

Book Reviews

Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The facts of life: the creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995, pp. xii, 415, illus., £19.95 (0-300-06221-4).

If sexuality is as much a product of what goes on behind the eyes (in the brain) as between the legs, as modern theorization of the erotic suggests, then what our forebears knew, and what we as contemporary sexual actors know, or think we know, matters. This is the starting point for Roy Porter and Lesley Hall's lively and compendious study.

Their subject is "sexual knowledge", but a simple phrase poses a host of problems, theoretical, methodological and practical. Take, for instance, *Aristotle's master-piece*, a popular handbook of reproductive sex, in circulation, in various revised and later bowdlerized editions, for perhaps 200 years until the late nineteenth century, which is discussed at exhaustive length in the first part of *The facts of life*. Leaving aside the unsolvable question of who wrote it in the first place—certainly not Aristotle—we have a host of other imponderables: who was it for? who read it? how did they read it? how did it influence them? did it affect their behaviour? We can speculate, but we cannot know with certainty. But what we can say, with all the necessary cautions, is that a book so widely circulated for so long must have had some meaning: as part of that inchoate, contradictory, confusing but constitutive body of knowledges, popular, religious, medical, legal, out of which human actors constructed some sense of themselves, their sexual needs, their desires, and their actions. We can lift the curtain on our ignorance about sexual behaviour from a host of records—from legal proceedings, memoirs, surviving correspondence, and newspaper coverage. But we also need to know the limits of knowledge which sets frontiers on what people in the past could have known. This is the signal service of this book. It provides us

with a horizon of intelligibility for surveying the erotic adventures of the past three centuries.

On the whole, the story they tell is a depressing one, largely because they concentrate on the construction and deployment of knowledge rather than on individuals' reaction to it. The latter could often be creative and imaginative. For example, dire warnings against contraception could be used to glean knowledge of how to employ it. Tracts against homosexuality were useful for homosexually inclined people to comfort themselves that they were not the only such individuals in the world. Porter and Hall, however, pay more attention to the propagandists than the propagandized, for perfectly sound reasons, for they generally set the terms of the debate. And by and large the discourse has been a fear-laden one. The Enlightenment naturalism of the eighteenth century may have encouraged a sexual libertinism for some, as the authors suggest; but at the expense of a fear of the masses, exploitation of women, and execration of the crime against nature, sodomy. By the nineteenth century, Porter and Hall suggest, in the wake of dire warnings of Thomas Malthus about overpopulation, the threat of venereal disease, and, at the end of the century, the fear of imperial decline, sexuality had become a zone of danger as well as pleasure. In the twentieth century, sexual progressivism and reformism, a long if often stretched tradition for two centuries, often became an ally of a new norm (for example, of compulsory heterosexuality) whilst attempting to combat a widespread ignorance about, and fear of, the most basic sexual activities.

So the book warns against a neat sexual Whiggism, a teleology which sees a long march from darkness into light. At the same time, Porter and Hall engage in a constant dialogue with the work of Michel Foucault, whose *The history of sexuality* is the most polemically brilliant challenge to teleological

Book Reviews

thinking about sexuality. Yes, we must reject a naturalistic approach to sexuality; certainly, we need to challenge the worst excesses of those who see the nineteenth century as a period of sexual darkness: certainly we must explore the relationship between sexuality and power. Yet, there was, they suggest, a real darkening of the sexual climate in the Victorian period (thus challenging Foucault's rejection of the "repressive hypothesis"); the "confessional" urge to speak of sex incessantly that Foucault explores is not an appropriate trope for understanding Protestant Britain; and there have been real reforming breakthroughs in this century, not just a switch in the mode of controlling bodies and their pleasures through shifts in the modalities of discourse and power. Things do change, in fact sexual mores change all the time, and sometimes for the better, in the direction of greater freedom and individual choice.

But perhaps the most important contribution of this book is to remind us again that to understand sexuality at any particular period, we have to understand how it is thought. For, as the American historian Jonathan Katz suggested some years ago, when we explore the world of sexuality we have to remember that nature (or Nature) has very little to do with it. Which is why understanding how sexual knowledges are created is so important for understanding the murky history of sexuality.

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Joan Cadden, *Meanings of sex difference in the Middle Ages: medicine, science, and culture*, Cambridge History of Medicine series, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. xii, 310, illus., £35.00, \$54.95 (hardback 0-521-34363-1), £14.95, \$18.95 (paperback 0-521-48378-6).

In this carefully written book, Joan Cadden explores ideas about differences between males and females in medical and natural philosophical texts composed between the late eleventh and fourteenth centuries. It is a well-

grounded historical study with a feminist edge: the author is alert to asymmetries and inequalities in the discussion of sex difference and to misogynist exploitations of scientific material. Cadden acknowledges at the outset that sex difference was not a category *per se* in the many learned Latin texts she treats; pertinent observations, however, occur in many situations, and these suggest the co-existence of multiple models of masculinity and femininity in the Middle Ages. The author, admirably scrupulous about preserving ambiguities and complications, routinely seeks to situate articles of natural historical information and the texts in which they appear in the broadest possible intellectual and institutional contexts.

In Part I, treating 'Seeds and pleasures', Cadden adopts a chronological structure and surveys ideas about the contributions of male and female in conception and the relation of male and female sexual pleasure to reproduction; she discusses the adoption and adaptation of ancient Greek ideas in early, medieval medical compilations, in monastic writings of the eleventh/twelfth century (Constantine the African, Hildegard of Bingen, William of Conches), and in university texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In Part II, concerning 'Sex difference and the construction of gender', Cadden organizes her heterogeneous material in categories, devoting chapters to feminine and masculine types, to sterility and to sexual abstinence. In the first, Cadden shows that complexion was fundamental in distinguishing female from male and pursues the ramifications of the idea that "the coldest man is warmer than the warmest woman"; she goes on to examine ideas about the generation of Adam and Eve ("creation") and the generation of a boy child and a girl child ("procreation"), to conclude with an interesting investigation of slippages in binary definitions: masculine women, feminine men and hermaphrodites.

As she explores connections between natural philosophical notions (sex) and understandings of sex difference in religious and lay culture (gender), Cadden finds it convenient to keep