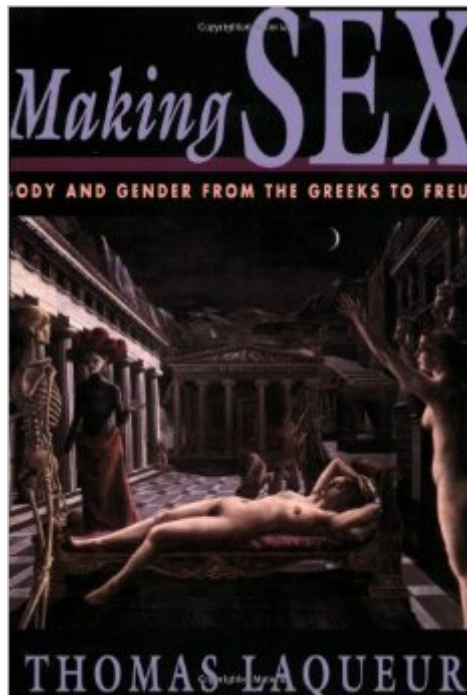


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Making Sex: Body And Gender From The Greeks To Freud



Synopsis

This is a book about the making and unmaking of sex over the centuries. It tells the astonishing story of sex in the West from the ancients to the moderns in a precise account of developments in reproductive anatomy and physiology. We cannot fail to recognize the players in Thomas Laqueur's story--the human sexual organs and pleasures, food, blood, semen, egg, sperm--but we will be amazed at the plots into which they have been woven by scientists, political activists, literary figures, and theorists of every stripe. Laqueur begins with the question of why, in the late eighteenth century, woman's orgasm came to be regarded as irrelevant to conception, and he then proceeds to retrace the dramatic changes in Western views of sexual characteristics over two millennia. Along the way, two "masterplots" emerge. In the one-sex story, woman is an imperfect version of man, and her anatomy and physiology are construed accordingly: the vagina is seen as an interior penis, the womb as a scrotum, the ovaries as testicles. The body is thus a representation, not the foundation, of social gender. The second plot tends to dominate post-Enlightenment thinking while the one-sex model is firmly rooted in classical learning. The two-sex story says that the body determines gender differences, that woman is the opposite of man with incommensurably different organs, functions, and feelings. The two plots overlap; neither ever holds a monopoly. Science may establish many new facts, but even so, Laqueur argues, science was only providing a new way of speaking, a rhetoric and not a key to female liberation or to social progress. *Making Sex* ends with Freud, who denied the neurological evidence to insist that, as a girl becomes a woman, the locus of her sexual pleasure shifts from the clitoris to the vagina; she becomes what culture demands despite, not because of, the body. Turning Freud's famous dictum around, Laqueur posits that destiny is anatomy. Sex, in other words, is an artifice. This is a powerful story, written with verve and a keen sense of telling detail (be it technically rigorous or scabrously fanciful). *Making Sex* will stimulate thought, whether argument or surprised agreement, in a wide range of readers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Joan Cadden's much more important and accurate book, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, opens by taking Laqueur's premise to task. And she's right to do so -- someone had to. The problem is that Laqueur simplifies. He attempts to argue, based on little understanding of the complexity of medical models used either in antiquity or in the Middle Ages, that a one-sex model predominated in medicine. And while, to a degree, he's right, he's equally wrong. He would be correct if Aristotle's model of the human body were the ONLY one used either in antiquity or the Latin west. But Aristotle pointedly presented his model of gender in opposition to that proposed by the Hippocratics. Galen, who obviously knew both Aristotle and Hippocrates, then modified the idea of what constitutes sexual differentiation even further. After Galen, we have centuries of commentary and modification by Arabic scholars -- Avicenna predominates -- before we get to the Latin translations which spurred scholastic debate in the universities of the west. Their model of the body was not simple or limited, it didn't rely solely on authoritative sources from the past, and it never solidified into a unified theory. To argue that it did would rob these individuals of their collective rationality and treat them like amusing children -- something a historian should avoid whenever possible. In order to create a readable and comprehensible text, Laqueur elided the complexities of the arguments common in the medieval universities regarding sex difference and reproduction in order to present his readers with a neat and tidy package. Whenever presented with a neat package in history, doubt the source. Cadden's work is a direct refutation of Laqueur's.

Baffling as it is, my book doesn't feature any imprint whatsoever. The bibliography clocks out with books of 1990 and says it was published on February 1, 1992. Of the some 330 pages, 56 are reserved for the bibliography and far too many footnotes. Also integrated are 63 smaller black and white images, some of them too dark. The book has many interesting historic concepts to offer. For example that the Greeks used tricks to make their penises appear SMALLER. That for two millennia the same name for homologous organs for "both sexes" was used, e.g. for what today is called ovaries/testes. That in Latin "vagina" wasn't used for what it means today, but additionally in good humor for "anus". That anatomic drawings were made in a way to make them appear the same for

women and men (just inside and outside the body). And that at one point the mind was considered the self, which is bodiless, hence no sex difference of mind. However, as other reviewers have pointed out in more detail already, Thomas Laqueur presents the one-sex-concept historically too monolithic. Indeed, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge Studies in the History of Medicine) is much more complex and should be considered obligatory reading, if "Making Sex" is read. Also of interest may be

Laqueur argues that like sex much like gender, which is now recognised to change with the times, has reinvented by people throughout time. Societies and communities tend to construct categories by which they organise things, people and their societies; whilst, these categorical tools appear legitimate and obvious to the historical actors who employ them, historical hindsight effectively demolishes their innateness. Laqueur argues that sex is not something that exists outside of us but within us, something that is transformed and made by communities and not by nature. Laqueur suggests that ideas of sex can be separated into two groups: the single sex model which precedes the 18th century and the two sex model which follows the invention of sex (which he claims occurs in the 18th century). Further, Laqueur claims that these changes in the conception and implications of sex changed as a function of society and were independent of scientific advances. Despite presenting a number of interesting case studies and examples Laqueur's evidence does not adequately support his thesis because historical knowledge challenges the one sex model; the lack of categories does not imply the lack of separate entities; the analysis of the implications of the language utilised by historical actors is problematic. Reading Aristotle also suggests that at least him considered sexes to be separate. He compares slaves to women and implies that there are separate. The historical record challenges Laqueur's assertions because societies have frequently divided roles, and sexual mores according to sex. Much of Laqueur assertions lay on the apparent absence of separate categories for men and women.

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