

Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture

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Karen Harvey's *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture* is a cogently argued, well researched, and accessible account of the ways erotic discourse shaped eighteenth-century understandings of gendered bodies. Her book situates erotica within the context of Thomas Laqueur's description of a shift in representation during the eighteenth century from a one-sex to a two-sex model of the human body.⁽¹⁾ But Harvey also challenges Laqueur's thesis, as well as dominant narratives of women's history and masculinity, arguing that multiple discursive shifts resulted from 'synchronic' rather than 'diachronic' changes. Insisting on the multi-vocality of erotic texts and mindful of the space between representation and practice, Harvey sees the representation of bodies as both a 'product of' and a 'screen for and projection of' cultural, social and political discourse.

Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century is timely given recent interest in scholarly work on erotica. Alexander Pettit and Patrick Spedding's mighty two-volume compilation *Eighteenth-Century British Erotica* makes available a multitude of previously inaccessible texts. And Bradford Mudge's more modest *When Flesh Becomes Word: An Anthology of Early Eighteenth-Century Libertine Literature*, for example, gives scholars and students a taste of erotic literature. Harvey's book is a valuable contribution to a field that has been grappling with the question of how to define erotica, pornography and seduction fiction.⁽²⁾

Harvey opens with a strong claim for the generic suppleness of erotica. Shaped by a number of discourses – social, cultural, literary, medical and scientific – erotic discourse was itself, she explains, a medium to negotiate questions about bodies, gender, and sexual difference. But, while literary and visual erotica was 'porous' (p. 13), Harvey carefully distinguishes erotica from two contemporary, related genres: pornography and seduction fiction. Whereas erotica is, by comparison, benignly metaphorical and satirical, pornography's explicit language invites promiscuous propinquity, at an imaginary level, between reader and the bodies on the page. And erotica is distinct from romantic and seduction fiction, she claims, because, in eroticising sentimental love, these genres are primarily moralistic. Recent work, like Lynn Hunt's *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*⁽³⁾, has categorised pornography and obscenity in relation to political and religious critiques of early-modern and eighteenth-century culture. And while some critics like Ros Ballaster have called eighteenth-century amatory fiction erotica for women ⁽⁴⁾, Harvey distinguishes erotica from amatory fiction based on style and theme. For her, erotica, unlike amatory

fiction, works stylistically by 'describ[ing] *material about sexual pleasure which depicted sex, bodies and desire through illusions of concealment and distance: bodies were represented through metaphor and suggestion, and depictions of sexual activity were characterized by deferral and silence*' (author's italics, p. 20). Harvey sees erotica as a kind of literary chiaroscuro, a genre that reveals and conceals at once, and she approaches it through the themes of 'sameness and difference'. Her distinctions are clear and valuable, though I do not entirely agree with her assessment of seduction fiction. Seduction fiction is often characterised by a series of deferrals, and many things are suggestively and partially articulated. Eliza Haywood, known in her day as 'the great Arbitress of Passion', for instance, consistently claims that 'language wants the force' to adequately express passion. Haywood's amatory fiction often displaces desire and passion onto language, though, unlike erotica, it leaves the desiring heroines (and readers?) unfulfilled. Text may be erotic, but it is not, after all, sex. Harvey is right to point out the important difference in tone between the two genres, and she usefully locates erotica at the juncture between pornography and amatory fiction: 'Erotica shared with pornography an interest in sex, and shared with amatory fiction a desire to hide it from the reader. This combination situated the genre on the cusp between refined restraint and liberated libido.' (p. 33) This last point is an important one, for the first chapter details a gendered readership of erotica within the context of a specifically eighteenth-century balance between refinement and sexual pleasure (p. 74).

Chapter 1 contextualises erotic literature in terms of the materiality of books, the content of erotica, and eighteenth-century reading practices. Since education, social status and gender determined reading practices, Harvey provides convincing evidence for the social and public nature of erotica. Whereas eighteenth-century conduct manuals warned women against the perils of private reading, erotica's intended audience was male and, though its subject could be called intimate, because of its satiric and heteroglot nature, erotica offered male readers 'intellectual' as well as sensual pleasure. The key to achieving this balance of reasonable pleasure was the public homosociality of erotica. Male social clubs like the infamous Hell-Fire Club equated male homosociality with civic virtues such as 'politeness... sociability, improvement, worldliness, and gentility' (p. 75). Men could feel aroused and even masturbate while consuming erotica – 'reading and sociable sexual activity were integrated' (p. 68). Indeed, in one of the images Harvey includes (Richard Cosway, *Group of Connoisseurs*, 1771–5), one member of a group of well-dressed, polite and apparently reserved club-goers who are admiring statues of nude women has, as Harvey puts it, his hand 'thrust firmly into the breeches' (p. 69). Harvey argues that such public pleasures protected men from the more crass enjoyments of the debauched tavern-goer or of privately enjoyed pornography. The contemporary American equivalent is the difference between the public homosociality of a strip club, where businessmen convivially consume light-fare porn together and the private sexuality of a jack-shack or bordello where individual men can pay for sex. One is respectable; the other is not.

Though there was a decidedly physical nature to erotica, Harvey tells us that primarily 'men's reading of erotica was not sex: it was wit, sociability, enquiry, and improvement and it embodied some of the classic civic virtues of Georgian England' (p. 77). She shows that erotica was a specifically masculine mode of interacting and of discussing popular, current ideas about medicine, science and politics through the satiric medium of erotica. Women's bodies became the conduit for such discussions, though erotica did not invite women themselves to participate in those conversations.

Having established the context for reading erotica, Harvey tackles the problem of 'sexual difference' in relation to the ways erotica represented the body. She complicates Laqueur's groundbreaking argument about the shift from a one-sex to a two-sex model of the body. She reads Laqueur's model in the context of the Enlightenment's ontological shift in which gender and racial difference 'was based on the physical rather than the cultural' (p. 79), and claims that the move from the one-sex to the two-sex model was not omnipresent. Harvey points out that a clear distinction between one-sex and two-sex models was conspicuously absent from the prolific erotic texts that satirised scientific texts of the day. Erotica is a resonant sounding board for such a theory because it satirised important scientific views of the day, on topics such as conception, desire, and physical sex characteristics (p. 80). Though such texts used humour and parody, they relied upon and reflected current scientific debates and beliefs. In eroticising conception, for

instance, parodic-scientific writers did not neatly subscribe to either a one-sex or a two-sex model, but rather, they used a 'circular' narrative to fit their rhetorical needs (p. 88). For instance, erotic writers played around with scientific theories about women's pleasurable active role in conception. Harvey reminds us that difference is not just a gender thing – it is based on a myriad of categories like race, nationality, age, etc. Harvey therefore adapts Laqueur's model to an approach that investigates the labile or 'elastic' representations of sexed bodies during the period.

Erotica captured, imagined and dissected female bodies with more frequency than it did male bodies. Harvey thus reads female bodies rather than male bodies as central to our understanding of gender and sexual difference. The dominant narrative about female sexuality in current scholarship is that the early-modern libidinous woman evolved into a passive and domesticated woman during the eighteenth century. By Harvey's account, erotica reminds us that this historical narrative ought to be situated in relation to male homosocial discourse. Moreover, such representational shifts were not clear, consistent, or immediate. Eighteenth-century British writers certainly used female sexuality as a measure of a healthy social body. Women were both feared and desired; desiring women were depicted as attractive and monstrous. Stylistically, erotica reflected such attitudes. Erotica measured social concerns in metaphoric language: maps and voyages signaled women's inscrutability. But the literary landscape of erotica was often contradictory terrain; though dangerous, fertile landscapes were desirable, anxieties about agricultural changes metastasised into fecund, erotic, feminised landscapes. Women's genitals, for example, were called 'private Enclosures' in *Erotopolis; Or, of the Situation of Bettyland* (1741), signaling a displaced worry about the diminishing availability of public grazing land. Considering the intersections of geography, gender, and place, as Harvey does, the book certainly draws on the influential work of critics such as Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860*, or Felicity Nussbaum in *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Narratives*.⁽⁵⁾ But Harvey takes these feminist critics' work into new territory by showing how feminine concerns like pregnancy and menstruation crop up in a masculine genre.

Harvey claims that there were fewer literary portraits of male bodies and that they signalled a different range of concerns than did female bodies. Fertility, for example, was important to erotic depictions of male bodies for different reasons. Masculinity signified national and martial might. Unlike female bodies, male bodies were defined by nationalistic or geographic differences in size, vigor, and fertility. 'Have heterosexual, vaginal, reproductive sex!', erotica said, 'and you will fulfill your patriotic duty'. Erotica registered xenophobic anxieties that emerged as Britain became a colonial power: dangerous, exotic male others might sleep with British women. In these circumstances, sex and even erotica could be about purity: patriotic purity.

The last three chapters of Harvey's book – 'Space,' 'Movement' and 'Pleasure' – make interesting points about the cultural environment of erotica. Eighteenth-century modernity reorganised work, domestic spaces and gender relations. Like many recent critics, Harvey rethinks the 'separate spheres' theory as an adequate way to read changing representations of British domestic identity. Erotic literature's conception of space, she claims, is too slippery for the theory of separate spheres that gendered public spaces as masculine and gendered private spaces as feminine.⁽⁶⁾ Harvey not only identifies commonly eroticised spaces, such as religious and pastoral spaces, but she complicates familiar dichotomies that are used to talk about morality and geography, like the association of the urban with license and luxury, and rural landscapes with civic and sexual virtues. For instance, gardens have been long associated with sexuality and transgression. But by looking at shade, privacy, opacity, and softness, for example, Harvey extends our understanding of the relation between pleasure and space. But she also points out the predictable dichotomies at work in erotica: pleasure can be safely staged in traditionally private, feminine spaces, like kitchens or laundry rooms. Harvey distinguishes such pleasures from more opprobrious public luxuries like chocolate consumption or gambling. But sex, Harvey says, 'is a place for men to visit' (p. 173), and erotica made it safe; erotica offered men a sanctioned space to experience reason's feminised nemesis: passion. This is where Harvey illustrates the mutual entanglement of public and private spaces.

'Movement' tells us what we would expect to hear about men ranging over and penetrating eroticised female landscapes. In satires of medical treatises or travel narratives, men gaze powerfully and knowingly on women's lush bodies as they are slowly revealed in a kind of literary 'striptease' (p. 180). In this scenario, men are mobile, women stationary. Like their literary counterparts (think of Daniel Defoe's Roxana or Moll Flanders, or of most of Eliza Haywood's heroines), erotic narratives punish women who are too lusty or adventurous. Harvey situates this rhetoric in the context of modern worries about gender: female virtue as metaphor for national virtue was under increasing threat (or at least increasing scrutiny). Eighteenth-century writers of conduct manuals and fiction brooded over ways to safeguard female virtue during a time when urbanisation and other forces left women comparatively unprotected from unwanted advances and assault. Of course female virtue had to be protected from adulteration because, for one thing, chastity ensured the clear transmission of property to legitimate heirs. Female sexuality was therefore a very public and legal affair. Numerous genres registered, absorbed, and transformed such anxieties. Harvey reads erotica against the legal discourse of rape trials and concludes that erotica echoed and rendered benign the legal language of rape by ending the sexual/ seduction narrative with mutual pleasure.

The last chapter fleshes out the tricky question of how gender fitted into eighteenth-century divisions between mind and body, reason and passion. Empiricism and materialism unleashed licit libidinous urges because of a new primacy of the body as instrument for understanding the world. Body was equated with passion and femininity, whereas mind was equated with reason and masculinity. Reading each sense separately, Harvey shows that erotica's distinction between pleasures of the imagination and pleasures of the body allowed women to feel pleasure but only in the context of a thoroughly masculinised narrative. She charts erotica's stylising of the senses interestingly, but I was not entirely convinced by her reading of women's speech in the sub-section 'sound.' Women became silent during sex, Harvey claims, 'and these accounts of women's virtual silence served to further blur the boundary between consensual and non-consensual sex' (p. 209). True enough: the failure of language often mirrored women's inability to ward off unwanted sexual advances and rape. But the dashes and drifts of language – the sighs and caesuras so typical of passages describing sex in the eighteenth century – could also be seen as partial iterations that signaled the attempt to render legible that which was largely unspeakable: female desire. It is, as Harvey points out, problematic that the discourses of desire and of domination skimmed seamlessly into one another. But those slips in language can also be read as the garrulous and suggestive way by which the language of sex promiscuously eludes discipline.

Such small disagreements are important only in that they point to the valuable way Harvey's book opens up critical conversation. It was with (licit) pleasure that I read *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century*. Harvey covers important new ground, and her perspective on erotic culture is fresh and smart. Her book is a valuable

resource and a welcome contribution to the field of gender and sexuality studies.

Notes

1. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Eighteenth-Century British Erotica and Eighteenth-Century British Erotica II*, ed. A. Pettitt and P. Spedding (2002, 2004); *When Flesh Becomes Word: An Anthology of Early Eighteenth-Century Libertine Literature*, ed. Bradford K. Mudge (New York and Oxford, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York, 1993). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford, 1992). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1975) and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1984); Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Narratives* (Baltimore, Md., 1995). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For a recent summary of ideas surrounding the critical reconsideration of the public/ private split that structured the ideology of separate spheres, see Lawrence Klein, 'Gender and the public/private distinction in the eighteenth century: some questions about evidence and analytic procedure', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29.1 (1996), 97–109. Amanda Vickery's 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36.2 (1993), 383–414 is a valuable historiographical review. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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