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### Book Review Of: *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* by Thomas Laqueur.

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# BOOK REVIEW OF: Making Sex

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**Laqueur, Thomas.** *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990.

*Making Sex* is an ambitious investigation of Western scientific conceptions of sexual difference. A historian by profession, Laqueur locates the major conceptual divide in the late eighteenth century when, as he puts it, “a biology of cosmic hierarchy gave way to a biology of incommensurability, anchored in the body, in which the relationship of men to women, like that of apples to oranges, was not given as one of equality or inequality but rather of difference” (207). He claims that the ancients and their immediate heirs—unlike us—saw sexual difference as a set of relatively unimportant differences of **degree** within “the one-sex body.” According to this model, female sexual organs were perfectly homologous to male ones, only inside out; and bodily fluids—semen, blood, milk—were mostly “fungible” and composed of the same basic matter. The model didn’t imply equality; woman was a lesser man, just not a thing wholly different in **kind**.

However, since the Enlightenment, Laqueur argues, males and females **have** been seen as different in kind, and many social and political consequences have followed. Where theorists of the “one-sex” model saw all human bodies as if resulting from arrows aimed at the target **human**, before which the arrows producing females fell short, the new “two-sex” model supposed that **male** and **female** were separate, opposed targets. Laqueur first noticed this paradigm shift while examining “the question of disappearing orgasm”: once thought biologically necessary for the conception of a child, female orgasm after the appearance of the “two-sex body” became a contingent or coincidental matter bound up with various political interpretations of “women’s nature.” He does not claim that one model definitively supplanted the other at a given historical moment. Traces of the “two-sex body” can be found in Aristotle, and the “one-sex body” lives on in popular myth even today. And he cautions against giving a causal account of the shift, one that relies on social or political explanations of it, since “the remaking of the body is itself intrinsic” to such explanations (11). Nonetheless Laqueur redraws the map of Western sexuality in a breathtakingly grand gesture.

Laqueur describes his book as a history of “bodies and pleasures” (Foucault’s phrase), and begins by situating his work amid current debates about the epistemological status of scientific and historical narratives. Still, his main techniques of inquiry remain those of traditional intellectual history. He combines a chronological tour through the usual philosophers (beginning of course from Aristotle) with ultraclinical discussion of changing anatomical knowledge and medicalizing fantasy, accompanied by startling illustrations. The argument is sweeping, the narrative lumps centuries together, and national differences are given little importance. Scholars of each subspeciality will be kept busy commenting on his work for years, no doubt, and the common reader who has absorbed it will perceive gender-switching plots differently than before.<sup>1</sup>

Laqueur often seems more interested in how literate Europeans thought about (and pictured) sex than in how most people actually lived sex and gender. Of course, such experience is notoriously difficult to find out about. So like most recent work on the history of sexuality, *Making Sex* operates within the Foucaultian claim that “discourses” –sets of culturally maintained representations–organize lived experience and human perception. This stance, by implication, narrows the gap between intellectual and social history.

Laqueur’s work also follows Foucault in finding metaphor where we most expect the literal—in biology, on the body—and in often making a “negative case,” showing that advances in the state of medical knowledge haven’t driven ideological change (though he is sensibly coy about exactly what **does** drive it). “No set of facts ever entails any particular account of difference”—since, given the wealth of detailed evidence for BOTH similarity AND difference between “women” and “men,” any model of sexual difference must always choose to highlight some issues and ignore others. His account of the Renaissance “poetics of biology” is particularly effective in showing that people didn’t make cultural use of what they might have scientifically known, if only they had cared to know it. Every era, he shows, has invented the science it (politically and culturally) needed within the boundaries set by prevailing epistemologies. Nonetheless, he realizes that actual bodies exist and have existed, and acknowledges “scientific progress”—for example, in fixing the relationship of ovulation to pregnancy and the menstrual cycle. To speak, as he does, of “scientific fictions” is not to say all science is somehow bogus, done with mirrors, purely in the service of ideology.

On the other hand, new scientific discourses may determine which cultural questions can be asked, but they don’t legislate any one answer. So, for example, around the time of the French Revolution the recognition that female orgasm was a contingent, not a necessary, part of reproductive intercourse made possible theories of women’s “passionlessness,” while female organs received new and differentiating names, and Woman took on a whole character derived

(in one way or another) from her ovaries, her experience of menstruation, and so forth. Because the testes were different, Woman was a different creature on all levels, from the cellular to the moral-philosophical. But these theories could be and were put to use by anti-feminists and feminists alike—though agreed to be **different**, woman might still be either physically weaker (unfit for participation in the public sphere) or morally stronger (more suited than men to duties of political governance). In political culture as in science, discourse determines the terms and the vigour of the debate, but not the outcome.

The argument that scientific explanation of the body is socially contingent leads Laqueur to Freud's revisionary anatomy. It is no news to most of us that Freud's account of progress from clitoral to vaginal orgasm as a sign of female "maturity" does not correspond to any biological reality. But Laqueur demonstrates conclusively that Freud must have **known** his progress narrative was social/cultural rather than physiological/biological—must, in other words, have known that it was either fanciful or coercive—because biologists had routinely discussed the centrality of the clitoris to female sexual pleasure, and the absence of physiological bases for sensation in the vagina, for literally centuries. We can now be sure that what Laqueur rather kindly calls Freud's "aporia of anatomy" was a result of active repression rather than simply a primitive state of medical knowledge; and this has obvious consequences for current feminist debate about Freud.

Laqueur's perspective relies heavily, as he acknowledges, on developments within "women's history" and on feminist theory—particularly on the distinction between "sex" and "gender" first made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, and developed memorably in Gayle Rubin's influential essay "The Traffic in Women."<sup>2</sup> Within the second-wave of twentieth century Anglo-European feminism, the concept of "gender" denotes those "observable" differences between women and men that could be argued to be culturally constructed (and thus mutable) rather than eternally, biologically given. Such a division between natural "sex" and cultural "gender" was absolutely crucial in combatting the myth of women's natural inferiority, of the appropriateness of their subordination to men, and so forth—it was a way of naming and undoing sexual essentialism.

*Making Sex* explicitly revises this dualism, asserting centrally that "sex, as much as gender, is made" (ix). Under the discursive regime of the one-sex body, it is asserted, there was not (as today) a base-superstructure relationship between sex and gender. Rather, gender was "real"—was constitutive of social relationships—while sex was contingent, an epiphenomenon. Laqueur suggests a paradox: that for the ancients, sex was socially constructed, gender "naturally" given—for example, through an insistence that hierarchical relations between men and women, as between free men and slaves, were eternal, immutable truths to be actualized in social roles, not in anatomical structures.

Does this make a complete hash, then, of the sex/gender dualism? Not necessarily. Feminist theorists Donna Haraway and Judith Butler have both argued that the recent success of feminists and cultural historians at distinguishing “sex” (biological givens) from “gender” (cultural constructions) has had the unfortunate side effect of letting anatomy off the hook, leading us to ignore the potential dangers (and pleasures) of cultural construction within the biological sciences and other discourses about “the body.”<sup>3</sup> Laqueur’s work advances this project, and further unsettles biologicistic arguments about the differences between women and men.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear, however, that unsettling the sex/gender dualism—which has after all proved politically quite useful under the two-sex model we have to live with now—is the best way to criticize biological essentialism. What would be lost if we said, not that “sex” is socially constructed **too**, but simply that we need to move the boundary a bit—that we’ve been calling some things “sex” that are really, after all, gender?

We might well lose the title of the book, of course, which plays on the equivocation between sexual difference and sexual activity, and (coupled with the naked women on the cover) gives a rather false impression of forthcoming titillation, since the subject of *Making Sex* is actually quite a sober one. In fact, there is very little discussion here of pleasures—and even less attention to pain. One thing that strikes a feminist as odd about this book is its tone: the emotional distance and the absence of horror while recounting rapes, clitoridectomies, ovariectomies performed for no medical reason but curiosity, death sentences meted out to those of ambiguous gender (or is it sex?), and the general subjection, manipulation, and domination of female bodies by male doctors and other “experts” throughout the long period the book covers. Laqueur does acknowledge, early on, that “the fact that pain and injustice are gendered and correspond to corporeal signs of sex is precisely what gives importance to an account of the making of sex.” He also acknowledges an absence in his book of “a sustained account of experience in the body.” (This he suggests is perhaps appropriate in a man writing about women; it is probably inevitable anyway given his broad schematic approach and his reliance on the methods of intellectual history.) But overall, Laqueur has clearly chosen to write a history of **difference** rather than a history of **oppression**.

This is more than a matter of tone: it leads frequently to what we might, borrowing Laqueur’s own term, call an **aporia** of political consequences. Feminists undertake to study the history of sexuality, for the most part, to understand women’s subordination in order to see whether and how it can be undone. Laqueur does note, from time to time, the social applicability or function of various conceptions of the body. The one-sex model served male power by explaining why men were needed for generation, and established the centrality of paternity; the two-sex model served male power by enabling discourses of female inadequacy. But since (for example) we know already that ancient Greece was an extremely sex-segregated and misogynist society in its social practices, its physicians’ specific conception of the body seems almost irrelevant to the major issue of power. One might contrast Laqueur’s approach to the sex/gender question in

ancient Greece with Anne Carson's in her essay "Putting Her In Her Place: Women, Dirt and Desire."<sup>5</sup> Carson deals with some of the same medical and philosophical texts as Laqueur, but she begins with a discussion of lived **gender** relations as they can be reconstructed from historical, literary, and juridical sources. This provides a fuller social context for discussion of, say, why women are considered "cooler" and "wetter" than men, and what follows from this in the social sphere.

Laqueur's underlying point still stands, that ancient relations of gender provided the base for which "anatomy" was the superstructure. But we wonder whether, in directing his attention so exclusively to the "scientific" discourses of the ancient world—rather than to, say, the pre-scientific ideology reflected in Hesiod, Semonides of Amourgos, and Aeschylus, which **did** elaborate differences of kind between two sexes—Laqueur has been anachronistically motivated by the modern assumption that sex differences really do come "first," that sexuality is the key to identity.

It also strikes us as curious that Laqueur did not find it important to address alternatives to procreative heterosexuality in any systematic way—either as a history of repression or as a (Foucaultian) history of "incitement to discourse." "Lesbianism" (the word does not appear in the index, though "tribade" does) is discussed only as it may or may not apply in cases of hermaphroditism; male homosexuality is discussed almost exclusively in sections about ancient Greece. The discussions of hermaphroditism suggest that doctors until quite recently were concerned purely to assign male or female sex to a body, rather than to assign male or female gender to a person—or to lay down moral injunctions about how such bodies might be permitted to behave. These are significant observations, and particularly interesting in light of the recent work on ancient Greek sexuality done by David Halperin and John Winkler.<sup>6</sup> But the sketchiness of the discussion is another byproduct of Laqueur's own decision to focus on bodies rather than people.

None of these criticisms need prevent Laqueur's argument from being useful in political debate, as a further marshalling of evidence for social constructionism generally. But there is something paradoxical—even when Foucault does it—about "marshalling evidence" for the conclusion that the facts didn't matter. Laqueur ends with the following sentence: "But basically the content of talk about sexual difference is unfettered by fact, and is as free as mind's play." We are uneasy about the use of fundamentally positivist historical argument to make this Foucaultian point.<sup>7</sup> We also wonder how to understand his (truth-)claims about the Great Divide between "one-sex theorists" and us, after he observes that "the play of difference never came to rest" (193). Such endless play of signifiers can disarm the counterexamples to his narrative of historical change, such as the eruption of the one-sex theory into "Dear Abby," or a pattern of ambiguities in Aristotle. The question is whether this freedom is compatible with saying that "in or about the late eighteenth [century] . . . human sexual nature changed" (5).

Twenty years ago, the raw materials of *Making Sex* would have made an amusing book about the odd persistence of sexual misconceptions. After Foucault, “misconception” might seem a misconception, and such a book would look antiquated and politically naive. Laqueur’s book is more sophisticated and politically aware, but equally lacking in polemical edge. He suggests in passing that *Making Sex* might be used against sociobiology and against the “science of difference” (21). That he himself does not do so, however, indicates what the history of sexuality has lost in becoming academically respectable.

## Notes

1. Laqueur notes how one-sex theory makes possible some new readings of classic texts (23ff), and others are already producing such readings, notably Stephen Greenblatt. See also Susan McClary’s discussion of “erotic friction” in 17th-century vocal music, which cites both Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) and an essay by Laqueur *Feminine Endings* [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991], 37).

2. A full and helpful genealogy of this distinction can be found in Donna Haraway, “‘Gender’ for a Marxist Dictionary: the Sexual Politics of a Word,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991). Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” can be found most conveniently in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward a Feminist Anthropology* (New York: Monthly Review, 1975).

3. Donna Haraway throughout the book cited above, and Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

4. As a historical realist, Laqueur does, however, seem to believe in **some** immutable sex differences, though he doesn’t state what they are, and in this he may differ from Butler and Haraway.

5. Anne Carson, “Putting Her In Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Greek World*, ed. D. Halperin, J. Winkler, and F. Zeitlin

(Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990). Our comment on Carson's essay applies as well to the other essays in that collection, and to Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).

6. David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London: Routledge, 1990), especially "The Democratic Body: Prostitution and Citizenship in Classical Athens"; and Jack Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1990).

7. Ironically, Laqueur clings to his conventional methods of intellectual history even as he demolishes other foundational structures, such as the sex=nature/ gender=culture system. If we think of these **methods** as natural to him, the Foucaultian conclusions become a culture built (unsteadily?) upon them. But this paradox has no easy solution, and we'd rather have our history with evidence than without.