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Louis-George Tin, *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012. Xi + 197. \$21.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-262-01770-1.

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This book trots through some eight hundred years of the development of what the author calls “heterosexual culture.” Although Tin claims at times to address culture in a broad sense, most of his evidence is belletristic, chiefly medieval romance and early modern drama (Tin is a specialist in French literature). The author asserts that “heterosexual culture,” which is not to be confused with heterosexuality, was invented along with courtly love during the twelfth century, that “heterosexual culture” was a radical revision of the status quo, and that it met with centuries of resistance. The exposition falls into three parts: “chivalric opposition to heterosexual culture,” “ecclesiastical opposition to heterosexual culture,” and “medical opposition to heterosexual culture,” with the balance shifting from medieval evidence to modern as the book moves from the first section to the third. The concept of “heterosexual culture” operating here is not one with which most historians of sex or sexuality will be familiar. It seems odd that courts, the Church, or medical experts should have opposed sexual relations between woman and man, especially given prejudices that both the Church and the medical profession demonstrated against homosexual behavior. What kind of “heterosexual culture” would they oppose?

“Heterosexuality is universal,” Tin claims, “whereas the culture of heterosexuality is not.” What he calls “heterosexual culture” awards “symbolic primacy to the man-woman couple and to love in its cultural, literary, or artistic representations” (p. ix). “Heterosexual culture is only one construct among many,” he claims, and is therefore neither unique nor universal (p. xi). The aim of Tin’s book is to show that heterosexuality is no more natural than homosexuality. “As a matter of fact,” Tin writes in his conclusion, “any sexual identity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is no more than the more or less conscious imitation of existing stereotypes, which are themselves constituted on the basis of other stereotypes imitating other imitations, according to an infinite movement toward an illusory origin” (p. 152). But in the twelfth century, for unspecified reasons, people at certain social levels escaped this mechanism of replication, setting off a “revolution in medieval society triggered by the emerging concepts of courtly love, as male friendships were gradually supplanted by heterosexual love” (p. 16).

The evidence offered for this “revolution” is literary, although Tin claims wide social significance for the revolution’s result. It is difficult to understand how the transformation was more than a literary trend that affected elite circles. Prior to the establishment of “courtly love” in the twelfth century, in Tin’s view, culture was “homosocial,” not “heterosexual.” The proper contrast, however, would be between “homosocial,” meaning a preference for the society of one’s own sex, and “heterosocial,” meaning a preference for the society of the opposite sex. Tin writes of a world in which men, “and above all, men of action,” “lived in a world far removed from that of womankind” (p. 4). Such men were “vassals of a rigid feudal order.” He repeats Georges Duby’s view that feudal culture was a time when “love between males was the norm, a homosexual love albeit not necessarily physically consummated” (p. 4). It is clear from Duby’s work, and that of many others, that male same-sex friendships were conventional within given literary spheres. That they were a social (and not merely courtly, monastic, or literary) norm is much to be doubted.

Tin seems to assume that marriage was new to courtly culture. He writes of a new “ethic of marriage” that grew up alongside “vassalic morality,” here repeating Duby’s claim that “normal love” was “the love that caused one to forget oneself, to surpass oneself in mighty deeds for the glory of a friend” (p. 4). That such love could bind two men is possible, but even in elite circles it should be seen as an ideal rather than “the norm,” as Tin describes it (p. 4). Tin also cites John Boswell’s view that the “primary material of public culture” was “celebration of heroic figures or events, among others” (p. 4). Boswell and Duby are not talking about the same thing, although Tin believes that they are. Indeed, Boswell’s assertions are as true of pre-feudal England as of England after the invention of “courtly love.”

There are many “heroic figures” in Anglo-Saxon poems that were written for elite audiences at least two centuries before the works Tin considers (i.e., 800-1000). Men in these poems are bound by ties of loyalty but did not enjoy the “passionate relationships” Tin associates with feudal cultures. Rather than passionate ties of man to man, the Anglo-Saxon poems valorize sober ties of a hero to his people or to his thegns. We see such ties in *Beowulf* and in “The Battle of Maldon.” Even in “The Wanderer,” known for its celebration of the bond between thegn and lord, the central figure mourns his lost warrior brothers more often than his lost lord. In the culture Tin constructs before courtly love, heterosexual unions are secondary to passionate ties between men. This claim too is disproved by a glance at Anglo-Saxon texts from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Heterosexual union is at the heart of the Old English poem called “The Wife’s Lament,” for example, and it is by no means the only exposition of heterosexual relationships in the period.[1] Early English (i.e., Anglo-Saxon) literature contradicts Tin’s characterization of sexual culture before the invention of “courtly love.” Might other early literatures do so as well?

Tin implies that the history of marriage begins with the definition of matrimony as a sacrament in the thirteenth century (p. 4, p. 129). He does not explain how the Church and secular governments regarded marriage before this time. Obviously marriage was an old institution by the twelfth century, by which point it had long since successfully established the “symbolic primacy” of the man-woman pairing and all the implications that that pairing might have, including literary representation (as in “The Wife’s Lament” and many Old English riddles, among other sources). Also new, Tin claims, was the “cult of the Virgin” associated with courtly love. He seems unaware that much has been written about the cult of the Virgin Mary in periods before the twelfth century.[2] Tin’s lack of knowledge about the history of sex and related cultural phenomena before 1200 is less remarkable than his lack of curiosity about social life in the early Middle Ages more generally. His failure to account for early culture as other than feudal and “homosocial” is significant. If he meant to exclude other vernaculars from his discussion and narrow his claims to France, he should have said so, explained why he ignored early (i.e., pre-twelfth-century) vernacular literatures, and acknowledged the limits these choices placed on his conclusions. After all, the vernacular cultures of early northwest Europe were in constant contact. Yet in Tin’s account it is as if earlier literary cultures, English in particular, did not exist, and as if French culture of the twelfth century were written on a slate previously blank.

A further weakness is Tin’s reliance on Boswell’s work, which was published in 1980. Tin repeats Boswell’s view that sodomy was not a serious sin before the twelfth century but thereafter became a “capital offense” (p. 27, p. 70, p. 163). Tin, like Boswell, tries to write social history from literary sources. Boswell doubted that the penitentials, handbooks used by priests in private confession, could contribute to the history of sexuality. He scoffed at the idea that they offered what he called an “index” to medieval morality and maintained that, in the penitentials, homosexual acts were punished less severely than hunting.[3] The early ninth-century penitential of Halitgar, bishop of Cambrai, assessed penances ranging from one to seven years for clerics who hunted; the same text assessed a penance of fifteen years for male same-sex intercourse. Already in 1984 Pierre Payer showed that Boswell was wrong about these acts in the penitentials about which Boswell wrote; others have also disproved Boswell’s claims.[4] Although he would seem to champion the cause of homosexuality, Tin, like Boswell’s other

co-religionists, suppresses evidence from handbooks of penance showing that men and women who preferred partners of their own sex suffered for their choices. The dismissal of their suffering is the downside of Boswell's argument for "Christian tolerance." Boswell's claim that the Church once accepted homosexual relations and turned a blind eye to sodomy is simply not true. It is, however, an impressive instance of a would-be revolutionary scholar defending an oppressive institution for the sake of a novel argument.

In the spirit of Boswell, Tin strains to extend homosociality to include homosexual union. Love between men was "not necessarily physically consummated," Tin warns (p. 4). But later he writes that when "a pair of [male] lovers" would kiss and "spend the night in one another's arms," their "sexual orientation" was not relevant to their contemporaries "since everything they did appeared normal and natural" (p. 15). One would expect such words as "normal" and "natural" to be used more guardedly than they are here, just as one would expect some documentation for this claim. Homosociality is not a "sexual orientation" but is, rather, the expression of love and loyalty between men who might well be involved in heterosexual unions. Such descriptions of "sexual orientation" are anachronistic and imply that men and women of the Middle Ages conceptualized sexual experience in the same language people do today. Anachronism is a problem elsewhere. Describing the knights who "fell together on the ground" after kissing ardently, Tin writes, "Pure Hollywood? Kitsch of the first order? Perhaps. Except for one thing: these two figures are male" (p. 12). Although he criticizes those who project heteronormative views onto medieval materials, Tin projects homonormative views onto the same texts. He cannot resist characterizing evidence in ways he assumes will make it seem relevant to his readers, calling movies to mind merely to assure readers that they are witnessing something important.

Although very little notice is paid to it in this book, the history of sex and the history of sexuality are well-developed topics not only in all the periods touched on by Tin but in earlier periods as well. The scant bibliography (three pages, pp. 179-81) ignores so much work on medieval French, German, and English sexual cultures and social histories that it is impossible to list it all in the space allotted to this review. Much of the territory covered in Tin's book has been thoroughly analyzed by others. One title can stand for many: C. Stephen Jaeger's *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*, which characterizes passionate male friendship in the context of what Jaeger calls "romantic solutions."^[5] Tin's failure to account for the arguments offered by Jaeger are inexplicable. Anodyne fillers take the place of analysis and argumentation: "As the Middle Ages drew to a close" (p. 31), "As the Renaissance dawned" (p. 73). Opposition from Church, state, and the medical profession variously waxes and wanes, according to the needs of Tin's argument. Time marched on, and no doubt the middle class continued to rise.

Two important points in the conclusion explain why this book is both incomplete and unsatisfactory. The first is that Tin admits that he worked in a hurry. He laments that his busy life and celebrity kept him from doing the required research. Four or five years would have been needed to do justice to the topic, and who has that kind of time? He wrote the book anyway (pp. 156-57). The second point is that, at least so far as Tin is concerned, the research he did not do would have made no difference to his claims. He wisely anticipates that "the *lacunae* and limitations of this pioneering study will be exposed" but justifies his haste, since his task was to "open up a field of study" (p. 157). The field has long been open, however, many seeds sown, many crops harvested. Had Tin bothered to notice any of this production, he would have found much in it to contradict, qualify, and correct his assertions, rather than to confirm them.

Tin is not shy about his scholarly weaknesses, which he regards as strength. "As *La Fontaine* famously pointed out," he writes, "loin d'épuiser une matière, il n'en faut prendre que la fleur" (far from exhausting a subject, it suffices to skim off the cream)" (p. 157). *La Fontaine* was writing about the merits of short fables, not short excursions into the history of sex, but the quote is apt for Tin's mixture of literary fiction and wishful thinking. It is a pity that Tin did not dip into the works of Thomas

Carlyle, who resisted the allure of brevity and wit alike: “Nay, in thy own mean perplexities, do thou thyself but hold thy tongue for one day: on the morrow, how much clearer are thy purposes and duties; what wreck and rubbish have those mute workmen within thee swept away, when intrusive noises were shut out! Speech is too often not, as the Frenchman defined it, the art of concealing Thought; but of quite stifling and suspending Thought, so that there is none to conceal.”[6] Amusingly, the handsome cover of this book reproduces René Magritte’s “The Lovers,” a sly take on concealment that shows a man and woman kissing through clothes wrapped around their heads. They are not the only figures associated with this book who seem to prefer not to know what they are doing.

NOTES

[1] These Old English poems, translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), are available in numerous anthologies.

[2] Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 114-58. See also Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-24.

[3] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 179-84.

[4] Pierre Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code 550-1150*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 135-39.

[5] C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[6] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, Book 3, chapter 3; see *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 165.

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