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Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xvi + 327 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and figures. \$99.00. U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-1107004917.

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Recent studies of early modern masculinity have developed several themes, but prominent among them are what might be called the “masculine anxiety thesis” and the “history of the phallus.” Patricia Simons takes on the tenets of these strains of thought, as well as challenging Thomas Laqueur’s “one-sex model” and raising questions about the centrality of reproduction in early modern understandings of sex. The connecting thread is what Simons calls “semenotics.” She argues that masculinity was based fundamentally on semen—on the production and projection of semen as a primary form of evidence of virility and male power—and offers an analysis of the male body in early modern culture in terms of the polyvalent meanings attached to male seed. Collectively, her analyses of visual and textual evidence significantly revise accepted ideas about the corporeal component of masculinity in early modern European culture.

Simons opens by contending that the male body has been ignored in historical accounts, and in terms of the centrality of semen, she makes a compelling case. Virility was primarily about the testicles in early modernity, rather than the penis, and inseminating fluid was a key marker of strength and male power (p. 5). The humoral understanding of the body supported the importance of sperm, while the penis was less important for penetration and more an instrument to facilitate projecting semen. By focusing on semen, Simons reveals an elaborate world in which corporeal pleasure was central. By deemphasizing penetration, she brings out beliefs, metaphors, and embodied practices—what she calls the “social iconography” of semen—that foregrounded pleasure and said little about procreation. The erotic delight of men and women involved far more than penetrative sex. Expressions of this delight can be read in the multivalent sexual culture of early modern Europe.

The first part of the book, focusing on masculine bodies in historical and visual terms, opens with an account of how male bodies were understood in terms of performative cues that demonstrated the male power of projection. Being a man was behaving like a man. Extrusion was a central component of being able to do so. The penis and testicles extended from the body and emitted semen. The beard was extruded hair that indicated male heat. Acting like a man included aggression as a marker of male heat, while femininity and effeminacy were defined by reception, particularly of semen. Simons uses the case of Elena/o de Céspedes to illustrate how these corporeal markers around projection functioned. Masculine failures (no beard; a penis that appeared late, was not impressive, and then disappeared) were countered with claims by Eleno of masculine success (something described as testicles; a male job; testimonials of satisfaction from female lovers). Because of the ambiguity of Eleno’s physical and behavioral signs, he was vulnerable in his masculinity and ultimately found wanting as a man by the Inquisition. By using this case of ambiguous masculinity, Simons effectively demonstrates how semen and projection fit into the definitional frame of male bodily comportment.

Having staked a claim for projection, Simons proceeds to take on the dominance of the phallus in scholarly accounts of masculinity. In chapter two, "The phallus: history and humor," Simons argues that the phallus is inadequate as the basis for a theory of masculinity because of its contingent nature. The Greeks regarded the phallus as a source of comedy, and Romans continued to regard it with amusement, although they also assigned it an apotropaic function against the Evil Eye (p. 55). Humorous phallic images and artifacts were overwhelmed, first by early Christian disapproval of all things sexual and then by the gradual development of the phallus as an allegedly universal fertility symbol. Simons contrasts the comic aspects of the phallus with the angst of Freud's castration issues in the Oedipus complex and Lacan's notions of the relationship of the phallus to subjectivity in the realm of the Symbolic. Simons particularly notes that such accounts of the phallus are somatically limited: they ignore the associations of the masculine with the testicles and semen (p. 69). While the reasoning demoting the phallus is a bit circular, Simons provides extensive evidence of the early modern remains that emphasize the comic elements in representations and discussions of the penis. The laughter to some scholars has signaled a crisis in masculinity, and Simons is careful to allow that there are examples of masculine anxiety in the historical record, but she rejects the crisis thesis. [1]

In fact, Simons argues in chapter three that there was an elaborate, confident social iconography around the material culture of male genitals. Everything from pilgrim badges to codpieces celebrated testicles and the semen they produced. Simons points out the visual references to tumescence caused by accumulated semen and suggestions of bursting forth. Balls could signal potent manhood, as could horses, and weapons such as spears, javelins, and swords. War was a source of images of penetration and projection, but more prosaic items such as pilgrim's bags, coins (for spending), and candles (for shape and because they generate heat) could refer to semen. Collectively, genital images could seem anxious, but were more often, "exultant or at least parodic, satirical and amused, and always historically conditioned" (p. 92). Whether popular or elite, images of male genitals supported patriarchal male power.

The power of semen as a masculine marker was supported in multiple cultural domains. Part two, which focuses on metaphors around the male sex, also modifies the cultural dominance of male semen. Simons begins by revisiting humoral medicine with an eye to the value placed on male heat, and on the expression of that heat in the testicles. Despite differences in how Aristotelian and Galenic models accounted for female contributions to reproduction, masculine heat was always central. Metaphors and images—stamping coins or seals, plowing fields, metal working, and hammering, for instance—reflected the understanding of semen as active and projective. The penis was less important, serving as the delivery system for semen. Projection was the object of intercourse, and early modern texts downplayed penetration.

Because expulsion of semen produced pleasure for both the active male and passive female, Simons argues that the evidence regarding projection requires a reconsideration of Thomas Laqueur's thesis that a one-sex model dominated understanding of human physiology until the eighteenth-century. [2] In addition to other critical comments, Simons contends that the more accurate description of early modern understanding is an "unequal two-seed theory," in which semen and heat are produced by both men and women in different quantities. Galen, despite his famous thought experiment inverting male genitals to visualize female reproductive anatomy, was interested in the colder semen of women. The woman released her seed, which desired male semen. While male seed is still more important in this model, Simons points out that it retains an important role for female specificity that Laqueur implicitly denies.

The idea that both men and women have and contribute seed in a sense can be understood to support sexual distinctions, but it can also be symptomatic of a one-sex model. That is, seed in both men and women is determined by relative amounts of heat. The elasticity of the early modern conceptual frames for the body seems to support the larger propensity to accept that different, divergent, even

contradictory ideas might be simultaneously true. In this case, men and women might be both one sex and two.

Regardless of who had how much, semen was a valuable resource. Chapter five, "Value and expenditure," examines how semen was represented as an economic resource. Usually understood as concocted from blood, semen was precious. Authorities debated about whether to spend and how much, and whether spending was healthy or debilitating. Moderation was something of an ideal, and spilling seed was seen as wasteful as well as sinful.^[3] The language and imagery around semen as having economic value is extensive. Testicles as jewels or gems or moneybags were doubled up in images of seduction involving purses, bags, and offers of coin. Prostitutes were represented with coins and other monetary referents. Images of age-disparate couples often included visual commentary on theft, deceit, and improper remuneration. In a society in which virginity was a commodity and dowry was only paid after successful sexual consummation, full purses were associated with fecundity.

Simons returns to the unequal two-seed theory in chapter six, which considers understandings of male and female pleasure. Where male pleasure was about the projection of seed, the physiology of female pleasure was more complicated. Medical knowledge held that women expelled their excessive plethora through menstruation but also required replenishment from male semen. The notion that a woman needed pleasure to release her seed and get pregnant, Simons argues, provided a commitment to female pleasure. Early modern understanding emphasized that the role of the uterus was to attract semen, but female secretions were regularly confused and conflated. Neither the clitoris nor the vagina figured much compared to the notion of uterine pleasure based on the emission and reception of fluids. Reworking medieval debates about who enjoyed pleasure more, early modern thought described male pleasure in terms of expulsion of seed, and female pleasure in terms of expulsion and reception. Male bodies also provided heat, which was crucial to concoct the seed, but also as a source of pleasure. Emergent pornographic discourses highlighted ejaculation as pleasurable for men and women while downplaying the reproductive aspect of sex.

Simons underscores her argument that reproduction was not the only issue in early modern understandings of sex in chapter seven, "Fertility and beyond." She concentrates on medical claims for the curative powers of semen. Women needed the moisture and heat of male seed to "clear" their vessels (p. 220). Metaphors for the womb as a field to be plowed and watered allowed for a range of agricultural implements and practices to find vivid redeployment as sexual imagery. Gardens featured images of abundance and fertility, fountains were understood as mirroring the projection of sperm, flowers recalled female genitals, and fruits served all kinds of sexual tastes. These images and metaphors functioned primarily to signal sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

Metaphors continue in chapter eight, "Implements in action," in which Simons provides an extensive tour through the morphology of sexual metaphors. Among the domains are musical instruments, clothing, writing implements, and everyday motions (such as brushing, combing, sweeping, grinding, digging and scratching). Perhaps the most extensive array of metaphors comes from cooking and the social iconography of the kitchen. Sexual metaphors around eating remain in modern culture, but the idea of spoons and ladles as sexually significant, or of ricotta cheese as a stand-in for semen, are largely lost on modern readers and viewers. Some metaphors, while not necessarily evocative now, are more obviously understandable (the motion of churning; the movement of bellows); some are less so (a frying pan as an erotic marker for the anus). Collectively, this world of metaphor suggests witty, often funny, sometimes grotesque engagement with the materiality of the sexualized body.

Simons concludes by reminding us that metaphors have to make sense in their cultural moment, and excavating their meanings can provide new and more nuanced understandings of embodiment in the past. For Simons, a key element of that past is the centrality of semen as a marker of male power and privilege. With their lesser semen, women were relegated to the inferior position in the "semenotic"

system. Simons explains not only that it was so and why, but how extensive and elaborate the structure in support of male semen came to be. At the very least, she invites us to look and read the cultural remains of early modernity in a new light, and I would argue that new light is revealing indeed.

NOTES

[1] Among the prominent proponents of the crisis thesis is Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2] Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[3] Todd W. Reeser, *Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). While Simons mentions the ideal of moderation, she underplays it at times. Reeser makes the commitment to moderation as a masculine ideal quite clear.

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