

A Review of

MYSTERIES OF SEX: TRACING WOMEN AND MEN THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY

Mary Ryan, (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2006)

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More than thirty years ago, Mary Ryan wrote one of the foundational texts of women's history in the United States. Her *Womanhood in America* looked at how society, politics, and literature constructed various meanings of femaleness over time. Her new book, *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men through American History*, takes as its starting point the same fundamental tenet: gender is hardly an immutable, natural given, and the variety of meanings attached to sexed bodies change over time. Those constructions of gender are neither simple nor straightforward. In fact, as Ryan would have it, they are a mystery.

Ryan seeks to unravel this mystery by exploring the cultures and practices that shaped constructions of sex and gender throughout the history of much of the North American continent. From Native American cultures to the demographics of the twenty-first century, Ryan charts some of the practices and events that contributed to the meanings of "man," "woman," and the boundaries between them. In her quest to better understand these meanings, Ryan employs three analytical categories: "gender asymmetry, the relation of the sexes, and gender hierarchy".¹ Ultimately, these categories prove to be a helpful set of historical tools precisely because Ryan recognizes that they are always mutually implicated and somewhat messy.

Mysteries of Sex has all the charms—and also the liabilities—of a grand narrative. It is also grand in both senses of the word: it is a masterful integration of primary and secondary sources, but it is also simply vast, covering more than five centuries. Like any narrative that treats a vast swath of land over an extended period, *Mysteries of Sex* unavoidably highlights some themes and leaves others out. But Ryan has chosen and interpreted well, and while one could lament particulars like the relative inattention to Western states, her narrative rarely lacks nuance.

For instance, Ryan's inclusion of Native American cultures is more than a mere nod to political correctness. Despite occasional homogenizing references to "Native American gender" and "Indian gender practices", Ryan is attentive to differences within and among different groups of Native Americans.² Moreover, the portraits of Native American cultures serve to illustrate in a dramatic way the underlying argument of the book: they denaturalize the contemporary American construction of gender by showing other possible systems of meanings of sexed bodies. That is, they demonstrate a different arrangement of not only gender roles, but what it means to be a "man" or a "woman." In some instances the construction of gender comes into even sharper focus, as when Ryan discusses berdaches who do not neatly fit either

¹ Mary Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men through American History* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2006), 13

² *Ibid.*, 46, 52.

category but still occupy a relatively stable place in the social order. Ryan does not, however, use this opportunity to question the usefulness of applying the framework of “gender”—itself a historically located concept—across historical time and space.

As an historian who has concentrated much of her work in the period, Ryan goes on to provide a vivid picture of both manhood and womanhood in the early republic and nineteenth century. Her discussions of the public sphere and how citizenship was gendered are both impeccably researched and provocative. Ryan demonstrates through her discussion of the political public how, no less than the meaning of womanhood, the meaning of manhood was constructed through discourse and practice.

Throughout the volume, however, Ryan is slippery in her usage of “gender”—seemingly integral to her analysis as both a term and a category. When Ryan leaves uncommon locutions such as “gender culture” and “gender practices” undefined, they lack clarity and detract from the overall coherence of her argument. Although she clearly outlines much of the theoretical literature on sex and gender in her introduction, in the body of the work it seems that at times she uses the terms “sex” and “gender” to satisfy a need for eloquence rather than technical specificity.

Moreover, in her final section, Ryan argues that by the late twentieth century, “modern gender” was “coming apart,” “fraying at the edges,” and “seriously eroded”, and that “gender conventions were clearly in disrepair”.³ Such proclamations serve to undermine Ryan’s constructivist standpoint by suggesting that there is something essential about gender to be frayed, “coming apart,” and “eroded” or some state of natural order that could be in “disrepair.”

Although *Mysteries of Sex* charts little new territory, it remains a remarkable collection of snapshots, each telling a small story about how people and institutions have created and recreated the meanings of sexed bodies in America. As a single-volume historical illustration of the constructions of gender, *Mysteries of Sex* should find its place in classrooms and on bookshelves across disciplines and generations.

³ *Ibid.*, 15, 281, 276.