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Sex, Identity and Hermaphrodites in Iberia, 1500–1800

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Reviews (II)

Cleminson, R., & Vázquez, F. (2013). *Sex, Identity and Hermaphroditism in Iberia, 1500-1800*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers.

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Scientifically and historically accurate, original and compelling. The study draws on cases of hermaphroditism and sex changes in Iberia over the years 1500 to 1800 and discusses the scientific theories and social and cultural beliefs which lie behind the understanding of these phenomena during this period of history. The authors address the question of personal identity and, more specifically, sexual identity on the basis of the analysis of the ‘tacit truths’ which make up a culture in order to understand the social and historical conditions which provide a context for the circulation of certain given ideas. They describe different cases of ambiguous individuals or sex changes which were documented in medical, juridical, theological and literary sources of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The study places scientific, theological, social and cultural discourse on hermaphroditism in Iberia within its own context and frame of reference. The framework for the textual treatment of hermaphroditism in Iberia is built on the basis of the scientific and religious discourses of the time and within the cultural and social constrained prevailing ideas and practices on sex and “gender”. The authors avoid any hint of essentialism in their analysis by which acts, behaviours and discourses are considered in light of current considerations. Instead, they employ and reveal the meanings of terminology which reflect the concepts and discourses utilized during the three hundred or so years which are covered in the study. Therefore, they employ and

interrogate the meanings of “hermaphroditism” and “sex change”, the significances which surround what it meant to be a man or a woman and the outward and inward signs that appeared to prove this status to doctors, inquisitors and theologians who examined “ambiguous” or “doubtful” cases of sexual identity.

The study gives a comparative account that goes beyond the more standard coverage of the topic in which Europe is often focused on Britain, France and Germany. At its heart is, of course, an analysis of the situation of hermaphroditism in Spain and Portugal which were generally ignored for any significance they may have for a broader understanding of an “European culture”, and more specifically, the history of sexuality. In this regard, the authors pose the following questions: what was notable about the two Iberian countries in respect of the knowledge of hermaphroditism in the European reality? What does the study of the discourse about hermaphroditism in Iberia bring to a wider comprehension of this topic? They argued that what is exceptional in comparison to other countries’ production of knowledge on hermaphroditism such as France and Germany is the general lack of transcendence of the cases studied and the analysis conveyed beyond the borders of Spain and Portugal.

In the Introduction, the authors set up the framework with which they will conduct the analysis of the different cases of hermaphroditism describing the models of sexual interpretation which were predominant at that time. They recognize the coexistence of the Aristotelian model with a Hippocratic-Galenic understanding of sex and gender during the period of study. According to the authors, although there were some differences between these two models, the interpretations of sex were vertical and hierarchical based on a “one-sex model”. These interpretations did not consider biology, the sex of the organism, as the stable basis by which visible differences in behaviours and social roles were established: *to be a woman or a man was not so much to possess a particular biological quality but rather to display a social attribute* (p.6).

In the first chapter, the concepts of *mirabilia*, *magicus* and *miraculous* are described. The authors describe the category *mirabilia* as extraordinary beings

and events, “marvels” that showed the omnipotence of divine design with mixed understandings of them as evidence of the benevolence of God or as a manifestation of evil. Whether the presence of God or evil, “marvels” are not necessarily counter-natural beings rather natural rarities who have their analogies in the Universe. This ambivalence is clear in the case of hermaphrodites and changes of sex, despite the fact that medical opinions classify them as natural happenings. The idea of *magicus* corresponds to what is supernaturally evil, where sin is present and where the intervention of Satan can be found. According to this interpretation, cases of hermaphrodites and sex changes were understood as warnings of some catastrophe to come or as the result of a sin against Nature. Between these two extremes of “marvels” and “anti-natural”, there was a third category in which hermaphrodites and sex changes were considered as *miraculus*, that is, as a sign of redemption. This category could be understood in a literal sense as instances of divine intervention in order to save the individual in a particularly problematic situation or as a symbol of original perfection or a lack of difference representing an emblem of the harmonious fusion of the opposites.

In the second chapter, the authors examine the question of hermaphroditism in four selected cases out of the twenty which have been collected. The case of Estebanía (born in Valdaracete in 1496) is presented, who managed to have her condition of hermaphrodite and her transit to manhood accepted by means of display of bravery, physical strength and her ability with weapons. Following, the case of Elena de Céspedes (born in Alhama, Granada, 1546) is examined, who was able to remake her own personality many times over because of the changing nature of commerce and the importance of particular skills. Next, the case of Catalina de Erauso (born in San Sebastian, 1592) is analysed, who combined war-like acts of male bravery and essential qualities of the perfect virgin woman through which she was known as the “virgin warrior” showing signs of impeccable religious devotion. Finally, the case of Juan Díaz Donoso (born in Zafra, tried in 1634) is examined, who was ordained as priest but acted as a woman and was accused of having seduced another man. In all these cases, the authors highlight the degree of agency of the individuals studied and their ability to

subvert the sexual norms of their time and place within the internal logic of the social conditions and sexual models clearly different from our own.

The third chapter traces the decline of the one-sex model and the interruption which this caused to the progress of knowledge about hermaphrodites in the eighteenth century in the Spanish context. The authors identify three main influences responsible for this decline: the naturalization of the monster, the take-off of legal medicine, and the biological foundation of the sexual differences. Firstly, nature began to be understood as mere nature governed by its own laws; under this interpretation towards nature, the monster, which is one of its products, can no longer be viewed either as a sign of divine omnipotence nor as a warning of providence. Secondly, the emergence out of the liberal state, which in Spain was revived under the rule of Isabel II, allowed the implementation by the government of health systems and the precepts of legal medicine. Under this framework, the medico-legal practitioner became the ultimate authority in the assignation of sex to those individuals deemed of “doubtful sex”. No longer is the “predominant sex” spoken of or the election of sex open to interpretation in case of ambiguity. The definite break with the one-sex model is represented by authors who argued that biological differences are the material basis which grounds the mental and physical existence of individuals. In this way, the old regime collapse, as differences are no longer situated in differences of rank but in differences between the organic and psychological constitutions of the body.

The fourth chapter develop the topic of hermaphroditism in Portugal from a three-fold perspective. The first section of the chapter focuses on some examples of sexual ambiguity in Portugal from the 1500 onwards. In this section, cases of gender transgressions such as that of Saint Uncumber, the bearded saint, is mentioned as an important framing discourse of sexual ambiguity. Other cases of sexual transgression such as Antonia Rodriguez, who became Antonio Rodriguez in the early 1600’s, are analysed in order to provide insights into the comprehension of the nature of sex in that period in the Portuguese context. The second part of the chapter analyses the thought of philosophers and medical doctors, many of them of Jewish origin, whose ideas framed discussions on sex changes and hermaphroditism. The third part

of the chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the cases of Sister Claudiana da Natividade (Vila Viçosa, 1622), Manuel Joao (1637), Estevao Luís (1686), Father Pedro Furtado (1698) and José Martins (1725) known as the “she-man” of Ervedal.

The authors conclude that in both countries the influence of the work of the Arabic scholars meant that understandings of hermaphrodites in Iberia were permeated by a highly pluralistic set of knowledge, from Aristotelian, Galenic and Hippocratic notions through Roman and Jewish law. This diverse scenario is evidenced by the discussions held among inquisitors and medical practitioners in Spain and Portugal which have been presented and analysed extensively by the authors in this study.

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