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The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence

Book

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Preface

In the West, making sense of history involves the creation of defining moments, boundaries: before and after. We are dominated by a view of time in which there is BC, and AD: or, if you want to see the same division differently, BCE and CE. Within these great swathes of time, we often choose to regard a shorter period as having its own identity, or zeitgeist, and select key images that define what happens before and after our chosen boundary. The history of the body is no exception to this. In the last 25 years, it has been dominated by a particular model in which the 'before' is the 'one-sex' body in which men and women have the same genital organs, only their location – inside or outside – differing. 'After' is the 'two-sex' body, focused on sexual difference. The shift from before to after has been placed in the eighteenth century, so that before becomes 'pre-modern' and after is 'modern'; before is 'them' and after is 'us'. This model was created by Thomas Laqueur in his 1990 book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*.¹ It has attracted much criticism, yet it has survived, even being enhanced by a 2003 debate in the journal *Isis* following a challenge to it made by Michael Stolberg.²

When I first read *Making Sex*, I found the simple two-stage model unhelpful for the texts on which I was then working, the classical Greek treatises on gynaecology found in the Hippocratic corpus, which are not part of Laqueur's 'past'. Here, I was finding neither a 'one-sex' body, nor an interest in the genital organs, but instead an emphasis on differently textured flesh as making women unlike men, a point strongly asserted and used by the ancient writers to suggest that disorders affecting women, throughout their bodies, needed to be interpreted, and therefore treated, very differently from those of men. In the book I published in 1998, *Hippocrates' Woman*, I found that, despite my misgivings about the overall model, much of Laqueur's general approach to the social construction of reality meshed with mine, and I quoted there his comment that 'Experience, in short, is reported and remembered so as to be congruent with dominant paradigms.'³ But I did not engage directly with his specific views on the ancient world, other than

¹ *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

² Michael Stolberg, 'A Woman Down to her Bones. The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries', *Isis*, 94 (2003): 274–99, and subsequent responses and letter to the editor; these will be discussed below, pp. 3–4.

³ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, p. 99.

noting in passing that his ‘one-sex’ model did not work for my material.⁴ In 2005, following the *Isis* debate, I was commissioned to write an article on this lack of fit for the ancient Greek world, and on the basis of that I was invited to take part in an exploratory seminar organised by Katy Park at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, on ‘Remaking Sex in Classical, Medieval and Early Modern Medicine’.⁵ Here, a group of scholars working on a range of historical periods came together and found that Laqueur’s model did not ‘work’ for any of them. The obvious question this raised was: why did it still survive? In our discussions, we noted the difficulties of challenging a model that is presented as covering such a long span of history, and that appears in a single easily acquired volume; I shall return to the reasons why Laqueur’s work was initially so popular, and why it still endures, in the Introduction to the present book.

A few months before the Radcliffe Institute seminar, the survival of Laqueur’s model had been vividly illustrated to me when I gave a paper, ‘Generating “woman”: Jacques Sylvius and Diane de Poitiers’, at the 15th Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Conference at the University of Miami.⁶ The theme of the conference was ‘When there was no sex or gender?’, which I took as an invitation to discuss a 1559 French translation of a treatise on menstruation, and its preface addressed to Diane de Poitiers; this was part of a wider project on Renaissance medicine, another area where Laqueur’s model seemed to me to have no value in understanding how the female body was represented. It was clear from the discussion of my paper that nobody could understand why I had not mentioned Laqueur, even once; their first reaction was to ask how what I had said could be made to fit within a ‘one-sex’ body. While Laqueur’s basic model had by that time become irrelevant to my research, it clearly continued to be seen as the starting point by those working in other periods or other humanities disciplines.

This story illustrates the point that the interdisciplinary range and subsequent appeal of Laqueur’s work has made it that rare thing: the common property of those working on history and literature, on the early modern period and the modern world. This is despite the many attacks made on it from different directions, some of which will be discussed in detail in the Introduction to this book. Yet it is precisely because of this range and continuing appeal that I believe the present book is necessary. Those coming to *Making Sex* from the many disciplines of the

⁴ Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London, 1998), p. 245, citing *Making Sex*, p. 99; see also p. 11.

⁵ The article was ‘The Mathematics of Sex: One to Two, or Two to One?’, commissioned article for special issue of *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History: Sexuality and Culture in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, 3rd series (vol. II, 2005): 47–58.

⁶ Subsequently published as ‘Engendrer “la femme”: Jacques Dubois et Diane de Poitiers’, in Cathy McClive, Jean-François Budin and Nicole Pellegrin (eds), *Femmes en Fleurs: Santé, Sexualité et Génération du Moyen Age aux Lumières* (Université de Saint-Étienne, 2010), 125–38.

arts and humanities are unaware not only of the work on the history of medicine and of the body that has happened subsequent to its publication, but also of the sources Laqueur omits, and the lack of care with which he uses those sources which he does bring into play.

There are other reasons why a book-length examination of Laqueur's work is needed. While he explicitly starts with 'the Greeks', those working in Classical Studies have found his arguments particularly unconvincing. His comments on the classical world in general are very sketchy, and based on a very small sample of evidence; restricted not just to medical texts, but to a subset of these. While he could respond to this criticism by saying that he focused on those ancient authors most cited by the later writers he went on to address in the later parts of his book, this still omits an entire strand of the Western medical tradition. His lack of knowledge of Hippocratic gynaecology, for example, weakens his comments on the sixteenth century, a period in which the Hippocratic insistence on women as entirely different from men was repeated as part of a male claim to be able to treat women's diseases more effectively than could illiterate female healers. This is one aspect of a wider problem with Laqueur: the 'one-sex'/'two-sex' model reduces complexity to simplicity.

Max Weber recommended for comparative study the creation of 'ideal types'; taking and merging features of various real examples, these imaginary constructs could then be used as a basis from which to compare the different examples that can be found in the 'real world'. However, it is central to his methodology that the ideal type itself has never existed. As Julien Freund put it, 'Being unreal, the ideal type has the merit of offering us a conceptual device with which we can measure real development and clarify the most important elements of empirical reality.'⁷ In Weber's words, the ideal type 'serves as a harbour until one has learned to navigate safely in the vast sea of empirical facts'.⁸ If we were to take them as ideal types, the two stages of Laqueur's model would have some value; but this is not how they have been read. Instead of using them as conceptual, comparative tools to make similarities and differences clearer, the two stages have been reified and the alleged movement from one to the other attached to a specific period, and to other real changes in that period. Ironically, what Laqueur had written about making experience fit the 'dominant paradigms' has also happened in the reception of *Making Sex*.

While further problems concern Laqueur's focus on the genital organs as the locus of sameness or difference – as we shall see in this book, this misrepresents the interest in fluids found in much of Western medicine – I shall be arguing here that the main issue with Laqueur's work is his selective use of 'evidence', and

⁷ Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber* (New York, 1969), p. 69. On the ideal type and references to it in Weber, see Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts* (Stanford, CA, 2005), pp. 119–21.

⁸ Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (eds and tr. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch) (New York, 1959), p. 104.

his lack of close reading of the material he does use. After commenting on some general issues concerning the absence of a 'one-sex' body from the periods on which I work – the classical and the early modern – I shall bring to the debate two stories very different from the canonical medical and scientific works on which he focused. These are the classical stories of Phaethousa, who grew a beard when her husband left her, and Agnodice, the 'first midwife'. I shall show how these have been used over time, and particularly in early modern Europe, to explore issues which are highly relevant to the 'one-sex' body: the possibility of changing sex; whether it is possible to disguise one's sex; and which parts of the body – in addition to the genitalia on which Laqueur's 'one-sex'/'two-sex' model makes us focus – really constitute an individual's sex. In the process of examining these in detail, I shall also focus on the sexual politics of models of the body; for Agnodice in particular, how her story was told and re-told relates to the medical control of the female body, by midwives, medical men, and women seeking to practise medicine. These examples of classical reception will also enable me to say more about the classical world itself, the different interpretations of the two brief key texts helping us to challenge our current readings of the ancient world.

Many people have helped me reflect on these issues over the years, and have encouraged me to continue publishing and thinking about them. I would like to single out Barbara Goff, who encouraged me to start this book, as well as my colleagues Monica Green, Catrien Santing and Manfred Horstmanshoff, all of whom stimulated me to face my problems with Laqueur's model. Above all, I would like to thank Andrew Cunningham, who saw a different book hiding beneath the one I thought I was writing, and persuaded me to rewrite it in its present form. I owe particular debts of gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, for funding a period of leave in which I could work on it,⁹ and to my successive heads of department at the Open University – Phil Perkins and James Robson – and to the Open University Arts Faculty for its support.

Now, nearly a quarter of a century after Laqueur published *Making Sex*, it is time to put the book's central thesis on trial, and to assess more critically the evidence on which it is based, and the use he makes of this evidence. This will enable us to move forward with a better – if more complex – picture of how sexual difference has been made, and remade, over the centuries. By focusing on evidence from the period of his 'one-sex' body, this book aims to explain the unease long felt by scholars about applying his model to the material they know best, and to move the debate forwards in an interdisciplinary way.

⁹ AH/I001506/1, 'Following Agnodike and Phaethousa: gender and transformation in the reception of ancient medicine'.

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