

## BOOK REVIEW

*David J. Cox*<sup>1</sup>

***'The Pleasure's All Mine': A History of Perverse Sex.* Julie Peakman. London: Reaktion Books, 2013, 472 pp. £25 hardback. ISBN 978 1 78023 185 3.**

Julie Peakman's latest addition to her already considerable output on sexology makes for an enthralling (and occasionally deeply disturbing) read. It is certainly not a book for the easily offended or squeamish, being graphically illustrated with depictions of many sexual perversions. Within its 12 chapters the book covers the gamut of sexual practices from algolagnia (sexual pleasure gained through the infliction of pain) to zoophilia (sexual attraction to animals). Chapter topics include masturbation, homosexuality, transvestism/transsexualism, bestiality, necrophilia, incest and paedophilia. There are numerous fascinating and often disturbing case studies detailed in the book, as well as a comprehensive bibliography.

It concentrates exclusively on the history of sexual activities within the Western world; from the Ancient Greeks to the twenty-first century and the Internet. The author states that she has 'focused on Europe and the West, as there is simply too much information to include in a worldwide examination of sexual perversion' (p.9), and then goes on to hint that a further volume based on the East may follow, somewhat intriguingly stating that 'sexual perversions of the East bring in an entirely new dimension worthy of another book' (p.9).

The book is a meticulous and academic review of societal and cultural intolerance of various sexual practices and the many changes over time with regard to what has been considered 'normal'. This is especially noticeable in the author's account of the Classical and Ancient periods' view of many sexual practices which the Western (more especially the Western Christian) world later found intolerable and abhorrent. Peakman also makes an interesting case for the depiction of women in the Christian world as secondary beings, often viewed as sexually predatory and 'remov[ing] men from the rational world of the mind' (p.24).

An example of Peakman's historical approach to sexual 'perversion' can be seen in Chapter Three, which investigates changing attitudes to masturbation. The reader is told that many medical experts in the Classical world, including Hippocrates (c.460BC-c370BC) and Galen (c.AD129-AD200), 'thought it necessary for men and women to orgasm regularly to release their "seed"' (p.47), but that by the early mediaeval period, onanism was seen to be 'unnatural' and 'against God's natural ordering of the world' (p.48) because the release of

seed designed solely for procreation was an offence against God's purpose. Up until the mid-seventeenth century 'it was believed that tiny, fully formed humans [homunculi] were carried in the sperm [...] Any waste of the precious fluid was therefore tantamount to homicide' (p.55). After the invention of the microscope, scientific thought suggested that masturbation had a debilitating effect on the person, both mentally and physically. Peakman contrasts this view with a recent (2009) leaflet published on behalf of Sheffield National Health Service, which was aimed at teenagers and which advocated 'regular masturbation [...] as an alternative to the risk of sexual diseases and teenage pregnancies and carried the slogan "an orgasm a day keeps the doctor away"' (p. 72).

I found the book to be thought-provoking and sometimes controversial; Peakman certainly does not shy away either from providing graphic accounts of the nature of some sexual behaviour or putting forward alternative views of such practices; for example, she concludes that 'for many people at the beginning of the twenty-first century, few body parts or activities are seen as out of bounds' (p.396). In her Epilogue (entitled 'A Limit to Tolerance'), she suggests that there is a choice of two ways in which society can proceed; 'Are we to accept a fundamentalist, oppositional approach towards those sexual preferences we consider strange, or are we to embrace more unusual sex acts wholeheartedly?'. She concludes by asking another provocative question; 'at a time when procreation is no longer a sexual necessity [...], if sex between men and women is not calculated to produce children, what is the difference in the value between vaginal penetrative sex, lesbian oral sex, male-female sodomy, male-male sodomy or the penetration of men by women using a strap-on (called 'pegging')?'

There are a few problems with the book. Captions for two anti-masturbatory devices (looking at which caused this reader to cross his legs in eye-watering sympathy for any unfortunate individuals forced to wear such inventions) are transposed (p.64) and there are a few typographical errors scattered throughout the book. Some of Peakman's assertions are either a little underdeveloped or lack supporting evidence; for example Bow Street Chief Magistrate John Fielding is somewhat hyperbolically described (p.303) as the 'founder of the modern justice system'. Whilst I am a great admirer of Fielding's work with the Bow Street 'Runners', I feel that this is stretching his influence a little too far. Similarly, she states that 'another way to get around the divorce law was simply to commit bigamy, though this was taken more seriously than wife sales' (p.31). But this is made without providing any evidence for this statement. As I have demonstrated elsewhere the punishment for bigamy varied widely throughout both time and place, and the offence itself was not necessarily only linked

to sexual desire; fraudsters often viewed bigamy as merely another method of gaining financial reward.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite these minor caveats, I thoroughly recommend the book; it will be of interest both to those historians studying the sexual mores of Western civilisation and also to sociologists for its often perceptive questioning of the ways in which sexual activities are defined as either 'normal' or 'perverse'.

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<sup>2</sup> See David J. Cox, "'Trying to get a good one": Bigamy offences in England and Wales 1850-1950', *Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review* vol. 4 (Autumn 2011): 1-32  
<http://www.research.plymouth.ac.uk/plr/>