

Frederick the Great's Sexuality – New Avenues of Approach

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Frederick the Great's sexual orientation provides an interesting case study; one that dissects the nature of power, temporality, and sexuality within the confines of elite Prussian eighteenth-century society. Analysis of this subject is significantly complicated by a deep web of adolescent repression which culminated in a level of prudence that still leaves modern scholars without a conclusive definition of Frederick's sexuality.¹ The sexuality of any human forms an important portion of their personality. Ignoring this facet for the sake of a convenient narrative is detrimental to understanding historical characters and the decisions they make.² Examining how Frederick expressed his sexuality and the inferences this renders about his character will generate a more nuanced understanding without being confined in a broad categorisation as a homosexual. For Frederick, this aspect has been neglected in no small part due to methods he undertook to hide portions of his nature from contemporaries and his legacy. A thorough investigation of the sexuality of Frederick the Great and its interrelations with his personality is therefore long overdue.

Frederick the Great, one of the most eminent men of his time, was not an obviously heterosexual man. His sexuality, which has only truly become a legitimate subject for inquiry within the last 60 years, has always been an integral component of his character, permeating from his adolescence unto his death. Despite ground-breaking works by German and Anglo authors in the last decade, the research has barely scraped the surface of what can be learned from Frederick and his sexuality. Scholars have elucidated the broad outlines of Frederick's sexual desires, without reaching definitive conclusions. The scholarship going forward must pursue pragmatic goals in response to this uncertainty – focusing on what we can learn without attempting to assign his sexuality to a definitive generalised classification.

Prior to the 21st century there has been only piecemeal discussion of Frederick's sexuality.³ The interest in the last decade has been ignited by the Tercentenary celebrations of Frederick's birth and the discovery of previously thought lost erotic poetry.⁴ It is only within

¹ Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, (Allen Lane: London, 2015); Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947*, (Penguin Books, 2006)

² Przemysław Bieńkowski et al., "Personality traits, gender roles and sexual behaviours of young adult males." *Ann Gen Psychiatry*. 15, (2016)

³ Jackson Shoobert, *Exploring Frederick (II) the Great's Sexuality in the wake of the Sexual Revolution*. (Unpublished Thesis, University of New England 2019)

⁴ Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 58, 62, 176, 179-180, 445-447; Reinhard Alings, "'Don't ask – don't tell' – war Friedrich Schwul?" *Friederisiko, Ausstellung*; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 187.

the works inspired by the Tercentenary, that dialogue concerning the acknowledgement of a queerness practiced by Frederick truly begins to become a common occurrence. This development is a newfound subject within the scope of the historiography.⁵

The argument that Frederick wore a psychological and political mask to conceal his true character has become more common in the historiography.⁶ Not enough attention has been given to this ‘masking’ and how it is entwined with Frederick’s sexuality. The interconnectivity is all but assured given the perceived deviant nature implicit in Frederick’s sexuality and the necessity of hiding it to avoid scandal. If Frederick maintained a clear sense of his present and future audiences, and how he approached them regarding politics, the arts and warfare, as argued recently, then it is entirely reasonable to assume that this would also extend to his sexuality.⁷

Recent discussions of Frederick’s sexuality have been coloured by an obvious desire to say with certainty that he was homosexual, with an undeniable dash of reasonable doubt.⁸ Given the constantly shifting tolerances and expression of non-heterosexual relations in the past it is important that misrepresentations are kept to a minimum.⁹ The difficulty presented with establishing certainty in matters of Frederick’s sexuality should not lead to ignorance. With this in mind, identifying his sexuality as an integral component of his character, and linking it to this argument of Frederick’s masking, will push the historiography further.¹⁰

References to Frederick in terms of homosexuality should not be dismissed as an attempt to lock his figure into a modern category. Instead the reader should look toward David Halperin’s terminology of homosexuality as “the specious unity of which all these other ideas shelter.”¹¹ In accepting that we cannot escape the “conceptual tyranny” of a term created far after the Frederick’s time; and acknowledging its inherent contradictions, the term homosexual can still prove analytically informative.¹² Placing Frederick in this theoretical structuring allows the use of the term ‘homosexual’ as a heuristic device without forcing a modern conception of homosexuality onto Frederick.

⁵ Shoobert, *Exploring Frederick (II) the Great’s Sexuality in the wake of the Sexual Revolution*.

⁶ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 189.; Pečar, Andreas, *Die Masken des Königs. Friedrich II. von Preußen als Schriftsteller* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016).; Lifschitz, Avi. “Philosophy And Political Agency In The Writings Of Frederick II Of Prussia.” *The Historical Journal*, 2020.

⁷ Christopher Clark, *Time and Power: Visions of history in German Politics, from the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich*, (Princeton University Press, 2019)

⁸ Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 58, 62, 176, 179-180, 445-447; Alings, ““Don’t ask – don’t tell” – war Friedrich Schwul?” (Munich: Hirmer, 2012); Burgdorf, *Friedrich der Große. Ein biografisches Portät*; Hahn, *Friedrich II. Von Preussen*

⁹ Hannah Smith and Stephen Taylor, “Hephaestion and Alexander: Lord Hervey, Frederick, Prince of Wales, and the Royal Favourite in England in the 1730s,” in *The English Historical Review*, Vol 124, Iss 507 (April 2009.) 296.

¹⁰ Blanning, *Frederick the Great*, 51; Shoobert, *Exploring Frederick (II) the Great’s Sexuality in the wake of the Sexual Revolution*

¹¹ H. G. Cocks, “Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality,” 1222; David Halperin, *How to do the history of homosexuality*, (Chicago, 2002), 107.

¹² Halperin, *How to do the history of homosexuality*, 107.

An example of this can be seen in Tim Blanning's discussion of Frederick's sexuality. Blanning suggests that a discussion of this topic must consider both a suggestion of Frederick's homosexuality and the potential detracting factors which rejects this hypothesis:

Unless a document can be found in which Frederick relates what he did, when and with whom, a residual doubt must remain. The cumulative weight of evidence, however, is difficult to resist.¹³

This caution exercised in avoiding zealous, unsupported inferences regarding Frederick's sexuality is exactly what the historiography needs – an analysis of Frederick that acknowledges the difficulties in penetrating his inherent complexity. American scholar of English literature and Women's studies Martha Vicinus argues 'histories that prioritize some presumed notion of sexual orientation limit our understanding and preclude more interesting and difficult questions.'¹⁴ Moving forward efforts must be exerted to extract more from the life of Frederick, defining new lenses of analysis that are of benefit to the study of both Frederick and historical sexuality.

The Frederick that the historiography glorifies is a man immortalised in history as a 'philosopher-king', whose Machiavellian absolutist political actions drove Europe and by extension – North America into war.¹⁵ There are aspects of his cultural aspirations that are central to certain works, though these have only become popular recently.¹⁶ A theory from Clark's *Time and Power*, that will be discussed later in this paper; highlights a keen awareness of his place within time which would manifest in an obsession with legacy that colours the image of Frederick left for the historian to interpret.¹⁷ His life can be bisected along numerous avenues of self-expression and external repression which with his sexuality in mind, can be seen through a new lens.

Frederick's identity was shaped by erudite pursuits in art, philosophy and high culture which were interests quick to manifest during adolescence – much to the ire of his infamously strict father Frederick William.¹⁸ Fearing the constant threat of the rod, Frederick grew wily to avoid punishment.¹⁹ The regular episodes of violence that erupted upon being caught by his father would teach the young prince to conceal his desires for fear of reprisal long before he

¹³ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 180.

¹⁴ H. G. Cocks, "Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality." *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 4 (2006): 1220; Martha Vicinus, *Intimate friends: women who loved women, 1778-1928*, (Chicago, 2005), xxii -xix.

¹⁵ Amusingly, Frederick penned a rebuttal of *The Prince* just months before his ascension and declaration of an unjustifiable war.

Frederick II of Prussia, *Anti-Machiavel*, (Newark Press. 2013);

A notable contribution to this rendition of Frederick is Thomas Carlyle, *History of Friedrich II. of Prussia*. Accessible at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25808> as of 27/2/21

¹⁶ Frederick II of Prussia, A. Lifschitz, and A. Scholar, *Frederick the Great's philosophical writings*. (Princeton University Press. 2020.); Giles MacDonogh, *Frederick the Great: A Life in Deed and Letters*, (St Martin's Griffin 2001)

¹⁷ Christopher Clark, *Time and Power*.

¹⁸ Blanning, *Frederick The Great*; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*

¹⁹ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 189.

assumed the throne.²⁰ This mask that was forged in childhood became effectively branded onto his face in the wake of the ‘Katte Affair’ and as a result has obscured his true character from posterity.²¹

This repression-forged identity and how it affects the Frederick presented to us in his correspondence and contemporary reputation has its origins in that moment.²² What remains to historians thus is a legacy of screening various aspects of character; the sexuality of Frederick, a subject that should by all means be an integral part of his actions, relationships, and personality. How these facets connect is fruitful grounds for further research.

On Defining Frederick’s Sexuality

Frederick’s historiography has experienced stronger discretion concerning the discussion surrounding sexuality than other subjects found in contemporary biographies.²³ The historiography has broken considerable ground on the subject in the last decades. Outside of contemporary defamatory publications from hostile sources, not limited to his father and Voltaire; evidence for connection between Frederick and the ‘effeminate homosexual’ is present, though not without its doubts. What writers have discovered has revealed a considerable amount of nuance to Frederick’s sexuality. Thus, the exploration of Frederick should seek to go beyond John Boswell’s three categories of ‘gay, straight, [and] bisexual,’ and instead pursue a social constructed identity divergent from traditional classification.²⁴ It must be acknowledged that Frederick’s position within the local royalty, his abusive upbringing and his strongly guarded personality all worked to generate a non-distinct sexuality that lays outside of more common generalisations.

Queer theorist David Halperin discusses five discursive traditions about homosexuality in his work *How To Do The History of Homosexuality*.²⁵ These touch on the traditions that western society has used to describe and neatly package the homosexual subclass over different time periods. Within these distinctions, we see numerous contemporary markers that apply to Frederick: the tendency towards French fashion, regarded as effeminate at the time, his embracing of life long male friendships, and the assumption that he engaged in homosexual relations. However, if we take on the nominalist stance that underlies social constructionist thought then we see invented categories using these tendencies to confine Frederick’s sexuality

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See below on page 7

²² The subject of Frederick’s mask is explored at length, with a focus on politics rather than sexuality in Pečar, *Die Masken des Königs. Friedrich II. von Preußen als Schriftsteller*

²³ Edward II received in-depth discussions on the subject of his sexuality as early as 1971, forty years prior to Frederick in H. Hutchinson, *Edward II*, (New York, 1971), pp 147-8.

²⁴ John Boswell, “Revolutions, universals and sexual categories,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the gay and lesbian past*, ed. George Chauncey, Martin Duberman, and Martha Vicinius (London, 1991) 17-31.

²⁵ David Halperin, *How to do the history of homosexuality*, (Chicago, 2002), 135.

into an easy to understand – though potentially inaccurate rendition of homosexuality at its most categorical.²⁶

The necessary approach to avoid the mistakes of prior historians is outlined by cultural historian Matt Houlbrook in *Queer London*. He argues that a large portion of histories with male homosexuals as the focus have been negatively affected by the notion of a unitary type of homosexual.²⁷ This assumption can only lead towards our modern-day conceptions reflecting directly back on subjects that should not be beholden to such anachronisms. It reflects that scholars must be concerned with how their modern views on sexuality affect their analysis, a far-reaching statement that affects all historical inquiries, notwithstanding the individual properties that Frederick displayed. As Boswell clarified in his work, the arguments between ‘essentialists’ and ‘social constructionists’ can be reduced to the epistemological battle between categorisation being a universal or nominal creation.²⁸ If sexual orientation definitions are universal, as ‘essentialists’ deem true, then we see that Frederick inverts the standard heterosexual orientation in some significant ways. These range from the shunning of his marriage without divorce nor heir to selection of numerous ‘favourites’ to be elevated to high government positions with seemingly no lineage, hired for merit and looks.²⁹

Berlin’s 18th century homosexual subcultures certainly existed, though it is far harder to grasp than other contemporaries in London and Amsterdam.³⁰ Steakley explains that this subculture is obscured by “a welter of metaphors,” that are popular in accounts on the subject, not unlike Frederick’s writing style.³¹ Early eighteenth-century Europe was undergoing a period of the reconceptualization of male sexuality. Heterosexuality in this time period had become “predominant, rather than as previously, the dominant, sexual paradigm.”³² Decades prior to Frederick’s lifetime it would not be uncommon to hear of men ‘embracing, kissing and sharing beds.’³³ Yet by the time Frederick’s early favourite Francesco Algarotti’s was in his prime, these interactions were regarded as effeminate by the public press.³⁴ This transition places Frederick in a time period of growing homosexual repression.

The motivation for obscuring a deviant sexuality in 18th century Europe is thus, particularly obvious. Especially given the recent events such as the Dutch sodomy trials of the 1730s and the slander and criticism Frederick, Prince of Wales faced in 1735 due to infamy

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ H. G. Cocks, "Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality," 1222; Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918-1957*, (Chicago, 2005), 118.

²⁸ Boswell, “Revolutions, universals and sexual categories.” 18-19.

²⁹ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 188-9.

³⁰ Steakley, ‘Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide’, 169-70.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Smith & Taylor, “Hephaestion and Alexander” in *The English Historical Review* 296.; Bodie A. Ashton, ‘Kingship, Sexuality and Courtly masculinity: Frederick the Great and Prussia on the Cusp of Modernity.’ In *ANU Historical Journal*, Vol II. Iss 1, (Australian National University 2019), 122-133.

³³ Smith & Taylor, “Hephaestion and Alexander” in *The English Historical Review* 296.

³⁴ Ibid, 297.

surrounding his male favourite.³⁵ The risk of both punishment and a devastating loss in public opinion was a looming threat if a potentially deviant Frederick was caught acting in an unambiguous deviant sexual manner. To avoid attention, correspondence would often hide their intentions behind a myriad of classical references and dense metaphors.³⁶ The potential judicial punishment Frederick may have faced for his sexuality, regardless of his privileged position in society directly contributes to the mask that Frederick donned to obscure his sexuality.

These threats didn't exist solely in the public sphere either. Given the clash between himself and his father, when Frederick's father referred to him as "effeminate," and a "sodomite," he knew quite well what he meant.³⁷ This cultural and political climate that surrounded Frederick demanded that privacy be observed by any queer character, with only few exceptions made for members of the upper class.³⁸ The unfortunate by-product of this privacy is the lack of conclusive evidence outside of rumours and trace references in correspondence.³⁹

How this has manifested, and is thus represented to us in the extant sources, means that a large portion of interpretation is necessary. The question of categorising Frederick's sexuality is defined by deficiency of hard proof. This leaves the only sensible conclusion to draw well defined within Blanning's work –

In the absence of the sort of conclusive evidence that is never likely to appear, it is impossible to say whether Frederick was an active – or passive – homosexual. What can be established, however, is that the ambience of his personal court was very distinctive.⁴⁰

Blanning's conclusion is sound, yet there is subject material that can be further advanced upon from this point. Examples of this plausible deniability of homosexuality are present in various factors of his life and character. Frederick is a figure who went to significant effort to celebrate male friendship and intimacy. This is displayed in his construction of the *Freundschaftstempel* (Temple of Friendship) which was officially homage to his sister and yet clearly represents his adoration of classical male pairings.⁴¹ Comparatively, Frederick's time in Europe was one of a transitioning societal response to deviant sexuality.

³⁵ [Alexander Pope], *An Epistle from Mr Pope to Dr Arbuthnot* (London, 1734.); L.J. Boon, 'Those Damned Sodomites: Public Images of Sodomy in the Eighteenth-Century Netherlands', in Gerard and Hekma, eds., *Pursuit of Sodomy*, 237-48.

³⁶ Steakley, 'Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide', 170.

³⁷ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 179.

³⁸ Steakley, 'Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide', 169-70.

³⁹ Tony McEnery and Helen Baker, "The public representation of homosexual men in seventeenth-century England – a corpus based view" *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* 3, no. 2 (2017): 197-217.

⁴⁰ Blanning, *Frederick the Great*, 446-7.

⁴¹ James Steakley, 'Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide' in *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol 16 Iss 1-2. 168.

Regarding its application to Frederick, an ‘essentialist’ approach fails to capture the integral nature of his sexuality to his entire being. It is a restrictive assumption to simply classify him as ‘essentially’ a homosexual, presenting a limited face-value representation, whilst avoiding the nuance within private life. ‘Social constructionist’ thought allows for something more substantial; and reveals how Frederick crafted his social identity and its relation to his sexuality.

New Avenues – Intelligent Relationships, Expression, his Father, Temporal Awareness & The ‘Katte Affair’

Frederick’s sexuality is directly related several of his to aspects throughout life ranging from positive and negative relationships as well as his response to his duties as a leader in 18th century Prussia. It also contributed to his intellectual pursuits and the methods he used to express his interests. This section addresses these subjects and how they relate to his sexuality.

Intellectual affinity is the key aspect present within any relationship Frederick cared for – his beloved sister Wilhelmine, his travelling muse Francesco Algarotti, his youthful confidant Hans Herman Von Katte, his closest working companion Henri de Catt and his epistolary companion Voltaire all generated erudite conversation. This craving of Frederick’s was only second to his desire for fame.⁴² Correspondence between Frederick and all these companions maintains a constant level of allusions to higher culture, penetrating both business and personal subject material.⁴³ This eloquence is also present within correspondence between Frederick and his potential lovers, meaning that historians have not found any records of his favourites being uneducated.

Ergo, the case can be made that intellectual stimulation is a key, shared component within Frederick’s most intimate relations. This facet of his sexuality has received insufficient attention within the most recent historiography. The discovery of *La Jouissance*, an erotic poem penned by Frederick for Algarotti, is one that is equal parts potential love letter and challenge to a claim that Germany lacked passionate poetry.⁴⁴ This addition to Frederick’s extant correspondence can help shed light onto other portions of his writing by revealing more evidence of subtext. With this new lens now readily available, the relationships Frederick held dear should be reevaluated to reenvision just how much conversation carried potentially erotic subtext. Relationships stimulated by intellectualism began early in Frederick’s adolescence. While the most famous example is clearly the charged exchanges between Frederick and Voltaire, it is the ‘Katte Affair’ that should be viewed as the centrepiece of Frederick’s emotional history.

⁴² Frederick penned a poem in honour of glory, declaring “*I will live and die for thee.*” Blanning, *Frederick the Great*, 58; Hahn, *Friedrich II*, 47; Clark. *Time and Power*. 111.

⁴³ Giles MacDonogh framed the best biography prior to Blanning entirely around this extensive correspondence – Giles MacDonogh, *Frederick the Great: A Life in Deed and Letters*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 68.

Following a flight at the age of sixteen from the typical princely army experience with the assistance of some young officer friends, notably his potential lover Katte, Frederick was jailed and threatened with execution for desertion. This charge had more to do with disobedience to his father than the actual military crime. A devastating blow to Frederick's psyche was delivered when his father forced him to bear witness to the execution of his closest companion and potential lover. This will be referred to as the Katte Affair. While this event alone didn't teach Frederick the prudence and self-abnegation evident throughout his reign, it is after this incident that the adult Frederick fully emerges.⁴⁵

The "Katte Affair" is not alone in the long list of childhood tragedies Frederick faced, but in the interest of brevity it shall be treated as the *Pars Pro Toto*. It is excellent example when engaging in numerous aspects of Frederick's sexuality and the historiography's reaction to it. It represents the major themes that pervaded Frederick's childhood – that of escapism in high culture, performative feigned dedication to his father's harsh education & violent consequences whenever discovered. Clark muses that the 'Katte Affair' was the true beginning of his life, given the division between his personality prior and after the event.⁴⁶ Reviewing the historiography's dealings with Frederick and his sexuality or the 'Katte Affair' proves a focal point to all further discussion on the subject.⁴⁷

Blanning refers to the execution of Katte for Frederick's sake as an event that romantically mirrored in the tragedy of Hadrian and Antinous.⁴⁸ Interestingly an Antinous statue previously owned by noted homosexual Prince Eugene of Savoy was acquired and prominently displayed by Frederick.⁴⁹ Yet despite the temporal distance from the incident allowing Blanning to make such a connection, we have no reference to Frederick mentioning Katte at all in the wake of the incident, let alone in tragic classic connotations.⁵⁰ There was no prosecution of any parties originally involved in the ordeal, with Frederick writing to his Secretary that those involved were to be forgiven.⁵¹ While Katte's father did see elevation to Field Marshal this outcome proved entirely diplomatic rather than personal; Clark speculates that the response to this incident is the emergence of Frederick from his adolescence, the first actions of an adult Frederick measuring his response to matters close to him.⁵²

This transition maintained many core aspects of Frederick. The spark of passionate intelligence, the apathetic approach to the holy scriptures and the idealisation for French Culture were still core aspects of Fredrick.⁵³ But the man who emerged from the "Katte Affair" was one who was no longer simply playing when it came to hiding his desires.⁵⁴ He made

⁴⁵ Blanning, *Frederick the Great*, 39-42; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 105-110

⁴⁶ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 110

⁴⁷ Detlef Merten, *Der Katte-Prozeß*, (Berlin: De Gruyter. 1980), 17.

⁴⁸ Blanning, *Frederick the Great*, 177-78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 177-78.

⁵⁰ MacDonogh, *A Life in...* 140.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

⁵² Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 110.

⁵³ Blanning, *Frederick the Great.*; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*.

⁵⁴ MacDonogh, *A Life in...*, 75.

personal prudence his craft, one that he excelled at, even beyond his skills with the pen or command. Only when he felt safely away from the public eye could he relax and be himself.⁵⁵ The constant suppression of his interest and desires during adolescence can be measured in the flurry of activities in cultural and political spheres he pursued upon ascension to the throne.⁵⁶ It should be of interest to examine further Frederick's life and his correspondence in the consequent years to identify further subtext concerning the obscuring of his true face obscured.

The development of Frederick's sexuality alongside his character in general is difficult to track due to the prudence he practiced as a necessary response to the repression handed out by his father.⁵⁷ Blanning emphasises the relationship between Frederick and his father, and how this impacted Frederick's ability to express his interest. Lamenting the treatment Frederick received, Blanning states: "Obviously we shall never know how Frederick might have turned out if his father had been understanding, loving and supportive."⁵⁸ Pointing to the diligent obedience expected of Frederick prior to, and later adopted in the wake of the 'Katte Affair,' the years as Crown Prince can only be considered a grand façade which denied any true representation of Frederick's personality during his formative years. We find evidence in the self-fashioning and general culture shift that occurred upon his ascension to the crown.⁵⁹ The arts would flourish where his father had stifled them, immigration was encouraged, and servile diligence to the Holy Roman Emperor was rejected.⁶⁰ Writing on the transformation of Berlin under his predecessors and himself Frederick noted that his father created a northern "Sparta," yet, Frederick's own Berlin took after Athens.⁶¹

Clark also points to the vivid effect that Frederick's father would have on creating Frederick's sexual identity. Frederick's early development saw active repression from his father, Frederick William, in the most brutal sense, with the prominent example being the 'Katte Affair.'⁶² These elements of fatherly, and by extension state-based, repression plays a pivotal role in forming the manner which Frederick expressed his sexuality. As a response to this repression, Clark concludes that Frederick's perception of 'history' and his relation to it was one of flight from the stifling modernity he existed in.⁶³ His refusal to associate with any non-practical legacy of his father thus became a private rebellion, mirroring his public rebellion against the status quo of Europe.

This history of language surrounding deviant sexuality is one that is flooded with classical references; just the use of Ganymede alone, appeared over a thousand times in a study

⁵⁵ Examples of this can be found in the privately circulated correspondence within his court. Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 189.

⁵⁶ Ranging from recruiting musicians, purchasing art, building theatres and waging war to name a few.

⁵⁷ Clark. *Iron Kingdom*, 189.

⁵⁸ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, xxiv

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 176.

⁶⁰ Clark, 110-111.

⁶¹ Frederick II, 'Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire de la Maison de Brandebourg', in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 1, ed. R Decker (Berlin: Imprimerie Royale, 1846), 266.

⁶² Clark, *Time and Power*, 113-114.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 114.

of 17th century terminology for the subject of same sex relations.⁶⁴ Frederick was aware what these references could mean. However, that does not make these references exceptionally divergent from the Junker society he was representative of.⁶⁵ The common Junker education of this period consisted of the exact subjects that Frederick's father attempted to censor. Interestingly, despite Frederick's supposed deviant sexuality; not a single internal challenge was mounted to oust him from his position as King.⁶⁶ Frederick must then have been acting in an acceptable manner or at the very least quietly enough to avoid upsetting the general populace.

Within Clark's *Time and Power*, Frederick is presented as a man who insisted on his own 'uniqueness,' seeing history as a hotbed of exemplars that resonated with his own achievements and interests.⁶⁷ This assessment has generated an exciting new manner with which to interpret Frederick, as an agent who was not only aware of, but able to change history for future generations. He was able to manipulate the official narrative to suit his political ends. Within this process, Clark infers that Frederick was keenly aware of how to hide questionable acts in private and diplomatic spheres.⁶⁸ Whilst every historical figure interacts with their legacy in a sense, few can boast the experience of writing exhaustive histories in the way Frederick could.⁶⁹ Thus, it must be acknowledged that Frederick represents a historical subject that actively interfered with posthumous historians and their interpretations of his actions and personality; the language and tone used by Frederick being a chief instrument in hiding his character.

Similarly, in writings by Andreas Pecar and Avi Lifschitz, the concept of Frederick utilising his powers as a self-aware author to tailor his image is pressed.⁷⁰ The evidence to support these claims lays in the attitude Frederick assumed when concerning himself with his historical writings. He declared in *Historie de mon temps* that he preferred not to speak of himself in his writing, and only if necessity demanded it would he do so.⁷¹ His historical writing was only ever circulated among a small circle, with motivations aimed at political and rhetorical justifications in response to criticisms to his handling of the state's wars.⁷² Yet he has his eyes towards the future, Clark argues this highlighting "Frederick's need to defend and legitimate controversial aspects of his own policy."⁷³ If the historian in Frederick was far-

⁶⁴ McEnery, Tony and Baker, Helen. *The public representation of homosexual men in seventeenth-century England – a corpus based view* 197-217.

⁶⁵ Bodie, 'Kingship, Sexuality and Courtly masculinity: Frederick the Great and Prussia on the Cusp of Modernity.' 122-133.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 114.

⁶⁷ Clark, *Time and Power*, 113.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

⁶⁹ This argument is central in Clark's *Time and Power* chapter on Frederick. 72-118

⁷⁰ Andreas Pecar, *Die Masken des Königs. Friedrich II. von Preußen als Schriftsteller* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016).; Avi Lifschitz, "Philosophy And Political Agency In The Writings Of Frederick II Of Prussia."

⁷¹ Frederick II, 'Avant-Propos,' 'Historie de mon temps,' in *Euvres*, (1775) xi

⁷² Andreas Pecar, "Friedrich der Große als Autor : Plädoyer für eine adressatenorientierte Lektüre seiner Schriften." In *Friedrich300 – Colloquien*, Vol. 1 (2007)

⁷³ Clark, *Time and Power*, 80.

sighted enough to write in this manner, then translating this awareness into his sexuality and private sphere is undeniable.

Frederick's habit of directly censoring information intended only for his private sphere can be found in the 1753 altercation with Voltaire. A post fallout Voltaire was travelling through the Holy Roman Empire when found himself apprehended by Frederick's men whose primary intention was to seize a very limited edition of poems penned by Frederick himself.⁷⁴ Thus, we have both textual and physical examples of the lengths Frederick went to control the flow of information about his character, at least when the information was intended for his private sphere.

Within Clark's framework, Frederick should not be expected to, nor did he use this historical awareness to further an anachronistic 'queer cause.' Rather than being a steppingstone towards future iterations of homosexual identities, Frederick represents a sidestep or an appeal to regression towards the idealised past. He looked to the past as his lifeline away from the 'barbarism' of his own time period.⁷⁵ This sidestep can be viewed in his legal treatment of sexual deviants in his country. Frederick never repealed any laws in regard to sodomy, and the double standard of elite privileges reigned free whilst the bourgeois and proletariat continued to suffer; just as occurred before his ascension, and in the wake of his death.⁷⁶ To his credit however, torture, harsh penalties and direct over rulings from the monarch in cases of sodomy that were the norm for Prussia were reduced heavily upon the ascension of Frederick.⁷⁷

The difference in class-based acceptance of expression of queer sexuality is displayed in an event where Frederick infamously inquired into a subject's private sexual sphere; an inquest that he would never tolerate being thrust upon himself.⁷⁸ Similarly, he held no reservations in discussing sexual subjects with his companions that were a far cry from the norm of royal correspondence.⁷⁹ There are multiple cases whereupon such libertine attitudes had the potential to blow up into scandal at Frederick's expense.⁸⁰ The observation here being that Frederick profited from his position in society which offered significant protection for his behaviour in relation to his sexuality.

New Avenues – Art, Censorship, Community, Class & Court

The idealisation of the Classical world previously noted, featured prominently within his aesthetic choices and frequent points of discussion with his closest of companions. This fascination should be considered a privilege of the elite of Europe, outside of some remnants

⁷⁴ Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire's Correspondence*, vol. 20. 329-30

⁷⁵ Clark, *Time and Power*, 112.

⁷⁶ Steakley, *Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide*, 166.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 164-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 166-167.

⁷⁹ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 444-453; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 188.

⁸⁰ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 334.

of Roman Law, the lower classes lacked easy access to distant past. The argument that Frederick's sexual identity was closely linked to his craving of intellect, must also then transect with his position in society. The prolific adornment of Classical art and architecture within his palace surely proves how much idle capital could be used to satisfy Frederick.⁸¹

Frederick adorned his favourite residence, Sanssouci, in a host of classical allusions to homosexuality, further proof a taste for such interests and their potential subtext. His 'Temple of Friendship,' was a space adorned with classical allusions to male partners was reserved for time with his closest companions.⁸² The aesthetic link between Prince Eugene of Savoy, the aforementioned famous homosexual commander of the generation prior to Frederick is rather pronounced within the historiography.⁸³ This connection was cemented in the securing of his prized statue of Antinous.⁸⁴ These stylistic choices have been pinpointed as intentional on Frederick's behalf, displaying the only acceptable form of public expression of queer sexuality for an elite member of the 18th century.⁸⁵

On the basis of class analysis, Frederick's sexuality offers an exceptional opportunity to examine the power dynamics of the elite and how they interacted with sexuality within the eighteenth-century. As noted by Steakley, the punishment meted out for sodomy in Prussian society for a baker was starkly different to the punishment for a nobleman.⁸⁶ Frederick is an example of an individual who suffered the same repression often meted out amongst the middle and lower class at the hands of the ruling elite, particularly from his father.⁸⁷ However, in comparison to the lower class, he inherited far more tools upon birth. Frederick's access to erudite learning, many parties willing to loan him money and the absolutist power invested in the head of the Prussian state all set him apart. These advantages allowed Frederick to live a privileged life compared to contemporary queers. These factors make Frederick's life a powerful case study within the inherent classist historiography of historical sexuality.⁸⁸

Applying this inquiry into upper echelons of Eighteenth-Century European society, Frederick's specific circumstance draw intriguing questions. Whilst he is certainly not the first member of the ruling class to have a non-traditional sexual identity, the environment that grew around him is unlike any other. Blanning states: 'the ambience at Potsdam was very different from the court of Versailles, or any other European court for that matter.'⁸⁹ Due in part to the compliant elite Junker Class, this court would flourish despite its deviancy. Frederick would create a court coloured by the homosocial, intellectually driven relationships he craved. These

⁸¹ Ibid, 176.

⁸² Ibid, 178.

⁸³ Steakley, 'Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide', 168.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 178.

⁸⁵ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*; Clark. *Iron Kingdom*; Steakley, 'Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide.'

⁸⁶ Steakley, 'Sodomy in Enlightenment Prussia: From Execution to Suicide', 164.

⁸⁷ Smith & Taylor, "Hephaestion and Alexander" in *The English Historical Review*, 296-7.

⁸⁸ Malinowitz, Harriet. "Queer Theory: Whose Theory?" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 2 (1993): 168-84. Accessed February 8, 2021. doi:10.2307/3346735.

⁸⁹ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 176.

were primarily held exclusively amongst men, and often surrounded by classical cultural allusions to homoeroticism and the power of male friendship.⁹⁰

While marginal at first, Frederick created a community in which he was set to flourish emotionally, while both concealing and supporting his interests. This manifested in a support network built around clandestine appreciation of the arts. Frederick was sheltered from his father's austerity program, by a community centred on the procurement of literature, fine clothing and music.⁹¹ These prior outlets can be seen as joint expressions of character though the link to sexuality is hard to say. This community is one that predominantly was constructed and maintained through his position of power first as the crown-prince, then later as the king. Such freedom of action, especially considering the previous tyranny of Frederick William, was simply not available to less privileged individuals.

Starting during his years as a Crown Prince, Frederick's art collection can be viewed as a rebellion against his father's philistine tastes.⁹² The simple collection of lavish artworks did not necessarily indicate any sexuality however, as Blanning notes in comparison to Louis XV and his aggressive heterosexual endeavours.⁹³ The ability to express oneself through expensive decorations represent the far cry situation Frederick faced in comparison to those not born into nobility, or at the minimum within the protective arms of those who wield power within society.

The high cultural allusions dominant within Frederick's dwellings, was not an austere endeavour; the acquisition of the Antinous statue was priced at 5000 talers -a significant sum.⁹⁴ The buying power behind this, was afforded in part by his father's austere spending measures, and later by Prussia's acquisition of the rich Silesian lands; Frederick would adorn his palaces with numerous high art allusions to homoerotic subject material. Blanning takes notice of these acquisitions, in particular due to their common classical allusions to homoerotic myths.⁹⁵ The aforementioned, *Freundschaftstempel*, a statue of Antinous previously owned by Prince Eugene, and a Fresco dominated by assorted classical male pairings were all displayed proudly by Frederick.⁹⁶ It is particularly hard to dismiss the sheer magnitude of this art, it can realistically only be interpreted as proof to Frederick's fascination with these figures of homoeroticism.⁹⁷ Outside of these decorations found within Frederick's personal spaces and correspondence, references to any kind of deviant sexuality become less common.

The public sphere was always an area that Frederick's absolutist rule reigned successfully, if not dominantly. Frederick managed to ignore any rumours directed against him in relation to deviant sexuality; in some instances even mocking those who published such rumours.⁹⁸ This lack of concern towards dissent is commonly attributed to Frederick's general

⁹⁰ Ibid, 178.

⁹¹ Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 104-105; Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*. 34.

⁹² Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 176.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 178.

⁹⁵ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 179

⁹⁶ Ibid,176-180.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Abbe Denina, *Essai sur le regne de Frederic II, Roi de Prusse*. (Berlin, 1788). 456-7

disdain for his average subject alongside the powers inherent in an absolutist monarchy to control the distribution of media.⁹⁹ Keenly aware of the performative actions necessary to maintain sovereignty over his domain, Frederick cared more for control rather than pure popularity.¹⁰⁰ He held a tenuous relationship with publications and often, censorship was no better in Prussia than any other neighbouring state.¹⁰¹

Another factor in minimising rumours or public scandal was Frederick's prudence. Frederick endeavoured to avoid being as publicly open as comparable queer royal counterparts. As Clark lays out in his work, Frederick was a man aware of his own position within the stream of time. This awareness colours his 'texts and utterances ... [as] generally rhetorical and performative, rather than expressive.'¹⁰² Certainly, with this awareness in mind, the absence of irrefutable evidence is testament to Frederick's ability to manipulate his reception via present and future onlookers. The picture thus drawn of a 'homosocial' court, is one that was protected by discretion, goodwill and well-operated censorship.¹⁰³ These actions certainly help explain the reputation that Frederick's court has held within the historiography.¹⁰⁴ Despite this obvious divergence from the norm of European court culture, there is no discernible rejection found within the nobility or the population of Frederick's territory in the vein of English Kings Edward II, James I, French King Henry III's respective reigns.¹⁰⁵ In part, this must be a result of Frederick's absolutist tendencies curbing any journal-based threats to his position, as well as a considerable popular image that was sustained for most of his reign.¹⁰⁶

The popular image that Frederick enjoyed amongst his subjects was a composite of his 'enlightened rule' and the efforts spent to manage his standing itself; he was a man extremely preoccupied with his posthumous reputation after all.¹⁰⁷ Represented as 'the historian king,' writing history to "defend and legitimate controversial aspects of his own policy."¹⁰⁸ It is no stretch to extend this attitude to the defence or concealing of more personal manners. Though there are questions that can be raised concerning where the line between his aforementioned indifference to the public opinion on the subject and his history of censorship must be drawn is unclear.¹⁰⁹ This proves to be the most challenging limitation to understanding Frederick with his sexuality in mind, yet as the discovery of *La Jouissance* a decade ago has shown: further evidence could be laying in an archive waiting to be discovered.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 456-7

¹⁰⁰ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 319-321.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 319-320

¹⁰² Clark, *Time and Power*, 79.

¹⁰³ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*

'Censorship' – Ibid, 319-325; Popularity – Ibid, 396.

¹⁰⁴ Shoobert, *Exploring Frederick (II) the Great's Sexuality in the wake of the Sexual Revolution*.

¹⁰⁵ All three mentioned had far less success dispelling rumours of a queer sexuality and suffered hits to their reputation for it.

¹⁰⁶ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 319-325.

¹⁰⁷ Clark, *Time and Power*, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, 319-325.

Conclusion

The underlying theme that is constantly prevalent with any examination of Frederick's sexuality is that the further the reader searches, the more the lack of conclusive proof will leave provocative questions without satisfying answers. Clark once referred to Frederick as an 'Enigma'; an epithet that is easily applicable in broad strokes to any portion of Frederick's character. His enigmatic nature will continue to spur new versions for future authors to uncover, more masks to join the gallery within Frederick's historiography.

In a standard Frederician biography and one will find equal parts idealist enlightenment ruler who consistently dealt in Machiavellian proto-Realpolitik diplomacy and Absolutist decrees. They may find Frederick as a poet concerned with the virtues of love and passion, yet a terrible husband and brother to all but a select few relatives. Commonly he is depicted a military genius studied in academies the world around, yet he lost just as many battles as he won. To say Frederick was a man of many masks, is an understatement, this paper argues that it is pivotal that this list of masks should be extended to include his sexuality. The concept of his sexuality, and the mask obscuring it, is a subject just as nuanced and interesting still demands more examination.

Frederick's sexuality as a subject may suffer from numerous difficulties barring easy explanation; the prudence Frederick practiced in removing any correspondence-based evidence – the most likely confirmation historians could ever find, yet this shouldn't diminish the value of the subject.¹¹⁰ Aesthetic values at an intellectual level provide a convenient cover against assumptions based on the décor selected for display within his palaces contribute to perpetual ambiguity that surrounds him. The subtext of these classical allusions was not missed by Frederick, and certainly not by posterity, yet there still lays just enough residual doubt to cloud any definitive answers. This in conjunction with understandable difficulties in attempting to piece pre-modernity sexualities together, Frederick presents an even tougher façade than contemporaries.

Frederick was a man who was equally defined by his perceived sexuality as much as he was by his political pragmatism demonstrated in diplomacy, wartimes and domestic policy. As suggested within this paper, there are numerous facets of Frederick's identity deeply intertwined with his sexuality that have yet to be explored in-depth. Frederick has always been represented as a venerated figure entwined with Prussian ascendant creator myths for nineteenth and twentieth century Germany. But increasingly he is also being seen as a historical figure with a truly interesting sexual identity, forged in the depths of childhood repression and manifested in a genuinely wonderful, often tragic existence within the Early Modern period. The past decade's work has penetrated into the rich pastures that are present within Frederick's

¹¹⁰ Frederick had established a new censorship board 9 years into his reign to prevent "Scandalous [publications]"

Acta Borussica. Denkmäler der preussischen Staatsverwaltung im 18. Jahrhundert, Behördenorganisation und allgemeine Staatsverwaltung, vol. 8. Files from May 21, 1748 to August 1, 1750. ed. G. Schmoller and O. Hintze (Berlin, 1906), p. 317.

life. The next decade must continue to engage with these ideas bringing forth the next face (or mask) of Frederick – as a man who was defined by sexual identity, just as much as any other.

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