

Sex and the Gender Revolution: Volume One: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London

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Reviewer: Robert B. Shoemaker

One of the first aspects of the history of gender to be extensively researched has been, unsurprisingly, sex. A frequent meeting ground of the sexes, historians have shown how attitudes towards and practices of sexual intercourse reveal fundamental cultural assumptions about gender difference. But it is not only heterosexual activity that is relevant. Even before gender became a popular subject among historians, Randolph Trumbach's work on male homosexuality in eighteenth-century London contributed the important insight that beliefs about homosexuality are a constituent part of understandings of gender difference. This book, the first of two volumes (the second will examine 'the origins of modern western homosexuality'), develops his arguments with material amassed during more than twenty years of research. It appears at a propitious but inevitably contentious time, for sex in the eighteenth century is a hot topic, and this book will have to compete with several other recent and forthcoming publications on prostitution, illegitimacy, and sexual reputation.

The main argument of the book will be familiar to those who have read Trumbach's earlier articles. Around 1700, stimulated by 'the emergence of individualism and equality', a 'new regime of sexual relations for men' developed. Those men who had sex with other men or boys became marginalised and labelled as 'sodomites' (the 'third gender'), and all other men assumed an exclusively heterosexual identity, with their sexuality shaped by the need to prove that they did not desire other men, while maintaining their superiority over women despite experiencing greater intimacy with them. This change had important consequences for extramarital sex in London: seeking to affirm their heterosexual masculine status, men resorted to prostitutes in greater numbers, as 'a new, heterosexually inspired prostitution' developed, and it led to high rates of illegitimate births and the spread of venereal disease. Violence towards women, both in the form of rape and wife beating, although not new, was also encouraged by these changes.

In the next generation these patterns were both reinforced and somewhat modified by the growing influence of sentimental, romantic and domestic ideas among the middle and upper classes. Attitudes and the practice of prostitution changed as prostitutes came to be seen more as a separate class of women, were sentimentalised, and became the targets of attempts to reform rather than punish them. Some men became more faithful to their wives, and some became less violent. Nonetheless most men, driven by the need to

prove their heterosexual identity, continued to consort with prostitutes, thereby facilitating the spread of venereal disease to a substantial proportion of the population. Influenced by romantic ideas, elite wives started to form adulterous liaisons with men, either servants or friends of their husbands, whom they met in their homes. 'By 1750 the entire system that this book has described was fully established'. (427)

This is an ambitious web of arguments, and they are supported by extensive research in legal records (of the Consistory Court, Quarter Sessions, and the Old Bailey), notably depositions, examinations and accounts of trials; the records of charitable institutions (the Foundling and Lock Hospitals); printed literature including pamphlets and newspapers; and letters and diaries. As such, this book provides the most extensive and richly documented treatment of eighteenth-century sexual behaviour ever published. The sources are effectively used to shed light on a wide range of subjects, including (in addition to those discussed elsewhere in this review) the changing ideological basis of male libertinism; the geography of London's brothels; the origins of the Foundling, Lock and Magdalen Hospitals; the shift in the significance of adultery from an issue of public concern to a domestic tragedy; attempts to cure venereal disease (notably the belief that men could be cured by having sex with prepubescent women); contrasting courtship and illegitimacy patterns found in four metropolitan parishes; changing attitudes towards infanticide; the central role played by male violence in courtship and seduction; the various strategies for marital dissolution in different social classes; and patterns of marital violence.

In assessing the overall argument, two questions need to be asked. First, has Trumbach convincingly documented the changes that he says took place? And second, has he correctly identified the causes of those changes? Trumbach certainly has identified many important transformations in sexual attitudes. The growing condemnation of any form of homosexuality and the concurrent development of a homosexual subculture in early eighteenth-century London were documented in his previous articles (and will be covered in volume 2) and they have been confirmed by other research. Similarly, the arguments concerning changing attitudes towards prostitution, and towards female sexual immorality more generally, with the increasing belief in female sexual passivity and the tendency to treat prostitutes as victims, fit in well with the work of other historians. The analysis of defamation cases convincingly shows that women continued to be concerned about defending their sexual reputations longer than men, thus providing evidence of the growing tolerance of male heterosexual promiscuity. The overall decline of defamation cases may reflect the growing belief that women's sexuality was too delicate a matter to be discussed in public, though the argument that consistory court judges and lawyers discouraged prosecutions is not substantiated. The increasing influence of romantic ideas on the lives of the upper and middle classes, documented in divorce cases, is also unlikely to prove controversial. But the arguments concerning the changing nature of prostitution and illegitimacy are less convincing. Here we come up against a fundamental problem that confronts historians of a subject as personal as sexuality, the limitations of the evidence.

There is plenty of evidence of *concern* about the growth of prostitution, especially streetwalking, in eighteenth-century London, but Trumbach fails to consider whether elite discourses, or the records of law enforcement, can satisfactorily document changing patterns of activity in the world's oldest profession. It is not convincing to argue from such evidence that there was 'a new, heterosexually inspired prostitution' in the eighteenth century. This would certainly come as a surprise to historians of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London, and in any case demands an explicit comparison with prostitution in the earlier period, which is not attempted. The arguments about the changing character of prostitution during the eighteenth century, that it developed as a subculture separated from conventional life, are based on similarly thin evidence, such as the patterns of sureties prostitutes presented when bound over by recognisance (women became less likely to be bailed by members of their own families). Since the recognisance was not a common method of prosecuting prostitutes (most were punished with a commitment to a house of correction), this evidence must be of limited relevance, especially since we know so little about the ways in which sureties were chosen and approved by justices of the peace, and how what constituted an acceptable surety might have changed over the course of the century. Trumbach is more cautious when arguing that increased levels of illegitimacy were another consequence of the new male heterosexual identity, but here too there is danger in reading the examinations of the mothers of bastard children too literally, and failing to

make allowances for the fact women may have constructed stories for their examiners which, by portraying themselves as helpless victims, maximised their chances of obtaining help.

In assessing whether Trumbach has correctly identified the causes of changes in heterosexual behaviour we come to his central point, that the root cause of 'the new male heterosexuality' was the emergence of the 'third gender', the sodomite, in the early eighteenth century. But here at the core of his argument there is something of a vacuum, since, with the exception of some prosecutions for sodomitical assault and blackmail in the Quarter Sessions and Old Bailey records, there is very little direct evidence to support the contention that heterosexual men's attitudes towards sex in the eighteenth century were fundamentally shaped by their fear of being labelled a 'sodomite'. Of course there is plenty of evidence of increased hostility towards male homosexuals, but this is not sufficient to prove the central contention that men's conduct towards their wives, mistresses and prostitutes was entirely shaped by this fear; that this is why, for example, men consorted with prostitutes. Here we come up against some significant limitations of this study. First, it is explicitly a study of *extramarital* sexual relations, not simply because such behaviour produced the best evidence, but also because Trumbach alleges that 'the history of modern male heterosexuality is substantially a history of extramarital relations'. (13) By failing to consider men's sexual conduct with their wives (except where it involved violence) Trumbach has ignored in a book on heterosexuality the vast majority of the heterosexual activity which actually took place in the eighteenth century. Second, by locating the source of all change in a shift in attitudes towards, and practices of, male homosexuality, he has largely ignored female sexuality, except when portraying poor women as the victims of the new male heterosexuality. Because, there was not, until at least the 1770s, a lesbian subculture against which to define themselves, he argues that most eighteenth-century women 'did not have an exclusive heterosexual identity', (429) and hence he sees little need to examine their sexuality. The one change identified, that some elite women, influenced by romanticism, experienced in adulterous affairs 'a second, deeper sexual awakening' than their first sexual experience with their husbands, (423) comes close to accepting uncritically later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stereotypes that women were sexually passive until aroused by their husbands, 'since the majority of women would probably not have masturbated before their first intercourse with their husbands'. (395) One can't help wondering whether the evidence can really support such a statement.

This is thus a frustrating book. On the one hand, Trumbach has developed the important insight that the histories of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and gender are intricately interrelated, an insight which, unlike the approach adopted by most gender historians, identifies important changes in masculine as well as feminine behaviour. On the other hand, by viewing all eighteenth-century sexuality through this one lens, he has failed to examine other important forces which shaped ideas and practices in London, including changing understandings of the body and the shift from a belief that women were the most lustful sex to the opposite; the impact of urbanisation and the spread of print culture on the ways sexual knowledge was diffused, interrupting channels of information traditionally controlled by women; a growing distinction between public and private life which marginalised public discussions of sex, especially female sex, and pushed them behind closed doors; and the impact of early industrialisation on traditional courtship patterns, encouraging earlier marriages but also destabilising them. Most of these changes served to encourage male heterosexual initiative at the expense of women, but not necessarily as a result of fears of homosexuality. But the new courtship patterns, as well as the adoption of the romantic ideals discussed by Trumbach, also allowed some London women the chance to take the initiative in their relationships, a point illustrated by several of the case studies in this book. This is an important and complex subject, unsuited to an essentially monocausal argument.

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