

In and Out of the Marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe by Diane Wolfthal. Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. 252. ISBN: 9780300141542.

IN THIS SUMPTUOUSLY illustrated volume, Diane Wolfthal's aim is to contribute to the visual history of sexuality, which, she notes, is "still being written" (1). By studying late medieval and early modern images in the context of sexuality, she compares and contrasts illicit and matrimonial sexuality. The Church as well as the State tried to dictate morality by placing restrictions on space. Nonetheless, as she argues, people resisted and subverted these attempts and "learned to transform space to suit their sexual desires" (8).

Wolfthal shows the many contradictory and ambiguous discourses that arise from these images. Because the word "sexuality" did not come into usage in English until the eighteenth century, she quite rightly notes that we do not know what was sexually stimulating to the medieval and early modern individual. Sexuality is a process that begins with desire and may move on to physical acts and end with either marriage or punishment. By situating the visual image in a physical space, Wolfthal enables us to understand the social nature of sexuality.

Central to Wolfthal's study is the idea that what happens in a space affects the meaning of that space. Rooms, especially, were associated with either private or public activities. The book is thus divided into chapters that reflect spatial topography. She begins with the bed, which often represented marriage in both its material and spiritual aspects. It was often part of a dowry as well as the scene of a priestly blessing. There are other images, however, that display unease about the Church's negative opinion of sex, payment of the marital debt, and performance anxiety.

In chapter 2 Wolfthal moves on to the dressing area of the house, in which she focuses on the portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton (ca. 1600). It is a unique image because it shows a full-length view of a standing woman, partially dressed, combing her hair, and gazing directly at the viewer. In an excellent discussion of material objects, Wolfthal shows how loose hair and the act of combing was associated with erotic desire. The portrait was intended for her husband, Henry Wriothesley, third earl of Southampton, and, in Wolfthal's view, demonstrates that marital sex could be joyful. It is a carefully researched and documented chapter that shows her skill as both an art and a social historian.

Her third chapter is intriguingly titled "The Woman in the Window" and reflects its fascinating content. As Wolfthal explains, windows and doorways were liminal spaces between the public and private. In secluding women, they

were “erotically charged sites” (75). Women were warned to stay away from windows and balconies lest they lose their reputations: store windows displayed merchandise for sale, which could lead to unfortunate consequences. As in her other chapters, she shows how this space was contested as well. Her images demonstrate that the line between the good and the bad woman was often fluid. For example, in depictions of the period of Carnival, patrician women are shown staring out of their windows at men, and the subjects in their border decorations challenge social constraints.

The bath, her theme for chapter 4, is an obvious subject for a book on Renaissance sexuality. People used public baths, which were linked to both heterosexual and homosexual encounters. Both the State and the Church attempted to regulate them, as seen in confessional manuals and public ordinances. One of the most interesting distinctions Wolfthal makes is between public and private baths. Looking at the decoration of these sites, she finds that it is only in the private baths of the elite that erotica appears. In the baths frequented by the public, the scenes that adorn the walls are religious in nature, so as not to encourage lustful thought or action.

In her final chapter, Wolfthal leaves interior spaces and goes into the street. As she explains, this was a place of commerce, filth, and commotion, as well as temptation and sin. As a result, the street was a site that was highly regulated, the border between law and criminality, and the subject of visual representation. Wolfthal gives strong and insightful readings of two paintings in this chapter. The first, *Punishment of the Unfaithful Wives* (ca. 1505) by an artist in the circle of the Master of the Polyptych of St. John the Almsgiver, tells the story of wives who are unfaithful when their husbands are away at war. Their punishment for becoming pregnant is that they must breastfeed puppies while their babies are suckled by dogs. Because the source of milk was believed to form character, these children would not only be perceived as less than human but also lose their inheritance rights. The artist, she points out, has connected sexual purity and sexual deviance, making a strong case for one while emphasizing the other.

Perhaps the most fascinating interpretation in the book is the second painting, Petrus Christus’s *Couple in a Goldsmith’s Shop* (1449). Most readings of the work have focused on the couple consulting with the goldsmith and most likely buying wedding rings. There is another couple, however, in the painting that is reflected in a small mirror on the table of the goldsmith. Using the image of the falcon, Wolfthal makes a strong case that these two men are homosexual and are being negatively compared to the betrothed couple. It is a very compelling argument.

In and Out of the Marital Bed is a beautifully illustrated, challenging book that every medieval and early modern scholar of love and sexuality should read. Wolfthal concludes the book with an interesting section on future research directions, such as the relationship of social class to erotica. But its most valuable contribution may very well be her short foray into present-day visual representations of marriage and sexuality and the current political debate about “traditional marriage.” This book demonstrates that its reality was anything but what its adherents contend.

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