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## Book Review: *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*

Renee Somers

*Bridgewater State University*

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***Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, Valerie Traub, 2015. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia. 480 pages, 4 illustrations, \$59.99. Hardcover.**

By Renee Somers<sup>1</sup>

We live in a culture whereupon any mention of the word “sex” catches our immediate attention and so Valerie Traub’s *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, both in title and the provocative cover photograph of “The Seduction of Eve” at Notre Dame, does just that. And once she has our attention, she keeps it; Traub is a masterful writer who knows how to successfully guide her readers through what can be, at times, a dense discourse that simultaneously engages and challenges us. Simply stated, it is a great read.

Her point of departure is clearly stated and she proves exactly what she aims to prove: that the making of sexual knowledge must be reconsidered by historians, feminists, literary critics and queer studies scholars so that we will come to terms with and employ the fact that sex is “unknowable” and therefore aids us in better understanding cultural epistemology and ideology. In her words, she discusses the “historicity” of sex and how that illuminates “how, when and why sex becomes history” (267). In this sense, sexuality is a way of knowing and a way of shaping the world rather than merely being reduced to simply an act or a desire.

Traub’s discussion is impressively thorough and erudite. She draws from many noted and important thinkers such as Alan Bray, Eve Sedgwick, Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin and many others to situate her own ideas within a context that clearly shows the evolution of an intellectual approach to sex. More specifically, rather than simply utilizing the ideas of other scholars and theorists to bolster her own, she instead uses them to lay a nuanced and solid foundation from which she adroitly builds. She locates specific patterns and approaches to “thinking sex” which enables her to trace practices—past to present—that have attempted to (and sometimes failed at) theorizing the impact of sexuality upon our lives, our culture and our literature. Consequently, her argument is entirely convincing because she deftly takes part in a critical conversation that allows her to showcase the originality of her own views. In this book, Traub aims to “reframe” and “reorient” ways in which we approach the historicity of sex, which means that one of her primary objectives is to point out the missteps others have made along the way. And one of the things I most admire about her is the way in which she accomplishes this: she pushes against commonly embraced perspectives in such a cordial but firm way. It’s as if she has invited a group of respected guests to her dinner table and by the dessert course, she has subtly but persuasively brought them around to her ways of thinking.

Furthermore, Traub is careful to frequently sign-post for her readers, gently reiterating her central argument and also summarizing what she has accomplished up to that point in her discussion. One instance, of many, when she does this is when she states, “if the previous chapters considered how, when and why sex becomes history . . . then the present chapter asks, conversely, how, when and why does sex become theory?” (267). In this sense, Traub’s thoughtful and clear presentation will appeal to a vast range of readers, some of whom may not be entirely familiar with academic jargon.

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<sup>1</sup> Renee Somers is an Assistant Professor of English at Bridgewater State University. Renee.Somers@bridgew.edu

Related to that is Traub's prose. Upon reading other reviews of the book, I was surprised that none make mention of Traub's writing skills. Her prose is a beautiful admixture of painstaking word choice and sophistication. It is polished, elegant and crisp, while maintaining an elevated parlance. In fact, she makes mention in the Preface of the extended amount of time it took her to complete her manuscript and I can see why; her eloquence is boundless.

A delightful highlight of the book is when Traub takes on the etymology of "dirty" sex words and keenly demonstrates how and why those words made (and continue to make) meaning. She unabashedly discusses words such as "prick," "cunt" and "fuck" to show how they encompass both gender and power and how the use of such words serves to reaffirm value systems. Her decision to be so explicit is admirably intentional as she explains, "[I am] committed precisely in the name of queer feminism to de-dramatizing sexual speech by forthrightly naming body parts, describing sexual acts and using even the most potentially offensive of words. Anything short of this would be to abrogate the commitment to thinking sex as a knowledge relation" (215). Forcing readers to confront the so-called obscenity of these words is a keen way to underscore her thesis: to make intellectual and cultural progress, we must be willing to sit comfortably with that which makes us uneasy. Only then will we begin to better understand ourselves and the world that we create.

Traub is an English Professor at the University of Michigan, but those readers who are seeking an extensive literary analysis of early modern texts will be somewhat disappointed. Traub is more interested in a broader scope of discussion that encompasses more theory than analysis. She remarks that she is hopeful that the principles she develops will be "useful to scholars' investigations of other times and cultures," but qualifies that her discussion is limited to texts and discourses produced in England from the late sixteenth to the later part of the seventeenth century (6). Despite the limited literary analysis, that which is included is very good. For instance, the climactic chapter "Shakespeare's Sex" is particularly magnificent as Traub dismantles the ongoing and sometimes relentless "was Shakespeare gay?" and "is there evidence of his gayness in his sonnets?" debates by essentially dismissing them as non-productive discourses. In Traub's words, she instead explores the conditions of interpretation that currently inform critics' engagements with the sonnets (229). She stays true to her goal of reframing and reorienting our ways of engaging with texts.

On the whole, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* is an illuminating and lively contribution to academic scholarship. It will better Women's Studies because it respectfully forces us to reconsider how we approach many of our key feminist, gender, queer, and lesbian issues with a generative energy.

### **Works Cited**

Traub, Valerie. *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Print.