

Allison Levy, ed. *Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy: Practice, Performance, Perversion, Punishment*.

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The past few decades have witnessed a surge in scholarship regarding sex and sexuality in early modern Europe. Seminal works by Michel Foucault, Thomas Laqueur, Michael Rocke, and Guido Ruggiero, among others, have provided solid frameworks

that place sexualities in historical context. *Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy* considers and counters this previous scholarship. In the introduction, Allison Levy asserts that one of the volume's goals is to confuse and complicate our vision of early modern sexual practices. Indeed, the authors seek out ambiguities with subtle readings of their historical sources, and their essays serve as correctives to works that mapped early modern sexualities in overly rigid terms or that interpreted them with modern sensibilities.

This volume is firmly interdisciplinary, with authors from history, art history, comparative literature, cultural studies, Italian, and English. It examines a wide range of subjects, including architecture, ceramics, literature, paintings, plays, poems, prints, and sculpture, though most are from Venice and Tuscany. The authors explore contemporary prescriptive and proscriptive literature as well as local laws and customs to tease out the nuances of records and representations of sex and sexuality. The book is thematically organized into four sections: "Practice," "Performance," "Perversions," and "Punishment." All sixteen chapters are worthy contributions, even if space does not allow for discussion of each one here.

The essays in part 1, "Practice," address questions of agency. Ann Rosalind Jones investigates sixteenth-century perceptions of prostitution in Venice and turns to Veronica Franco and Moderata Fonte for women's views on the issue; both assert that women became prostitutes to overcome hardships caused by the failure of male relatives to provide them with adequate sustenance. Diane Wolfthal reexamines notions of the gendered public-private divide and argues that women from varied social groups appeared in windows to facilitate courtship or sexual commerce. Patricia Simons provides a history of the dildo and its place in the European imagination as an Italian invention. Apparently used by women less often than popular literature suggests, the early modern dildo most often consisted of a stuffed leather casing stiffened with wood or bone.

The essays on "Performance" reveal flexibility in sexual attitudes. Karina Feliciano Attar looks to Fortini's frank discussion of sex between Jews and Christians in his *novelle* as evidence of an erotic openness in sixteenth-century literary circles. Courtesans, seemingly without shame, transgressed social codes when they adopted aspects of masculine and elite behavior to promote themselves, explains Chrisinda Henry in her analysis of Cariani's *Seven Albani Portraits*. Illicit sex could even be sanctioned, as Timothy McCall suggests in his essay on the social and economic favors that benefited the natal and marital families of nobles' mistresses in North Italian courts.

Part 3, "Perversions," takes on practices that challenge the heteronormative. Will Fisher offers a new interpretation of Bronzino's perplexing erotic paintings of Venus and Cupid by placing them in the context of contemporary debates on whether men gained more pleasure from sex with young boys or women. Anxieties regarding incest drive essays by Jutta Sperling and Rachel Poulsen. Sperling looks at the iconography of Roman Charity and similar instances of "queer lactations," while Poulsen analyzes della Porta's bawdy *La Sorella*. The authors untangle early modern understandings of sexual taboos, which were still in flux when compared to the Foucauldian universe of modern deviance.

Even so, those who transgressed sexually often paid dearly for their sins, as the volume's last section demonstrates. Robert Mills engages the punishments of sodomites, seen in the frescoes of the Collegiata in San Gimignano, to question the links between sex acts and sexual orientation. Daniella Rossi examines the practice of group rape to castigate sexual disobedience, with a focus on Venier's poem *Il Trentuno della Zaffetta*, in which a Venetian courtesan is violently disciplined. Men's lust for women was also patrolled, as Sergius Kodera explains using Bruno's comedy *Candelaio*.

This book, which was published in Italian in 2009 (Florence: Le Lettere), is a welcome addition to the growing literature on early modern sexualities that will appeal to scholars across the disciplines. Though some of its essays could have been further developed, the volume raises important questions about sexual practices and attitudes in early modern Italy.

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