Book Review


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Carolyn Dinshaw takes her ironic title from a scene in Quentin Tarantino’s film, Pulp Fiction (1994), in which the African-American underworld boss, Marsellus Wallace, turns on his redneck rapist and vows to “get medieval on your ass.” Using this comment as a touchstone, Dinshaw proposes a new kind of queer history that examines how the medieval past becomes construed in popular culture in terms of the violent, sodomitical, not to mention sadomasochistic, redneck-southerner, male-homosocial present. Dinshaw’s project, as she sees it, is to intervene in popular culture’s fantasy of itself against a violent, homophobic medieval past by exposing the complicity of the postmodern in the medieval past it represents. Her methodology is queer history, by which she means a history that seeks to “make connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now” (1). By insisting on the medieval in Tarantino’s film and exploring our use of the medieval to set against our cultural present, Dinshaw hopes also to recuperate the medieval in modern queer studies and politics.

Her book asks, “how do communities, then and now, form themselves in relation to sex?” (1), and it pursues the answers to this question through a variety of literary and historical texts, including religious instruction for parish priests, accusations of sodomy among Lollard heretics, a historical...
record of a male transvestite arrested for prostitution, the heterosexual fellowship of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the politics of Margery Kempe. She conjoins these medieval sites of deviant sexuality with archival work by Michel Foucault, the culture wars of the late 1990s, and, of course, *Pulp Fiction*.

Dinshaw’s method of splicing the postmodern and the medieval by way of creating a new queer history follows a direction of recent queer studies in premodern sexualities. Her argument for a queer history that creates a community across history even as it interrogates historical and literary sites where heterosexuality collapses with deviant sexuality, however, is radically new. Using the theory of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, Dinshaw considers a history that allows the “voices of deviant desires to emerge” (18). At the same time, the queer scholar herself is engaged in an affective or erotic act that Dinshaw calls a “tactile history”—that is, one in which past and present touch rather than oppose one another and in which the queer scholar’s desires are fulfilled.

One of the more controversial and arguable implications of Dinshaw’s theory of queer history is that the queer scholar’s “touch” can alter cultural studies (34). Beyond the contributions that medieval scholars have to make to political debates and academic disciplines, Dinshaw asserts that queer scholars have this special touch that differs somewhat from the touch of other kinds of history. This is where her argument becomes problematic because it suggests that tactile history comes naturally to queer scholars—that it is the queer scholar’s touch that makes for a queer history.

Merry Wiesner-Hanks is an early modern (Renaissance) historian who takes on a different kind of a history in *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*. Departing from the European focus of her previous studies of women and gender in the early modern (Renaissance) period, Wiesner-Hanks includes eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and North America in her study of “how Christian ideas and institutions shaped sexual attitudes and activities from roughly 1500–1750” (2). The historical and geographical scope of her study is breathtaking, but it represents an alternative attempt to Dinshaw’s of addressing the crossover of the modern and the premodern.

Such a historical and geographic range is compounded by a “range of approaches” that Wiesner-Hanks admits “may seem quite dizzying” (13). This is one of the book’s shortcomings. In order to expand the early modern focus beyond the European, Wiesner-Hanks is forced to reiterate the impossibility of generalizing across massive geopolitical areas and religious divisions at the same time that she tries to make such generalizations. In fact, the book is necessarily limited by its scope to generali-
zations, leaving the interesting microhistorical evidence out entirely. The result is a net loss, I fear, even though Wiesner-Hanks's book is a salutary effort to correct previous studies of sexuality, premodern culture, and, in particular, Christianity in the premodern world.

How does Wiesner-Hanks finally answer her own question about how Christian ideas and institutions shaped sexual attitudes and activities in Europe and its colonies from 1500 to 1750? She begins by “getting medieval”—that is, by tracing the establishment of Christian ideas about sex from the New Testament to the church fathers, to the institutionalization of confession, and to the establishment of church courts to try heresy and sexual deviance. The regulation of sexuality, according to Wiesner-Hanks, becomes a major strategy for the consolidation of church power and control, particularly through the increasing regulation of marriage law.

The early modern period is marked by the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Here Wiesner-Hanks finds that “Catholic and Orthodox leaders were just as suspicious of sexual pleasure as many Protestants” (134). It might surprise some postmodern scholars of sexuality to know that the pattern of persecution for sex crimes experiences its greatest upsurge during the 1560s and not the Middle Ages, while premodernists might be interested to know that the Eastern Orthodox Church tended to lump heterosexual and homosexual deviance in the same category.

The three chapters on Latin America, Africa and Asia, and North America track the colonizing of these countries through what Wiesner-Hanks calls a “blending,” or adaptation, of Christian and pagan sexual norms. Here she resists recent scholarship in cultural studies that argues for a less cozy view of the encounter of European and non-European norms. Her most pervasive conclusions from these three chapters are that the medieval church regulated sexual activity through external controls and internal norms and helped to enforce racial distinctions between colonizers and colonized through its regulation of sexual distinctions.

Wiesner-Hanks concludes that the categories—of sex, race, religion, and nationality—are interdependent. She states that “the centrality of sex to the preservation of boundaries is something that nearly all human societies have recognized” (255). The specifically Christian aspect of this common tendency becomes obscured in her conclusions to the book. Many readers will find this generalizing too apt to let Christianity off the hook and, in the process, to ignore the particular role that it has played in modern sexuality. Finally, Wiesner-Hanks points to the recent presidential sex scandal to comment that “our modern world has not shaken its history as much as theorists of sexuality have posited, however” (267). Yet Foucault and most historians
of sexuality after him have argued for this carryover, so it is unclear with
whom Wiesner-Hanks is actually disagreeing. On the enduring traces of
premodern sexualities, nevertheless, both Wiesner-Hanks and Dinshaw
would agree. On the methods of intervening in contemporary sexuality
discussions, whether one “gets medieval” or embraces the non-European,
the two authors would disagree. The way in which one thinks about history
is finally what makes all the difference.