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Charles Bernheimer. *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. xviii + 329 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1947-4.

Frank Lestringant. *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. vi + 247 pp. $38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20240-5.

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Of Cannibals and Prostitutes: Figures of Obsession in Modern French Culture

In a recent issue of the *American Historical Review* (vol. 102, no. 5, Dec. 1997), Renaissance historian John Martin expressed his dissatisfaction with the New Historicism as an approach to historical inquiry. Broadly, the New Historicism is an anthropological approach to literary criticism which argues that various discourses–literary, legal, economic, scientific, and others–form a larger linguistic system of signs which define a culture at a particular moment in history. In "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence," Martin faults the New Historicism for being "profoundly ahistorical" because its analytical approaches "tend to be based on a totalizing view of politics and power…that leaves little room for oppositional or dissenting voices" (p. 1312). Specifically, Martin rejects New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt's notion of "self-fashioning," in which the self becomes an expression of larger cultural forces and the more traditional notion of subjective identity becomes a "fiction of individual autonomy" (p. 1315). Against Greenblatt Martin argues for a reinvigorated humanistic conception of individual autonomy, whereby individuals are capable of self-expression despite cultural constraints. But what about those individuals or groups who have been historically denied the capacity to define themselves? What, for example, of cannibals and prostitutes?

Before historians jump on a bandwagon of dismissing the New Historicism, the books under review, by literary critics Frank Lestringant and Charles Bernheimer, remind us that cultural discourses exert a particularly powerful ability to impose identities upon "silent" and marginalized bodies, and that the operations of such discourses are intimately bound in political domination. Far from being ahistorical, the critical discussions in *Cannibals* and *Figures of Ill Repute* are informed by an acute sense of historical chronology. Lestringant is particularly attuned to the complex, conflicting, and contingent linguistic terrain upon which, over a period of centuries, Europeans fashioned the identity of the "cannibal." And although Bernheimer employs what might be judged an ahistorical psychoanalytic perspective, his "prostitute" is historically specific to nineteenth-century France. Above all, Lestringant and Bernheimer demonstrate that the marginalized identities of cannibals and prostitutes are not trivial concerns for historians. Michel de Montaigne's famous sixteenth-century essay, "Of Cannibals," and Edouard Manet's notorious nineteenth-century painting, *Olympia*, are central works in the contemporary canon, taught even at the level of the Western Civilization survey. Readers of Lestringant and Bernheimer may find that the literary critic still has something to teach the historian.

Cannibals, by Frank Lestringant, Professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Lille III-Charles de Gaulle, provides an excellent example of what the New Historicism has to offer cultural historians. Over the course of the book, Lestringant shows how the "Cannibal," initially a heterogeneous figure who readily inhabited a Renaissance cultural realm, was transformed into a mute and abhorrent image in the Western imagination. Further, that dreadful image was successfully imposed upon the bodies of indigenous peoples during the era of the European colonization of the New World and the Atlantic slave trade. Lestringant's book charts a linguistic process whereby Europeans marginalized and vilified Native Americans and Africans as cannibals and savages. "For the Cannibals did really exist, and have never ceased to speak to us….Their retrieval from beneath the stratagems, excuses and prim attenuations of the learned on the one hand, and, on the other, the sensational exaggerations beloved of the public at large…is

the aim of the present book" (p. 7).

Lestringant's point about cannibals, in the plural, is that anthropophagy (the practice of eating human flesh) does not equal cannibalism. He objects both to the reduction of the cannibal to the anthropophagite, and to the association of all anthropophagous rituals (not the least of which is the Christian Eucharist) with cannibalism. *Cannibals* demonstrates that, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the identities of cannibals and the meanings of cannibalism were multitudinous and uncertain, and the figure of the cannibal was employed by European authors toward various rhetorical and didactic ends. By the nineteenth century, however, the identity and qualities of the cannibal had been reduced to a wholly non-European savage, who possessed "natural" appetites for human flesh and engaged in "primitive" cannibalistic rites. Montaigne's noble Brazilian cannibals, whose loquacity had dazzled the king's court in 1562, were replaced by hairy and lubricious African savages, whose nineteenth-century performances in two-bit colonial sideshow filled the likes of French novelist Gustave Flaubert with dread and disgust.

The term "cannibal," Lestringant reminds us, was invented by Christopher Columbus upon his 1492 arrival in Cuba. The word was a corruption of "Caribs," the enemies of the peace-loving Arawaks who welcomed the Italian captain. In the coining of *canibal*, Columbus created a portmanteau word by joining *canis* (the dog-headed *cynocephalous* of Pliny) with *bal* (belonging to "the lordship of the Great Khan"). On his second voyage, Columbus discovered the remains of cooked human flesh in a recently abandoned Carib village on Guadeloupe. Thus, Columbus's *canibals* came into being, an impossible combination of dog-headed and human flesh-eating descendants of the Great Khan. Although the canine and Asiatic genealogy was soon put behind, the "monstrous table manners" (p. 17) of the cannibal swiftly and tenaciously captured the imagination of Europeans.

Among cannibals, Lestringant's preference seems to be for the literary ones. From Francois Rabelais and Montaigne to Voltaire, various French men of letters characterized the natural condition of cannibals as being less barbarous than the cruelties perpetuated among civilized Europeans. Yet the common denominator of the savage state of the cannibal leant itself to other imaginary formulations of character as well, and these negative assessments were placed upon a scale of increasing ignominy. Among the early ethnographers of Brazilians, Andre Thevet viewed cannibalism as a form of revenge inflicted upon one's enemies, repugnant but understandable. Huguenot Jean de Lery became obsessively focused upon the horrific and disgusting act of cooking and eating human flesh. On an allegorical level, de Lery saw corollaries to cannibalistic practices in the theologically-inspired wars of religion in Europe. But in practice he relegated cannibalism to a distant geography inhabited by savages. Jean Bodin was perhaps the first comparative ethnographer of cannibalism. Bodin differentiated between the "bestial, hunger-driven rage" of northern cannibals, and the "melancholic, passionate fury" of southerners, for whom cannibalism was more thoroughly interwoven with their nature. In contrast to Montaigne's Brazilian cannibals, hosted by the king's court in Rouen, the cannibals of these early ethnographies occupied a geographic and cultural terrain outside of Europe.

Lestringant's objective is to demonstrate that as observations of cannibals by European colonials and missionaries became more factually descriptive, the imaginary image of "the Cannibal" represented in their writings, and consumed by European readers, grew increasingly barbaric, disgusting, and incommunicado. This was not so with Montaigne's cannibals, whose nominal identities were inseparable from the Golden Age language employed by the essayist. Through rhetorical eloquence, Montaigne's cannibals were able to overcome "the most tenacious and essential taboos of Christianity: nakedness, polygamy, cannibalism" (p. 99) and become figures of pure morality, beings who practiced political harmony within their own society, and employed physical violence only against their enemies. Paradoxically, the barbarians embodied the aristocratic and noble virtues lacking in their civilized European hosts.

The various attempts to draw "realistic" portraits of cannibals, by contrast, thoroughly relegated the cannibal to a pre-human, or at least pre-civilized realm. Cannibalism could be "explained" in various ways–as a method of torturing one's enemies, as a primitive ritual of consuming or vomiting human flesh, as a self-imposed version of population control practiced by islanders, as a physical necessity when other food resources were lacking. But no matter what the explanation, cannibalism expressed a pre-civilized and denigrated human nature. In the context of these horrific "natural" explanations for cannibalism, civilization through colonial expansion and mercantile reconnaissance became the cure for humanity's "perverted nature" (p. 155). Cultivated and educated Europeans were superior to barbaric savages. Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" is succeeded by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a "prefiguration of colonial self-righteousness" (p. 142). Having deprived the cannibal of human qualities, above all of speech, the European be-

came self-justified in the slaughter of dreaded savages in the defense of conquest and civilization. Rendered mute by naturalistic explanations, cannibals were missionized, enslaved, and exterminated.

Between Montaigne and Flaubert, Lestringant places Theodore Gericault's, *The Raft of the Medusa.* The painting commemorates the 1816 shipwreck of the frigate *Medusa*, and the setting of 152 men adrift on a makeshift raft. When the raft was recovered nearly two weeks later, only fifteen starved and half- naked men remained. In the intervening days, the food available to the survivors had been the flesh of their dead companions. In the 1819 painting, Gericault painted a muscular black man waving a red flag above the assemblage of raft survivors. According to Lestringant, this heroic figure was expression of Gericault's abolitionist sympathies. But that message was lost on contemporary critics, who focused upon the horror and misery of sailors reduced to cannibalism, and who dismissed the black man as an ignorant African who failed to understand what was happening around him. Two hundred fifty years after Montaigne, cannibalism no longer spoke; it was reduced to a horrific, silenced, and degraded image.

Another obsessive and degraded figure in French cultural history has been the prostitute. In *Figures of Ill Repute*, Charles Bernheimer, Professor of Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania, explores how the figure of the female prostitute embodied fantasies of "identification and repulsion…desire and its inevitable disappointment" (p. 1) in nineteenth-century France. Numerous gifted French writers, including Honore de Balzac, Eugene Sue, Charles Baudelaire, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Flaubert, Emile Zola, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, and artists, notably Manet and Edgar Degas, were obsessed with the figure of the prostitute. While not properly New Historicist in design, Bernheimer operates from a psychoanalytic literary perspective, *Figures of Ill Repute* shares in the project of demonstrating how a particular representation, in this instance the brothel whore, became a central culture figure of social and political domination in nineteenth-century French art and literature.

This figure of the prostitute, Bernheimer argues, was a male phantasm. "I love prostitution, for itself, independently of what is beneath it," wrote Flaubert (quoted in Bernheimer, p. 134). It was the artificiality of the prostitute, made beautiful through make up and gas light, completely lacking in middle-class virtue, which these artists and writers admired, not the woman herself. They were further attracted to the prostitute because she plied her trade on the margins of bourgeois society, just as their own artistic and literary works were subjected to the marketplace of a burgeoning capitalist consumer economy. Yet such admiration did not translate into fondness. The prostitutes penned and painted into their works were overwhelmingly depicted in brutal, naked, and obscene terms. Further, the misogyny expressed by these male artists and writers was not limited to their creations, but constituted a complex of ambivalent attitudes which they projected upon the bodies of actual women.

In psychological terms, Bernheimer is writing about a deep-seated male fear of women's sexuality. The depiction of the whore as foul-smelling, hysterical, effluvial, putrefying, syphilitic, and cadaverous, Bernheimer argues, represents the impossible project of men attempting to contain women's bodies and their sexuality. The figure of the prostitute becomes an artistic and literary extension of Parent-Duchatelet's hygienic studies of *filles publiques*, and of the failed attempt of the French state to regulate women prostitutes in *maisons de tolerances* (see Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan, [Cambridge, Mass., 1990]). Bernheimer carries the cultural trajectory even further, as he claims that the ambivalent figure of the prostitute haunts modernist aesthetics generally. Gender differences embedded in modernist artistic and literary works, Bernheimer concludes, are "frequently just as reactionary and misogynist as those of essentialism…a rhetorical strategy whose goal is the displacement, if not exclusion, of representations of the female sexualized body" (p. 273). Still, Bernheimer suggests, modern art has not been altogether successful in its effacing of female sexuality. In his own reading of Manet's *Olympia* and Degas's bordello monotypes, Bernheimer teases a sexualized female body back out of these paintings, against the efforts of these nineteenth-century male French writers and artists to contain it.

While provocative, Bernheimer's ideas are not new, but then neither is this book, which first appeared in print in 1989, published by Harvard University Press. What is new, is that *Figures of Ill Repute* has been recently reissued in a paperback edition by Duke University Press (aside from a brief preface, a facsimile reprint of the hardback edition). The new, affordable price makes the book an ideal choice for student seminars, at both the upper-division and graduate levels. Historians and students not steeped in the language of literary and art criticism, however, may find Bernheimer's book tough going. Further, some readers may find themselves ill at ease reading a book which overflows with virulent, misogynist images of women, a condition Bernheimer admits he felt when

writing the book.

While *Cannibals* and *Figures of Ill Repute* contain valuable insights for the cultural historian, they are perhaps best utilized in conjunction with other treatments of these issues. The tools and materials with which Lestringant and Bernheimer have fashioned their books carry their own limitations. The evidential bases of these books, and those of the New Historicism generally, are limited largely to art and literature. This may be appropriate to the disciplines of art and literary criticism, but it may not satisfy many historians. Fortunately, a couple of recent historical works cover similar historical terrain, and they provide supplementary readings to Lestringant and Bernheimer.

The milieu inhabited by Lestringant's cannibals also constitutes a substantial portion of Florike Egmond and Peter Mason's *The Mammoth and the Mouse: Microhistory and Morphology* (Baltimore, 1997). The final section of this book explores the historical persistence of Pliny's monstrous humans, early modern European practices of ritual torture and execution, and Dutch paintings of Brazilian natives as corollaries to Germanic barbarians. In their treatment of these topics, Egmond and Mason draw upon "low" and obscure sources rather than the literary canon, an evidential shortcoming they explicitly associate with the New Historicism. Further, they are more interested in the recovery of a *longue duree* of cultural homologies, the relationship of microhistory to morphology, than in processes of marginalization and domination.

The representation of prostitutes is also the subject of Jann Matlock's *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York, 1994). Where Bernheimer theoretically connects Parent-Duchatelet's obsessions with sewers and prostitutes with the artistic and literary containment of the vile prostitute's body, Matlock makes the close historical connections through her inclusion of medical, psychiatric, and political source materials. Moreover, she emphasizes that French middle-class women reacted against the characterizations of women as prostitutes and hysterics. These figures were not simply modes of male domination, they also provided French feminists with a basis for political resistance.

Still, *Cannibals* and *Figures of Ill Repute* remind us why the analysis of cultural representations pioneered by the New Historicism remains valuable for historians. Admittedly, the approach circumscribes social identities, rather than treating individuals and groups as self-conscious historical actors. Yet there is a history to the formation and meaning of these representations. The linguistic process which fashioned the cannibal, and then robbed him of speech, was conflictual and historically contingent. Misogynist fantasies embodied in the figure of the nineteenth-century prostitute were highly ambivalent. French literary and artistic representations of cannibals and prostitutes embody a particular kind of historical reality.

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