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FROM IDENTITIES TO TYPES

Will Stockton

Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley by Mario DiGangi. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Pp 304, 30 illustrations. \$65.00 cloth.

One question currently dogging Renaissance scholars is how to discuss sexuality without also discussing identity, especially gay and lesbian identity. In their provocative 2005 essay “Queering History,” which opposes the time-disturbing force of queerness to the presumptively teleological imperatives of historicism, Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon complain that “modern sexuality studies has become really only a field about lesbian and gay male identity.”¹ Goldberg and Menon picture a field in which scholars focus almost exclusively on the history of homosexuality and read characters who have gay sex or express homoerotic sentiments as either anticipatory of, or legible only in their difference from, modern gays and lesbians. Certainly, the difference that centuries of sociological, scientific, and juridical change make to sexuality, and consequently to the concept of sexual identity, has been a topic at the forefront of the field at least since Michel Foucault undertook the project of historicizing sexuality itself. Whereas the authors of some recent studies in Renaissance sexuality seek to distance themselves from any sort of teleological history of (homo)sexual identity, preferring instead to focus on the erotics of temporality, affect, and materialism, others have kept their histories more tightly linked to modern identities without assuming that these modern identities

are themselves stable formations against which one can measure the difference of the past.²

Mario DiGangi's focus on sexual types, rather than identities, in his historically rich and often analytically surprising new book offers a marvelous example of what scholars can accomplish when they stop worrying over the approximation of early modern to modern sexualities. If an identity is a sense of self, an I that coalesces in relation to others with a similar sense of self, then the type is recognizable dramatic figure, a character: "These characters look familiar not because they (necessarily) represented people likely to be encountered in the daily lives of early modern English men and women, but because they were . . . recognizable figures of literary imagination and social fantasy" (5). Expressions of erotic agency by sexual types provide DiGangi with focal points for analyzing the formation and transgression of gender, social, political, and economic orders in the early modern period, while this analytical shift away from understanding dramatic characters as embodiments of variably modern sexual identities keeps the book's historical inquiries tethered quite strictly to the early modern social imaginary. Dramatists William Shakespeare and James Shirley delimit the historical trajectory of the book, which shows little to no concern for the afterlives of the types it

analyzes: the sodomite, the tribade, the narcissistic courtier, the citizen wife, the bawd, and the royal favorite. *Sexual Types* is also no polemic: it offers no pugnacious response to, and even little engagement with, all the current queer pontificating about the perils of identity and teleology. It nonetheless offers a model for how Renaissance sexuality studies can avoid both the traps of teleological thinking and the reduction of sexuality studies to simply the study of gays and lesbians.

Given the sheer amount and analytical thrust of previous scholarship on the sodomite and the tribade, DiGangi's challenge consists in framing both figures not as protohomosexuals, but rather as dramatic types. Even more challengingly, he must argue for the existence of each as a type although neither appears in character books from the period. Both types accordingly make curious choices for the first two chapters, but these chapters firmly anchor the book in the field of Renaissance sexuality studies and provide DiGangi, as the subtitle of his book suggests, with a point of Shakespearean departure. He reframes the sodomite as a "composite type, a hybrid figure composed of elements from common social types such as the prodigal, the epicure, the 'good fellow' (a gamester or a drunkard), and the friend" (7). Analyzing religious commentaries on the destruction of Sodom in order to establish the

variety of economic, sexual, and social norms the sodomite violates, DiGangi turns to one of the theater's most famous sodomites, *Troilus and Cressida's* Patroclus, reading Thersites's insults ("boy" and "Achilles' male varlet") as indicative of the sodomite's composition of "idle, proud, prodigal, and sexually transgressive" character traits (43). Subtly but productively adopting the deconstructive analytic that many scholars of sodomy have employed, DiGangi's reading cannily reveals that the accusations brought against Patroclus are also "consonant with the dominant social values of the play" (43)—that the sodomite condenses and embodies traits expressed by the more heroic characters.

Even more rewarding as a venture through familiar territory is DiGangi's chapter on the tribade. Drawing on Valerie Traub's work, as well as on an archive of anatomy books and travel manuals, DiGangi argues that the representation of the tribade as usurping men's superior sexual role is sometimes undercut by the simultaneous representation of female homoerotic relationships as egalitarian. One dramatic example is again a bit overdetermined: Titania, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, bucks Oberon's authority by refusing to relinquish the changeling boy; and while her relationship with her votaress remains hierarchical, she asserts female-female eroticism against patriarchal

domination. The truly innovative, if briefer, reading of *The Winter's Tale* argues that Paulina is legible as a tribade whose sixteen-year, secret relationship with Hermione, ending with the restoration of Hermione as wife, mother, and queen, challenges the "substitutive logic" (87) that informs anxieties about the type.

These first two chapters, on the sodomite and the tribade, respectively, situate several of Shakespeare's plays in a network of other nondramatic texts. Chapters 3 and 4, by contrast, not only move away "from Shakespeare," as the book's subtitle promises, but also provide extensive close readings of single plays. DiGangi anticipates that this methodological shift will perplex some readers, but he states that no hermeneutic of necessity governs it. Rather, his own scholarly desire does: "The different mode of argumentation . . . reflects my desire to explore different ways of situating sexual types among literary and cultural discourses in an effort to understand the complexity of their functioning" (14). While one still wonders how certain modes of argumentation would accordingly simplify the analysis of particular types, the following chapters lack neither complexity nor payoff as they jointly analyze the dilemmas attending typological discrimination.

Chapter 3 reads Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* as a play whose

mockery of the narcissistic courtier as a “mincing” imposter is compromised by Jonson’s characteristic tendency to deconstruct his own critique. That is, the play’s political critique ultimately runs up against the impossibility of distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate courtiers. The novelty of chapter 4, on the type of the citizen wife, lies in the fact that its interest in the eponymous character of Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* is only secondary. Moving the citizen wives and their exchanges—financial and conversational—to the center of his analysis, DiGangi studies how the sexual slander they deploy and receive defines and disciplines them as wives who possess both erotic and economic agency. This shift in focus enlarges our sense of a play we already know to be about the relationship between work and sex because it reveals the citizen wife to be a sexual type who walks—like Moll Cutpurse herself, albeit within the context of marriage—the particularly tenuous line between a working woman and a whore.

The final two chapters survey multiple plays in their analysis of two sexual types who play intermediary roles in heteroerotic relationships: the bawd and the royal favorite. Whereas the bawd is typically denounced as a decrepit old woman who actively seduces a younger woman, the bawd actually appears in plays (including

John Fletcher’s *A Wife for a Month*, Thomas Dekker and John Webster’s *Westward Ho*, Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, and Shakespeare’s *Pericles*) with varying degrees of agency. She also appears physically in ways that only approximate her reputation as grotesque. In the logic of her condemnation, the bawd threatens to make women common—that is, unchaste—and she does so through the use of rhetorical commonplaces and proverbs. Observing that anti-bawd rhetoric similarly relies upon commonplaces, DiGangi plays brilliantly on the term *common*, reading the bawd not simply as a figure punished by the law, but also as a figure whose deployment of commonplaces exposes the common rhetorical foundations on which the law rests.

The final chapter on the royal favorite examines a number of less familiar Caroline plays, including Philip Massinger’s *The Maid of Honor* and *The Great Duke of Florence*, Thomas Killigrew’s *Claricilla*, and James Shirley’s *The Royal Master*, *The Duke’s Mistress*, and *The Traitor*, to chart the evolution of the type from a Ganymede figure (like Gaveston in Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*) whose relationship with the sovereign weakens the latter. The Caroline favorite, DiGangi argues, is a more monstrous, self-aggrandizing figure whose mediating role in royal relationships renders the king’s will illegible for

other subjects who have a stake in the monarch's relationships and the affairs of the nation. The invective directed toward the monstrous favorite is thus, DiGangi emphasizes, not necessarily a way of critiquing the monarch's sexual preferences, but a way of critiquing "the king's reliance on inscrutable affections . . . to govern the baffling network of alliances and affiliations that comprise the political nation" (220).

I have framed *Sexual Types* as an intervention in Renaissance sexuality studies that successfully shifts the field's focus from identity to types, and from figures who embody and express homoerotic desire to the range of sexual figures who populate the early modern stage. DiGangi's epilogue makes clear, however, that he also hopes his book will intervene in the field of character studies, which remains overwhelmingly focused on Shakespeare and his production of "virtual personhood" (223). A more robust sense of the kinds of types that populated the stage, of the kinds of social and political change in which the theater was involved, and of the "modes of queer embodiment and dissidence that were thinkable in early modern culture" requires "[l]ooking beyond the Shakespearean norm" (225). To the great extent that Shakespeare remains early modernity's most

prominent queer, I would claim *Sexual Types* as exemplary of one kind of wide-ranging, textually comparative, historically sophisticated work from which Renaissance sexuality studies, as much as character studies, can learn as it seeks to move from Shakespeare to elsewhere.

Will Stockton is associate professor of English at Clemson University. He is the author of Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and the coeditor of Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze (Ashgate, 2009) and Sex Before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Notes

1. Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History," *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1608–17, quotation on 1611.
2. For examples of the former, see Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Madhavi Menon, *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). For an example of the latter, see Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, vol. 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).