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Book Review: Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West 1890-2000

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Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West 1890-2000. Cas Wouters. 2004. London: SAGE Publications. pp. 188. Includes bibliographical references and indices. \$110.00 (hardcover). \$35.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Andrea Powell Jenkins¹

In *Sex and Manners*, Cas Wouters describes and interprets the results of his extensive study of manners books published just before and throughout the twentieth century. Wouters uses evidence from English, Dutch, German, and American manners and sexual advice books to discuss historical changes and national differences in courting and dating customs in and among these four countries. In particular, Wouters focuses on how changes in “courting regimes” prompted changes in women’s identity and in sexual relationships between men and women (6). He claims that the “informalization” of manners from 1890-2000, evidenced by the change from chaperonage to dating systems of courting, led to the emancipation of women in all four countries under study (2). Moreover, Wouters infers that, because the United States transitioned from a system of courting to that of dating earlier than the other countries under study, American women now experience less equal treatment than women in the other countries. Wouters goes on to establish ways in which the changing balance of power between the sexes is connected to the growing cultural expectation that individuals exercise self-control rather than depend on external social restraints to control their sexual behaviors. He claims, in fact, that this changing expectation has brought the “lust balance” to public attention and demanded that people reconsider the relationship between sex and love (124). He concludes with the assertion that relationships between men and women have become dependent on gender-role negotiation. Ideals of equality between the sexes have become potential impediments for true emotional connection.

Wouters examines the informalization of manners by describing the transition, which occurred toward the beginning of the twentieth century in all four countries under study, from a chaperonage system of courting to that which became known as dating. The chaperonage system required chaperones to “protect” young women both from strangers who might want to seduce them and from their own sexual urges. Perhaps most of all, chaperones guarded young women’s honor; respectable women were not left alone with young men (49). According to Wouters and the manners books that he cites, the chaperonage system was on its way out of fashion by the 1920s and completely gone by the 1950s. Its replacement was dating, a system in which young women met young men outside of the home, traveled (frequently to dance halls) with them in cars, and, to all intents and purposes, acted as their own chaperones. While chaperonage placed significant external social controls on women, dating emancipated women by allowing them to control their own interactions with men.

Dating was widely accepted in the United States earlier than in the three other countries, primarily due to the early development of a national youth culture in the 1920s. Wouters claims that because Americans accepted dating as a prevalent form of courting so early, when men still dominated the household and earned more than women, the uneven distribution of power between the sexes simply carried over into dating routines

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of the day and crystallized over time into widely accepted dating codes. Another reason why women in the United States failed to challenge the uneven balance of power between men and women in dating was due to the competitive nature of a youth culture which valued women for the amount of money that their dates spent on them and men for the amount of money that they could afford to spend on their dates. In fact, codes such as the “paying code,” which designated that American women never pay for themselves on dates, and the “petting code,” which suggested that men win women and, by extension, the right to engage in petting (and in later decades, sex itself) by demonstrating their ability to pay for expensive dates, confirmed the consumerism of the American dating system and affirmed the uneven balance of power between men and women that is still common, in many ways, in the United States (93).

Nonetheless, because dating signified a change from external social controls to internal controls, even in the United States, it allowed women more freedom to regulate their own sexuality, especially beginning with the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s. During the Sexual Revolution, the second wave of youth culture (this one, according to Wouters, involving all of the countries under study) demanded changes in perceptions of the lust balance, or the balance between love and sex. Wouters uses evidence from sexual advice books and the Dutch feminist magazine *Opzij* (translated as “Aside/Out of the Way!”) to demonstrate the transition from attitudes that enforced the “traditional lust balance,” which equated love-related sexuality with women and lust-related sexuality with men, to an “emancipation of sexuality,” which encouraged women to embrace sexuality (125). Among other things, the Sexual Revolution popularized the idea/fantasy of sex-for-the-sake-of-sex, which prioritized sex over love. In reality, however, many women during the last few decades of the twentieth century reported a desire for relationships based on an equal balance of sex and love. According to Wouters, both men and women have attempted, with limited success, to bring the lust balance into balance, and to enjoy and value love and sex equally.

Wouters concludes with a description of a cultural “tug-of-war” that has sometimes thwarted these attempts at a balance between sex and love (159). He claims that the ideal of total equality between the sexes, which arose with the dating system in the early-to-mid- twentieth century and solidified during the Sexual Revolution and subsequent decades, has led to an ambivalence regarding roles specific to either gender. According to Wouters, most men and women experience internal conflict between attraction to traditional gender-role ideals and more egalitarian gender-role ideals. Wouters argues that Westerners are still in the process of accommodating the manifestations of women’s emancipation that have occurred throughout the twentieth century. Until this process is complete, he claims, couples will have to negotiate the terms of their relationships based on their own style of “emotion management” (159). He suggests that we learn to manage our often contradictory desires in “playful” ways (161).

A potential shortcoming evident in this book is the shift in methodology between Chapters 2-6, in which Wouters cites examples exclusively from manners books, and Chapter 7, in which he relies primarily on examples from *Opzij*. Although Wouters takes great care to explain his reasons for this change, Chapter 7 deviates slightly from the book’s focus on the study of manners. Also, because Wouters relies so heavily on the Dutch *Opzij* in this chapter, its discussion is limited in several places to female emancipation in the Netherlands.

Sex and Manners provides a solid background on changes in courting regimes in the West and the effects of these changes on relationships between men and women. It synthesizes a substantial amount of primary and secondary research on changes in courting and dating systems in the West and attends to important nuances in gender-role negotiation. Wouters uses skillfully close reading to delve into the meanings implicit in the advice found in manners books and sexual advice books. In the final chapter, he makes key connections and draws subtle distinctions between emancipation processes as they have occurred in England, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. Also in this chapter, Wouters formulates fascinating theories on the history and the future of female emancipation in the West. I would not recommend this book for use with undergraduate students, as it presents evidence in the manner of a sociological research project, which is to say that it might seem a bit too dense for the typical undergraduate. However, this text would certainly inform the development and organization of many Women's Studies courses.