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desire: a history of European sexuality

Anna Clark, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, 282pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-77518-2, £18.99(pbk).

Writing about sex and sexuality in the years after Michel Foucault is something that inevitably involves a certain degree of determination and confidence. It is apparent that Anna Clark possesses both these qualities and that she is not overawed by the claims of Foucault (and indeed eminent others) to have 'done' sexuality. Clark's contribution is to bring together a considerable range of material and consider it within the framework of a theoretical binary about European sexuality: on the one hand sexual desire as dangerous, and on the other sexual desire as creative and transformative.

This distinction, made in the first paragraph of the first Chapter, is not deficient in confidence. Whether or not we might consider this distinction useful, or revelatory, is, however, another question. It is certainly a method (together with its assumptions about human history) that this reviewer would want to question.

The grounds for this scepticism do not lie in the style of Clark's book, which is both energetic and accessible. The problem, however, is in the use (and often the abuse) of historical material and with that the methodological slippage from the particular case to the generalisation. For example (on p.75), Clark begins a paragraph by stating that 'Social relationships between men were also characterised by intense bonding'; a further paragraph (on the same page) begins with the comment that 'In Italy, sex between men seems to have been fairly common'. It is true that studies of defined, instances of, behaviour are cited but these seem unremarkable and without the kind of theoretical implications that Clark ascribes to them. Although we might not be enthusiastic about quantitative traditions within either social science or history, they do have the advantage of making us aware that one example of a certain form of behaviour does not constitute a general pattern and that phrases such as 'seems to have been fairly common' are meaningless. We have to ask, both rhetorically and for the purposes of the accurate construction of history, both what the words 'fairly common' and 'seems' mean, as well as asking who has collected this information. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, after decades of the writing of history about the excluded and the 'hidden', there is no place for uncritical assumptions and statements about the past or for statements such as that on page four which claim that 'traditionally ... parents ... instructed young

people to desire sex only in marriage'. A considerable literature about England suggests that for centuries what marriage was linked to was provision for children.

Part of the problem with history, as feminist historians, as well as historians of the working class and ethnic and racial minorities have long argued, is that much history is written by the rich, the powerful and – crucially before the beginning of the twentieth century – the literate. Clark makes few concessions to this central factor; indeed, we are presented with an account of the unfolding of European sexuality that is largely drawn from written records, many of which were often about what (powerful) people hoped – or fantasised – was happening rather than what was happening. The ordinary and commonplace seem to have little part in Clark's book; what is missing throughout is the sense that for the majority (and in my view there is a point at which sheer numbers do matter) sexual desire was an often fleeting, contradictory part of a short, probably harsh existence. For women, heterosexual sexuality was marked for generations by its consequences; people often behaved differently in the past (e.g., people of the same sex sharing beds) less because of different sexual mores than those of material circumstance.

One of the truly alarming aspects about some accounts of the past is that they can suggest some sort of human progress (and specifically that of the west) towards a plateau of enlightenment and understanding. Here, the word difference, in its everyday English meaning, becomes important. The past was neither a staging post to the present, nor did people in the past organise their worlds in terms of competing binaries. The very danger of sex (and its association with pollution and corruption) has long been part of its attraction: the erotic has often been formed out of the meeting of these apparent contradictions. But that should also make us aware that 'desire' does not exist without human agency; the making of the erotic is an important part of human history, but it is also a history in which differences of gender, age, ethnicity and class play their part.

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