

Will Stockton and James M. Bromley, eds. *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. vii + 330 pp. \$27.50. ISBN: 978-0-8166-8077-1.

*Sex before Sex* proceeds from an observation that is brilliant in its simplicity: despite copious work in queer theory and the history of sexuality, “the sex act itself actually remains an undertheorized and underhistoricized concept” (10). As the introduction proposes, and as the individual essays attest, the critical tendency to take for granted that we know what sex is and means not only omits a profusion of acts and fantasies that would have been experienced as sexual in the early modern period, but also limits and distorts our understanding of the intricacies of gender, power, identity, and desire. Challenging interpretive protocols that tend to confine sex to penetrative, or at least genital, acts, the volume’s introduction insists that the boundary between “reading” and “reading into” is less stable and knowable than conventional scholarly practice has allowed (6). As Stockton and Bromley argue, the subordination of early modern to modern sexual norms and criteria for evidence has gone largely unremarked and “contributes to the field’s relative inattention to acts

that have no immediate connection to the most prevalent, politicized, identitarian discourses of sexuality in the present” (8).

In response, *Sex before Sex* reveals the unexpected forms of sexual desire and practice that become accessible once we set aside the “presumptive knowledge” that, as Valerie Traub observes in the volume’s afterword, “overwrites what sex is, what it does, what it means, and why we should care about it” (291–92). Essays by Christine Varnado, Kathryn Schwarz, and Nicholas F. Radel offer compelling studies of the interplay of evidence, perception, and normative preconceptions in scholarly reading practices. As these essays demonstrate, sex in early modern literature is largely, to borrow Varnado’s term, “invisible”: it not only occurs offstage, as in drama, but also is described in elliptical and imprecise terms — if it is described at all. Sex (or, as Schwarz shows, chastity) is as much a counterfactual, imaginative construction as an objective, material event. Consequently, as Radel puts it, we have “no way to access an understanding of bodies in aesthetic texts that is not inflected by and that does not revise the present in which we write” (112). Proceeding from this premise, essays by Melissa J. Jones, Will Fisher, and James Bromley focus on pleasures and practices whose disappearance from modern sexual discourse has led critics to overlook their prominence in early modern literature and culture. As these essays show, if we begin by admitting that we cannot know in advance what counts as sex, then representations of male impotence (Jones), chin-chucking (Fisher), and anilingus (Bromley) acquire unexpected significance as forms of eroticized pleasure and intimacy for both women and men. Attention to such representations, moreover, compels us to reexamine our assumptions about gender roles and structures of power. Holly Dugan and Will Stockton contribute essays that have similarly important implications for feminism as well as queer theory and sexuality studies. These essays focus on the topic of rape — Dugan examines representations of animal rape of humans and Stockton traces the link between female fear and fantasy of rape — to challenge both past and present assumptions of female sexual passivity and male sexual initiative. Turning from sexual acts to sexual objects, Stephen Guy-Bray and Thomas Luxon reveal the inadequacy of the assumption that sexual partners must be human. In provocative discussions of Browne, Donne, Marvell (Guy-Bray), and Milton (Luxon), these two essays turn us back to an Aristotelian view of continuity and intercourse among vegetable, bestial, human, and celestial being, thereby challenging many of the categorical distinctions that have shaped critical approaches to sexuality and figuration. Traub’s afterword both summarizes and extends the discussion by treating the essays as a springboard for further troubling the parameters of identity, historicism, and queer studies as they are conventionally understood.

*Sex before Sex* engages questions about method and the future of queer studies. The determination of the authors to “embrace the possibilities of the critics simultaneous anteriority and posteriority” to early modern sex makes this essential reading for early modernists, and I anticipate that it will inspire a good deal of scholarly work to come.

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