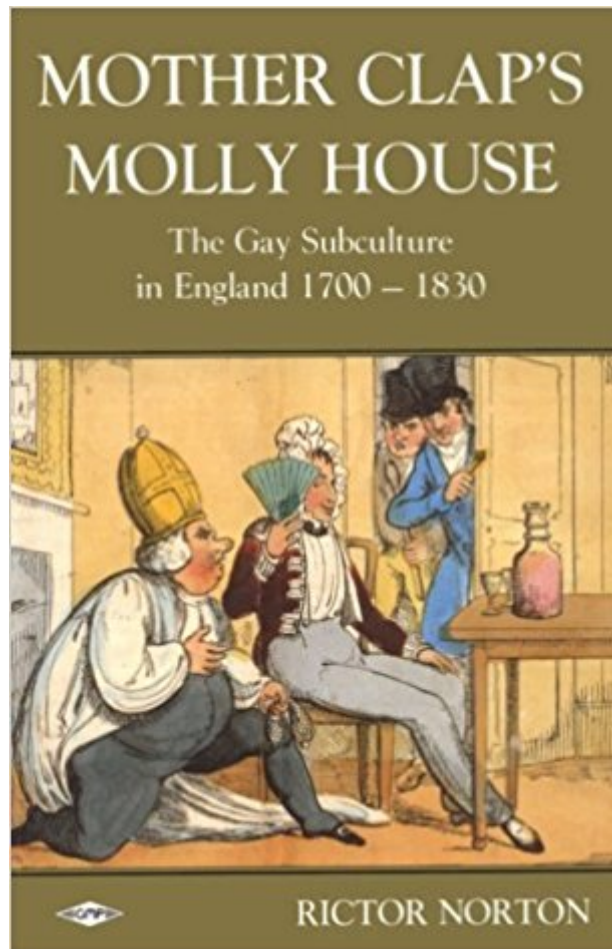




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Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture In England 1700-1830



Synopsis

This pioneering study breaks new ground in presenting the gay community's history by sporting one of its more distinctive branches—molly houses. In this updated edition, with two new chapters, Rictor Norton digs deeper into both past and present to rediscover the original foundations of the molly subculture and challenges traditional notions by suggesting that it was primarily composed of the working class—blacksmiths, milkmen, publicans, and shoemakers. More extravagant personalities are investigated as well, such as dramatists Samuel Foote and Isaac Bickerstaff, and the Rev. John Church, denounced for blessing gay "marriages." --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

"Seldom has a history of London been so entertaining . . . strongly recommended." ["Time Out"](#) "Lively and scholarly account of the underside of bygone London that concentrates on details, not theories . . . Norton gives a fascinating archaeology of London's homosexual past, its slang and its antics." ["Sunday Times"](#) "This richly enjoyable book chronicles official and popular hysterical ignorance, confronted by glorious human perversity." ["New Statesman and Society"](#) "To anyone interested in the development of sexual politics and social mores of the period, this book is an invaluable reference work . . . an absorbing read . . . not only an important sociological study, but it serves as a testament to the resilience and courage of this group." ["New Times"](#) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Rictor Norton gained his Ph.D. from Florida State University for a study of homosexual themes in English Renaissance literature, which became the basis for his book *The Homosexual Literary Tradition*. He edited a highly-acclaimed issue of *College English* devoted to *The Homosexual Imagination*. He moved to London in 1973 and was an editor for *Gay News* from 1974-1978. He is currently a freelance writer and editor. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

While fascinating and well researched, I wished it had more of an overview that synthesized the topics of study. Repeatedly got lost in the weeds of citations, quotations, names, and dates, skimming chapter after chapter without much meat to chew on. Very happy to learn a little about this era, but this book is more of an academic text and not really for a general reader.

Norton has focused on the Georgian Era, when he says that an organized gay subculture first emerged in London society. Prior to that, there may have been small groups at court or among a particular group of associates, but this was at least semi-public and quite extensive. Norton has done much of his research using legal records, which of course biases the study a bit, although he may have had little choice. Most of the men appearing in those records are working class, not aristocrats. There were gay clubs (molly houses), cruising grounds and secret signs for identification. According to Norton, there was an intense campaign against vice, including homosexuality in the first thirty years of the time period. After this, while sodomy remained punishable by death, Norton's account seems to show mixed feeling among the populace. One "respectable" woman calmly informed the court that one man shared dressmakers with her, and had asked to borrow her red suit. Many people seemed not to care, as long as the activity was discreet and didn't impinge on them, but this tolerance could be punctuated with terrifying incidents of arrest and violence. This time span which includes the popular Regency era, should be of interest to fans of that era as well as gay histories. Norton seems to me to be massaging the material a bit to fit what he wants to see. He avoids more problematic issues such as bisexuals, transsexuals and transvestites. He argues that the gay fad for dressing up in women's clothes corresponded to a period when masquerades were generally fashionable, which is true as far as it goes. One still wonders why the men almost always seemed to have dressed as women and had "maiden names." They could have dressed up like male icons, like the 1970s disco group The Village People. Norton also gives a brief recounting of the preceding history, beginning with the first secular sodomy laws in

the 1530s. I was annoyed by his take on the tale of the 2d Earl of Castlehaven, tried and executed for sodomy and rape in the 1630s. According to Norton, Castlehaven had homoerotic relationships with his servants, and invited and assisted them in raping and conducting adulterous liaisons with his own wife and his 12-year-old daughter-in-law. Norton (somewhat reluctantly?) concedes that Castlehaven deserved to be punished for his wife's rape, but seems distressed that paying attention to his alleged violence against women might interfere with Castlehaven's status as a gay martyr. (Castlehaven denied participating in his wife's rape, and in engaging in sodomy. although he apparently did engage in homosexual activity. For a very different take on the case, see Cynthia's Herrup's *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven*, and Richard Rambuss' review of her book, *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven*. (Book Review): An article from: *Shakespeare Studies*.) Rambuss argues that this case is a stress point between women's studies and gay studies, and that applies to some parts of this book as well. What I find outrageous is that Norton defends not only consensual sex between adults, but also sexual assault. As a woman, I have had quite enough of the "relax and enjoy" school of rape theory. He informs us that the heterosexual rape rate was much higher; one would expect it to be nine times higher in absolute numbers, all things being equal, if ten percent of all men are gay. He then proceeds to tell us about two cases of rape, one which he thinks is false, and the other that he describes as being more humorous than horrible. I failed to be amused by it. He attempts to soften the homosexual aspects by arguing that the victim was perhaps angrier at being partially strangled (maybe that was the humorous part), than he was at being raped. He also tells a case of a man who threw a mail boy up against a gate and fondled him. I don't think that the mail boy deserves to be called a sneaky rogue for talking his way out by promising to meet the man in a week. The mail boy returned with reinforcements and the attacker was arrested. Stripped of all sexual connotations, it remains that the two victims were assaulted. In sum, I think that it was for the most part well-done and well-written, even if I ground my teeth through large parts of it. Hopefully, I will never meet Norton.

This is a serious and well-researched book on a little known chapter of history. Many authors could have taken the same material and produced a ponderously dull tome of purely academic interest, or a polemic for the disaffected. Despite the obvious depth of his understanding of the subject material, Norton manages to write in an easy, accessible style with frequent flashes of real wit. *Mother Clap* is a thoroughly worthwhile read for the serious scholar and the curious amateur alike.

I have never seen any other book on this period of gay culture. I wish they would republish it. I think it would sell very well.

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