

Homagium: Joan Cadden's "Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages"

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IF TODAY THE fourteenth-century scholar Peter of Abano is almost a household name, at least among medievalists, we owe Joan Cadden for having brought to our attention this long neglected thinker without whom any account of medical thought during the Middle Ages would be incomplete. If today pleasure has been accorded its proper place in the history of medicine, generation, and sexuality, then the same scholar needs to be credited for many important insights into pleasure's workings. If medievalism has remained a vibrant academic province, well populated and replete with intellectual excitement, we need to pay homage to Joan Cadden among others. Needless to say, these are only a few, selected achievements. What has made this scholarly success story possible is a history written at the seams: the seams of disciplines—namely, history of science, gender history, history of sexuality, social history, and intellectual history—the seams of womanhood and masculinity, the seams of natural and moral philosophy, the seams of prescription and description, as well as the seams between erudite and non-erudite reservoirs of learning. These Caddenish seams are anything but clear-cut. They are frazzled, at times surprising, if not productively confusing. Consistently, Joan Cadden has resisted a retreat into the loftiness of intellectual history.

One of the many memorable sections of *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, Joan Cadden's signature book of 1993, treats the question of misogyny. The author helped shatter the myth of an all-pervasive misogyny in medical discourse of the period. The picture that emerges from her treatment of the status of women in medieval discourse is one of staggering complexity. While men provided the model case for discussions of human anatomy and while what could be gleaned from

women was secondary, there was a wide spectrum of learned opinion on women's physicality, including the contribution by a woman scientist, Hildegard of Bingen. Yet importantly this marked difference, if not hierarchy, between genders and their different epistemological status also stimulated the curiosity of medieval thinkers. Put differently, a rich tapestry of opinions, theses, and suppositions crystallized around questions pertaining to gender.

As this abbreviated discussion of misogyny in medical texts shows, we have in Joan Cadden the rare historian of science with a literary sensibility. Her writings pay attention to the difference of literary genres (pedagogical treatise, medical handbook, the commentary, for instance), textual milieus, and discursive contexts. What is more, her studies are attentive to the ambiguities of terms, of passages, of themes. She has therefore enriched the investigation of science in history with the sensibility of the philologist. Philology has been the object of many, maybe too many, theorizations in recent years. But the praxis of philology is a messy affair, one without larger than life heroes and heroines. For the medieval context, it is a world with few known authors or scribes, and it is a world of often unremarkable differences between manuscripts whose contexts of usage frequently elude us. Whoever engages philological practices usually finds it hard to argue for radical changes or shifts. Ingeniously, Joan Cadden offers shifting milieus of knowledge production and their corollary, new questions, to explain the slow transformation of knowledge and traditions, the accumulation of scientific insights as much as the increasing sophistication of medical thought in the later Middle Ages. What is more, philological sensibility feeds a critical engagement of, if not productive resistance to, a wholesale embrace of theory. Against the temptation of simplifying the record, she has insisted on complexity. That she has carefully carved out how such complexities manifest themselves, that she has employed a concise and ever shifting vocabulary of analytic descriptors to capture complexity, is one of the most forward-looking aspects of her work. Such is the academic world that, thanks to Joan Cadden's work, we have inhabited vicariously as readers.

As a researcher, historian, and writer, Joan Cadden has escaped the teleological trap, refusing to organize her materials in a narrative of fundamental change in which the omniscient scholar guides us triumphantly

from a point of departure to a point of transformation, touching on various intermediate stations in the course of the argument. But she has also resisted another temptation, namely to celebrate “diversity, eclecticism, and alternatives” (4) for their own sake. The coexistence of multiple sources, the openness of medieval natural philosophy to social concerns, the interconnectedness of intellectual interests that characterized medieval thinking is far from comforting in this vision. These connections never cease to unsettle. They undermine certainties about disciplinary boundaries in medieval science, the boundedness of textual archives and discourses, or about the supposed centrality of Christianity to the Middle Ages. What she unearths is therefore best described, in her own words, as a “network of ideas” (167). Congruence, consonance, and tensions emerge between different arenas of knowledge production. “If concern about coital positions constituted an important point of convergence for medicine, natural philosophy, canon law, and theology, and thus illustrates the way in which scientific understanding reinforced and was reinforced by other aspects of medieval culture,” she writes, “it also constituted a point of divergence” (246).

The tremendous resonance of *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* has much to do with a work that is conceptualized at the seams. This porosity has attracted a wide scholarly audience to this study, an audience far beyond the medievalist camp. In my own field, the history of sexuality, Joan Cadden’s signature contribution has had a tremendously liberating effect. The historiography on sexuality has both been enabled and disabled by the lingering impact of this history’s formative moments in the 1970s, Michel Foucault’s notion of sexual discourse on the one hand and historical approaches informed by sociological theory on the other hand; I am thinking in the latter case of Erving Goffman, Mary McIntosh, Jeffrey Weeks, Barry Adam, Ken Plummer, David Greenberg, and David Halperin. Discourse theory has directed our attention to the dynamics of utterances and the force issued by conceptual categories; sociological approaches have privileged sexual systems over specificities, grand narratives of change over temporal simultaneities as well as tied sexual histories to modernization paradigms. There is no doubt that her work has benefitted from the aforementioned approaches. But it is more, a lively pastiche, stitched out of textual trouvailles and multiple

connections that rarely cease to delight, enlighten, or challenge. At the same time, Joan Cadden has worked to widen our conceptual vocabulary and revive stale terminologies in sexuality studies through an infusion of terms carved out of medieval debates. At a moment when scholars grappled with the implications of sexual identity as a concept, she engaged a wide nexus of terms, terms such as “natural conditions, inclinations, [and] forces” (217), “nature,” and habits – terms whose semantics subtly widen our horizon in thinking through sex in history. To be sure, every one of these words would merit commentary and explanation to elucidate the ways in which they shed light on differences between sexual thought then and now. Broadening our glossary is not only important because it takes issue with the essentialist mode of thinking, a point Joan Cadden makes herself in the introduction. Hers is also a cautionary call to critically investigate the primacy of modernist formulations over the rich intellectual landscape of the past.

In this and other ways, Joan Cadden has captured novel perspectives on scientific thought in the medieval world and its productive eclecticism. Medieval medical gender thinking was not merely a conduit for ancient thought; it drew its strength from a variety of sources, sources that were cross-fertilizing and engaged new questions, new bodies of texts, and new perspectives. Medieval thought on reproduction incorporated errant knowledge and experiential tales, for instance; it was a field of knowledge replete with notions imported from female herbalists as well as benefiting from discussion of hermaphrodites. Viewed thus, plasticity may be medieval science’s most persistent feature. Such eclecticism may in fact explain medieval medicine’s intellectual resilience; thought constituted in these ways was fit to meet the demands of changing scholarly communities and audiences.

Let us be clear, the stories we have learned from Joan Cadden do matter. First and foremost, they matter to scholars working within the history of science: the initiation into medieval debates on generation and reproduction has itself contributed to the generative nature of research on medieval science in recent years. Yet importantly, these many stories have connected the history of science to other fields of knowledge. Not surprisingly, the study of reproductive thought in the medieval context has become significant to many scholarly communities engaged

in researching the Middle Ages, the history of sexuality, and gender history. The field that once was the province of the most forbidding specialists, medieval science, thus has become a field whose themes and issues are shared with a variety of traditions and subfields. We have all become or can at least imagine becoming historians of medieval science. No other fact could give better testimony to Joan Cadden's distinction as a scholar.

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