

6-12-2017

# Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns / Valerie Traub

James Beaver

Follow this and additional works at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc>

 Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

James Beaver (2017) "Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns / Valerie Traub," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 12 , Article 17.  
Available at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Modern Culture by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [awesole@clemson.edu](mailto:awesole@clemson.edu).

**Valerie Traub. *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*.  
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 480 pp.**

Reviewed by JAMES BEAVER

“In queer studies right now,” Valerie Traub argues near the conclusion of *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, “Theory partakes of the prime time, while history is yesterday’s news” (269). In *Thinking Sex*, Traub aims to demonstrate why “yesterday’s news” still matters to scholarship today. It is first and foremost a response to the prominent role of theory in queer studies, and, particularly, scholarship on queer temporality. In response to queer theory, Traub constructs an interdisciplinary historiographic methodology that attends to the variety of sexual practices of the past. Eschewing traditional frameworks for exploring sexuality such as subjectivity and desire, Traub takes as her focal point epistemology, treating sex as a “knowledge-relation,” a product of multiple discursive and social indexes, which can take strikingly different forms during the course of history. At the core of sex, she contends, is an unintelligibility or opacity which lies in a fundamental tension with our attempts to produce “knowledge” of it (9). “Sex may be good to think with,” she says, “Not because it permits access, but because it doesn’t” (4). In other words, as an object of study, it conditions a field of knowledge imbricated with indeterminacy. How, asks Traub, does one create knowledge from an experience so individualized, ephemeral, and local, let alone decipher “the intractable epistemological problem” of the “irreducibly dual status of sex as material embodiment [. . .] and sex as representation” (130)? An adequate history of sexuality, she contends, must both negotiate the dual status of sex, while also basing its methods around the principle of this indeterminacy.

In Part I, “Making the History of Sexuality,” Traub lays out the intellectual groundwork from which her project derives as well as recent scholarship to which she is responding. In Chapter 2, “Friendship’s Loss: Alan Bray’s Making of History,” she considers the field’s debt to the historiography of Bray. For Traub, the significance of Bray’s historiographic methodology lies in his shift from attention on homosexual identity to “the analysis of social structures and processes that regulate the intelligibility of same-gender attractions” (39), particularly, “the location of male intimacy in a range of early modern social systems” (41). Ultimately, Traub views Bray’s work as a precursor to her own historical practice, one which will bracket questions of homo and hetero, queer and straight, in order to attend to the particularities of the historical moment. In Chapter 3, “The New Unhistoricist in Queer Studies,” Traub offers her most direct challenge to the recent scholarship in queer temporality. Here, she highlights the work of three prominent queer scholars (“the unhistoricists”)—Carla Freccero, Jonathan Goldberg, and Madhavi Menon—who use similar deconstructive modes to unsettle normative conceptualizations of temporality, chronology, and history (62). Their attempts to link such disparate concepts operate through a mistaken

## Reviews

analogical logic, Traub contends, as well as theoretical terms—such as hetero and homo, distance and proximity—which are abstracted from the specificities of historical contexts. While Freccero, Goldberg, and Menon promote a “queer theory as that which challenges all categorization” (81), Traub believes that historiography must, ultimately, contend with historical categories, and advocates a historicism “dedicated to showing *how* categories, however mythic, phantasmic, and incoherent, *came to be*” (81). Chapter 4, “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” introduces a critical mode “to fashion a broadly synoptic account of historical regimes of eroticism [in this case lesbianism]—without losing sight of each regime’s specificity, complexity, relative coherence, and instability” (86). By analyzing “recurrent explanatory metalogics,” which “draw their specific content from perennial axes of social definition,” Traub contends that historians can locate “cycles of salience,” where we “encounter what can look a lot like ‘lesbianism’ in the distant historical periods in which we work” (85). In this model, the historian can find connections between the Renaissance tribade and twentieth-century sapphist, or treat same-sex intimacies of medieval and early modern women living in convents as prototypes for nineteenth-century romantic friendships.

Part II, “Scenes of Instruction; or Early Modern Sex Acts,” transitions to questions of epistemology, as Traub asks what, exactly, critics are doing when they identify “sex” in the early modern. Chapter 5, “The Joys of Martha Joyless,” uses a moment of sexual naivety in Richard Brome’s 1638 play *The Antipodes* to query how one can make sense of sexual knowledge that appears neither normative nor transgressive, but, rather, emerges from ignorance and incomprehension. For Traub, Brome’s play offers the opportunity to treat sex not “as a discrete, unified, bounded, and essentially passive object of inquiry” (117), but something that is made, learned, and practiced. Chapter 6, “Sex in the Interdisciplines,” considers the epistemological implications wrought from “the irreducible materiality of bodily acts” that make up what we identify as “sex” (174). Rejecting the “affective turn” toward “an *archival ars erotica* as an emergent field habitus” (137), Traub turns her attention to the lack of historical evidence on specific sex acts, observing that this often accompanies critics’ “presumptive knowledge” (143) about what sex is. What is missing in studies of sexuality, she argues, is an investment in studying sex “as such,” *sex qua sex*, something “[ir]reducible to power or discourse or the truth-of-the subject, yet also something not ultimately knowable” (167). Traub advocates “risking empiricism” (165) in order to construct “a *historicized theory of sexual variation* capable of analyzing not only *what* early moderns did, but the reasons *why* they did what they did” (152). Chapter 7, “Talking Sex” explores how euphemisms, stock phrases, and words like “dildo” and “naught” inform the period’s sexual language, as Traub traces “linguistic excess [. . .] slip[ping] into epistemological aporia” (172), and asks, “what might happen when terms refuse to be spelled out—and, in particular, what [might] this refusal or resistance [. . .] mean to a history of early modern sex” (173).

Part III, “The Stakes of Gender” considers “the difference that gender specificity makes to the now twenty-year-old project of ‘queering the Renaissance’” (8), by conducting a literary and historical practice that Traub identifies as simultaneously feminist and queer. In Chapter 8, “Shakespeare’s Sex,”

## Reviews

Traub undoes what are often perceived as the “necessary relations among gender and sexuality, biography, narrative, and sequence” in the *Sonnets* (236). In the poems to the young man, Traub discerns not a subversive homoeroticism, but rather “a homoerotic of reproductive futurity” (259), within rather conventional lines of early modern notions of intimacy and friendship. In the dark lady sonnets, she discerns sodomy, specifically, a non-reproductive sexual closure of the future, which allows her to conclude, strikingly, that “Shakespeare’s sonnets appropriate a future exclusively for men” (261). Chapter 9, “The Sign of the Lesbian,” returns to the fraught relationship between contemporary queer theory and historicism, as Traub attempts to shift the focus of lesbian history “away from identity and toward the knowledge relations that subtend the links among ‘lesbian,’ ‘queer,’ ‘history,’ and ‘theory’” (266). In her view, the lesbian can serve as “a sign for the impasses involved in making sexual knowledge” (292), suspending, and residing in, tensions between knowing and unknowing, intelligibility and unintelligibility, which govern all historical inquiry. In her final chapter, Traub engages once more with key interlocutors Lee Edelman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and offers her concluding thoughts on how we might view sex as an agent in history.

*Thinking Sex* organizes its inquiry through two central questions: (1) “What are the contours of sexual knowledge—its contents, syntaxes, and specificities—for the early moderns? (2) And which social, intellectual, and institutional processes are involved in creating and exchanging it—for them and for us?” (7). The bulk of Traub’s critical investment lies in the second question. In her desire to create an interdisciplinary approach to studies of sexuality, Traub deftly maneuvers between the contrasting methodologies and agendas of historical, literary, queer, and feminist studies. *Thinking Sex* is at its best in her command of this scholarship, as she traces the various intellectual trajectories which have come to inform contemporary debates on sexuality. Her primary challenge is to the “universalizing pretensions of queer theory” (23), and to the category of “queer” itself, which she contends has enabled erasures of the historical specificities of sex acts in favor of a singular rubric of all-encompassing alterity. Traub makes a strong case that a renewed investment in historicism must find its place amidst the theoretical allures of queer theory. However, she might at times do more to explore the compatibilities between the two. Her declaration, early on, that “readings [. . .] are not the same thing as history” (71), dismisses a bit too easily the value of queer theory’s deconstructive reading practices to historical aims, especially since she concedes several pages later that “history denotes the narratives that we construct about the past and past times” (79). Surely, such narratives find their basis in readings and, at some level, an engagement with form, of the kind queer theory invites us to participate? Beyond this firm divide between theory and historicism, Traub’s investment in contending with contemporary debates leaves less space for the early modern period itself. Only two of *Thinking Sex*’s eight chapters are devoted to a specific reading of an early modern text, while a tantalizing composite portrait of early modern sexual practices is condensed to a single page. Ultimately, these observations serve to provide a stimulus to further explore the implications of her project in the early modern period. It is, in fact, an invitation for other early modern scholars of

## Reviews

sexuality to do so. *Thinking Sex* is, primarily, Traub's working through of a historiographic methodology against the backdrop of theory's rise. Her aim of a broad history of sexuality over the long durée, as well as her exploration of the limitations in current theory, are highly valuable for both early modern scholars and scholars of the history of sexuality seeking to cross the great divides of our disciplinary and institutional practices.

---

**James Beaver** received his Ph.D. from Brown University in 2015. His dissertation, "Material Encounters of the English Renaissance," explores the relationship between words and things in the works of Donne, Jonson, Shakespeare, and Spenser. He is currently an instructor at Bryant University.