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*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 53 (2). pp. 163-169. ISSN 0013-2586.**

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## ASECS AT 50: INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE E. HAGGERTY

*Declan Kavanagh*

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George E. Haggerty, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of California, Riverside, specializes in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Queer Studies. His many books include *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (Penn State, 1989); *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Indiana, 1998); *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999); *Queer Gothic* (Illinois, 2006); *Horace Walpole's Letters: Masculinity and Friendship in the Eighteenth Century* (Bucknell, 2011), and, most recently, *Queer Friendship: Male Intimacy in the English Literary Tradition* (Cambridge, 2018). In addition, he co-edited *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature* for the Modern Language Association (1995), and *The Blackwell Companion to LGBT/Q Studies* (Blackwell, 2007). He was general editor of Taylor and Francis's *The Encyclopaedia of Gay Histories and Cultures* (2000); and he has also edited a collection of essays by his long-time partner, the musicologist, Philip Brett: *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays of Philip Brett* (California, 2006).

He has also published a wide range of essays in such journals as *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, *Genders*, *Novel*, and *SEL* and in various collections and anthologies. At present he is working on an epistolary biography of Horace Walpole. Professor Haggerty's work has had an immeasurable impact upon the field of eighteenth-century studies, queer studies, the gothic, and genre studies, more broadly. His ground-breaking research, often showcased at ASECS over the last few decades, has opened up new and vital possibilities for our collective understanding of literary histories of sexualities, genders, intimacies, and homosocial friendships. His

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research has established both lesbian and gay studies, as well as queer, approaches to the long eighteenth century as a valuable sub-field of enquiry with far-reaching ramifications. Professor Haggerty's important work on queerness and the gothic mode has set the theoretical parameters for work on gender, sexuality and the gothic that has emerged over the past two decades; scholars are still engaging with his work on the gothic with decisive consequences for research both within the field of anglophone eighteenth-century studies and beyond. Above all, Professor Haggerty is well-known for his profound collegiality and incredible intellectual generosity. His corpus of work continues to inspire scholars, both emerging and established. His past, and continuing, contribution to both the scholarly field and to the organization of ASECS itself provides the basis for the interview that follows.

**Declan Kavanagh:** Thank you very much for agreeing to speak to me about your career to date and about your involvement with the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Your research has been incredibly important for my own work on eighteenth-century effeminacy and political cultures; this is really an honor for me. I am curious to know a bit about the history of queer or lesbian and gay scholarships at ASECS. Has ASECS, in your opinion, changed in relation to LGBTQ+ scholarship?

**George Haggerty:** When we first started a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans / Queer Caucus at ASECS, we were a small group of marginalized scholars who found one another at ASECS and who immediately saw the virtue of working together. Once we established ourselves as a caucus, that meant we had sessions at every conference. There may have been naysayers, but for the most part we felt welcomed into the Society, and our work received support and great interest from the Society at large. Because our group included such wonderful scholars as Susan Lanser, Kristina Straub, Hans Turley, Chris Mounsey, and Caroline Gonda, we were already making a decent scholarly impression.

I have seen Queer Studies change at ASECS as well. I will talk about the below, but Disability Studies in the Eighteenth Century suggests both a new direction for Queer Studies, and it shows younger scholars taking those issues that are central to themselves and making them visible in ASECS. This has been a great success and a good model for others wishing to make their presence felt at ASECS.

**Kavanagh:** Thank you. It is good to hear that early LGBTQ+ scholarship was well received at ASECS. I would like to know about the trends or methods in eighteenth-century studies that you have found most influential?

**Haggerty:** Queer Studies more generally and Queer Studies at ASECS especially have shaped scholarly approaches to the eighteenth century for me. Many of the scholars that influenced me, like David Halperin, David Eng, Christopher Craft, and Lee Edelman, were not strictly in the eighteenth-century. But their work in sexuality studies engaged me, and I found that their work could be used to address issues that were important to us in ASECS. All these ideas have been worked out at ASECS in roundtables and sessions for the last twenty-five years. Those of us working to make queer studies all that it could be, have used scholarly conversa-

tions at ASECS, with those both inside and outside the field, to build a consensus of the challenges facing us. I am proud of how we have been able to work within ASECS to further this important field.

**Kavanagh:** Your comments give a good sense of the collective nature of queer eighteenth-century studies. If I can ask you to think more pointedly about your own research, can you tell me about the piece of published work that you are most proud of?

**Haggerty:** What I am most proud of in my career has been my ability to work in my chosen field and to make that a platform for queer studies. In a way, *Men in Love*, represents the most important breakthrough in my own thinking about gay topics, and in that work, I seemed to discover how to talk about those issues with historical clarity. This grew out of earlier, cruder, work I had been doing in the field. It may not have seemed obvious to everyone that eighteenth-century studies would be a center of queer studies, but from the time in the mid-eighties when I wrote an articles on “Literature and Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis,” I knew that this would be possible. From those early days, I had Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a model and support. Later, through ASECS, I found in Susan Lanser a colleague and an inspiration. I am proud of how much this work and this society have been integral to who I am.

**Kavanagh:** Can you tell me more about the process of writing “Literature and Homosexuality in Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis”? For example, did you worry about how it would be perceived by other colleagues in the field?

**Haggerty:** Of course, I was most worried, as a young and not-yet-tenured scholar, what my UC Riverside colleagues would say. Their universal enthusiasm and support for this line of inquiry gave me a strong sense that I would find support in the larger academic community as well. For me, the sign of that support came through ASECS, I found I already had a position in the field I was hoping to foster. The success of that early piece meant that I was readily invited to take on such things as *Professions of Desire*, which was the Modern Language Association’s first foray into Gay Studies. I edited that book with Bonnie Zimmerman, a colleague at California State University, San Diego. It was an honor to work with Bonnie, who was already a figure in Feminist and Lesbian Studies. Working with Bonnie, and sharing concerns with her, at such an early point in my career, meant that feminist and lesbian approaches to literary and cultural studies were essential to my growth as a queer scholar.

Various panels and roundtables at ASECS, with colleagues such as Susan Lanser, Kristina Struab, Caroline Gonda, and Sally Driscoll, meant that I was never isolated in a gay-male scholarly world. I have learned as much from these colleagues as I have learned from anyone in the profession. I was immediately attracted to lesbian studies, both in the eighteenth century and beyond, because it was my impression that lesbian scholars talked more about relationships and intimacy than gay scholars did. This is of course a gross simplification, but what I wanted to talk about most of all in my study of male relations in the eighteenth century was, and

still is, the quality of friendship between men who are also erotically interested in men. *Unnatural Affections*, my book about female novelists of the later eighteenth century, was a first attempt to get at these issues in works where they were most palpable. *Unnatural Affections* was also a work dedicated, as it were, to all those working in feminist and lesbian studies who had inspired me and given me hope that there was a lot more to say about male-male relations as well.

**Kavanagh:** Thanks for this. The ways in which feminist and lesbian scholarship informs work on queer masculinity is not always so obvious to those who work outside of the field. What motivated you to study eighteenth-century studies?

**Haggerty:** I discovered the eighteenth century in my very first English class at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA. Because of a good entering record, I was placed out of the usual Freshman English classes. I decided in my first year that I would major in English, and the first class I took was “The Eighteenth-Century Novel.” I was thrilled with the class—I think we read more than eighteen novels that semester—and I savored every word. If I also tell that you that the same professor, Maurice Geracht was his name, offered a seminar in Gothic Fiction in my junior year, you will understand how very deeply shaped I was by that undergraduate experience. The intellectual excitement of those classes affected me profoundly, and I knew even as an undergraduate what I would go on to graduate school to study.

What I loved most about the literature of the period, and what I still love about it, is its wild inclusiveness, its invigorating attempts to explore everything and anything in an attempt to make sense of human experience. I loved, almost naively, a period in which most novels had the names of individual people as a title. I could think of nothing more exciting than opening a novel called *Moll Flanders*, *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*, or *Emma*, discovering what that life would be and, more importantly for me at that time, how it would be told. I was excited by the discovery that literature could be and do so much more than I had earlier been led to believe. Discovering the eighteenth century, as an undergraduate, and then again as a graduate student, I felt I was encountering a world that was different from my own but also similar enough that I could learn from it. And I have.

**Kavanagh:** Your answer reinstates for me the importance of teaching for our field of research. Seminars on the eighteenth century can so often lead to doctoral work. An organisation like ASECS has an important role to play in the development of our research but also our pedagogical practices. What are ASECS’s biggest challenges moving forward?

**Haggerty:** The biggest challenges are keeping the field of eighteenth-century studies central to the agenda of the U.S. system of higher education in the twenty-first century. There are arguments for keeping this field central, even as English and History departments, to name just two, expand in myriad new directions. I have seen this as a crisis throughout the University of California, and I am sure that it is a national crisis as well.

**Kavanagh:** To flip the question, what are ASECS's biggest strengths going forward?

**Haggerty:** The greatest strength of ASECS right now is its capaciousness and deep commitment to diversity. I am continually impressed at ASECS's ability to reinvent itself, and as it does so, the field itself expands. When this happens, curricula are reformed, classes are invigorated, and a new generation of scholars is drawn into this remarkable field.

**Kavanagh:** I agree about ASECS's "capaciousness"; that is a useful way of capturing one of the organisation's strengths. You mention a new generation of eighteenth-century studies scholars and I wonder about the prospects for emerging scholars in our field. What advice would you give to scholars entering the field at the moment?

**Haggerty:** I would advise young scholars in this field to do exactly what they are doing: find the issues that speak compellingly to them and work to bring those issues to the attention of those engaged in the field and beyond. I have been excited to see the kinds of panels the younger scholars are putting forward: as the field changes in these ways, it becomes stronger and more durable.

**Kavanagh:** I want to know about what it was like to write *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (1999). What did you think was at stake in that project?

**Haggerty:** I was in a Humanities Eighteenth-Century Group at my campus, and I tried to present some material about male same-sex expression in the literature of this period. The other folks in History, Spanish, and French said (ludicrously) that there were no similar expressions in their areas of expertise. Frustrated, I went home and wrote the first section of *Men in Love* in a mad passion to show these people what I was talking about. When I finished that section, I recognized that it would make a decent book if I added some chapters. I had enough to say about Gray, Walpole, and Beckford, that the book almost wrote itself. All that took some time, but when I finished, I knew I had written a book that we needed. I was delighted to see it in print.

**Kavanagh:** I really love that you wrote the first section of *Men in Love* "in a mad passion". There is something beautiful and telling about that. Your book, *Queer Gothic* (2006), has been a field defining scholarly intervention in gothic studies. Did you envision its impact when you were developing the project?

**Haggerty:** More than any of my books, *Queer Gothic* emerged from a class I taught regularly at UCR. I developed various units of that class into articles and possible book chapters. As I worked on this book, though, my partner Philip Brett sickened and died in 2002. *Queer Gothic* was virtually completed when this happened, but I set it aside for a few years because of this traumatic event. When I returned to it, I recognized that it had come together in ways that would make a good publication, and I sent it out without really seeing how special it had become.

I have a good sense that my “interventions” have been recognized and appreciated. People have been generous about my work, and I feel that it has participated in a growing consensus of what we can achieve in queer eighteenth-century studies.

**Kavanagh:** As scholars, we often hear a lot professionally about the genesis of a project but little about the ways in which projects start and stop due to deeply personal events. Thank you for sharing that. In thinking about how the personal informs the professional, can you tell me about the specific challenges and opportunities facing pioneering scholars in the past who were interested in exploring the queer eighteenth century?

**Haggerty:** Not everyone had the encouraging home campus environment that I had. Work in the field has been dismissed as unimportant on other campuses. I cannot imagine a career flourishing without that home campus support.

**Kavanagh:** Can you tell me about the project that you are working on now?

**Haggerty:** My current quasi-biographical project grows out of my career-long fascination with Horace Walpole. Horace makes an appearance in almost all my books, and I find that I have not yet said everything I want to say about him. In my recent book, *Horace Walpole's Letters*, I offered readings in the Walpole Correspondence, an amazing accomplishment that is rarely seen as the astonishing achievement that it is. I am not talking only about W. S. Lewis's editorial achievement, which is in its own way utterly overwhelming, but I am also and more urgently talking about the letters themselves. There is nothing like them in the English tradition, and I hoped to make them more available to a range of readers. Even if that project was successful, and I think to a certain extent it was, I also feel that Horace's life can be explored by means of the letters. That means that I can revisit this amazing collection and probe it for details of Horace's own life. I think the Horace that emerges is more complex and engaging than the Horace we have known. Is that a gay Horace?, everyone wants to ask me. And that is the hardest question to answer. Did he know a range of proto gay men as friends and associates? (of course, he did), and did he like gossip on this topic and jokes to this effect? (indeed!), and did he even express love for his very closest friends and talk to them and about them in intimate terms? (he did). But is there anywhere any evidence that he expressed this love in physical ways, there is not. Of course, there may be a document that I have not yet discovered, and I more than ready to be proven wrong. But I also think there is a great deal to learn from this kind of male-oriented eighteenth-century figure. If friendship takes the place of erotic relations, it sometimes takes on an eroticism all its own. That is what I love about these letters, that and a lot more about this fascinating figure who will always stand at the center of queer studies in the eighteenth century.

**Kavanagh:** Do you think that it is *really* important to prove physical intimacy in order to read an author as “gay” or “queer”?

**Haggerty:** When we are talking about “proof,” the terms of analysis seem to have changed. Once in an ASECS conversation, a well-meaning friend listened to what I had to say about Horace Walpole, and said, “Oh, yes. You need to find the smoking gun!” That comment surprised me because I had not thought of my research as that kind of detective work. It would be great if Walpole, like Beckford or Lewis, had a clear history of sexual relations with other men or boys, but he did not. For me, that does not make the discussion of a queer Horace Walpole any less salient. It makes a greater challenge for me, because what I am talking about is the emotional quality of his friendships, the emotional intimacy that shapes his private experience. Horace Walpole is even more interesting to me for this reason.

**Kavanagh:** Given the centrality of Horace Walpole to your interests, would you like to conclude our interview with a quote from his work or an anecdote that illustrates your continuing interest in his work and life? Thank you for taking the time to respond to my questions.

**Haggerty:** If it is not too long, I would like to include Horace’s elegiac letter to Horace Mann at the death of their mutual friend John Chute:

This fatal year puts to the proof the nerves of my friendship! I was disappointed of seeing you when I had set my heart on it—and now I have lost Mr. Chute! It is a heavy blow; but such strokes reconcile one’s self to parting with this pretty vision, life! What is it, when one has no longer those to whom one speaks as confidentially as to one’s own soul? Old friends are the great blessing of one’s latter years—half a word conveys one’s meaning. They have memory of the same events, and have the same mode of thinking. Mr. Chute and I agreed invariably in our principles; he was my counsel in my affairs, was my oracle in taste, the standard to whom I submitted my trifles, and the genius that presided over poor Strawberry! His sense decided me in everything, his wit and quickness illuminated everything—I saw him oftener than any man; to him in every difficulty I had recourse, and him I loved to have here, as our friendship was so entire, and we knew one another so entirely, that he alone never was the least constraint to me. We passed many hours together without saying a syllable to each other, for we / were both above ceremony. I left him without excusing myself, read or wrote before him, as if he were not present— Alas! Alas! —and how *self* presides even in our grief! I am lamenting myself, not him! —no, I am lamenting my other self. Half is gone; the other remains solitary. Age and sense will make me bear my affliction with submission and composure—but forever—that little *forever* that remains, I shall miss him. My first thought will always be, *I will go talk to Mr. Chute on this*—the second, *alas! I cannot*—and therefore judge how my life is poisoned! I shall only seem to be staying behind one that is set out a little before me.<sup>1</sup>

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## NOTES

1. This was written on May 27, 1776 (and it appears in *The Yale Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, ed. W. S. Lewis, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–81) 24, 209–210.



