

Forum

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Early Modern Sexualities: Two Views

TO THE EDITOR:

I began reading “‘Use Me But as Your Spaniel’: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities” (127.3 [2012]: 493–511), by Melissa E. Sanchez, anticipating an account of what we know about early modern sexualities. I soon realized what a more attentive reading of the title suggests: that the essay is an account of what we know—and don’t know—about early modern women’s sexualities as a function of conflicts between feminism and queer theory. These conflicts, Sanchez argues, brought into public contention the way an influential strain of second-wave feminism had minimized and sanitized the general norms of women’s sexual desire that are acceptable and “healthy”—effacing lust, abjection, violence, the desire for excess, the unequal distribution of power, the use of pain to experience pleasure—and in the same spirit had bowdlerized the evidence of early modern women’s sexualities. To restore this evidence, Sanchez elicits from texts by Spenser and Shakespeare a rich array of representations of different- and same-sex desires and behaviors that go far beyond the sexual norms that, she maintains, have been projected back onto the past.

In making this argument Sanchez raises questions of real interest to me. But the focus of her project is dictated by the political encounters in which she frames it, and her implied readership is principally interested in the sex wars of the 1980s and their aftermath. Sanchez’s actual readers, however, are MLA members, a more heterogeneous group that includes no doubt some of the essay’s implied readers but also many who have a tangential relation to those encounters and who read Sanchez’s article to learn more about early modern studies, the history of sexuality, or some combination of these.

My contribution to the Forum aims to address these actual readers, especially if they finished reading Sanchez’s essay hungry for more

knowledge about early modern sexualities or, like me inattentive to its specific project, disappointed by the implication that there's nothing more to learn. In fact there's a great deal more to learn. An enormous amount of research has been published in the last three decades by literary and nonliterary scholars who may or may not be feminist, queer, or both but whose work falls outside the boundaries of the sex wars. There also have been efforts to bring together and synthesize this work to attain a schematic but comprehensive sense of how from 1675 to 1725 there occurred a revolution in the conception and practice of sexuality that in its concrete historicity achieved the transformation that we normally attribute to the period from 1875 to 1925. This research also illuminates much that seems unaccountable, or invisible, when the story of early modern sexuality is confined to what Sanchez tells us about the feminist-queer encounter and to her own helpful readings of Spenser and Shakespeare.

To summarize: before roughly 1700, women were thought to be by nature the lustful sex, desiring sex rather than simply needing protection from it. Marriage was the arena of "generation," for which vaginal penetration was mandatory, and in this sense conjugal cross-sex was therefore "normative." But more commonly—hence "normatively"—sex was likely to be a collective and semipublic affair, including masturbation as well as the broad range of non-penetrative acts of petting, fondling, bundling, and the like that modern discourse consigns to the status of "foreplay."

Elite men displayed their power and masculinity through the penetration of women and young male commoners (in political contexts, "pederasty," a political rather than a sexual act), groups that for this purpose occupied the same category of subjection. "Gender difference" didn't exist. The anatomical differences between women and mature men were obvious and taken for granted as signs not of their fundamental difference but of their respective inferiority and superiority along the same continuum. Moreover, these physical differences were embedded in a complex experiential network of sociocultural practices that

subordinated what we think of as "natural" difference. Sex as such—an indwelling, biologically grounded conception of the self as well as the abstract category by virtue of which that conception made sense—didn't exist. In other words, early modern people experienced their sexuality as not sex but gender: as a "social construction," but without any sense of an alternative, contrasting determinacy.

By the early eighteenth century, biological sex had entered into a process of disembedding, becoming in time the fundamental criterion of personal identity. In their emergent difference from men, women ceased to be associated with concupiscence, and femininity slowly began to acquire its nineteenth-century character of dispassionate ethical subjectivity. Masculinity began to require that men feel sexual desire only for women. A male subculture defined by exclusive same-sex object choice coalesced as a functional correlate to the biologically male and female genders, a sort of third gender that bestowed on masculinity and femininity a differential coherence achieved through a mediating category that was at once both and neither.

This bald summary schematizes a historical transformation that was a major component of the transition to modernity. To speak more accurately, the early modern period should be seen not as the singular "before" to a singular "after" but as part of a chronological process that transpires in the space between before and after.

To learn more about this transformation, *PMLA*'s readers might start with the proceedings of a 2009 symposium held at Rutgers University, "Before Sex: The Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Sexuality Hypothesis" (*Signs* 37.4 [2012]: 791–848). Elsewhere I have expanded this hypothesis and coordinated it with a broad range of other developments to advance a comprehensive understanding of the transition to modernity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England (*The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* [Johns Hopkins UP, 2005]).

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