

Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830. By CLARE A. LYONS. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. 432 pages. \$55.00 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

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With its Quaker formation and its broad mix of peoples, Philadelphia was an unusually open city in the eighteenth century. Clare A. Lyons's work focuses on self-divorce (including adultery), bastardy, and prostitution and posits a rising arc followed by steep declension within the city's broader "pleasure culture" (1), of which sexual expression was a part, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It establishes a base point in the years before 1780 and then tracks changes through the age of democratic revolutions (1780–1800) and the early national period (1800–20).

Until Pennsylvania passed a divorce law in 1786, a common practice of marital separation was for a husband to advertise his wife's abandonment of his bed and board in the newspaper and declare that he ended all financial obligations to her. A wife could respond through the papers, either denying that she had eloped or offering her reasons for separation. Lyons probes these charges and countercharges to understand the meaning that husband and wife gave to marriage. She argues that wives gradually became more assertive, exposing their husbands' adulteries and, in some cases, expressing their own right to personal happiness.

In Philadelphia authorities and private citizens normally left neighbors alone unless there was a threat of personal harm or to the public order. In this environment casual sex led to a rising number of bastards. Philadelphia had an unusual outrelief system that helped to support independent women: pregnant women had the right of care during birth and early child support. Normally, the father paid, either willingly or because authorities forced him; if he could not, the woman could enter the almshouse. In the years before 1780, approximately one out of every thirty-eight adults was a parent of a bastard. That number increased in subsequent decades both absolutely with population rise and relatively by a doubling of the bastardy rate. Who was responsible and what were the remedies became matters of intense debate engendering changes in the understanding of sexuality and moral responsibility. Ultimately, Philadelphia adopted a more punitive system that forced expectant women into the almshouse and put their children to work to pay off the debts incurred by their very existence.

Prostitution had an open public face in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, part of everyday street life. Men socialized around prostitutes, and women moved fluidly in and out of the trade. In the revolutionary era, men were allowed to retain their extramarital liberty, and their freedoms grew with new assertions of male sexual prerogatives. Briefly, women also seemed to gain expanded sexual freedom; however, that door swiftly closed. Left outside were prostitutes and women engaging in casual sex. In addition, as the culture came to redefine female respectability as chastity or the married state, the category of prostitution expanded to encompass all nonmarital sex. Prostitutes were considered either victims, whatever their degree of agency, or part of the working-class and African American rabble, whatever their background.

The pleasure culture operating in Philadelphia found one of its expressions in the world of print by the mid-eighteenth century. The audience for newly eroticized almanacs, pamphlets, books, and prints expanded beyond the elite to include the literate middle and lower classes. Surviving works offer a path into the consciousness of Philadelphians. Almanacs, for example, supply a rich vein of material about casual and marital sex and relationships. Important in this exploration are what was written and who read it.

After the growth of male sexual privilege and heightened female sexual independence, the fluid ideas about sex shared by all classes bifurcated in the early national period (1800–20). The middle class began to accept male hypocrisy and require sexual restraint from women and relocated the pleasure culture to the rabble of the streets, composed of free blacks and lower-class whites. The implications of these changes for women's sexual independence were profound. Prostitutes were pushed out of legitimate society, and women conceiving children out of wedlock were blamed and punished.

Summarizing the book does not do justice to its rich detail, attention to race and class, effort to link culture and practice, and fine writing. The amount and quality of information is staggering, requiring at times an unfortunate relegation to notes of material needed in the text. Building effectively on the existing body of significant work on Philadelphia, especially studies by Billy G. Smith and Karin Wulf, the author mines court records, papers of benevolent societies and the bodies granting poor relief, and church records. She uses with great efficacy advertisements and accounts in newspapers and the significant corpus of extant printed books and pamphlets. All these sources furnish a solid base of quantitative and qualitative evidence, offering an important picture of nonmarital sexual activity in this closely studied city.

One of the most important elements of the book is its genuine effort to link discourse to practice. In some places the author suggests that the relation is direct, that adulterous husbands and wives and couples engaging in casual liaisons understood their behavior within the cultural context of stage plays, almanac humor, and novels. In other moments she indicates that sexual actors rejected the scripts: bastardy did not disappear because it was condemned in public print. In addition to supplying a close reading of some important texts, Lyons looks at readers. Library records offer one of the keenest pleasures in the book; for example, readers learn that in 1772 Betsy Towers and other women borrowed books such as *The History of Miss Sally Sable* (1757).

Questions, however, abound. In the early sections of the book, when the language is upbeat, the profoundly gendered nature of the evidence is not fully recognized. To what degree did the pleasure culture ever really include women? Beyond reading choices, what evidence exists of women's attitudes? Though the existence of bastard children testifies to female behavior, there are many possible reasons why a woman might have engaged in a casual liaison. Was she overpowered? Or was sex perhaps part of an exchange for money or for liquor? At one point the author mentions that more than half the illegitimate children came from sex across ethnic lines. This suggestion of the importance of ethnicity in family formation might suggest a plotline different from mere expression of the pleasure culture. The assumption that any woman who leaves her husband to choose another mate is striking a blow for sexual autonomy and personal happiness seems problematic. What if she sought and found another abuser? Women are always presented positively: when arrested for drunkenness or fighting, they are praised for being assertive, forceful, and self-confident. Could they have been merely common drunks? Finally, though all women are perceived as independent of family, broader kin, and ethnic group, were they, in fact, entirely on their own in this way?

As the author moves with the flow of argument, a totalizing tone colors the narrative. This tone represents more than a rhetorical flaw. It is the intellectual trap of hegemonic thinking. Clearly, there were counters to the pleasure culture that Lyons mutes or ignores. A central one is religion, both traditional and evangelical. One opportunity to analyze its influence—almost seized by Lyons but allowed to slip away—lay in her mention of the Philadelphia Quaker Women's Meeting's condemnation of bastardy. More broadly, why does the Second Great Awakening, which had a profound influence on Philadelphia and other major cities, go almost unmentioned? Moreover, though there is much attention to some of the racier fictional material, what about the popular medical discourse? What copies of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* were available? What about popular methods

of contraception and abortion? Given what historians know about lying-in, midwifery, and some of the written guides that circulated, what might have been the discourse of childbirth?

As the arc of the book begins its descent into the nineteenth century, further questions remain about the pleasure culture's survivals and elaborations. The ideal of the restrained, desexualized woman certainly had its day in the early nineteenth century, yet this model was played against popular depictions of crime and scandal, new understandings of sexuality and its relation to the nervous system, the emergence of a new sexualized celebrity culture, the growth of prostitution and brothel life, and the rise of the sporting man and popular commercial entertainments for his enjoyment. Like the late eighteenth century, the nineteenth century offers a rich and yeasty brew.

Historians are rescuing sexuality from its hidden and anecdotal past. As *Sex among the Rabble* reveals, sex is an evocative topic capable of bringing fresh insights to history and has critical links to broad themes and public policy. The questions raised here are significant in part because this volume is otherwise so well presented and important. Among its many strengths are the fine writing, well-chosen illustrations and aids to learning in maps and charts, and copious footnotes pointing the way for future scholars. With abounding detail it unearths valuable material that clearly establishes the importance of the urban pleasure culture and nonmarital sexual relations as well as sexuality's links to broad themes in culture and public life.