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doubting sex: inscriptions, bodies and selves in nineteenth century hermaphrodite case histories

Geertje Mak, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2012, 320pp.,

ISBN: 978-0-7190-8690-8, £70.00 (Hbk)/£16.99 (Pbk)

The steady growth of the history of sexuality as a field of academic study no doubt reflects the fact that many questions about sex, gender and the vagaries of desire remain unanswered. Many of these questions were first articulated in the course of the nineteenth century when doctors began to turn systematic attention to the sexual body. Here the debates focused at least initially on the identification of 'sexual perversions', including, most famously, homosexuality, the control of which played a central role in the repressive scientific and legal debates that would shape modern national politics in the West. The nineteenth-century proliferation of discourses about sex remained deeply indebted to long-held beliefs about biological sex and related gender expressions. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that sexually indeterminate or multivalently sexed bodies constituted a particular problem for nineteenth-century medical observers. For they not only challenged the binary distinction between 'male' and 'female', but they also raised questions about the relationship between sex, gender and what we would now call sexuality.

Geertje Mak's expansive, thoroughly researched study provides compelling insights into the role of hermaphroditism in nineteenth-century medical practice. Where previous studies, notably Alice Dreger's *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (1998), have read hermaphrodite discourses for the evidence they provide of the perpetuation of damaging, if ultimately untenable, gender norms, Mak turns attention from 'the hermaphrodite' as an artefact or object of historical analysis to a consideration of 'hermaphroditism as a verb: *doubting sex*' (p. 6). She excavates a rich archive of nineteenth-century medical case histories about hermaphroditism written in German, Dutch, French and English, including the well-known narrative of Herculine Barbin, whose *memoirs* were famously published by Michel Foucault, and many hitherto unexplored case histories. Organising them into three main parts—'Inscription', 'Body' and 'Self'—Mak argues that these texts allow us to trace a significant historical shift from an outward-facing 'logic of the category of sex' in the nineteenth century (when doctors focused on physical and socio-moral concerns) to a new 'inward turn' in the early twentieth century when, according to Mak, doctors stopped being diagnosticians and instead became surgeons tasked with matching the physical appearance of their patients to the patients' sense of the 'inner truth' of their individuality (p. 232).

For example, in Chapter 6, on 'The Dislodgement of the Person', Mak discusses the case of 'Miss M.' who had 'ordinary looking' female genitals but during orgasm produced a liquid discharge that, as subsequent examination confirmed, contained living spermatozoa. This case was published in a study of six sexual 'misdiagnoses' published in 1912 by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who was one of the most influential and supportive doctors researching what he called 'sexual intermediaries'. Hirschfeld was so sceptical about his own observations of 'Miss M.' that he invited five colleagues to check his results and repeat the examination of the patient. 'Miss M.' was duly invited back to the clinic where she allowed herself to be undressed and shut in a designated room where she masturbated and ejaculated into a test tube. A microscopic examination confirmed the previous result, and 'Miss M.' entered medical history as a person whose outwardly 'female' body produced 'male' sperm. Mak, in line with the overall focus of her investigation, reads the case of 'Miss M.' as an indication of a significant shift in medical attitudes to masturbation, arguing that the case testifies to a new medical openness about masturbation, which, within the confines of the clinic, was now 'no longer felt to be indecent' (p. 146).

Doubting Sex considers, then, what the hermaphrodite case studies reveal about changing medical practice. This emphasis on the importance of medical technologies for determining—and more importantly, for *doubting*—sex is a poignant reminder of the influential role of the medical profession in speaking for the body. But it also raises difficult questions about the patient–doctor relationship, and about subjectivity, intimacy and the everyday lives of the people who became 'case histories'. Hirschfeld, for instance, notes that 'Miss M.' has sexual relationships, and it is hard not to wonder about the effects on her of being exposed to the gaze of half a dozen medical doctors, or about the ramifications of a clinical diagnosis of 'hermaphroditism' for those people who came into contact with the medical profession because of the disjuncture between their physicality and contemporary assumptions about how humans should be sexed and gendered.

Perhaps the significance of *Doubting Sex's* transnational dimension could have been addressed more head on. For what emerges from Mak's extensive research is an astounding archive of feelings and experience that, despite its focus on the views of medical men, nevertheless suggests that living in a non-normative body shaped different lives in similar ways. *Doubting Sex* will become an important reference point for historians of sexuality, medicine and the body, and for scholars of gender and modernity.

Heike Bauer
Birkbeck, University of London

doi:10.1057/fr.2014.8