

Contradictions in the Representation of Asexuality: Fiction and Reality

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Abstract

This paper discusses an obscure chapter in the history of sexuality, one that has received precious little attention until quite recently: asexuality. Perhaps because of this dearth of investigative efforts, asexuality has never fully developed as a discursive object and has been notoriously absent from the theoretical discourse on sexuality. Asexuality, for example, is glaringly absent from Karen Horney's seminal *Feminine Psychology* (1922–1937) as well as from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976–1984) and Pepper Schwartz and Virginia Rutter's more recent *The Gender of Sexuality* (2000). Modern nescience on the subject reflects an age-old unawareness: asexuals have received contradictory and obtuse representations in Western narratives from the earliest glimmers of Western culture. Thus, the discussion of asexuality in this paper will focus on modern-day representations of asexuality while looking back at earlier portrayals in order to provide context for the discussion. It will also touch upon common misconceptions about asexuality in biological and social contexts, such as the idea that it is a malady that can be cured or a phase in an individual's life that will eventually be overcome, much like pubescent acne. Beyond aesthetic portrayals, one must also touch upon the human cost of such invalidating conceptions: prevalent assumptions put asexuals at physical and emotional risk. Fortunately, the asexual community is now discussing and documenting the inner complexities of this misunderstood "sexuality" quite seriously. This is done particularly via the Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN). One of the main ideas that this community wants to disseminate is that, very simply, a person identifying him or herself as asexual does not experience sexual attraction (e.g. lust) towards other people. And that this in no way makes such a person "abnormal".

Keywords: asexual, asexuality, alternate sexuality, sexual attraction

Introduction

Though the sexuality of fictional characters has been diversely portrayed for centuries, sexuality as a subject of scientific discussion has not received serious attention until recently. Prior to the XIX century, people were not strictly categorized as heterosexual or homosexual, that is to say, they were simply people who indulged in heterosexual or homosexual practices: such practices were heterosexual or homosexual, but not the individuals who engaged in them. King James of Scotland and England (VI and I), for example, was known to have “carnal entanglements” with other males such as Esmé Stewart, 1st Duke of Lennox. But no one ever labeled him as a “homosexual”. This changed in the XIX century when heterosexuality and homosexuality began to be defined as two distinguishing and circumscribing elements of a person’s identity. To a researcher into asexuality, such a restrictive definition fails to account for a group of people who do not fit into its closed binary structure, leading inescapably to misidentification of the asexual as a latent homosexual, as “[t]he concept ‘homosexual’ really functions as a category of negation, containing all who are not heterosexual. The label tells us virtually nothing about an individual other than the single fact that she or he is not heterosexual” (Paris, 2011, p. 70). This misidentification can be recognised in many centuries’ worth of fiction. Nowadays, while society is beginning to distinguish asexuality as distinct category, modern narratives attempt portrayals of “stereotypical” asexual characters that in no way reflect the complexity of asexuality. As we shall see, not only is the stereotyping of asexual characters detrimental to the understanding of asexuality, but also the treatment of these characters negatively affects society’s chances of accepting asexuals by unfairly pigeonholing them, and worse, by ultimately “fixing” or “curing” asexual characters as if they were suffering from an abnormality. This “fixing” demonstrates that the binary (heterosexual/homosexual) system of classification is still in play, conclusive and unambiguous: the asexual must therefore be incorporated, eventually, to one or the other of its constituent domains.

In this sense, modern society tends to believe that every human *must* be sexual in some way, so that it is entirely impossible to never be sexually attracted to anyone. There is a strong belief that “[h]uman beings are sexual creatures. The individual dimension of our fundamental sexuality is part of normal living, for we are continually made aware of the fact that humankind is divided into two sexually determined groups, male and female. [...] Humans are a sexual creation” (Grenz, 1997, p. 31). This generally accepted idea that everyone *must* be sexually attracted to someone and *must* have had sex sometime in their life gives rise to the idea that asexuality is an aberration because it is an affront to everything that makes up a human being. Furthermore, having sex is the only known way to replenish humanity and to convey one’s own lineage and genes to future generations. Royal families have always been preoccupied with succession, and Chinese society has actively emphasized having sons, as the family name can only be continued through a male heir; consequently, a wife’s failure to have a son has often resulted in the creative interpretation of Confucian values so as to allow men to have concubines that might produce a male heir. Until recently boys were more highly valued in Chinese society for the same reasons, causing the abandonment and adoption of many Chinese girls.

The “passing on” of one’s “blood” or genes to subsequent generations is, unarguably, an exceptive characteristic of the human person. At the end of the XII century, Geraldus Cambrensis reports that “the kings of Clan Conaill [Ireland] continue to be inaugurated in the high style of their ancestors – by public copulation with a white mare” (Cahill, 1995, p. 175). This ritual occurred because if the future “king” were not fertile, then the kingdom would not

thrive, as sexual drive and fertility were tied directly to the fertility and prosperity of the kingdom, its land and its people. So if the successor was not fertile and could not have heirs, the kingdom's future would be in peril, as well as the royal bloodline.

Medieval Portrayals

An interesting example of an asexual character comes from the Middle Ages. Marie de France's character Guigemar (in the *Lai of Guigemar*, late XII century) has but one troubling liability in the narrator's estimation. A perfect knight in every other conceivable way, he seems absolutely disinterested in women. He shows no interest in men either. His chivalry, his loyalty and his great successes on the battlefield make him a great catch, except that it seems that he couldn't care less about having physical relationships with anyone:

Nature had made one mistake concerning him, for he never showed any interest in love. There was not a lady or a maiden under heaven, no matter how noble or beautiful, who would not have taken him as a lover, if he had sought her love. Many women often sought his love, but he felt no such desire; no one who knew him could imagine that he wanted to experience love. For this reason, strangers as well as his friends considered him doomed. (p. 4)

Guigemar's lack of interest was indeed troubling to the narrator, for in order to become a complete human being Guigemar needed to fall in love, copulate and have heirs. It seems likely that Marie de France was telling or repeating the story of an asexual person, a person for whom she had no categorizing system, as the term "asexual" did not exist in the Middle Ages. But Marie's remarks regarding the knight, from an asexual's perspective, reflect everything that is wrong with assumptions about asexuals. Needless to say, in the Middle Ages no one categorized sexual orientations; however, the narrator's treatment of Guigemar's lack of interest in women ("strangers as well as his friends considered him doomed") may be compared with modern society's naiveté, as reflected in the aforementioned disregard for asexuals in modern research.

Obviously, the narrator thinks that her knight's lack of interest in women is extremely disconcerting. In stating that Nature made one mistake concerning her knight, Marie believes that Guigemar's disinterest is an aberration that must be fixed, that it is perplexing and contrary to the natural order. Yet, and in contrast to Marie's editorial, not once does Guigemar, carefree and happy, mention his disinterest as a troubling matter. Presumably, this is due to the fact that he would likely identify as asexual (if such categorizations had existed in the Middle Ages), and to most asexuals this disinterest is not distressing in any way since they cannot miss what they have never had the need to experience.

Marie de France's observations regarding her knight have an obvious parallel to modern interpretations, reflected in people that attempt to fix or decipher asexuals through condescension ("Oh sweetie, maybe you just haven't found the right person yet"). So it is that the author of *The Lay of Guigemar* forcibly annuls Guigemar's disinterest in women through the violence of a hunting accident: when Guigemar strikes a white doe with his arrow, the projectile bounces back to injure him. At that point the doe begins to speak, putting a curse on him by saying that his wound cannot be healed by anyone except by the woman with whom he falls in love:

He struck the doe in the forehoof. It fell instantly. The arrow rebounded: it struck Guigemar in the thigh in such a way that it went clear through and struck the horse, so that Guigemar soon had to dismount. He fell to the ground onto the thick grass next to the doe that he had felled. The wounded doe moaned in agony. Then it spoke these words: “Ah! Alas! I am dying! And, you, vassal who have wounded me, this is your destiny: may you never have a cure! Neither from herbs nor roots, nor by potions nor by a physician will you ever be cured of the wound you have in your thigh, until she cures you who, for love of you, will suffer great pain and great sadness such that no woman has ever suffered; and you will suffer the same for her, and all those who love, have loved, or will love in the future will marvel at this. Leave here! Leave me in peace! (p. 5)

While asexuals have been known to fall in love, get married and have children, the doe’s actions practically *force* Guigemar to find a lover in order to save himself from dying, in other words, the author has forced a cure on the character, since his asexuality was clearly deemed an aberration. But Guigemar’s first thoughts after being wounded have nothing to do with finding love; he scrambles to find another way to survive this, for curing his wound in the manner that the doe prescribed seems unfeasible:

Guigemar was grievously wounded and overwhelmed by what he heard. He began to think about what country he might go to in order to have his wound cured, for he didn’t wish to allow himself to die. He knew quite well, and was correct in thinking, that he had never met any woman to whom he would give his love nor who would cure him of his pain. (p. 5)

The author’s attempt to fix Guigemar by providing him with a beautiful young queen with whom to fall in love actually works, as the brilliant young knight is cured of his disinterest in women and gets to save the damsel in distress. However, this cure makes for a sea-change in Guigemar’s personality, essentially ruining Guigemar’s selfhood: he is no longer a knight dedicated to personal advancement and to promoting his polity, but a creature entirely dedicated to love. In other words, once he falls in love with the Queen, Guigemar ceases to exist as person with individual will. This seems to point to the fact that the only way of fulfilling the author’s wish to cure Guigemar’s disinterest is by destroying his selfhood and abrogating his free will. This kind of plotline in which an asexual becomes cured and falls madly in love with a beautiful woman, very happily having sex with her, comes across today as a very myopic representation of asexuality.

While many asexuals do have sex with their partners, they generally do not lust after them as lust implies experiencing sexual attraction (Bogaert, p. 13). Yet, and in a very unconvincing episode, Guigemar experiences sexual attraction the moment he sees the queen, as reflected in statements like “already there was strife in his heart, for the lady had so wounded him that he completely forgot his homeland” (p. 9). Since the author portrays Guigemar as cured of his disinterest in women, the unadvised reader might be led to believe that this is a tried and true remedy for asexuality. This type of misconception is still operative today: asexuals regularly post, on anonymous social media apps like Whisper, comments they have received that endorse corrective rape, doubt the existence of asexuals, and state that they suffer some sort of illness.

Renaissance Portrayals of Asexuality

One of European literature's most interesting portrayals of an asexual individual comes from Cervantes's masterpiece, *Don Quijote* (1605; 1615). In chapters twelve to fifteen, a girl named Marcela supposedly drives Grisóstomo mad with love for the sight of her, although she never once has expressed interest in him or in any other person. Because of her vehement defense of her freedom from the fetters of love, it is entirely possible that Marcela is Cervantes's portrayal of an asexual individual. Grisóstomo commits suicide because of her disdain and Pedro and Ambrosio, his chums, call her cruel, deceitful, a she-devil, and heartless because she has refused a wonderful young man's (Grisóstomo's) advances. Her stated desire for freedom and her avowed disinterest in men and sex are inconceivable to Grisóstomo's friends, who find her testimony preposterous. They believe that her beauty and bearing are tools that she employs to drive men mad for her; that she teases them and leaves them to pine for her. However, Marcela contradicts that narrative by saying that she never led Grisóstomo on and she never had any interest in men: she was born free and desires to stay that way. Her words can almost be taken as an asexual manifesto:

I told him [Grisóstomo] that [my purpose] was to live in perpetual solitude, and that the earth alone should enjoy the fruits of my retirement and the spoils of my beauty; and if, after this open avowal, he chose to persist against hope and steer against the wind, what wonder is it that he should sink in the depths of his infatuation? If I had encouraged him, I should be false; if I had gratified him, I should have acted against my own better resolution and purpose. [...] It has not been so far the will of Heaven that I should love by fate, and to expect me to love by choice is idle. (Cervantes, 1901, p. 99)

The other characters' attitudes towards Marcela manifest a general misunderstanding of asexuality, a belief that everyone is sexual by nature, so that Marcela *must* be using her sexuality for evil purposes. Such attitudes towards women, of course, have always existed, but they are especially pronounced when it comes to asexual women like Marcela. If the author may be allowed a personal aside, I must say that I can certainly relate to Marcela, as in the past, before I realized I was asexual, I had similar things said about me, and even when statements were not malicious, accusations were still hurtful. Since the majority of asexuals are women (or identify as women) according to the Ace Community Census of 2015 (around 62%), it can be supposed that many asexual women have experienced the same issues that Marcela and even I experienced when being kind to someone, then turning them down (for either dates, sex, hooking up, etc.), and then being accused of leading them on, teasing, and being heartless. These accusations are the products of ancient and still current misconceptions and a general ignorance regarding asexuality. Because of such misconceptions, it is understandable if few people want to "come out" because they fear the consequences.

Representation of asexuals in more recent productions like film and television shows continues the long tradition of idiosyncratic portrayals as exhibited in *The Lay of Guigemar* and *Don Quixote*. Modern asexual characters are either extremely brilliant or have some odd characteristic or personality trait that makes the viewer interested in them. Brilliance or quirky behaviour are necessary because characters without an interest in sex are obviously not considered interesting.

Modern Portrayals of Asexuality

Modernity follows a familiar and ancient pattern of misconceptions regarding asexuals. The first modern asexual that comes to mind is Sherlock, from Steven Moffat's reiteration of the Sherlock Holmes character. Asexuality is inscribed in the character, despite the fact that in interviews Moffat has said that

There's no indication in the original stories that he was asexual or gay...he declines the attention of women because he doesn't want the distraction... It's the choice of a monk, not the choice of an asexual. If he was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that – it's someone who abstains who's interesting. (Jeffries, 2012, n.p.)

In spite of Moffat's statement, I would still maintain that Sherlock is asexual due to his particular personality and unique personal characteristics. Sherlock never expresses interest in any woman except for Irene Adler, and even then it is more of an intellectual interest because, except for Irene, most people bore him mercilessly. Her antics make him introspectively curious about her and, for once in his life, it seems that Sherlock may have actually developed feelings for another human being. But it is obvious that there is nothing sexual in those feelings. Even in a later series, he only enters into a relationship with one of Mary and John's bridesmaids to gain access to her boss's office. The lack of sexual attraction that Sherlock seems to experience *all the time* makes his character remarkably focused on his work, so he is rigorous, concentrated and precise. And asexual.

While Sherlock's personality is quite recognizable to asexuals, the character still furthers misconceptions and inadequate stereotypes. For one, the viewer might get the impression that asexuals are mainly men, and this is a true misrepresentation. Out of the one percent of the population that is asexual (Bogaert, 2012, p. 42), 62% identify as women (Ace, 2016, n.p.). Secondly, Sherlock's cold and calculating genius in addition to his lack of sexual needs establishes the further stereotype that most asexuals are extremely brilliant and, as an upshot of brilliance, do not experience sexual attraction. This sort of reasoning can give rise to the idea that asexuals lack sexual needs only because they are too busy thinking and have not had the time to experience sexual fulfillment yet. This furthers the creation of dramatic tension in programs and films that depict asexuals, as their asexuality makes for a very interesting challenge for the other characters, as they endeavor to change their lack of interest in sex at critical points in the program; in reality, this "change" is not very feasible. Thirdly, the fact that Sherlock never has a serious relationship implies that asexuals cannot have relationships. In fact, many asexuals do have relationships that are solely romantic and involve no sex, while others carry on a romantic and a sexual relationship usually only because they want to please their partner or have struck a compromise with them, such as having children. The Ace census (2015) provides very informative percentages as to whether asexuals have never had sex (65%), are currently sexually active (12.4%), or have been sexually active in the past (22.5%), with separate percentages detailing the motivations behind sexual activity.

Another character that displays asexual characteristics is the Eleventh Doctor, an incarnation of Doctor Who played by British actor Matt Smith. Although the character has developed romantic relationships with his companions, i.e. the Tenth Doctor and Rose Tyler, he nevertheless displays asexual characteristics such as behaving awkwardly when others have kissed him (River Song), interrupting Amy and Rory's public displays of affection, and generally failing to understand human sexual (and possibly even romantic) relationships. This general awkwardness regarding his companions' relationship in the bedroom (Amy and Rory

request to have one bed rather than separate bunk beds, yet the Doctor does not understand their bizarre request) makes him very understandable to asexuals, who can be somewhat uncomfortable with sexual matters; for the Eleventh Doctor, any situation with even remotely sexual overtones becomes comically awkward.

However, in line with modern representations of asexuals, the Eleventh Doctor is still not very representative of typical asexuals, as he is still male and impossibly brilliant. These two factors combine to make the Eleventh Doctor just as fanciful as Sherlock, but compounded by the fact that the Doctor is an alien. In spite of it, his way of dealing with the awkward situations brought on by sexual tension is altogether endearing and captures, quite authentically, what many asexuals can experience in similar situations.

Another modern asexual character that represents asexuals fairly well is Voodoo, from the American comedy television series *Sirens*. She is an acceptable stereotype of an asexual: female, single, not interested in sex, etc. Beyond simply having never experienced sexual attraction, like the majority of asexuals she is utterly repulsed by sex (55% as per Ace, 2016, n.p.). Voodoo even goes so far as to tell her coworker Brian, in no uncertain terms, that she does not want to date him because he is sexual, and because of this the relationship would not end well. Of course, Brian tries to change himself for her, but this only creates more problems and forces Voodoo to prove to him that he has not “transcended” his sexuality.

To some viewers, Brian’s attempts to date Voodoo seem calculated to end in sex, all the while avoiding a romantic relationship. Yet this assumption would be, in my opinion, incorrect. Rather, Brian’s efforts to date Voodoo are clearly an attempt to develop a romantic link with her. But she refuses even that. Some asexuals also identify as aromantic, meaning that they do not experience romantic attraction either. It is possible that her character is meant to portray such an asexual. If so, Voodoo leans towards a false representation of asexuals, given that only a small minority of the community identify as aromantic (19%, as per Ace, 2016, n.p.). What further compounds the issues with Voodoo’s asexuality is that it seems her coworkers are spectacularly uninformed: Hank, for example, says of Voodoo that he “doesn’t have the imagination to make up a sexual pathology that strange and that boring” (*Sirens*, “The finger”, 2014, April 3). This by definition stigmatizes asexuality and makes it more difficult for Voodoo to explore her boundaries as an asexual, relegating her to a supporting role without much depth.

However, the most troubling aspect of Voodoo’s personality is perhaps the one that should most be expected: to make her character more interesting as an asexual, she was given an obsession for the grotesque, bloody, and macabre. It seems as if the screenwriters believed that she would not be a viable and interesting character in and of herself without such a hobby and that her salient character trait (being asexual) was not sufficiently appealing. Of course Voodoo is not entirely obsessed with gruesomeness, and her emotional relationship with Brian is an important feature of the show, but this odd characteristic stands out as an eccentricity and coalesces her with Sherlock and the Eleventh Doctor. Each one of them has something odd and extraordinary that sets them apart from the average person and makes them interesting. Without these extraordinary traits, screenwriters seem to say, the viewers cannot look at asexual characters as whole, interesting or compelling.

Conclusion

Asexuality is such a diverse spectrum of behaviours that it is very difficult to represent accurately. What is more, the misconceptions about asexuals created by diverse fictional characters throughout history have made it difficult for asexuals to be understood and accepted by society. At times these misconceptions can even create dangerous ideas about asexuality: that it does not exist, that it is an aberration that must be fixed, that there must be some mental or hormonal imbalance that causes it, etc. Until more diverse asexual characters can be represented without simplistic stereotyping in mainstream literature and film, asexuality will be regarded as a malaise “to be cured”. Scientific study will help in this effort, but it seems at present that it will be years before enough comprehensive data is gathered to show that asexuals exist outside the limits of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and that we are normal human beings.

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