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Review of Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England

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James M. Bromley and Will Stockton, eds. *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 329 pp. ISBN 9780816680771 (paper).

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The study of the history of sexuality continues to generate fruitful lines of inquiry. While the essays in this collection focus primarily on early modern literature written in England, the work will be of interest to scholars investigating a range of topics, including gender, identity formation, religious history, dramatic performance, and poetics. Indeed, the history of sexuality has become a flashpoint for discussions of the study of history itself. Ongoing debates across periods have highlighted the ways in which asking questions about the nature of sexual identity and desire helps us ask broader questions about the degree to which we should understand the history of personal identity and social interactions as iterative or teleological. *Sex before Sex* intervenes in such conversations by asking us to consider depictions of sexual acts within their historical contexts and in proximity to present-day sexual acts and identities.

Sex before Sex offers diverse perspectives, some of which figure representations in Renaissance texts as precursors of present-day sexualities. In many ways, the essays respond to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's still-relevant demand that scholars avoid a history of sexuality that sees "the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another" but instead investigate "the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist" (47). Rather than attempting to frame the sexual practices they examine as precursors to those in our own period, the collected essays focus primarily on how these erotic acts – sometimes strikingly unfamiliar to our contemporary sensibilities – fit within early modern cultural logics of gender and desire. The essays thus contribute to the ongoing project of calling into question norms and assumptions, a project whose outcome Melissa Sanchez (writing recently in *PMLA*) nicely frames as "the more we learn about past practices, values and fantasies, the more we are compelled to reconsider present truisms about what is normal or healthy" (47). In their introduction to *Sex before Sex*, editors Bromley and Stockton describe the volume as having goals similar to those articulated by Sanchez: to "re-map the early modern sexual landscape while reframing modern criticism as an embodied, erotic practice situated within cultural definitions of sex that the essays [in *Sex before Sex*] simultaneously seek to trouble" (19).

This new collection takes up strands of thought expressed within Madhavi Menon's collection, *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Duke University Press, 2011). Writing in the *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, Graham Hammill describes that collection as reminding us that "sexuality is not something that can be easily divided into periods like Renaissance or Early Modern but, as Menon suggests in her Introduction, has affective and temporal dimensions that subvert the historicist project by foregrounding experimental readings that often chafe against historicist sensibilities." Bromley and Stockton's collection similarly calls into question the tendency among scholars to frame sexual identities as evolving from one into the next. *Shakespeare* places many of Shakespeare's works in dialogue with our own contemporary expressions of queer sexuality in order to generate new readings of the texts. In contrast, *Sex before Sex* establishes a dialogue between literary

works and contemporaneous early modern texts in order to expand our understanding of what sex may or may not have meant during the period. In doing so, they are at once historicist in the sense that they expand the contexts from which depictions emerge and also non-teleological in the sense that they are not necessarily focused on placing sexual acts in a genealogy that leads to our present moment. Writing recently in *PMLA*, Valerie Traub has urged scholars to “read chronologically without straitjacketing ourselves or the past” (23). By freeing themselves to examine formulations of sex “before sex,” the collection’s authors suggest ways in which scholars can embrace an approach such as the one urged by Traub.

A handful of essays stand out as emblematic of this collection’s new thinking regarding approaches to the study of early modern sexuality. Thomas Luxon offers a new perspective on his earlier work on sexuality in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Luxon reflects upon how verbal interchange between Adam and the angel Raphael positions “conversation itself [as] a kind of sex before sex, not just in the sense of intellectual foreplay but in the mythic sense of a world *spoken* into being” (268). In doing so, Luxon takes the opportunity to revisit his arguments in *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship* (Duke University Press, 2005) and to respond to Jonathan Goldberg’s claims in *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (Fordham University Press, 2009) that Miltonists (including Luxon) often overlook homoeroticism in the poet’s work. Christine Varnardo’s “‘Invisible Sex!’ What Looks Like the Act in Early Modern Drama?” encourages scholars to avoid interpreting off-stage sex acts in drama as necessarily “straight” encounters. Indeed, the question of what Romeo and Juliet actually do during their night together offers a useful flashpoint for her argument. Even if we agree that the two young lovers have sex, she notes, we do not know what acts constitute “sex” for them. Melissa Jones similarly turns our attention to the unseen or to the absence of sex as she examines depictions of impotence in Thomas Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines” and John Marston’s *Metamorphosis of Pygmalion’s Image*. Each of these essays reminds us to look for sexuality not only in its myriad expressions but also in its absence.

Several essays expand our notion of what constitutes the sex act. Will Fisher calls our attention to the existence of nearly one hundred texts that make reference to “chin chucking,” a gesture where “one person gently strokes or pinches the chin of another” (141). Acknowledging this act as an erotic one allows Fisher to trace how depictions of it may have reinforced social categories of class and age but also may have allowed for an expression of female agency when women performed the gesture. Stephen Guy-Bray examines Renaissance attempts to use relations between animals and even relations between plants as metaphors for human sexuality. In doing so, he very effectively demonstrates how “in the Renaissance, both the boundaries among various kinds of living organisms and the boundaries that structure our contemporary sexual taxonomy were largely unfixed” (196). Indeed, this statement compellingly alludes to the project of the anthology as a whole: to destabilize not only the categories by which we define sex but also the frameworks by which we understand normative sexual desire in terms of what it means to be a desiring subject or a desirable object.

This shared strategy allows the essays to identify new texts of interest and also to open new readings of familiar themes and texts. For example, Kathryn Schwarz revisits the linkages between sex and death in depictions of *Lucretia*, while Will Stockton revisits the linkages between Spenser and Milton in *The Faerie Queene* and *Comus*.

By focusing on diverse expressions of “sex” in the early modern period, the collection acknowledges previous scholarship but redirects our attention to overtly erotic pleasures. For example, important work by scholars such as Alan Bray helped us see that acts of intimacy that read as erotic today – sharing a bed, kissing – were sometimes but not always erotic acts in the early modern period. David Schalkwyk’s work on service relationships and Alan Stewart’s work on relations between humanists and their secretaries have helped us see how these formal working relationships might be subtended by loving bonds. *Sex before Sex* takes a different tack by asking us to move away from focusing on modes of social relation and instead to look at (sometimes unfamiliar) acts between individuals in order to understand how they might be experienced (by a practitioner, a reader, or even a critic) as erotically stimulating. In doing so, the collection turns our attention to the vital project of developing criteria by which we can better recognize depictions of sexual acts in the archive.

Three essays in particular help us see the complexity of the project that connects the essays in the collection. Nicholas Radel’s “‘Unmanly Passion’: Sodomitical Self-Fashioning in John Ford’s *The Lover’s Melancholy* and *Perkin Warbeck*,” for example, argues that “there is no ‘before sex’ at all” (134). Radel helps us see that historians of sexuality can argue for a period before *homosexuality* but that male-male desire can nonetheless be rendered visible in homosocial relations, especially at the level of speech between men, as instantiated in Ford’s early tragicomedy and his only history play (134). As Traub notes in her Afterword to the volume, “several contributors seek to disrupt the logic of pre- and post- by locating early modern sex in proximate relation to the present” (301). In one such instance, James Bromley’s “Rimming the Renaissance” traces literary references to oral-anal stimulation in order to disrupt heteronormative assumptions about this sexual act often linked with gay men in our contemporary imagination. Bromley shows how the act that we term “rimming” today appears in diverse contexts – practiced by men or women, perceived as a passive or active act – in a way that productively divorces sexual act from sexual identity. Working towards a similar goal, Holly Dugan’s essay considers the implications of a long lineage of literary references to rape of human females by male apes. Using a 1952 survey of the sexuality of apes as an evocative starting point, she illuminates a pattern of thought in which early modern accounts of sexual ravishment blur boundaries between “men’s animal desires and animals’ all too human ones” (215). The approach results in new readings of Shakespeare’s *A Comedy of Errors* and John Donne’s *Progress of the Soul*, emphasizing that conflating bestiality and sexuality threatens to naturalize rape both in the Renaissance and today.

I will close by turning our attention to one of the most incisive comments in the collection. Radel’s essay reminds us of the limitations of the reading practices involved in the history of sexuality. He writes, “there is no sex before sex precisely because we cannot speak about the arrangements of bodies and desires in earlier ages without at least referencing our own normalizing constructions and thereby participating in a process of reading both backward to the past and forward into our present” (112). With this caveat in mind, however, the collected essays advance our understanding of early modern sexuality by deploying diverse approaches with awareness of their limitations. In her Afterword, Traub emphasizes that we can see the same project at work across the volume’s essays whether an essay embraces anachronism, as Bromley’s and Dugan’s do, or frames early modern sexuality as profoundly disconnected from

experiences in our own period, as Fisher's and Guy-Bray's do. She nicely underscores the importance of the collection this way:

Understandings of early modern sex remain circumscribed by a number of stubborn assumptions: that it is almost always heterosexual; that it ultimately tends towards the "consummation" of penis in vagina; that its apotheosis is to be found in the couple form; that, unless it is a matter of violent assault, it is inevitably a prelude to or sign of marriage. [...] In other words, a presumptive knowledge overwrites what sex is, what it does, what it means, and why we should care about it. (291-292)

Traub's final sentence here strikes me as particularly important. When studying the history of sexuality, we need not find sex everywhere in texts. At the same time, perhaps it is the case that sexuality – given its centrality to personal identity, as well as to the desire to be recognized and to be fulfilled – is everywhere in texts. Whatever the case, it is worthwhile to remember that sex can appear in ways not immediately visible. It might be unseen on the page or stage; alluded to; or described through metaphor. It might manifest itself in a way unfamiliar to modern sensibilities, or it might appear embedded so deeply in the familiar – the quotidian or the mundane – that we do not recognize it for what it is.

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