

An Evolving Conception of Sexual Difference: Evaluating Thomas Laqueur's Theory on the Emergence of a 'two-sex model' in the Eighteenth Century.

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Abstract

In 1990, historian Thomas Laqueur published his pivotal 'one-sex, two-sex' model. The theory outlines that before the 18th century, it was believed that there was but one sex. The relationship between the male and female sex was vertical, with the female being an inverted, less perfect version of the male sex. While the theory made waves in the sphere of gender history, Laqueur's model has major theoretical flaws. It is built solely upon evidence from the 'great men of Western canon medicine', omitting female and homosexual voices. It stitches together pre-existing contradictory theories, dismisses important contemporary revelations regarding sex difference, and misrepresents the change in perception of sex that occurred in the 18th century.

Introduction

Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex*, published in 1990, has been hailed as one of the most influential pieces of work for historians of gender. The work outlines an evolving theory of sexual difference, which posits that before the eighteenth century, there was one sex

for the two genders.⁵³ The relationship between the male and female sex was vertical, with the female being an inverted, less perfect version of the male sex. The sexes differed in degree, not in kind. However, in the eighteenth century, there was a change in how sex was perceived, from the former 'one-sex' model to a 'two-sex' model. This placed man and woman on opposite sides of a horizontal spectrum, and branded them as incommensurable.⁵⁴ This drastic change was not driven by biological discovery, but rather by political incentive. The underlying rationale behind this was that bodies had to be defined as opposite sexes to allow power to be formally granted to one group - men - and withheld from another - women. This could only happen if the groups were incommensurable.⁵⁵ This political theory was then legitimised by science and medicine. Although Laqueur there are those who subscribe to his theory, this essay shall contend that, while *Making Sex* has most certainly contributed to and helped shape the discourse on the history of sexual difference, its reductionist nature justifies the many criticisms that it has provoked. The foundation of the 'one-sex' model is composed of a combination of contradictory theories, excluding female and homosexual male voices from the discourse, and over-simplifying the extremely nuanced issue of shifting gender relations throughout the early modern period.

This essay shall evaluate the most prominent criticisms of *Making Sex*, starting with what it deems to be the most influential - Park and Nye's assertion that Laqueur ignores the voices of women and homosexual men in the construction of this theory. This essay will then take a thematic approach in exploring further criticisms. The first criticism evaluated is the manner in which the theory combines two contradictory theories of sexual difference, as highlighted by Harvey, Paster, and Park and Nye. The portrayal of

⁵³ Thomas Laqueur (1992). *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. pp.194-207

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

the incompatible Aristotelian and Galenic theories as a groundbreaking discovery of a one-sex model is illogical and misleading. This essay shall then evaluate Laqueur's neglect to incorporate the 'discovery of the cliterous' into his model, as emphasised by Park. The cliterous has no corresponding male equivalent, and thus knowledge of its existence in the 16th century debunks the notion that a 'one-sex' model was canon. This omission has a direct implication concerning the apparent perception of hermaphrodites in society. Lastly, this essay shall evaluate Hitchcock's claim that there was indeed a 'revolution' in how sex difference was viewed in the 18th century, but that this did not encompass a shift from a 'one-sex' to a 'two-sex' model. Rather, sex became more phallogentric, resulting in a decreased focus on female pleasure, and an increase in homophobia in society. This essay shall argue that all the criticisms are valid, and that Park and Nye's is the most important.

Speaking with a Male Voice

The harshest criticism of Laqueur's work comes from Park and Nye, whom criticise him for 'obliterating' the voices of women and homosexuals from the narrative of perceptions of sex in the pre-modern period.⁵⁶ They assert that Laqueur "assumes a patriarchy so hegemonic that even women speak with a male voice". They allude that his seeming "celebration" of the pre-modern period could be read as a "male fantasy of a womanless world."⁵⁷ While this conclusion is drastic, it is certainly justifiable to criticise Laqueur for neglecting to encompass a well-balanced collection of perspectives in his narrative. The exclusionary nature of Laqueur's narrative provides a weak foundation upon which the 'one-sex, two-sex' model is built. If the voices of women and homosexual men had made up part of the model, many of the other criticisms aimed at Laqueur would be remedied. As asserted by King, Laqueur's

⁵⁶ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p56

⁵⁷ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p56

argument is undermined by focusing on work solely by the “great men of the canon of Western medicine”.⁵⁸

A Melange of Contradictory Theories

A prominent critique of Laqueur ‘one-sex model’, is that fundamentally, it is a melange of different theories from the pre-modern period. Laqueur has stitched together elements from these opposing theories, conveniently overlooking blatant contradictions in his recycled creation. The two opposing theories in question are the Aristotelian and Galenic theories.

The Aristotelian theory concentrated on the importance of ‘vital heat’ in the body, implying that women are inferior to men as they possessed less vital heat. Katherine Park, in *Rediscovering the Clitoris*, cites Jean Riolan, Professor of Anatomy at the University of Paris, in his *Discours sur les hermaphrodites (1614)*. Riolan subscribed to Aristotle's ‘highly dichotomized model of sex difference’, which places a focus on the incommensurability of male and female. He states: “Men are hotter than women; thus a single person cannot have both the genitals and temperaments of both man and woman together.” Additionally, it was held that only the male needed to ejaculate during sex to bring about conception, as the male seed was the active component, while the female acted as an incubator.⁵⁹ This again is illustrated by Riolan: “...the woman contributes matter, and the man gives the active and shaping seed of the child.”⁶⁰ It is evident that under the Aristotelian view, a woman's sexual function was in no way parallel to a man's. This could reasonably be labelled a ‘two-sex’ belief system. Overall, the Aristotelian perspective paints a highly dichotomized picture of sex difference.

⁵⁸ King, *Trial*, p70

⁵⁹ Katherine Park and Robert Nye (1991) ‘Destiny Is Anatomy’, *New Republic*. 18:2. p54

⁶⁰ Katherine Park (1997). ‘The Rediscovery of the Clitoris’, in David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (eds), *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*. London: Routledge. p181

However, as Karen Harvey emphasises in *'Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century'*, in Laqueur's one-sex model, two seed theory dominated.⁶¹ This is a distinct feature of Galenic humoralism. Galenic humoralism also alludes to the notion that men and women's genitals can be thought of as inversion of one another. This is in direct contrast with the obvious dichotomy of the Aristotelian approach. However, literal interpretations of this inversion have led to claims that Laqueur's model is reductionist. To prove his theory, Laqueur, in the words of Gail Paster, has 'subordinated the importance of gender difference in Galenic physiology'.⁶² Park and Nye have labeled the Aristotelian and Galenic approaches as 'mutually contradictory', and this essay agrees that, due to above reasons, this critique is certainly valid.⁶³

Disregarding the Cliterous and Implications of Hermaphroditism

Arguably as negligent as selectively combining elements of different theories, is a refusal to adequately acknowledge a discovery at all. Although he briefly acknowledges it, Laqueur opts not to lend importance to an element that has fundamental consequences for his theory - Renaldus Columbus' 'discovery' of the clitoris in the 16th century. Park focuses on the significance of the "*Rediscovery of the Cliterous*", in her work by that name. She asserts that the importance of cliterous, tribadism, and clitoridectomy in French medical discourse serve to counter Laqueur's arguments that these issues can be overlooked and are of little concern in the world of the one-sex body.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Karen Harvey (2004). *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p80

⁶² Gail Paster (1993). *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press p17

⁶³ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p54

⁶⁴ Park, *Rediscovery*, p187

Park stresses, most crucially, that Laqueur is mistaken to disregard the anatomical significance of the cliterous, and the prominence of tribadism in medical discourse. In evidence of this, Park points to the writings of French medical practitioners in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The writings acknowledge the comparisons and analogies that can be useful in comparing male and female genitalia. However, they did not stretch this to assuming that the analogies meant the two sets of genitals were the same kind.⁶⁵ Doing so would be reductionist and an over simplistic interpretation of sex difference, blatantly ignoring the evidence that the cliterous provides against this notion.

The 'discovery' of the cliterous is so relevant to Laqueur's theory as, if it were the case that people believed women were inversions of men, their full set of genitals already corresponded to their male counter-parts - ovaries to testicles, uterus to scrotum, vagina to penis. If the cliterous was, as some suggested, the onset of an additional penis, did this render all women hermaphrodites? If such a concept were to be widely accepted, this would surely result in an acceptance of hermaphroditism as a natural occurrence. If sprouting a penis meant moving along the one-sex spectrum towards male genitals - the embodiment of the perfect sex, then women changing into men should be viewed as a positive thing. This was not the case. Hermaphroditism had extremely negative connotations.

These negative connotations are captured in microcosm in late sixteenth century France, by the treatment of Henry III and his mother and regent, Catherine de' Medici. Henry and his mother were the target of both Protestant and Catholic criticism, both of which employed themes of hermaphroditism and sexual inversion.⁶⁶ This sentiment was captured by Huguenot writer Agrippa d'Aubigne when he decried France's current rulers as "hermaphrodites, and effeminate monsters", going as far as to state:

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Park, *Rediscovery*, p172

“Happy the Romans who had for tyrants the Caesars, lovers of arms and art, but unhappy he who lives as an infamous slave under a manlike woman and a female man.”⁶⁷ The idea that the Medicis were hermaphrodites that had adopted unnatural gender roles was used to paint them as sinners not solely against French law, but also in opposition to the natural order given by God.

The seriousness of the social taboo of hermaphroditism is further evidenced by the fact that in sixteenth century France, medical opinion quite frequently altered the lives of individuals, resulting in them being made to change their gender, undergo risky surgery, leave their marriages, or in certain cases face exile and imprisonment.⁶⁸ By the very fact that “hermaphrodite” was even a concept, let alone a serious taboo with widespread social impact, it is hard to seriously consider the notion that there was a “one-sex” model on a scale that “tended towards [male] perfection”. This consolidates Park’s criticism that Laqueur is mistaken to disregard the anatomical significance of the cliterous.

The Phallogentric Sex Revolution

Why is it that Laqueur neglects to address such pivotal issues? For Park and Nye, it is because he is so “bent” on proving his own thesis.⁶⁹ The above nuances regarding interpretations of sexual difference in the early modern period imply that it would be impossible and reductionist to attempt to condense such a narrative into a “one-sex” model. As Park points out, while such simplifications can be useful in initially staking out the problems in the emerging field of the history of sexuality, one must be cautious of its accuracy and the consequences of relying upon it too heavily. Medical thought on sexual difference was nuanced and heavily contested throughout the early modern period, and was shaped through the interaction of many factors including

⁶⁷ Park, *Rediscovery*, p172

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p54

professionalization, personal rivalry, national tradition, and the impact of new methods of inquiry and the rereading of ancient texts. Park asserts that it is these factors, rather than any retrospective theory or interpretation, that reveal the complicated relationships between sex and gender in the early modern period.⁷⁰

Criticisms such as those from Stolberg, which criticise the apparent chronology of Laqueur's approach, could be said to take primary issue with the timing of Laqueur's theory, as opposed to the concept that there was a shift in mentality from viewing sex on a vertical spectrum to a horizontal one. However, Stolberg, amongst other critics, asserts that the change in attitude towards sexual difference as we enter the eighteenth century is less clear cut than Laqueur suggests.⁷¹ Hitchcock speaks of a sexual revolution as opposed to merely a shift from a one-sex model to a two-sex model. This revolution was far from liberating, however. Hitchcock's sexual revolution of the eighteenth century had vastly different consequences for women than it did for men. A key element that changed was the attitude towards the female orgasm. In keeping with Laqueur's writings, Hitchcock maintains that, up until the eighteenth century, it was perceived that both the male and the female orgasm were required to conceive. However, during the eighteenth century, new theories emerged that implied that it was only men, and not women, that needed to orgasm. The medical reasoning behind this was that male sperm was the active element in conception, with the female fulfilling the role of 'incubator'. Therefore, women were seen as less vital to the process of reproduction than men. Hence, this set off a process whereby distinction between the genders became 'natural'.⁷² According to Hitchcock, this signalled a new perception of female passivity.

⁷⁰ Park, *Rediscovery*, p172

⁷¹ Stolberg, *Bones*, p276

⁷² Tim Hitchcock (1996). 'Redefining Sex in Eighteenth-Century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 41, p78

This development may sound less like a sexual revolution, and more like a 'coming down of sexual experience', and a new 'sexual McCarthyism directed specifically at women'.⁷³ This perception, however, strikes Hitchcock as too simplistically dichotomous. The question we should be asking is what changed about sex that led it to having such an impact on demographic regime?⁷⁴

The answer, Hitchcock posits, is a shift to phallocentrism. Practising sex became more phallogentric in the eighteenth century. In evidence of this, it is highlighted that the use of the word 'play' as a term for sexual activity, without its 'fore' prefix, died out during that period. The period saw an 'obsession' with the penis.⁷⁵ This in line with other trends from the period - more penetrative sex would provide a satisfying explanation for the increased rate of population growth, the increased rate of bastardy, and the heightened proportion of the population that were married (presumably due to increased rates of conception).⁷⁶ This is further backed up with literature associating attitudes towards sex with the industrial revolution, which championed productivity. A transition to penetrative sex is fundamentally a change from non-productive, anti-natal to productive, pro-natal sex.⁷⁷ Thus, Hitchcock's 'sexual revolution' encompassed an attitude whereby the male orgasm was the ultimate goal. Women were biologically redefined in order to deny them a sexual role.⁷⁸ This does indeed mimic a shift in gender relations, as 'the active male actor on the world stage becomes the active inserter on the petit stage of the bedroom'.⁷⁹ This was enabled by the denigration of female sexuality and perceived overall passivity, both within and without the bedroom. So, while it is accepted that there

⁷³ Hitchcock, *Redefining*, p79

⁷⁴ Hitchcock, *Redefining*, p79

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Hitchcock, *Redefining*, p80

⁷⁹ Ibid

indeed some change in how sex-difference was perceived around the eighteenth century, it was not as simplistic as a shift from a 'one-sex' to a 'two-sex' model, but rather a more nuanced refocus sparked by multiple factors. Hitchcock's theory of sexual revolution is more convincing than Laqueur's reductionist 'one-sex, two sex' model, and reinforce chronological criticisms relating to Laqueur.

Increasing Homophobic Attitude

It would be tempting to think that the above account of Hitchcock's sexual revolution was a triumph for males of the eighteenth century. This would be incorrect. Males also faced negative consequences of the increased phallocentrism of the eighteenth century - particularly homosexual males. However, as Park and Nye highlight, work on masculinity is much less developed than work on women.⁸⁰ Laqueur claims that homoeroticism was not considered a violation of the heterosexual order, but merely a 'culturally unacceptable reverse of power and prestige'. This stance refuses to acknowledge the abundance of theory from throughout the high Middle Ages and Renaissance that sets procreative heterosexual sex at the heart of the natural universe and, as Park and Nye highlight, associates sodomy with heresy as a rejection of the order created by God.⁸¹

The emphasis on productive penetrative sex resulted in the century witnessing an increased homophobic attitude from the general population as a whole. Heterosexual sex became an important indicator of normality; of masculinity.⁸² Literature on the subject illustrates that men felt an increasing pressure to participate in more penetrative heterosexual sex to evidence their 'normality'. Mutual masturbation and fondling, even in a heterosexual sense, were no longer enough to shield from suspicions of homosexuality. This indeed does suggest a profound shift in sexual attitudes and forms

⁸⁰ Harvey, *Reading*, p10

⁸¹ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p56

⁸² Hitchcock, *Redefining*, p84

of sexual behaviour.⁸³ Park and Nye echo this sentiment, commending Laqueur for his ‘admirable feminists commitments’ but regretting the extent to which he ignores the adverse impact a shift in sexual attitudes had on homosexual men during the eighteenth century. However, in the exact same sense that women’s bodies needed to be liberated from the constraints of phallogentric science, so too did men’s need to be.⁸⁴ By excluding men from interpretation, Laqueur undermines his own praiseworthy efforts to demonstrate the scope of the cultural construction of sexuality.⁸⁵

A Redefining of Sexual Difference

The above indicates that, rather than a clear transition from a one-sex to a two-sex model, the early modern period instead witnessed what was a ‘redefining’ of sexual difference. Park and Nye concur that it is likely sex was perceived differently before the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ However it is paramount to bear in mind that each historical epoch expresses their conception of sex in its own unique way.⁸⁷ Paster claims that Laqueur’s version of the physiology of sexual difference in Renaissance culture does not sufficiently account for the possibility of simultaneous and contradictory ways of engendering sexual differences.⁸⁸ Harvey consolidates this point, claiming that eighteenth century understandings of bodies combined the old and the new. This integration of new theories encompassed debate which further prompted the production of even more new understandings.⁸⁹ Laqueur consistently asserts that the changes in perception of sex were a direct result from evolving political agenda, however Harvey convincingly points out that this stance subsumes a wide range of genres under only one. It indicated that novels,

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p56

⁸⁶ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p54

⁸⁷ Park and Nye, *Destiny*, p56

⁸⁸ Paster, *Embarrassed*, p82

⁸⁹ Harvey, *Reading*, p7

sermons, and other didactic materials, plays, legal records, philosophy, scientific tracts and medical books were ‘all simultaneously saturated with the motivations of political writers’ - a notion that is unfeasible and undermines Laqueur’s stance. If a change in one genre were to automatically result in simultaneous, similar changes across a range of genres, it would be implied that culture is monolithic. This disregards the manner in which different mediums draw upon different sources and serve different performative roles in society.⁹⁰ Laqueur’s exclusive focus on the political narrative justifies Paster and Harvey’s critiques.

Conclusion

This essay has asserted that the many criticisms of Laqueur’s *Making Sex* are valid, and that the most important critique comes from Park and Nye. Park and Nye’s criticism, that Laqueur’s history ‘speaks with a male voice’, underpins many of the other criticisms faced by *Making Sex*. The basis of Laqueur’s one-sex model rests upon a fusion of two contradictory theories - the Aristotelian theory and the Galenic theory. Laqueur has rightfully been accused of misinterpreting his sources, taking analogies of inversions as inappropriately literal. His dismissal of the consequences of literature surrounding the cliterous is perplexing and serves to further undermine his model. The exclusion of female and homosexual male voices from Laqueur’s discourse ensures that he is only capturing a very limited perspective when he delves into the past. Although this essay agrees that it is likely there was an change in how sex difference was perceived around the eighteenth century, as Laqueur suggests, it finds that a transition from a ‘one-sex’ to a ‘two-sex’ model is far too reductionist. Hitchcock’s emphasis on an age of phallocentrism provides a more nuanced and convincing argument to account for the change. Nonetheless, it is important to note the valuable contribution that Laqueur’s *Making Sex* has had on the realm of gender history. This impact has been

⁹⁰ Harvey, *Reading*, pp.7-8

acknowledged by the critics themselves, with Harvey calling the work 'groundbreaking', and Stolberg stating that it indeed provided an 'important stimulus' for further research on the subject.⁹¹

⁹¹ Harvey, *Reading*, p6

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