

Review Article

Histories of Difference

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Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*, Blackwell, 1999, pp. 220, £45, £13.99 pb.; **Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero** (eds), *Premodern Sexualities*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 276, £40, £14.99 pb.; **Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen** (eds), *English Masculinities 1660–1800*, Longman, 1999, pp. 268, £60, £19.99 pb.; **Tim Hitchcock**, *English Sexualities 1700–1800*, Macmillan [now Palgrave], 1997, pp. 172, £45, £14.99 pb.; **George E. Haggerty**, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century*, Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 214, £39.95, £13.50 pb.; **David Alderson**, *Mansex Fine: Religion, Manliness and Imperialism in Nineteenth-century British Culture*, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 207, £45.

The five books demonstrate how concepts of gendered and sexual difference have changed the intellectual landscape of contemporary historical writing. While addressing different readers and periods, and occupying disparate positions, sometimes polemically, all of them proceed from a shared basic assumption that the analysis of diverse types of gender and sexuality will enable the contemporary reader to reach the fullest understanding of the chosen period. Although their arguments meet with varying levels of success, they can be welcomed as a sign that on both sides of the Atlantic the analysis of gender and sexuality has moved productively from the margins to revise our view of the past.

While each of these texts explains its theoretical positioning, for readers who might not be aware how exactly these positions have a history outside their periodisation, Chris Weedon's *Feminism, Theory and the Politics*

of Difference will be a useful intellectual map. This is a challenging and ambitious text, which aims to review second wave feminism through the concept(s) of difference. To this end Weedon gives a descriptive and critical intellectual history of feminism, organized into thematic chapters on the radical, lesbian and queer, psychoanalysis, the postmodern, class, ethnicity and the global. While not completely successful in terms of providing a detailed comprehensive coverage, this thematic approach does enable the reader to understand the importance of balancing the desirability of a coherent sense of historical development against the inevitable tendency of such narratives to suppress alternative positions.

This is best and most successfully exemplified in the central three chapters of the book, on the postmodern, class and ethnicity. Here a clear exposition of major figures such as Foucault, Butler, Dyer, and hooks is aligned with a careful critique of the more totalising parts of their theories. Hence at the end of each chapter there is a conclusion which encourages the reader to evaluate the thematic preoccupation of individual chapters within the overarching concept of difference. This will be particularly useful for an undergraduate readership, though it is a pity that too often in the text ideas and theories are attributed to the generalized 'some feminists'. It may be that, for good strategic and philosophical reasons, Weedon is seeking to forge an alternative to the individualized patriarchal history of ideas, but for the undergraduate this might encourage vague generalizations.

While the other books considered here are less ambitious than Weedon in their combination of intellectual and historical coverage, they do evidence a similar commitment to broadening and challenging any remaining notions of a normative history. Interestingly all also employ chapter thematics to orientate the reader, thus adding to the straight historical narrative and further encouraging an active consideration of the process of periodisation itself.

Thus the most original of the collections, *Premodern Sexualities*, is organized into four sections themed as The Erotics of Conquest, Medicine and Law, Sexuality and Sanctity, and Rhetorics and Poetics – with thirteen pieces in all. Of all the books reviewed here, the introduction by the editors Fradenburg and Freccero is the most lively and contentious. The contextualisation of the collection within queer theory and Foucault is as expected. However when the authors turn to the relationship between desire, pleasure and history the argument becomes less clear. This is not helped by the use of a heavily subordinated sentence construction. However the book's focus on the crucial relationship between the contemporary historian, his/her identity, and the historiography of sexuality is on the whole successfully delivered. *Premodern Sexualities* is a varied collection in terms of a multinational authorship and diversity of subject matter, which is partly explained by its origin as a special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* in 1995. The collection primarily addresses postgraduate and mature researchers, although a judicious selection could be made of essays suitable for an informed undergraduate

readership. The subject matter of each section is wide-ranging, such that the most successful essays in the first section include José Piedra's 'In Search of the Black Stud', which traces the transactional and imperialist imagining of black male sexuality and is a welcome and rare example of an explicit discussion of race/ethnicity in the work under review, and re-readings of homosexuality in Shakespeare's *Henry V* in 'Henry's Desires' by Richard Corum. In other sections essays such as that by Kathy Lavezzo on *The Book of Margery Kempe* make nuanced comparisons between printed and visual texts, while the relationship between poetics and sexuality is fruitfully and tantalizingly expounded by Patricia Parker.

In terms of the editors' stated aims to apply queer theory to the historical period and to produce material which will be of interest to a modern historian, the most successful section is the second, focusing on medicine and law. The first two essays, one on a male transvestite prostitute in fourteenth-century London by Ruth Mazo Karras and Davis Lorenzo Boyd, the other on hermaphroditism in early modern France by Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, are excellent examples of a balance between historical scholarship and theoretical positioning. In both there is a careful sign-posting of where the authors are moving into more 'imaginative' historical reasoning and this results particularly in the case of Daston and Park's essay in conclusions regarding the shift of sexual/gender binaries that deserve to be taken beyond this specific case. The last essay in this section, 'Don't Ask Don't Tell: Murderous Plots and Medieval Secrets' by Karma Lochrie is outstanding. Here the somewhat provocative juxtaposition of President Clinton's compromise on gays and lesbians in the military, with the operation of the knowledge of the female body and its written exchange within male circles in the thirteenth century, is cogently and meticulously handled. The presence of ideological plots and their transmissions within powerfully disabling codes is presented as central to both contemporary and historical culture, and the call to dismantle such codes acutely delivered.

The other collection, *English Masculinities 1660–1800*, comprises eleven essays and is organized into four sections with an introduction and conclusion. Due to the overall clarity of writing and level of theoretical positioning this book could be used by undergraduates and the general reader. The sections are themed as Sociability, Virtue and Friendship, Violence and Sexuality and bring together a variety of scholars to examine and positively fracture any homogeneous stable definition of masculinity. The editors Hitchcock and Cohen provide a comprehensive review of the theoretical background with a particularly clear exegesis of notions of compulsory heterosexuality, and the importance of the axis of class when discussing masculinities.

The collection is notable for the range of types of masculinity which it examines. Hence constructions of homosexuality in the court of James I are read in an elegantly written essay by Alan Bray and Michel Rey alongside an examination of the separation of public manliness and sex in Boswell. Such

combinations have clearly been carefully organized by the editors and should provide intellectual stimulation for the reader. There is a particularly suggestive essay “‘The majesty of the masculine-form’: multiplicity and male bodies in eighteenth century erotica’ by Karen Harvey. Here the circulation of texts between same sex male readers with the screen of an inter-textual female listener is read as part of a construction of nationality as much as of masculinity. The last essay ‘The old Adams and the new man: emerging themes in the history of English masculinities, 1750–1850’ by John Tosh takes up again the relationships between masculinity and nationality and pushes them into new areas. This is a strong, well-researched piece which warns against gender ‘being in the last analysis superstructural and epiphenomenal’. It is the strength of this essay and the volume as a whole that they/it can raise and to some extent answer such complex problems in such an accessible way.

These strengths are also to be found in the earlier book length study *English Sexualities 1700–1800* by Tim Hitchcock. Clear and accessible chapter organization, and the lively wit of its rhetoric, garner the enthusiasm of undergraduates and Masters’ level students. Each chapter provides a clear overview of the critical debate, particularizes this in terms of some specific historical case studies and offers an original critical repositioning. Chapter four, on The Body, Medicine and Sexual Difference is particularly successful in its analysis of a wide range of eighteenth-century texts, both literary and medical, alongside an engagement with the work of historians such as Thomas Laqueur. This material introduces one historical origin of compulsory heterosexuality, and, in Hitchcock’s beautifully accomplished manner, leads into the next chapter ‘Subcultures and Sodomites: the Development of Homosexuality’. It is this kind of meticulously researched (see the full and helpful notes) and clearly written yet complexly argued work that will ensure the continued centrality of these debates to the historiography of sexuality.

The two remaining texts clearly share most of the intellectual assumptions of the work just discussed, and constitute contrasting examples of the monographs which are being produced in this area. Both combine the scope of a century with the close study of a number of authors. In this they will be of more interest to the literary critic or historian. Although bright undergraduates would be able to and would profit from reading them, their primary audience is that of the postgraduate and beyond.

Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century by George E. Haggerty is an elegant book both in its intellectual argument and presentation. This is an assured and informed narrative of the century, which, like the above work, emphasises the historical fluidity of the concepts of masculinity and sexuality. To this Haggerty adds the concept of male love which he defines as part of the continuum of possible relationships between men. This is not to say that he does not consider the other widely discussed types of relationship of the period (he does) but that he wishes to displace

the importance of the sexual act for understandings of male-male relationships. As he states 'Two men having sex threatens no one. Two men in love: that begins to threaten the very foundations of heterosexist culture'.

The book is divided into two parts: Masculinities, and Sexualities. The first examines the eighteenth century discourses concerning displays of masculinity. Hence chapters deal with the whole range of sexual practices and publicly regulated displays of affection. The material in chapter two, *Gay Fops/Straight Fops*, is particularly good in its comparison of literary and visual material. Heggarty demonstrates how codes of masculinity and nationality were mutually reinforced to exclude the feminine, whether evidenced by biological males or females. His discussion of portraiture is very suggestive and merits further expansion.

Part Two, *Sexualities*, takes the form of three case studies of literary figures, Thomas Gray, William Beckford and Horace Walpole. This complements the argument of the first part by expanding on the taxonomy of possible behaviours in relationship to specific figures and their literary output. Throughout these chapters the close readings of literary works are consistently impressive and provoke the reader to recast some well-known texts. The argument works particularly well with Beckford where the re-reading of his novel *Vathek* is both poignant and should shift readings of this text as 'just gothic'. Similarly the discussion of Walpole and *The Castle of Otranto* shows how personal letters can be read as ambiguously as literary texts and how revealing they can be when brought together. This is an excellent addition to a very fine series (*Between Men – Between Women*) which should stimulate debate both in eighteenth century literary studies and in the theorisation of sexuality.

David Alderson employs a similar combination of intellectual context and reading of literary texts in *Mansex Fine: Religion, Manliness and Imperialism in Nineteenth-century British Culture*. As with the other texts reviewed the male body and sexuality are central to Alderson's thesis and he organizes his monograph thematically while particularizing his argument through case studies of work by authors such as J. H. Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Oscar Wilde.

Alderson's argument brings together the work of many notable critics on nationality, the importance of Protestant work and games ethics, male sexuality, and the reception of Hopkins and Wilde. While there are suggestive points raised, especially in regard to the construction of the Anglo-Saxon race of England, these are somewhat underdeveloped. The chapters do not make it clear whether the author is articulating a literary reading or employing such in an analysis of nineteenth-century discourse or engaging in the ongoing debate concerning the relationship between these areas and fluid notions of sexuality. The implication of the introduction is that he intends to encompass all of these but unfortunately the end product does not do so. Rather it reads as an ongoing, unresolved engagement with these various debates. This problematic is evidenced by the choice of title. 'Mansex fine' is as the author states

'a strange title, I admit' being a quotation from the Hopkins poem 'The Bugler's First Communion'. What follows is a good reading of the poem in terms of the overall themes of the book but as with the rest of such readings they remain interesting discrete units rather than part of an integrated whole. Symptomatically unresolved is the significance Alderson wishes to place upon 'mansex fine'. As with the book as a whole, its potential remains unfulfilled.

Taken together these books diagnose the good health of work at the intersection of sexuality and history. Still, with some notable exceptions these texts are strangely silent on the notion of race. Weedon makes a significant contribution to the articulation of race with sexuality in local and global terms; it is to be hoped that further work on the historicisation of sexuality will follow this lead.