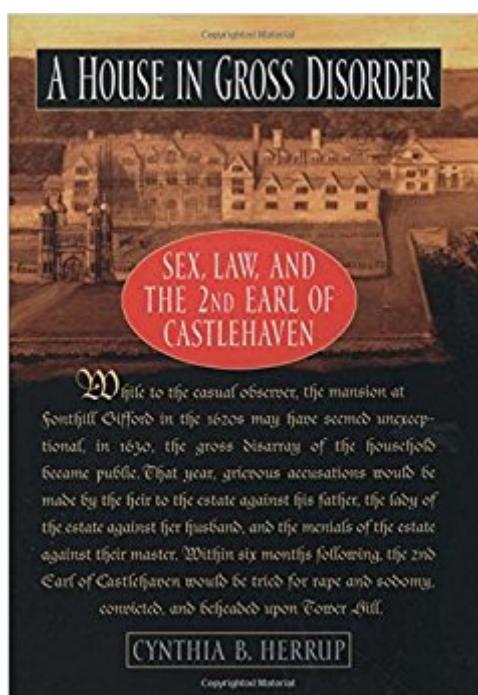


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# A House In Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, And The 2nd Earl Of Castlehaven (Sex, Law, And The Second Earl Of Castlehaven)



## Synopsis

Sex, privilege, corruption, and revenge--these are elements that we expect to find splashed across today's tabloid headlines. But 17th century England saw a sex scandal that brought disgrace to the ruling class and ended with the beheading of an earl. In *A House in Gross Disorder*, Cynthia Herrup presents a strikingly new interpretation of the case of the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven and of the sexual and social anxieties it cast into such bold relief. Castlehaven was convicted of assisting in the rape of his own wife and of committing sodomy with his servants. But more than that, he stood accused of inverting the natural order of his household by reveling in rather than restraining the intemperate passions of those he was expected to rule and protect. Herrup argues that because an orderly house was considered both an example and endorsement of aristocratic governance, the riotousness presided over by Castlehaven was the most damning evidence against him. Avoiding simple conclusions about guilt or innocence, Herrup focuses instead on the fascinating legal, social and political dynamics of the case and its subsequent retellings. In riveting prose, she reconsiders a scandal that still speaks to contemporary anxieties about sex, good governance, and the role of law in regulating both.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Charged with rape and sodomy, the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven was convicted and beheaded in London in 1630. But as Herrup argues in this very scholarly study, the court was concerned with sodomy more as the source of "disorder" than as an immoral act. The sexual behaviors in the earl's

mansion were not unusual for the times. What made Castlehaven different, Herrup carefully documents, was that the earl was threatening social order, disrupting societal expectations of nobility. The earl's encouragement of a servant attempting to rape his wife outraged the nobles not out of concern for the woman but because cross-class sex threatened to "pollute" the noble lineage. Likewise, his son complained about the earl's sex with servants not because of sexual propriety but because his father was giving them land and wealth the son expected to inherit. Herrup (history and law, Duke Univ.; *The Common Peace*) presents this interesting argument clearly and thoroughly. A good choice for legal and academic collections, a little dry for public collections. A Robert C. Moore, Raytheon Electronic Systems, Sudbury, MA Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A mildly interesting analysis of the 1631 trial of the infamous earl of Castlehaven, who was beheaded for sodomy and rape. Herrup, professor of law and history at Duke, takes us back to Stuart England to explore the legal, social, and political implications of the Castlehaven trial. Castlehaven's household was a paragon of family dysfunction. The earl favored his male servants over his own son, encouraged one servant to rape his wife, and engaged in sodomy with the house staff. Herrup theorizes that the case against Castlehaven went far beyond these shocking allegations, tapping into deep-seated cultural anxieties about power and hierarchy. Castlehaven's inability to control his own sexual urges, combined with his failure to regulate his household, was viewed as undermining the established social order. Thus, King Charles I prosecuted the "disorderly" Castlehaven as a lesson for those in power. At trial, the specific facts of the case were largely ignored in favor of arguments about how Castlehaven's misconduct tended to endanger social harmony. The crown's prosecutors also harped on Castlehaven's alleged Catholicism to cast him as a dangerous outsider. Herrup's contention that a high-profile trial can transcend its factual circumstances is hardly groundbreaking. What a particular trial is "about," what it means in a larger cultural context, depends largely on the interpreter: sensational trials fascinate us because they have many subtexts. While Herrup skillfully examines the different meanings given to the Castlehaven trial over time, what she doesn't do particularly well is flesh out the individuals involved or place them in a convincing historical context. Scholars of Stuart England will find much here that's intellectually provocative, especially in the realm where law and social history meet, but the general reader will want a bit more human drama mixed in with the intellectual abstractions. (15 photos, not seen) -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I second the points S. N. Kras made in his review. I found the book thought-provoking and a surprisingly quick read for an academic work. While the 2d Earl of Castlehaven remains a bit of an enigma, he and all the characters in this episode in English history really do come to life in this book. I found myself wanting to get hold of the primary sources the author cited and learn more. My one criticism is directed not at the book but at the Kindle formatting. There is an interactive table of contents, but reading this book on the Kindle would have been a much better experience with interactive footnotes. As it was, I had to create bookmarks within the endnotes and laboriously click through many pages of notes before arriving at, say, note 59 for a given chapter.

For my college's senior seminar class this book was required reading so we could get the experience of how a researcher used secondary sources. I could only get to page 10 of this book, and I had this book for months before senior seminar, it was that slow of a read and boring.

A nice and satisfying read. Herrup combined a truly impressive amount of primary sources, scattered over 10 different archives and libraries. Instead of drowning in the source material and the vast body of secondary literature, she offers a nice, crisp and concise 150+ page analysis. All the raunchy details of the Castlehaven case are there, but the supposed escapades of the Second Earl of Castlehaven are not the prime focus of this book. Through the relatively restricted prism of a scandalous lawsuit, Herrup achieves in painting a surprisingly broad and kaleidoscopic image of civil society in the mid-17th-century Britain. She skillfully treats themes such as the relations between men and wives, the official and actual perceptions of Catholics and Irish, the delicate position of King Charles I and the strife at the royal court between old nobility and the recently ennobled. Herrup carefully avoids any references to the marquis De Sade. It's easy to see why. Inclusion of De Sade would probably have broadened the scope of the book too much: times, country and circumstances were so much different. But still, it's seducing to compare the two. Sade was given a death sentence in 1772, just as Castlehaven 141 years earlier. Both men did not repent, both their wives were of questionable reputation. And the accusations against Earl Mervin could have directly inspired parts of Sade's *Philosophy In The Boudoir*.

I suspect this book was written as a PhD thesis. It is big on post-structural analysis of the Castlehaven trial - looking to interpret the trial in terms of the legal, religious, political and gender issues of the day. It also analyses the subsequent retellings of the story over time and how writers

and commentators continue to interpret the story in light of the prevailing issues and conflicts of their own times. This very academic commentary is woven throughout the book and ultimately weakens what might have been a compelling account. Sadly, the balance between events and interpretation has been lost. Readers who are not familiar with the historical context and the broad details of the reign of Charles I, will struggle to understand much of the author's interpretation anyway. There are some engaging aspects to this account but they owe more to the natural curiosity raised by a tale about sexual deviancy, family discord and uncertain guilt, than to the author's heavy-handed attempts to tell us what it all means (without ever explaining why we should care).

I loved this book. The story is unbelievable, and Cynthia Herrup does a great job of explaining all its ins-and-outs (no pun intended). If you want a novel, this ain't it. But if you want a great history book, this is for you. Me? I'm giving it to all my friends . . . and maybe my mom too!

The story of the Earl of Castlehaven is almost too amazing to be believed--not only for the actions of the Earl himself, but also for his trial and what \*it\* said about English society of the time. In addition, the light that the trial sheds on that time's notions of sexuality, "family," and politics is astounding. But somehow, somehow, Cynthia Herrup manages to make it all deadly dull. Reading the book was an exercise in tedium--Herrup's prose is strictly academic and she's given to long paragraphs in which she says precisely nothing. There are many fascinating books on the subject of sexuality, politics, and family during this period of English history. This isn't one of them.

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