

Colonial Sexual Cultures

*Rictor Norton**

Clare A. Lyons. *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2006). Pp. 420. 21 ills. \$22.50 paper. ISBN 0-8078-5675-4

Clare Lyons's important and comprehensive history of late-colonial heterosexuality is likely to become the major point of reference for anyone studying sexual practices and gender politics during the founding of the American republic. It is an ideal source to consult for anything to do specifically with early American women, and its very extensive footnotes (sometimes longer than the text on the page above them) reveal the current state of knowledge about eighteenth-century sexuality. Deftly employing a wide range of sources, from newspaper reports and advertisements, through divorce records, bastardy records, and diaries, to almanacs and broadsides, Lyons convincingly demonstrates that the sexual culture of late-colonial Philadelphia was sexually permissive despite the predominance of Quakers in the city: "The seeds of patriarchal marriage had not taken firm root in colonial Philadelphia" (43).

During the 1760s and 1770s, Philadelphians openly recognized casual sexual relations (including their by-product in bastardy); divorce was becoming common; nonmarital sexual

pleasure was generally accepted; an urban pleasure culture flourished; and sexual pleasure was pursued for its own sake. Virtually no attempt was made to curtail prostitution, and bawdy houses were located throughout the city, not just in the port area. People from all classes, women as well as men, regularly enjoyed casual sexual behavior, and a permissive attitude continued relatively unchecked until the nineteenth century, despite an explosion in venereal disease.

Philadelphia's sexual culture was distinctive, far more liberal than that of Boston, or Connecticut, or New York. For example, the Overseers of the Poor in Philadelphia actively supported mothers and their illegitimate children and did not compel them to submit to marriage. The authorities also winked at infanticide, which never became part of the discourse on either sex or crime, whereas New England produced numerous pamphlets about "murdering mothers."

Lyons explores what Philadelphians thought about sexuality by examining the popular print culture of almanacs, broadside ballads, pamphlets, domestically produced bawdy books, and openly erotic books imported from Europe. Sexual relations were perceived as natural and enjoyable, and pleasures sought outside of marriage were deemed desirable and guilt free—for women as well as men. Generous quotations from a literature that is overwhelmingly playful and positive make this section of the book particularly enjoyable. Real life paralleled fantasy life, as shown by advertisements about runaway wives and official records of divorces, which demonstrate that men were increasingly cuckolded by women in pursuit of casual trysts.

After the Revolution, domestically produced bawdy was increasingly suppressed, as society found it desirable to create the responsible citizens of a free republic. Such material, reconstructed as "erotica," rather than being available to the

democratic masses, became restricted to gentlemen of means. The sexual culture nevertheless continued to flourish: the bastardy rate doubled, prostitution became pervasive, and adultery became commonplace, as demonstrated by evidence gathered from legal documents, divorce cases, and records from the Guardians of the Poor, as well as from almshouses.

Before the Revolution, there was virtually no reference to African-American sexuality, or to black–white sexual relations. During the 1790s, cross-racial sexual relations were tolerated, influenced by the French colonial refugees from Saint Domingue who maintained their African wives and mistresses. But racial anxiety increasingly led to stigmatization of cross-racial relations in the print culture and regulations to curtail their occurrence.

An abundance of scholarly evidence demonstrates dramatic shifts in public perceptions and private behavior between the 1760s and the 1790s, and then between the 1790s and the 1820s. The alleged shift between the early colonial period and the 1760s is more difficult to demonstrate, for there is a paucity of data for the earlier period (e.g., the print culture was very much smaller before 1760s, making direct comparisons difficult). Lyons suggestively analyzes chronological changes *vis-à-vis* class. Cross-class intimacy was relatively unimportant during the 1760s, or at least few patterns based on class can be discerned. The lower classes claimed their social space by the 1770s, creating their own street culture. After the Revolution, in order to support the ideal of respectable democracy, the elite classes construed themselves as “the citizenry,” relegating the lower classes to “the rabble.” The barriers set up between polite society and this rabble included turning sexually independent women into unruly streetwalkers, and African-Americans into subhumans. Sexuality became increasingly regulated, and permissiveness was subjected to

constraint and discipline. Unregulated sexuality became “disorderliness,” a marker of baseness, and this view was connected to increasing racial segregation. Reforming evangelicals at the end of the century played an important role in reconfiguring the sexually active woman into the victim of seduction. Paradoxically, the love of liberty deprived many people of their sexual liberty.

However, part of the sea change Lyons detects is really a matter of degree rather than kind, and it may also reflect a change in class dominance rather than a change in sexuality (e.g., the middle class now firmly controlled the print culture and aimed at a higher-class readership). Changes were greater in perception than in practice, for nonmarital sexuality continued to flourish well into the nineteenth century. Lyons suggests that a new disciplinary regime was needed to support a modern industrial state, but her book contains no significant discussion of economic development, other than a detailed survey of the economics of marriage. There is very little foundation for her claim that antebellum capitalists began to “mount an assault” on the laboring classes.

Two dozen statistical tables provide detailed analyses of bastardy, class, divorce, prostitution, and sexual transgressions or crimes, and clearly demonstrate that changes took place. However, Lyons sometimes overinterprets the data. She uses statistics on advertisements for runaway slaves to argue that “self-divorce” was becoming acceptable, but the sole purpose of such advertisements was to enable the husband to disclaim financial liability for the wife. Lyons seems to regard female autonomy as evidence of a “fluid” continuum between genders, and she overrelies on Thomas Laqueur to argue that a “bifurcated” biological concept of gender superseded a “one-sex” concept. But the data Lyons has gathered are not sufficient to support these claims.

Unlike many other books on eighteenth-century sexuality, there are no entries in the index for *homosexuality*, or *sodomy*, or *buggery*. Sodomy is mentioned in the chapter on popular erotic or bawdy literature when Lyons discusses criminal trial collections reprinted in the colonies, but otherwise, homosexual behavior seems to be nonexistent, as far as Lyons is concerned. This absence is understandable in the chapters on bastardy, marriage, and divorce, but it is not clear why it is absent from chapters on “the urban pleasure culture” or prostitution, nor is it clear why subjects such as “sexual lifestyle,” “sexual appetite,” “female sexuality,” and “male sexuality” are not broad enough to include a glance at homosexual relations. What makes this omission so extraordinary is that Lyons herself has published a long and interesting article, in which she documents that homoerotic practice was part of the sexual culture in the City of Brotherly Love, and such data would have supported the conclusions in her book.¹ The gay activist Larry Kramer has condemned Lyons for presenting a “sanitized” version of history. I won’t use Kramer’s intemperate language, but the omission of homoerotic data from Lyons’s book is, indeed, inexplicable.

¹ Clare Lyons, “Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 119–54.

***This Review Essay was published in *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 33, no. 1, Winter 2009, pp. 144–147.**