

Patricia Simons. *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History*. Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xv + 328 pp. \$99. ISBN: 978-1-107-00491-7.

Art historian Patricia Simons aims to demonstrate “the premodern endurance of a semen-centered and humoral way of conceiving of sexed bodies” (3), in which the signifier of premodern European masculinity was not the penis but the scrotum, with its testicles and capacity to ejaculate, or “project,” semen. Giving most attention to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, Simons is at her best surveying an array of cultural objects and practices, from high to popular culture and from institutional to everyday locations, celebrating, joking about, and granting power to the male genitals and semen: these include phalli on stone monuments and capitals,

graffiti, manuscript margins, and badges; the ritual uses of phalli; and the use and representation of dildos. The codpiece, for example, was “not so much a ‘penis sheath’ as simultaneously a means to store, protect and accentuate the cods, that is, the scrotum” (98); the projective quality of the codpieces shown in Renaissance portraits implies erection and thus, according to humoral and caloric theories, a “load of semen” swelling the genitals and demanding release (102).

Early modern Galenic theory held that both male and female bodies manufactured and ejaculated semen, the women’s ejaculatory release of fluids being within the uterus and construed as triggered by “their eager reception of male semen,” the latter the cause of their pleasure (22). In this “semenotic” economy, the penis is reduced to the necessary “delivery vehicle” of male semen into the female uterus. Such an economy, Simons insists, produced sexual difference, a point she takes to have been too easily blurred by Thomas Laqueur’s account of a two-seed, one-sex model of early modern differentiation, in which male and female are conceived as homologous if unequal in their degree of development or perfection (*Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, 1990). As Simons puts the case, Laqueur’s model of similitude and reversibility of male and female genitals “fostered the neglect of corporeal materiality and the effect of power upon the conceptualization of bodies” (142); she proposes instead an “unequal two-seed theory” of premodern sexual difference. If Laqueur would hardly disagree that the two-seed, one-sex model of sexual differentiation did not preclude hierarchical differentiation among male and female bodies, Simons’s very fine account of the textual history of the one-sex homology of male and female bodies, reintroduced into European anatomical theory with the translation into Latin of Avicenna’s Arabic *Canon* after 1170, demonstrates that the analogy of the reversibility of male and female parts was only an “introductory teaching device” stated perfunctorily in the introductions of medical texts but not integrated with the subsequent information, which stressed the perfection of male bodies (145–47).

The historical question of whether there is a single sex of men points to the problem of defining patriarchy in pre- and early modern Europe as “the system of adult male domination, from the household to the State” (73). Many categories of adult males were subordinate to both higher status male and female persons (and even to children). If here Simons suggests that patriarchy defines all adult males in universalizing terms, she states also that it does so in such a way that “social, political and economic advantage accrue[s] through the mechanisms of differentiation, between various kinds of men and also from those considered lesser according to factors such as gender, rank, age, marital status and wealth” (73–74). Likewise, she presents men as “biologically sexed” but suggests also (and correctly) that reception of “male” semen defined bodies — whether legibly female or male — as feminine or effeminate (25). Given a one-sex, two-seed model of sexual differentiation, in which cultural ideas of hierarchy and the uneven development of bodies produce sexual difference, the question of how bodily substances, tissues, and processes themselves come to be sexed as male or female should be pressed further. What Simons seems to

be describing is a normative structure. If the production and emission of male semen defined the sex of men in pre- and early modern Europe, not all individuals who made semen could be called manly or belong to and represent the class of patriarchs; conversely, some exceptional persons who did not produce and emit male semen were recognized as manly.

Simons adopts a material studies approach to premodern phallic objects and practices in order to reject the association, in modern Lacanian psychoanalysis, of the phallus with lack, loss, and mystery; she demonstrates instead the pervasive visibility of the male genitals in premodern and early modern artistic and cultural production. Critiquing Mark Breitenberg's *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (1996), Simons argues persuasively that representing masculinity as lacking "accords with elementary habits and traditions of Euro-American patriarchy" (73). As Simons rightly insists, any account of masculinity as tenuous "needs to be balanced by an awareness of limitations both institutional and cultural that provided sufficient assurance and normative grounding" (27). One might easily show that performances of anxiety, ambivalence, or instability may themselves be appropriated to an ever expanding norm of masculine subjectivity.

Simons repeatedly argues the point, however, by juxtaposing premodern artifacts — traces of popular and institutional practices that are by definition without a modern discourse, and often humorous rather than anxious — and a modern discourse, namely, psychoanalysis, assumed to be productive of anxious subjectivity. Such oppositions are taken as providing *prima facie* a corrective to anachronistic and falsely universalizing applications of modern gender theory; Simons aims thereby to reveal psychoanalytic discourses of phallic lack or castration as historically unspecified and not evident in the material archive of popular and artistic practices and objects (of which she has a dazzling command). But the Lacanian phallus is not identifiable with any signifier or mark but denotes (heuristically) that which enables the differentiation among marks, for example, the capacity to separate one part from another with which it is contiguous or to make that part synecdochic of the whole that it thereby constitutes. At one point Simons attempts to decenter Lacan's statement, "Speaking of love is itself a *jouissance*" ("Love Letter," 70), by pointing out that Louise Labé had already published in 1555 the sentiment that "the greatest pleasure that there is, after love itself, is talking about it" (70). Here, Simons suggests that Lacan and Labé were speaking of the same experience and even in the same terms (Labé has "already published the thought"). Such moments point to some indecision about the relation between premodern artifacts and modern discourses. Is Simons arguing that modern psychoanalysis describes a radically new, discursive experience of sex and is accordingly applied to premodern cultural production only anachronistically (a discontinuity in the concepts of sex and masculinity) or that psychoanalysis mystifies, obfuscates, and solemnizes (hides under a veil) a basically continuous situation?

THOMAS A. KING
Brandeis University