth century by an understanding of tears, including public weeping, as a sign, for both women and men, of an inner nobility and sensibility.⁶⁵

⁶³ Schlenther, ‘Whitefield’s Personal Life and Character,’ 27.

⁶⁴ T. Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶⁵ See the discussion on ‘Men in Tears’ in Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, 93-96.

Whitefield's enacting of both female and male characters was certainly confronting to many of his hearers. One observer even likened his style to that of a woman giving birth. 'Hark! He talks of a Sensible New Birth – then belike he is in Labour, and the good Women around him are come to his assistance. He dilates himself, cries out [and] is at last delivered.'⁶⁶

Whitefield suffered physical ailments and a nervous temperament that sometimes led him to question his strength and masculinity. Offering to serve as a missionary in the newly established colony of Georgia would call for an exhibition of perceived masculine virtues such as courage and physical exertion that would demonstrate his manliness. 'Georgia was no place for boys, and it was no place for women. It was romantic, dangerous, and above all manly.'⁶⁷ On the first of his seven transatlantic journeys bound for Georgia, the effeminate Whitefield was intimidated by the rough masculine culture on board ship but was determined to do what he could to win the crew over to the gospel.⁶⁸

Whitefield had very few meaningful relationships with women, and his marriage was entered into more as a business arrangement than out of any kind of romantic attachment. Early Methodists saw celibacy as the preferred state, leaving one free to serve God without distraction. Marriage however was allowed as a concession as it was 'better to marry than to burn with lust.' (1 Cor. 7:9) Early in his public career, in June 1739, Whitefield had a brief flirtation with Elizabeth Delammote, whom he referred to as 'Betsy'. At 29 she was five years older than Whitefield but he struggled with his feeling for her, uncertain of how love for God and love for a wife could be combined in the life of an itinerant preacher.⁶⁹ During his second and triumphant tour of the colonies his diary records his inner struggles as he

⁶⁶ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 40-43.

⁶⁷ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 31.

⁶⁸ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 54.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth was the sister of Charles Delamotte who accompanied the Wesleys to Georgia. See Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1: 357-68.

experienced ‘a deeper sense of my own vileness, than I have felt for some time.’⁷⁰ This sense of inward ‘vileness’ is a standard trope in Evangelical diaries but ought not to be dismissed as posturing. It is difficult, however, to identify the source of such feelings. Sexual ambiguity would certainly contribute to such a sense of inward uncleanness and agony of soul, though they could equally describe a heterosexual struggle. Schlenther includes in his recent biographical portrait of Whitefield that ‘the inescapable evidence suggests that there was some large gap in Whitefield’s life that while perhaps occasionally plugged, almost certainly was never filled.’⁷¹

On 5 April 1740 Whitefield wrote to Elizabeth Delamotte and her father proposing marriage. ‘The letters were so devoid of love or affection that they seemed, consciously or not, virtually guaranteed to elicit a rejection.’⁷² ‘You need not be afraid, of sending me a refusal,’ he assured her father, ‘For, I bless God, if I know anything of my own heart, I am free from that foolish passion which the world calls Love.’⁷³ He assured Elizabeth that his proposal was ‘not for lust’ and that ‘the passionate expressions which carnal courtiers use, I think, ought to be avoided by those that would marry in the Lord...I trust, I love you only for God, and desire to be joined to you only by His command and for His sake.’⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, his marriage proposal was rejected.⁷⁵ Luke Tyerman’s description of Whitefield as ‘as odd a wooer who ever wooed’ seems an accurate one.⁷⁶

Whitefield had greater success with another Elizabeth – Elizabeth James – introduced to him by his fellow Methodist preacher Howell Harris.⁷⁷ Whitefield’s marriage to Elizabeth James was more of a convenient arrangement contracted in a business-like fashion than it was

⁷⁰ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 164.

⁷¹ Schlenther, ‘Whitefield’s Personal Life and Character,’ 27.

⁷² Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 166; The proposal correspondence is discussed in Dallimore, vol. 1: 465-76.

⁷³ G. Whitefield to T. and Mrs. Delamotte, 4 April 1740, Whitefield, *Works*, vol.1: 159-60.

⁷⁴ George Whitefield to Elizabeth Delamotte, 4 April 1740, *Works*, vol.1: 160-61.

⁷⁵ Dallimore suggests that Wesley’s recent break with the Moravians may have affected the Delamottes’ attitude toward Whitefield. They were devoutly attached to the Moravian community. Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1: 473.

⁷⁶ Dallimore, *George Whitefield* 1: 368.

⁷⁷ It is an interesting coincidence that both of the women he proposed to had the same name as his mother.

a love affair. It enabled him to stave off the advances of younger women which frequently occurred for a man of such celebrity status as Whitefield, and it bought him the respectability of marriage and family. Certainly no suggestion of romantic feeling or even basic attraction appear in his letter to Gilbert Tennent: ‘I married...one who was a widow, of about thirty-six years of age, and has been a housekeeper for many years; neither rich in fortune nor beautiful as to her person, but, I believe, a true child of God, and would not, I think, attempt to hinder me in his work for the world.’⁷⁸ The marriage was consummated, as Elizabeth gave birth to one son (who tragically died at the age of four months), and subsequently experienced four miscarriages.⁷⁹

In fact Elizabeth James had earlier professed her love for Howell Harris, who had rejected her and told her she would be better suited to Whitefield instead who was looking for a wife who would keep house and help him manage the affairs of the Bethesda orphanage.⁸⁰ The couple lived much of their lives apart and exchanged letters in a formal and infrequent manner. Stout sees Whitefield’s choice of an unattractive wife for whom he had no sexual desire as a strategy to free him from an unwanted distraction from his calling.⁸¹ It seems at least as likely that the lack of sexual attraction for Elizabeth may have been due to a same sex attraction that could not have been named or perhaps even fully recognised by Whitefield. On one occasion, only two months into his marriage, he expressed a longing for the asexual condition of heaven, when ‘we shall neither marry nor be given in marriage but be as the angels of God.’⁸²

⁷⁸ G. Whitefield, *The Works of the Rev. George Whitefield* (6 vols). London: 1771-1772, vol. 1: 363.

⁷⁹ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2: 166-68 recounts the loss of her first child in infancy. See also Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2: 217-18, 290.

⁸⁰ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 169.

⁸¹ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 169-70.

⁸² Whitefield, *Works* 1: 355. The scriptural allusion is to Matthew 22:30.

Cornelius Winter lived for a time with the Whitefields as an office assistant and ministerial protégé of sorts. In his memoir he claimed that Whitefield ‘was not happy in his wife.’

He did not intentionally make his wife unhappy. He always displayed great decency and decorum in his conduct toward her. Her death [on 9 August 1768 at the age of sixty-five] set his mind at liberty. She certainly did not behave in all respects as she ought. She could be under no temptation from his conduct towards the [opposite] sex, for he was a very pure man, a strict example of the chastity he inculcated upon others.⁸³

In contrast to his cold relationships with women, his male friendships were warm and affectionate. Near the end of his time at Pembroke College, Whitefield established a close friendship with eighteen year old Lincoln College student Thomas Turner with whom he began to bathe privately.⁸⁴ Whitefield had also developed a very close friendship with John Edmonds, a founding member of the Fetter Lane Society, with whom he exchanged five letters in early 1738 that hold more amorous content than anything he ever wrote to the women in his life (with the possible exception of those to Selina, Countess of Huntingdon). Geordan Hammond, one of two co-editors of a forthcoming critical edition of Whitefield’s correspondence, has referred to these as ‘the most affectionate of any that I’ve seen from him.’⁸⁵ ‘Surely...there is a divine attraction between your soul and mine...and the very mention of your name fills me with a sympathy I never felt for anyone before ... May we continue lovers of God and one another for ever...oh dearest, dearest Mr Edmonds, ever,

⁸³ *Memoirs of Cornelius Winter*, Bath, 1808, cited in Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2: 471-2.

⁸⁴ G. Whitefield, manuscript diary, 29 February–26 June 1736, British Library Add. MSS 34068, 31 May 1736, 15, 23 April, 10 May 1736, cited in Schlenther, ‘Whitefield’s Personal Life and Character,’ 15.

⁸⁵ G. Hammond, email received 5 April, 2016.

ever, ever your own, G.W.’⁸⁶ Whitefield wrote to Mary Edmonds that she possessed what he ‘would be glad to have...your husband for a companion.’⁸⁷ On one of his seven transatlantic journeys, Whitefield and his young secretary and financial agent John Syms, who often served as a kind of personal valet, shared a cabin and slept in the same bunk.⁸⁸ Such a level of intimacy as evidenced in these relationships may strike the modern reader as remarkably homoerotic but again the language of affection is multi-layered and open to a range of interpretation.

It is not possible, given the available evidence, to prove conclusively that George Whitefield experienced same-sex attraction. The language of male-to-male affection in eighteenth century Britain may mislead us into mistaking homosociality with homoeroticism. The absence of the idea of ‘sexual orientation’ during the eighteenth century must also be taken into account. ‘Outing’ historical figures is a dangerous business since the temptation to find more in the sources than is warranted is always present. Historical research should not be driven by the present needs of the church (though it does inform them) and one must avoid anachronism. My own considered opinion based on the circumstantial evidence presented here, is that Whitefield was likely to have been same-sex attracted, but his ‘sexual orientation’ (to use a present category) did not damage his capacity to be the most effective evangelist of his age. In fact his effeminacy, his theatrical talent and love for performance, his flamboyance, and his emotional ‘womanish’ style in the pulpit were the very things that gave his ministry the dramatic power that attracted outdoor audiences of unprecedented size. While it is clear that transgressive male sexual acts occurred among Methodist preachers,

⁸⁶ Whitefield to J. Edmonds (10, 13, 22 January 1738), cited in Schlenther, ‘Whitefield’s Personal Life and Character,’ 15.

⁸⁷ Whitefield to M. Edmonds (31 January 1738), Graham C. G. Thomas (ed.), ‘George Whitefield and Friends: The Correspondence of Some Early Methodists’, *National Library of Wales Journal* (1990-2) 26:4, pp. 372, 374, 384, cited in Schlenther, ‘Whitefield’s Personal Life and Character,’ 15.

⁸⁸ Syms is referred to as a ‘friend who accompanied [Whitefield] on all his journeys and attended to his wants’ and by Luke Tyerman as Whitefield’s ‘major domo.’ The two had a falling out after Syms joined the Moravians in 1743. See *Letters of George Whitefield from the Period 1734-1742* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976) 546, fn. 339.

there is no indication that Whitefield ever engaged in such acts. The thesis that Whitefield's choice of a loveless marriage, was an indication of his struggle to make a choice between human love and divine love, is the most widely accepted explanation for the lack of heterosexual passion in his life. However, it is equally possible that unwanted feelings of same-sex attraction drove him to such a marriage as a means of controlling his more natural impulses. If that were the case, Whitefield would not be the first or the last gay man to adopt such a strategy as a means of negotiating a heteronormative world.