

Cadden, Laqueur, and the “One-Sex Body”

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, Joan Cadden briefly positions her view of the topic relative to that of Thomas Laqueur’s in his *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, published three years earlier in 1990: “[My] analysis differs from that of Thomas Laqueur, whose recent work argues that before the eighteenth century male and female were in various ways regarded as manifestations of a unified substratum. Though there is much evidence in the present study that fits his “one sex” model, medieval views on the status of the uterus and the opinions of medieval physiognomers about male and female traits suggest evidence of other models not reducible to Laqueur’s” (3).¹ In these few remarks, which I wish I could deliver in person, I want to step back, fifteen years later, and think both about how Cadden’s and Laqueur’s arguments relate to one another and present the results of my own research concerning one aspect of the issue.

In the introduction to her book, Cadden characterizes the difference between her view and Laqueur’s with characteristic generosity in terms of his identification of a unitary model of sex difference in premodern Europe, a model that he has more recently promoted to the status of a “worldview,”² according to which, “there existed many genders, but only one adaptable sex” (Laqueur, 35). Laqueur’s allegiance to a single model contrasts with Cadden’s own emphasis on what she calls “diversity, eclecticism, and alternatives” (4), or “complexity, fragmentation, and difference” (7). In Cadden’s words, “the plot of [my] account . . . does not consist in the discovery of the essence of medieval views on sex difference and the logic of their relation to a gender system; instead it consists in the unfolding of relations among various distinct but overlapping sets

of theories, values, and interests” (10). This approach is very much in keeping with the “comic mode” of historiography advocated by Caroline Bynum in the introduction to *Fragmentation and Redemption*, which appeared the same year as *Making Sex*.³ And it contrasts dramatically with Laqueur’s taste for Foucauldian schemas, notably the one Foucault proposed in his introduction to the English translation of *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, published in 1980. There Foucault divided all of Western thinking about sex difference into two periods: one before the invention of the idea of “true sex” ca. 1800, and one dominated by that very idea. This is the “plot” that, with some minor adjustments in terminology, yielded the framework of Laqueur’s book.⁴

Yet contained within this general methodological contrast between Laqueur’s approach and Cadden’s are more specific differences—beyond the obvious fact that for Laqueur the Middle Ages figured only as a “millennial chasm” (his words) separating Galen from the inhabitants of Renaissance and Reformation Europe (63). Perhaps the most basic is his persistent association of premodern views of sex difference with the inverted anatomy of the male and female genitals first proposed by Galen in Book 14 of *On the Use of Parts*, despite intermittent attempts to supplement this with gestures to the physiology of generation and sexual pleasure. Cadden, in contrast, consistently privileges function and physiology—“seeds and pleasures,” as she titles her first chapter—over the shape of the genitals in thinking about sex difference. In fact, she devotes only five pages to the morphological differences between men and women (177–81), of which the longest section deals with patterns of hair growth.

So what happens to Laqueur’s argument if we do *not* treat the Latin Middle Ages as a mere vehicle of transmission for classical ideas—if we take seriously the long, complex, largely plotless story told by Cadden, which traces the ever denser accumulation of ideas, themes, questions, and points of view regarding sex difference over the period from the eleventh to the later fourteenth century?⁵ One answer is clearly that it complicates it. Given the multiplicity of views of and approaches to the topic by medieval scholars, it is difficult to sustain any claim, as Cadden makes clear, that there was a single model of sex difference in the

premodern period. I would, however, go further in contesting Laqueur's account, which hinges on the contention that during the "millennial chasm" between the composition of Galen's *On the Use of Parts* and the early sixteenth century, "various Latin translations, compendia, and Arabic intermediaries transmitted the one-sex body of antiquity [i.e., of Galen's *On the Use of Parts*] into the age of print" (63).

Some time ago, I set myself the task of tracing the route taken by Galen's one-sex body across this "millennial chasm." From the outset, I assumed that the story would be messier and more complicated than Laqueur suggested. In fact, I expected to find the situation that Cadden identified with respect to medieval opinions regarding the related problem concerning the existence of female and male seed: an absence of consensus, strong arguments on both sides of the issue, together with attempts to reconcile the two positions. Thus I thought that I would find accounts of the body as governed by genital homology coexisting and in conversation with accounts that emphasized the difference between the sexes.

What I actually found surprised me, although it is entirely in keeping with Cadden's own observation that "Galen's monumental *On the Use of Parts*, which contains ample relevant material and was available in Latin in abbreviated form from the late twelfth century, did not play a direct role in the main conversation about reproductive roles, sex determination, and sexual pleasure in the natural philosophy or medicine of the late Middle Ages" (108). Before 1500 I could find no convincing expressions of the idea of genital homology at all, even as an alternative to be discarded, except for a few brief passages in the works of several late medieval surgeons, including Guy de Chauliac, who seems to have been one of the only medieval scholars to assimilate the full text of Galen's *On the Use of Parts*.⁶ Not only did *On the Use of Parts* not circulate—for example, it did not appear in any of the first four printed editions of Galen's *Opera*—but the Latin translation of the Arabic abbreviation of it mentioned by Cadden, which did, lacked the last four books, including Book 14, in which the homology was found. The same was true of Alfanus's Latin translation of Nemesius's *De natura hominis*, which Laqueur also cites as an important late classical source, and which was also incomplete.

The homologies did appear in one chapter of Avicenna's *Canon*, on the anatomy of the uterus. This chapter was the object of a number of late medieval commentaries, none of which foregrounded the genital homologies at all. Throughout this period, rather, discussions of the anatomy and physiology of the uterus focused on the two functions that most clearly differentiated women's bodies from men's: menstruation and the ability to conceive and carry offspring. While there was no sense that men's and women's bodies were opposites—they were understood to share many aspects of their non-reproductive anatomy and physiology—their genitals were presented not as spatially inverted, but as distinct in function and form.

Laqueur is correct to point out the power of Galen's one-sex body in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European culture, but he wrongly assumes that it spent the intervening centuries percolating along. When it reappeared, it was as part of the humanist revival of interest in the works of Galen, as opposed to medieval compilations and commentaries, and one important focus was the long-neglected *On the Use of Parts*. Thus the appearance of the one-sex body in the early modern period represents a resurrection of a Greek idea that had effectively played no role in Latin (as opposed to Arabic) medical culture for well over a thousand years. Beginning around 1500, *On the Use of Parts* began to circulate in manuscript, in which form it strongly influenced the work of the early sixteenth-century Italian anatomists Alessandro Benedetti and Jacopo Berengario da Carpi. After it was finally printed, in 1524, we find its traces in the work of Charles Estienne, and, of course, Andreas Vesalius, who gave us the woodcut of the penile vagina that we, like sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers, writers, and publishers, have grown to know and love so well. In other words, the "one-sex body" is not a pure invention: rather it is a specific idea contained in a couple of paragraphs of a single book of a single work of Galen. Its *fortuna* is closely connected with the complicated *fortuna* of that book, which was virtually nil in the medieval period. What needs explaining, then, is not, as Laqueur claims, "why did the attractions of this model fade at all?" (61), but why did they appear?

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∞ END NOTES

1. All abbreviated references refer to Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
2. For the language of “worldview,” see Thomas Laqueur, “Sex in the Flesh,” *Isis* 94 (2003): 300–306.
3. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1990).
4. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980), xi.
5. Ironically, the same criticism can be made of many histories of medieval Latin science, which treat the Arabic Middle Ages only as a vehicle of transmission for ancient, mostly Greek, ideas.
6. For the results of this research, see Katharine Park, “Itineraries of the ‘One-Sex Body’: A History of an Idea” (in preparation).