Sexuality: Another Useful Category of Analysis in European History

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Joanna Bourke. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 336 pp. ISBN 0-226-06746-7 (cl).

Bernadette J. Brooten. *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xxii + 412 pp. ISBN 0-226-075915 (cl).

James R. Farr. *Authority and Sexuality in Early Modern Burgundy (1550–1730)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. viii + 252 pp. ISBN 0-19-408907-3 (cl).

Felicity A. Nussbaum. *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. x + 264 pp. ISBN 0-8018-4075-4 (pb).

Robert A. Nye. *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. ix + 316 pp. ISBN 0-19-404649-8 (cl).

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Pick up any catalogue issued by an academic press these days, and you will be sure to notice that more and more books on the history of sexuality are being published. Once associated primarily with gay and lesbian history, the study of sexuality, like the study of women, has moved from a history focused on discovering homosexuals in past societies to one that employs sexuality as a category of analysis much like that of gender.[1] If this trend continues, it will become increasingly difficult for historians to ignore this fundamental aspect of human experience when constructing their narratives of the past.

The books chosen for this review span a wide time period in European history, and each approaches the topic of sexuality differently. Nonetheless, they do share certain characteristics. All of the authors have been strongly influenced by women's history and consequently pay close attention to the relationships between sexuality and gender. In addition, all of the authors address the work of Michel Foucault. While each of the authors is clearly interested in tracing the development of a "dominant" discourse on sexuality, they are also concerned with the ways in which

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such discourses are contested or rejected, as well as their relationship to actual sexual practice.

The authors demonstrate a tendency to move away from the essentialist/social-constructionist debate that has so marked gay and lesbian studies. Although most of the authors implicitly address the question of whether sexuality is an intrinsic and timeless condition or is defined by socially-constructed beliefs and practices, their primary focus is on the role of sexuality in creating social and political distinctions. As a result, these studies reveal how analyses of sexuality can shed light on a variety of broader historical and cultural questions. Sexuality is used as a category of analysis to examine not only sexual identity, but the political and social identity of individuals and groups as well. Together, these works raise interesting questions concerning how sexuality has been understood and experienced at different times, the role of sexuality in creating political and social hierarchies, and the nature of the relationship between discourse and practice.

Of the five works examined in this review, only Bernadette J. Brooten's *Love between Women* places itself explicitly within the context of gay and lesbian history. One of Brooten's goals in this thoroughly-researched and carefully-argued study is to draw attention to the existence and experience of women who had erotic relationships with women in the ancient Roman world. Brooten, hoping to correct what she sees as the lack of gender analysis in the work of John Boswell, argues that Romans during the early Christian era were aware of the existence of erotic relationships between women, and that they condemned these relationships as monstrous and unnatural.[2] Brooten argues that by focusing on female, rather than male homoeroticism, one can perceive continuities between early Christian writers who elaborated a negative view of female homoeroticism and their non-Christian contemporaries. Brooten argues that early Christian writers adopted existing discourses concerning homoeroticism to recast the boundaries of the Christian community. By drawing on both Jewish and pagan writings concerning same-sex relationships, Paul of Tarsus blurred the difference between Jew and gentile; as the Church became more established, other Christian writers began to conflate female and male homoeroticism, thereby distancing themselves from pagan writers who condemned all sexual relationships between women but considered certain relationships between men acceptable.

Brooten is also concerned with exploring breaks and continuities between ancient and modern notions of homosexuality. She argues, for example, that the ancient world, unlike our own period, recognized a variety of sexual orientations, defined by "whether a person took an active or a passive sexual role, as well as the gender, age, nationality, economic,

legal (slave or free), and social status of the partner" (3). These various categories reflected the organizational hierarchies of the Roman world. Brooten also emphasizes continuity with the modern period. In addition to documenting the existence and awareness of erotic relationships between women, Brooten analyzes astrology guides to argue that ancient Romans believed that a person could be predisposed to seek out erotic relationships primarily with people of the same sex. She also contends that a precedent to the "medicalization" of homosexuality in the nineteenth century can be seen in the ancient practice of prescribing clitoridectomies for women with "masculine desires," a term that she convincingly argues was a code word for women who had erotic relationships with other women. In emphasizing such continuities, Brooten seems to place herself within the essentialist school of thought, one that argues that past societies contained individuals whom we would today recognize as "homosexual."[3] At the same time, however, Brooten's careful and nuanced commentary on and use of ancient terms to describe women who had erotic relationships with other women maintains the specificity of the period she investigates, allowing her to analyze the meanings of homoeroticism in the context of ancient, rather than modern, beliefs. Indeed, Brooten seems to want to move away from the essentialist/social constructionist debate altogether; she argues instead that her concern with differences and continuities is meant to demonstrate that the periodization of gay, and especially lesbian, history may require some rethinking.

James R. Farr's goals are quite different in his *Authority and Sexuality in Early Modern Burgundy*. Farr explores attitudes concerning sexuality to shed light on the Catholic Reformation in Burgundy, arguing that sexuality served as the connecting link between secular and ecclesiastical reform movements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Farr argues that the disruption of the religious wars of the sixteenth century, accompanied by an economic crisis that resulted in outbreaks of popular rebellion and a growing number of vagrants, led to a desire to restore order by emphasizing social distinctions. According to Farr, the elite justified both its status and control through a discourse of self-discipline that soon came to focus on the (sexualized) body, increasingly perceived as the source of disorderly passion. While etiquette manuals taught Burgundian elites to control their own bodies, their rulings within the Burgundian law courts attempted to control the bodies of others.

Farr's book, divided into two sections, represents a marriage of cultural and social history. In the first section, Farr draws on the work of Foucault, anthropologist Mary Douglas, and a range of feminist theorists to analyze prescriptive literature, both secular and ecclesiastic, concerned with bodily discipline and control of the passions. In the second section,

Farr focuses on legal judgements concerning four areas of particular concern: clerical celibacy, rape, infanticide, and prostitution. This arrangement allows Farr to examine the contradictions between discourses concerning sexuality and their implementation. He notes, for example, that although the crime of rape by seduction (clandestine marriage involving a minor) was considered an attack on parental power, and therefore punishable by death, in practice legal authorities tended instead to levy fees or encourage the two involved to marry. Thus, Farr argues, "daily experiences . . . forced [judges] to innovate in the pursuit of their ideology" (106).

Although Farr tends toward the constructionist standpoint, he also seems to imply that the material body can serve as a site of resistance to prescriptive views of sexuality. "One must understand," Farr writes, "the body . . . as an agent cast into fluid situations not of its making, and thereby constrained by its conditions . . . and simultaneously provided room to maneuver to satisfy its interests" (7). Farr offers ample evidence of women's resistance to elite attempts to control their sexuality. His evidence, however, does not necessarily demonstrate that the actions of women who appeared in the Burgundian law courts stemmed from an innate bodily imperative; these women equally could be seen as operating according to a different cultural understanding of sexuality altogether. By opposing elite discourse to "the reality of the bodies [of women] all too often beyond the reaches of authority," (161) Farr tends to obscure the possibility that a multiplicity of sexualities may have existed at this time.

Farr argues convincingly that gender was perceived as central to the system of control elaborated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, stating that "the fiction of a fixed social hierarchy was predicated upon assumptions held by early modern men about unequal gender relations" (20). Working from this hypothesis, Farr focuses primarily on the control of female bodies. Yet, as the other studies demonstrate, gender and sex are not always identical, and greater attention to male bodies might have provided an avenue for exploring the interplay of different constructions of sexuality. This is especially the case in Farr's discussion of the control of clerical sexuality. Farr contends that the celibate cleric was held up as a model of the ideals of self-control and discipline of the passions. And yet Farr's discussion of clerical sexual activity focuses exclusively on the relationships between male clergy and women. In contrast, Brooten argues that for early church authorities, concern over erotic relationships in single-sex religious communities resulted in increased hostility toward same-sex sexuality. Although Farr's focus is primarily on the parish priest, could we not still assume that similar antagonisms would have emerged during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in France? And if they did not, then *why* they did not becomes an interesting historical question. Farr,

sensitive to the ways in which sexuality intersects with class and gender distinctions, might have broadened his study by addressing the question of same-sex relationships. Nonetheless, Farr, in using sexuality as a privileged vantage point from which to trace the complex power relationships between church and state, local elites and the crown, and parlementarians and the common people, demonstrates how attention to sexuality can provide insight into larger historical questions.

In *Torrid Zones*, Felicity A. Nussbaum explores the relationship between power and a multiplicity of interrelated sexualities. This study examines a variety of eighteenth-century literary texts, written by both men and women, to show how the territory of the emergent British Empire was mapped onto the female body. As enlightenment thought and imperial concerns converged, the sexualized female body came to form the center of a discourse concerning British national identity. Nussbaum contends that the elaboration of the bourgeois domestic ideal in British culture depended upon a certain understanding of its imperial "others." The virtuous bourgeois woman, for example, identified with maternity and monogamous heterosexuality, was defined in contrast to the female colonial native and the working-class prostitute, both of whom were identified with permissive and transgressive sexuality, including polygamy, venal sex, and lesbianism. However, despite their emphasis on differences among women, these narratives were only rendered comprehensible through an implicit recognition of women's similarities. At times, Nussbaum maintains, it became difficult to distinguish between the harem and domesticity. Such confusion opened up an opportunity for women writers to use the discourses surrounding domesticity and empire to critique male dominance. Nussbaum argues, for example, that by portraying the harem as a homoerotic space, rather than as a community of women in competition for the sexual favors of a single, dominant male, the harem could provide a model of female community and female sexual liberty.

Nussbaum shows how sexuality operates to create and complicate distinctions based on both gender and race. In one example, she examines how English male travel writers veiled imperial power relations in describing supposedly consensual sexual relations with women of the colonies; their purported lack of racism was, Nussbaum contends, a cover for their "sexual oppression of women" (79). Likewise, Nussbaum demonstrates how feminists reproduced the racial distinctions of imperial discourse in their critique of male power; in celebrating the "torrid zones" of the empire as sites of sexual freedom, they reproduced the distinctions between England and its empire that structured sexual and racial power relations. Nussbaum further reminds us of the limited nature of these critiques by stating "the empire of love is a powerful enabling fiction, but a

metaphor nevertheless, while men's imperial dominion involves actual territory and the legitimating power to colonize the world" (134).

Nussbaum sees the control of sexuality as stemming primarily from the material needs of the empire and increased trade. As the above quote suggests, Nussbaum is aware of the difference between discourse and practice; however, she is not primarily concerned with how literary resistance to prescriptive definitions of sexuality might translate into ways of living one's sexuality differently. Although Nussbaum does not specifically address this issue, like Farr she alludes to the possibility of dissonance between the actions of the body and the discourses produced to describe those actions. But unlike Farr, Nussbaum does not explain such dissonance as stemming from an essentialized bodily resistance to the power of discourse. Rather, she sees such dissonance as rooted in the inability, on the part of English observers, to comprehend the "other" constructions of sexuality they encounter.

Nussbaum's larger theoretical and political goal in tracing the variety of representations of female sexuality in eighteenth-century English literature is to demonstrate "contradiction inherent within 'Enlightenment'" (206). Nussbaum argues that the mythic universalism of the Enlightenment was achieved by "[reducing] diversity to an illusion of unity" (195). Nussbaum wants to recapture that diversity, so as to salvage the Enlightenment as a useful paradigm for the development of what she refers to as a "global" feminism (6). Nussbaum argues that although the Enlightenment effectively justified domination through a discourse of universalism, it never fully succeeded in eradicating a diversity of meanings that could serve as points of resistance.

Already influential in French history, Robert Nye's *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* is one of the first historical studies to examine the construction of masculinity in modern France. Like the other authors, Nye demonstrates the importance of sexuality in creating group identity; in this case his focus is on how male middle-class elites in France adopted and transformed the aristocratic code of honor in the nineteenth century. Nye's study traces the development and dissemination of honor codes, which he sees as forming the "conceptual bridge [between] private sexuality and the public domain of male sociability" (viii). Nye convincingly links the two, showing how both sexuality and sociability were believed to be governed by a set of rules designed to promote and maintain qualities defined as honorable, including virility and self-control. Nye argues that French men used the duel to manifest several aspects of their masculinity. Fighting a duel demonstrated one's right to inclusion into the elite, and eventually, as France became more democratic, into the nation of male citizens. The duel was associated with virile sexuality: men

fought to defend the reputation of women, but they also fought to counter charges of effeminacy linked to homosexuality. Thus for Nye the duel becomes the linchpin that connects public and private masculinity.

Following Joan Scott, Nye argues for the need to examine sex, which he defines in biological terms, and gender, a social construction, "dialectically" (5). While Nye is concerned with the way in which the understanding of sexuality becomes enacted through the medium of the physical body, he tends to present the relationship between discourse and practice as one of seamless continuity. It would be interesting to know what possibilities might have existed for resisting, or reinterpreting, the dominant definition of masculinity that Nye describes. Alternate models of masculinity did exist in nineteenth-century French culture. Margaret Waller, for example, has argued that romantic writers in France celebrated effeminacy.[4] And whereas in the late nineteenth century fatherhood did become an important component of masculinity, the early-nineteenth-century *flâneur*, the prototype of urban modernity, was virtually always represented as a bachelor. As later scholars build on the insights in Nye's pathbreaking work, they will no doubt develop a more complicated view of masculinity and male sexuality in nineteenth-century France.

Building on a growing body of work devoted to the study of masculinity in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England, Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male* is more successful in capturing the variety and complexity of definitions of masculinity in the years surrounding the First World War. One of the primary interests of this well-researched and informative study is Bourke's reliance on letters and drawings of the common soldier, offering us insight into how a significant number of British men understood their own masculinity. Bourke's analysis combines the letters and drawings with documents emanating from institutions and groups that sought to shape and control the meaning of masculinity.

By taking into account the variety of actors involved in the creation of masculine identities, Bourke is able to demonstrate how various definitions of masculinity were contested and transformed. Her examples illustrate the possibilities created by the war for imagining masculinity and male sexuality differently. After the war, dress reformers, for example, followed the lead of feminists in advocating that men wear loose shirts and shorts to obtain a healthy, masculine physique; others argued that only well-tailored clothes encouraged the self-discipline that was believed by many to be a necessary masculine quality. Attitudes toward male sexuality were also affected by the war. Bourke describes the prevalence of homoerotic and homosocial relations during the war (she stops short of discussing homosexual relationships among soldiers, for reasons that are not entirely clear) and argues that homoeroticism became an important

tool for creating group identity. Drawing on the tradition of male sporting clubs, military authorities promoted the beauty of the male body as a way to break down class and ethnic barriers within the army. Upon enlisting, soldiers were required to strip naked, and were then given uniforms designed to improve the appearance of the male physique. Soldiers were encouraged to identify with the beautiful male body, which they sought to obtain through physical exercise and military drill. During the war, masculinity and male sexuality thus came to be defined in relation to other men. Although the considerable number of war-wounded prompted an acceptance of male vulnerability during the war years, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a growing emphasis on masculine strength and control, increasingly associated with authority rather than equality. Although Bourke does not relate such changes to the political context, it would be interesting to know how such transformations interconnected with political movements such as fascism that also glorified the muscular male physique.

Although the emphasis on male beauty occurred within a homosocial and homoerotic environment during the war, in the postwar period relationships of any sort between men were discouraged in favor of heterosexual bonding. While Bourke argues that most men wished to return to heterosexual domesticity after the war, it would be interesting to know how men who had sexual relationships with other men responded to this change in emphasis. Nye argues that male homosexuals of the French literary elite largely accepted dominant definitions of masculinity; Proust, for example, fought several duels to "defend his sexual honor" (123). One wonders if homosexuals in England acted similarly after the war, or if they instead contested the renewed emphasis on heterosexuality. Bourke's interest in heterosexual men alone leaves her unable to answer, or even raise, such questions. Nonetheless, her arguments reveal both the close connection between masculinity and male sexuality, and the fluid role that gender can play in creating definitions of what it means to be a man.

In each of the studies considered in this review, sexuality appears as a privileged site for the construction of meaning concerning the social and political order. Sexuality serves to distinguish between different categories of people, both to unify and divide. In this sense definitions of sexuality become central not only to the identity of the individual, but to the identity of the group. With the exception of Bourke, these studies focus primarily on emergent or established elites. It would also be interesting to study how groups with less power understood and experienced their sexuality.

A related insight that these books provide is that sexuality can be defined and experienced in a variety of ways. While gender and sexuality tend to work together, other distinctions can be equally or more impor-

tant. For the ancient Romans, for example, the primary distinction in describing sexual relationships was between active and passive behavior. Women who engaged in sexual relationships with other women were not seen as unnatural simply because they transgressed gender boundaries, but because they adopted an active sexuality, one associated with masculinity, but also with freedom and citizenship. Similarly, in eighteenth-century England, sexuality was closely intertwined with class and race. The ways in which sexuality is defined and contested seem therefore to depend upon what other categories and distinctions are believed to structure power relationships within any given society. By extension, the control of sexuality is closely related to attempts to define and preserve social and political hierarchies, attempts, these authors remind us, that are always contested and resisted. It comes as no surprise then that interest in sexuality becomes especially intense during moments when a society is undergoing some sort of political or social transformation.

In the United States, as elsewhere, the recent expansion in the number of scholarly studies on the history of sexuality corresponds to a time when questions concerning gay and lesbian rights, abortion, and sexual harassment are dominating the news media and television talk shows and sit-coms. We might be well advised to apply the insights these authors provide to our own societies, so as to understand, and perhaps influence, the way in which current debates concerning sexuality are working to shape and define the late twentieth-century social and political landscape.

NOTES

[1] The title of this essay and the term "category of analysis" refer to Joan Scott's pathbreaking essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–75.

[2] John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard, 1994) and John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[3] The best known articulations of this debate in the history of sexuality are John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality,* representing the essentialist position, and David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), representing the social-constructionist position. An overview of this debate can be found in Edward Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* (New York: Garland Publications, 1990).

[4] Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1993).