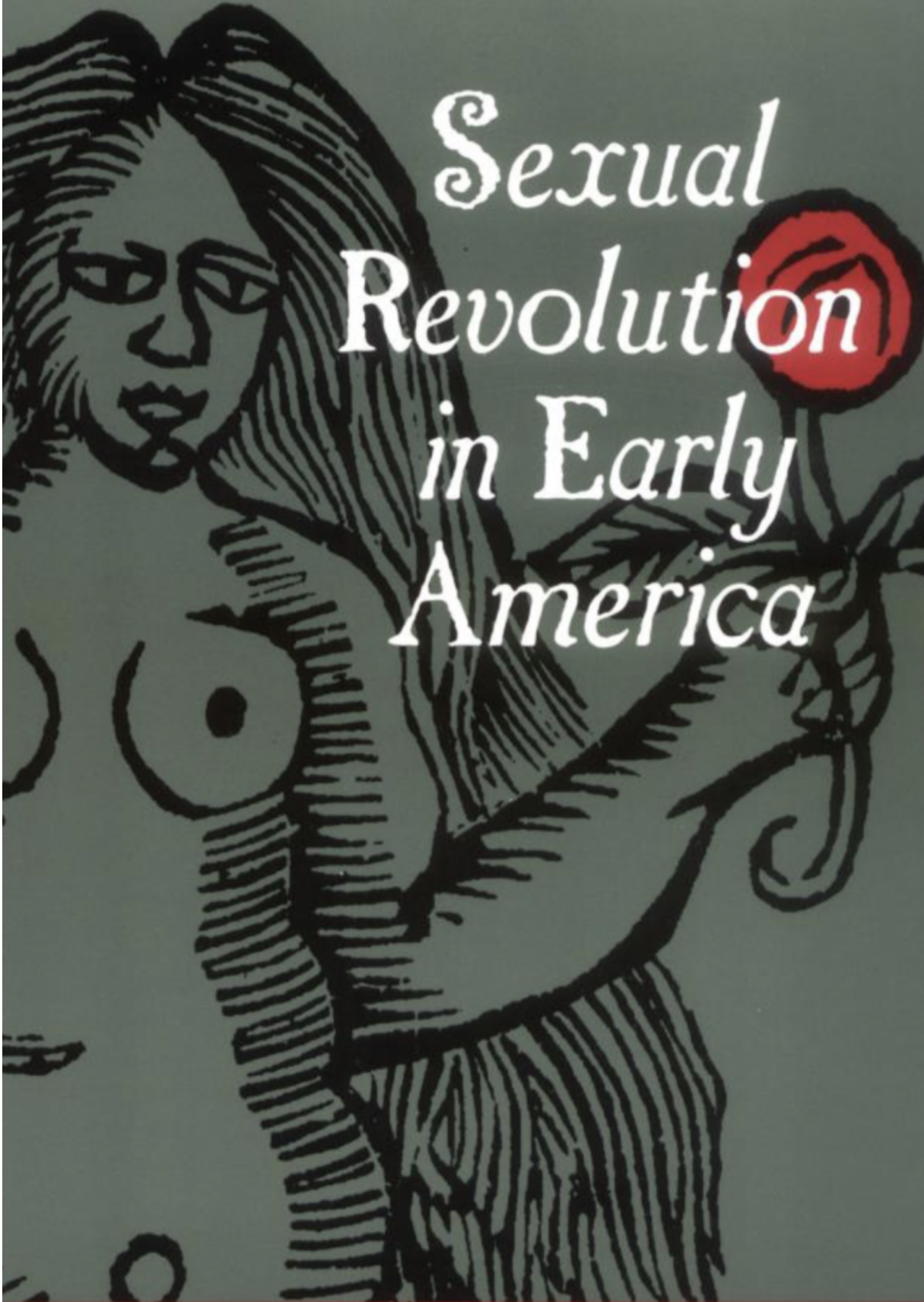
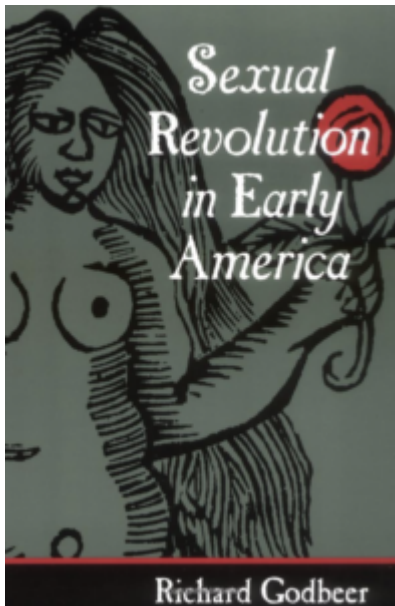


Sex and the Sources



*Sexual
Revolution
in Early
America*

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Richard Godbeer



Sexual Revolution in Early America

Ten years ago an unnamed historian advised Richard Godbeer not to undertake this project on early American sexuality because there was not “sufficient evidence” (12). That negative assessment was certainly the standard view. Historians could read for years without discovering much about sex in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the whole, the inhabitants of the colonies and early republic were remarkably reticent about what went on in bedrooms (and attics, stables, fields, ships, barracks, and bawdy houses, not to mention haystacks, pool tables, and more) as bodies interacted with bodies in ways that were “erotically charged” (11). They occasionally mentioned “conjugal embraces,” “flourishes,” “ravishings,” “connexions,” or “abominations.” But for the most part, even post-Freudian historians did not try to decipher the meanings of these arcane words. Our access to the sexual practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has also been mediated by those pesky Victorians who bowdlerized many published documents, or who fed offending letters and diaries to the flames in order to make their ancestors seem “respectable.”

Since the early 1990s, however, the work of Kathy Brown, Sharon Block, Kenneth Lockridge, Claire Lyons, John Murrin, Merril Smith, Bruce Daniels, Rodney Hessinger, and more has proven the naysayer wrong. And earlier studies by Roger Thompson, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Christine Stansell, and others stretching back to Edmund S. Morgan’s 1942 article on the Puritans, meant that the advice was outmoded even when it was uttered.

Historians have recovered early sexual beliefs and practices in three ways. One is by intensive searches through the archives for surviving evidence. Another is through a rediscovery of popular literary and medical texts. For example, *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*, a guide to procreation that went through many cheap editions, provides access to contemporary sex lore, while joke books, almanacs, and best-selling novels reveal anxieties about gender, power, and seduction. The final and perhaps most useful method has been the development of

an expanded definition of sex. The sexual encompasses far more than erotically charged physical interactions. Sex is also a cultural construct that includes a particular society's ideals and anxieties, practices and constraints, and categorizations of the erotic. These constructions vary over space and time. Expressions of the sexual are everywhere in the archives: in sermons, magazines and newspapers, court records, letters and diaries, even if the physical manifestations of sex are not.

Godbeer has followed the sources in this synthetic overview of the sexual in early America. He spends the bulk of the book in New England where the well-preserved sermon literature and court records offer a wealth of information. Of the nine chapters in the book, four are devoted to New England, and a large part of the chapter on the interactions (or lack thereof) between native peoples and European colonizers also concerns New England. In the discussion of the southern colonies, Godbeer focuses on the Carolinas, but, when evidence is sparse, he includes examples from the Chesapeake, the Caribbean, and even Surinam. In his last chapter he turns to Philadelphia in the second half of the eighteenth century, a focus that follows Clare Lyons's innovative analysis of that place and time—a dissertation soon to be a book—but inserts occasional court cases from New York City. It is an approach that maximizes the evidentiary base and provides a wide-ranging look at the sexual, but makes it difficult to track change over time or to define regional sexualities, except in New England where change seems to have been more evolutionary than revolutionary.

In one of the important findings of this book, Godbeer challenges our early-twenty-first-century understanding that it is natural that each person have a distinct sexual orientation that comprises a major part of personal identity—a sexuality. Early European Americans had no such understanding. Sex was an aspect of family life, of religious belief, of developing racial identities, of attitudes toward the authority of state and church, but rarely, if ever, considered an innate predisposition. Sex was a site of conflict, particularly between officials and the bulk of the people who were either rebellious or bound by customary notions of respectability or accountability that emanated from community traditions, not from their so-called “betters.” Puritan officials celebrated the joys of marital sex and utilized explicit sexual imagery in theological writings, in part to distinguish themselves from their view of Catholic teachings, but worried about the tendency of illicit sex to undermine godliness. In the more loosely governed Carolinas, officials worried about undisciplined settlers reverting to savages. City officials worried about post-Revolutionary assertions of sexual liberty. Those who seek a golden age of “family values” in the past will not find it in the lives and times of the founders.

If the strength of the book is that it is source driven, it is also a weakness. Godbeer does not fully address the biases of the surviving sources, one of which is that most are male authored. Indeed, he often adopts an uncritical male gaze in passages such as “Americans became increasingly troubled by the

implications of a more permissive sexual culture, especially as it affected young women" (277). Who are these Americans? It seems that they are not young women, who are only the objects of national concern. He tends to see women as the variable, and men as constants, so that he spends much time tracing the development of the seducible woman, morally responsible for her sexual purity, but no time asking why so many men adopted the persona of the sexually libertine rake. He seems to argue that feminist historians have exaggerated the liabilities of women under the double sexual standard. Christine Stansell calls the Bedlow rape trial "a digest of misogynist thought girded by class contempt." Godbeer places it in the context of the poem "The Orange Woman," a "celebratory" ditty "acknowledging [poorer women's] sexual urges and welcoming opportunities to indulge them" (307). But whose fantasy is this? Some analysis of the source would be welcome. Issues of gender, of consent, of power, of the practice of mastery are generally underdeveloped.

This is a book aimed at a general audience. Those who have been able to attend recent conferences and keep up with the increasingly voluminous literature on sexuality will find much that is familiar, perhaps a little too familiar. Others will welcome a short, accessible survey of an interesting topic.

Further Reading: Christine Stansell's description of the Bedlow rape trial is taken from her *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana, Ill., 1987), 23-4.

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