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Anne E. Linton, *Unmaking Sex: The Gender Outlaws of Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. x + 254 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$39.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781316511824; \$39.99 U.S. (ebook). ISBN 9781009053037. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009053037> (open access).

Review by Sarah Horowitz, Washington and Lee University.

In *Unmaking Sex*, Anne E. Linton addresses what has become a fundamental axiom in the historiography of gender, sexuality, and medicine: the idea that in the nineteenth century, medical professionals saw sexual indeterminacy as impossible and that human bodies were either entirely male or entirely female. This theory of what has been called “true sex” was developed by scholars such as Michel Foucault and Thomas Laqueur. In their works, they claim that the sexual body of the nineteenth century was constructed along the lines of clear sexual dimorphism, in contrast to earlier eras that were comfortable with more ambiguity.[1]

Yet as Linton shows through a rich examination of sources, from medical texts to novels, this was hardly the case. Medical professionals often had an expanded and more nuanced understanding of the sexual body, even sometimes despite their own professed belief in “true sex.” At the same time, the nineteenth century saw an intense fascination with sexual indeterminacy, with numerous works of literature focusing on individuals labeled at the time as “hermaphrodites” but who today we might call intersex. As Linton notes, “hermaphroditism” and “hermaphrodites” are outdated terms, but not entirely equivalent to “intersex,” which came into existence in the twentieth century. This latter term came to be linked with medical interventions for infants, whereas the earlier vocabulary she uses arose from an era when “some individuals [had the] freedom to live their lives outside of medical control in a way that would become virtually impossible in the twentieth-century West” (p. 171). Linton is thus interested in how medicine, the law, and literature attempted to impose control on individuals, even as it always failed to do so.

Linton’s work contributes to queer history, showing how doctors, authors, and patients understood possibilities beyond the binary. As she lucidly explores, the dominant cultural and medical assumption of the nineteenth century was that biological sex aligned with gender identity and a heterosexual sexual orientation. Despite this, many individuals lived lives outside of that binary, whether by understanding their gender identity as fluid or by asserting a strong sense of their gender that did not fit the sex doctors assigned to them.[2]

In the first chapter, Linton dives into the medical understanding of sex and the possibilities of sexual ambiguity in the nineteenth century. She also reveals how ideas and tropes circulated between literature and medicine and back again. Novelists drew on case studies discussed in medical texts while doctors used “decipherment, interpretation, and the construction of a narrative argument” to determine the sex of patients (p. 35). Doctors thus made pronouncements about the truth of patients’ bodies and identities in ways that drew on the traditions of realist novels and detective fiction. In relying on these literary techniques as opposed to just examinations of patients’ external genitals, doctors undermined any claims about the stability and legibility of sex. Moreover, not all doctors believed in “true sex” and currents of medical thought insisted on the possibility of what was termed “true hermaphroditism” (p. 49). Other practitioners claimed to believe in “true sex” but contradicted themselves on that matter within the space of a single text or used pronouns in their descriptions of patients that were at odds with their pronouncements on patients’ gender. As Linton eloquently puts it, “Real ambiguity and neutrality did exist in the nineteenth century because bodies that challenged the confines of the two-sex model existed then just as they exist now” (p. 52).

Chapter two examines how the legal system handled (or failed to handle) individuals whose sex was indeterminant. According to the Napoleonic Code, all children had to be registered as either “male” or “female”. These judgments then determined the life course of individuals: who they could marry, how they could inherit, and whether they were subject to conscription or not. In the face of this inflexibility, many legal scholars took up the question of how to handle “hermaphrodites” and arrived at no clear consensus on the matter. Some proposed that the law recognize possibilities outside of the binary classification. But, as Linton reminds us, the nineteenth-century engagement with non-binary possibilities was not always meant to make life easier for individuals deemed to be neither male nor female, nor to recognize their dignity. Indeed, legal scholars sometimes proposed adding options like “neuter” or “doubtful” to sex determinations out of a desire to prohibit individuals from marrying or inheriting on the grounds that they were dangerous to society.

In the second half of the book, Linton turns to literary treatments of androgyny and ambiguous sex. Chapter three focuses on novels from the early nineteenth century, some of which are now forgotten, but others of which, like Honoré de Balzac’s 1834 *Séraphîta* and Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* from 1835, have entered into the canon. In contrast to other scholars who have seen these works as evidence of a timeless interest in androgyny, Linton shows these works as intimately linked to the medical fascination with “hermaphroditism” as well as real-life cases of sexual ambiguity. Like medical texts, these novels often created a sense of suspense as to what a character’s true gender was. And just as doctors did, nineteenth-century works of literature might float the conception of “true sex” while also raising the possibility of identities outside a sexual binary. For instance, Henri de Latouche’s 1829 *Fragoletta: Naples et Paris en 1799* refused any definitive statement about the sex of the main character, while in Balzac’s *Séraphîta*, the eponymous character’s gender identity depended on the beholder and was described as shifting and in ways that resonate with Judith Butler’s claim that gender is performative.[3]

The final chapter examines how anxieties about “hermaphroditism” in the late nineteenth century fused with concerns about degeneration and sexual deviance. Linton places Émile Zola’s 1872 *La Curée* in conversation with scientific texts of the time to demonstrate how these tropes moved back and forth from the domain of science to that of literature. The novel features multiple androgynous characters, one of whom Zola called a “strange hermaphrodite” (p. 139); Zola

described this work as one about “a race that lived too quickly and that resulted in the man-woman of rotten societies” (p. 138). In this, Zola reflected the degree to which hermaphroditism was attributed to heredity degeneration and regarded as a danger to society and a source of France’s declining population. Doctors, too, began describing individuals whose sex could not be determined in moralistic ways, such as by suggesting they were deviant and untrustworthy, and therefore could not be reliable reporters of their own stories and best interests. Once again, though, literature could undermine the idea of “true sex”. While Zola drew on all these scientific ideas in *La Curée*, his novel also challenged them, describing characters’ perversions as arising from their environment or as temporary, as opposed to innate and hereditary. Zola’s desire to call on science to explain human behavior came into conflict with the fact that his writing suggested that biology was not destiny.

Linton ends with a brief epilogue discussing how “hermaphroditism” transformed into “intersex”. In the nineteenth century, surgical interventions were rare and generally performed on adults, but in the mid-twentieth century, doctors frequently used surgery on infants to make children’s bodies conform to their sense of what genitals should look like. Technological progress in the form of the development of new surgical methods meant that sexual dimorphism was routinely imposed on individuals in ways that had not been true for an earlier era. Intersex activists have successfully pushed for the medical establishment to change how they work with patients and provide them with more autonomy over their own bodies. Linton points out that the nineteenth-century imposition of “true sex” on bodies and the resistance to it are forerunners of these more contemporary struggles.

*Unmaking Sex* is beautifully written and artfully structured. It is also a vitally important work. Politicians in both the United States and France have fulminated against the use of inclusive pronouns and attempts to recognize that not all individuals have binary identities, often on the grounds that doing so would be to give in to trendy fads. As Linton shows us, though, there is a long and rich history of individuals living and loving outside of the binary. Her work reveals that gender outlaws are nothing new and that sex and gender binaries are unstable, precarious constructions.

## NOTES

[1] Foucault articulates this in the preface to Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980). See also Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[2] Works on the history of intersex history include Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Sandra Eder, *How the Clinic Made Gender: The Medical History of a Transformative Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Geertje Mak, *Doubting Sex: Inscriptions, Bodies and Selves in Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite Case Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). Other recent works that take up the challenges to the gender binary in the nineteenth century include Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Rachel Mesch, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from*

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*Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[3] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

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