

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ulinka Rublack. *Gender in Early Modern German History.* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xiii + 308 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81398-3.

Reviewed by Bethany Wiggin (Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-German (September, 2003)

“Gender” without Its History?

The twelve articles collected in this ambitious book are, as the volume’s editor, Ulinka Rublack, explains, intended “to make accessible to English-speaking audiences some highly original German scholarship on gender history in the early modern period on mainline teaching topics [...] on which little research is available so far.” Furthermore, as Rublack explains in the preface, each contribution aims to contribute to the development of “a new approach to gender history, which fully takes account of the distinctiveness of past subjectivities” (p. xiii). To the extent that this collection fulfills these two goals, it will likely appeal most to two kinds of readers, neither proficient in German: teachers of European history survey courses and researchers of non-German early modern topics. Given the preface’s laudable aim of making more German scholarship accessible to English-speaking audiences, this reader wondered about the choice to include so many articles written by scholars whose work is already widely available in English and well known in the Anglo-American context. The reader not proficient in German might very well be left with the unfortunate impression that gender history is an overwhelmingly Anglo-American concern—an impression which certainly could not have been among the aims of this book, yet one which can only be corrected by the ability to pursue the references to German scholarship on gender included in the articles’ notes. Despite these reservations, it should be noted at the outset that this volume contains several particularly strong contributions: that of Eva Labouvie on men in witchcraft trials, Rublack on state-formation and gender, and the very fine contribution from Ulrike Strasser on nuns’ experiences of monastic enclosure.

Rublack’s introductory chapter briefly situates the subsequent articles, helpfully placing them in the

context of the historical structures and events particular to early modern Germany and amidst other research in the field. A map of Germany around 1547 also assists the reader in deciphering the intricacies of early modern German geography. The volume’s articles elaborate the roles that gender played within multiple transformations occurring in the wake of the Reformation (confessionalization, social disciplining, and state formation). Thus, their focus is primarily on the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with lengthy excursions into the eighteenth and even well into the nineteenth centuries. Strangely, the articles presented here are nowhere placed within the context of theories of gender and gender history. Any account of the shifting concerns of such theory would have to include its historical roots in the feminist movement and its continued political concerns. That this history is here almost completely elided may account for an almost total absence of explicitly feminist or any other political goals, an absence still more puzzling in a volume which hopes to win readers (feminists surely among them) interested in gender in other fields of inquiry but unable to read German. (Strasser’s article provides the noteworthy exception to this silence, as I discuss below.) Furthermore, had such a contextualization been undertaken, the volume’s opaque division into four sections (masculinities, transgressions, politics, and religion) would have been more readily transparent. The fruits of gender analysis, as Rublack rightly states, no longer allow early modern German gender history to be dealt with “under the model exam question of whether the Reformation strengthened patriarchy or marital equality” (p. 9). It is worth asking here, however, whether “gender” can still do the analytical work which historians such as Joan Scott originally advocated, work whose viability Scott has more recently questioned and which has given rise to considerable discussion in the German context.[1]

Heide Wunde's article, "What Made a Man a Man? Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Findings," opens the volume's initial section on masculinities. Inspired by recent scholarship on the history of youth and childhood, Wunde seeks to define "the meaning of gender membership for male individuation and the development of men's identity" (p. 24) based on her readings of several autobiographical texts depicting threshold moments in the lives of men of the aristocracy and middle classes. Their self-portraits identify clothing as a particularly important marker of their identity and stress the significance of the moment at which they first donned pants. Her sources' emphasis on sartorial conventions lead Wunde to postulate that breeches "served to mark an initial distinction between men and women" (p. 27) and provided a favorite trope to express the negotiations between husbands and wives later in life (p. 35). Yet, as she rightly cautions, the semiotics of clothing are by no means stable. Unfortunately, this article does not explore the ways in which men's clothing behavior was also informed by categories other than gender. Questions of how pants signalled not only masculinity but class, professional, and religious allegiances are bracketed here, presumably "since little research has been done on [masculinity] for the early modern period" (p. 25). Magic practiced by men in village communities of the Saar region is the topic investigated by Eva Labouvie in this section, "Men in Witchcraft Trials: Towards a Social Anthropology of 'Male' Understandings of Magic and Witchcraft." Arguing that magic practiced by men was far less likely to be associated with supernatural or black magic, Labouvie—alert to intersections of class within her gender history—interprets two cases involving men accused of witchcraft. She extrapolates from these micro-histories to demonstrate that in the Saar region, "in nearly half of the cases in which a rich farmer ... became caught up in a witch trial the accused succeeded in obtaining an acquittal for lack of evidence or in surviving torture ... three times—both outcomes that were available to male defendants without money or influence only in exceptional cases, and not to even the richest women" (p. 64). Labouvie's article, which first appeared in German in 1990, has been helpfully supplemented by a note providing references to the wealth of recent work on men and witchcraft trials.

Tangles with the law likewise feature prominently in the volume's second section on transgressions which opens with Alison Rowland's article, "Mon-

strous Deception: Midwifery, Fraud and Gender in Early Modern Rothenburg ob der Tauber." Rowland discusses the case of a young woman, Anna Seitterin who—supported and perhaps prompted by an elderly local midwife—claimed in 1569 to have given birth to monstrous puppies, not just once but five times in all, the final "birth" occurring through Seitterin's mouth. The two women were successfully able to maintain the monstrous births' credibility for nearly two months, profiting handsomely from their scheme until investigations began which concluded in the fraud's exposure and their punishment. As Rowland points out, "What strikes the modern reader as bizarre about this case is not only what the women did but the fact that—for a time at least—it succeeded" (p. 71). She thus proceeds to show both how the fraud could initially have been credible and in what ways the authority to "distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit" was significantly inflected by gender (p. 71). Unfortunately, the reader is left with the feeling that this tale fails adequately to transcend its fascinating particularity. Tantalizing references are made to "cases involving male con-artists," for example, "whom Rothenburg officials appear to have believed capable of defrauding others without any supernatural assistance" (p. 88). The only reference to Katharine Parks and Lorraine Daston's important *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (1998), for example, is buried in the twenty-fifth endnote. Greater critical engagement with the growing body of work on wonders and the inclusion of additional case studies of fraud promises to yield a valuable full-length study into the important role that gender played in such issues. Lyndal Roper's article "Evil Imaginings and Fantasies: Child-Witches and the End of the Witch Craze," also scrutinizes an extraordinary legal case, albeit one which stretched from 1723 to 1729 in Augsburg. Like Wunde's piece, this article is in dialogue with recent scholarship on the changing meanings of childhood. Here, however, a psychoanalytic reading (apparently Kleinian, although this was not particularly clear) of symbols of childhood is undertaken within the economy of a very late witchcraft trial. Instead of featuring the prototypical witch as old woman, however, the protagonists in this case were children accused by their parents of engaging in illicit sexual games and of seeking to do their parents bodily harm. Fears of the witch—always already determined by the psychic structure of infant sexuality in Roper's account—were in this case transferred onto children, revealing for

a brief historical moment the commonalities between older fears of the witch and more modern anxieties about child sexuality. Or, as Roper concludes, “Before witchcraft was finally consigned to the nursery, it paradoxically helped to give birth to an ambivalent fascination with children, their games and their fantasies” (pp. 121-22). A favorite topic of transgression, gender bending, is examined by Mary Lindemann in her article, “Gender Tales: The Multiple Identities of Maiden Heinrich, Hamburg 1700.” Given the frequency with which early modern women seemed to have cross dressed—demonstrated, for example, by Rudolph Dekker and Lotte van der Pol in *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (1989)—one might be tempted to ask whether women dressing as men might better be considered less as transgressive and more as frequently recurring threads in the every-day fabric of early modern society. Indeed, as Lindemann writes of the Maiden Heinrich, whom she identifies as Anna Buncke, “Transvestism [...] was likewise neither new, uniquely shocking, nor regarded as especially abominable” (p. 141). In fact, the public who followed the lurid tale of sex and murder in which Buncke was involved had no trouble understanding the many sexed and gendered twistings of Buncke’s story as she gradually offered it (under torture) to the presiding Hamburg magistrates and as it was subsequently related in a series of popular pamphlets (the title pages of one are reproduced here). Lindemann’s article aptly stresses the inadequacy of “using twentieth-century words to assign gender roles” to “sexual universes and gender worlds that are ours no longer” (p. 146). The inclusion of Merry Wiesner’s review of recent scholarship, “Disembodied Theory? Discourses of Sex in Early Modern Germany,” as the final article in this section on transgressions is especially puzzling. Wiesner reports that German- and English-language work on sex in early modern Germany is equally informed by “the Foucauldian paradigm of ‘sexuality as discourse’” (p. 154), although both take Foucault’s chronology to task, indicating “that there was ‘sexuality’ long before the eighteenth century” (p. 156). The insistence on dramatic historical rupture stressed by Foucault and Laqueur has in general played a much less important role in scholarship on early modern Germany than in the history of sexuality, a result of “the overpowering force of a different theory, that of ‘social discipline’ and the related ‘reform of popular culture’ put forward by Gerhard Oestrich, Peter Burke, and Robert Scribner” (p. 157). Wiesner

provides an engaging discussion of some of the more influential work indebted to this model along with a comprehensive bibliography in the notes, surely helpful to anyone in the field. She concludes on a somewhat wistful note, “It remains to be seen whether the scholarship on sexuality in early modern Germany, particularly that which has appeared only in German, will have much of an impact on the general threads within the history of sexuality” given “the increasing unfamiliarity with German within the English-speaking world” (p. 163). Certainly, her review can help to address this problem. Still, one wishes that more of this German scholarship could have been translated for inclusion in this volume instead of being consigned to the notes.

Renate Blickle’s misleadingly titled chapter, “Peasant Protest and the Language of Women’s Petitions: Christina Vend’s Supplications of 1629,” open the volume’s third section on politics. Vend’s considerable efforts and remarkable ingenuity to obtain clemency for her exiled husband from Elector Maximilian I of Bavaria are outlined in this study which “is interested solely in the unique historical person, her concrete actions—and as far as possible—her ideas” (p. 180). To what degree Vend’s written petitions are representative of “the language of women’s petitions” is indeed not Blickle’s goal. Why then this title? Indeed, whether Vend herself—or, for that matter, any woman—wrote the petitions is never clear. As Blickle states, Vend “required a written supplication, and for this she needed to find a scribe or lawyer. Without this piece of paper describing her business, her chances of being ‘heard’ were slim indeed” (p. 185). Nevertheless, all authorial intent is attributed to Vend in the insightful readings of the rhetoric in which the two petitions were couched. Although questions of authorship are not adequately problematized, it soon becomes clear why the first petition fell on deaf ears while the second, adopting the language of Maximilian’s claims to act as a father to his subjects, resulted in the long-desired legal return of Vend’s husband to their farm in Rottenbuch. In her article “State-formation, Gender and the Experience of Governance in Early Modern Wuerttemberg,” Ulinka Rublack admirably fulfills the aims of this volume as outlined in her introduction. This chapter, truly a pleasure to read, tells of the successful efforts of the citizens of the town of Ebingen to effect the dismissal of the local ducal governor, long notorious for his sexual dalliances, more immediately rumored to have impregnated his maidservant, and reportedly

ready to assist in infanticide. The anger against the governor–Rublack vividly portrays the town and the violent unruliness let loose by its inhabitants–is situated within the context of the publicity surrounding the duke’s extra-legal liaison with his mistress, publicity which surely hastened the initiation of a ducal enquiry in Ebingen. Rublack’s findings are then compared to existing scholarship on popular politics and state control in other German regions; in the notes one finds an ongoing dialogue with scholarship on still other places, particularly early modern England, a discussion surely to interest this volume’s intended audience.

Ulrike Strasser’s contribution “Cloistering Women’s Past: Conflicting Accounts of Enclosure in a Seventeenth-Century Munich Nunnery,” with which the volume’s final section on “Religion” begins, should find many admiring and appreciative readers. Strasser’s theoretically savvy reading of the enforcement of Tridentine reform in two female Franciscan monasteries in the 1620s is based primarily on two sources: a transcript long hidden in the Bavarian State Archives and written by a nun present for the final sealing of the convent’s doors and the first official convent history which commemorated the enclosure a century later in 1721. Her reading of the earlier eye-witness account evokes the distress, even heartbreak, that the women’s community experienced upon enclosure and the ways in which mourning and melancholia still inform the later official history. As mentioned above, Strasser’s work is the only piece in this volume explicitly to address feminist concerns and the politics of her own scholarly remembrance. Like Rublack, Strasser calls for historians’ increased attention to the historicity of emotions, arguing, “Historical writing that makes room for the mourning of female trauma [...] carries both emotionally and politically transformative possibilities” (p. 242). The political possibilities of historical writing also concern Ulrike Gleixner in her contribution, “Memory, Religion and Family in the Writings of Pietist Women.” In her detailed reading of the Wuerttemberg Pietist Charlotte Zeller’s voluminous pious history of female family members begun in the 1860s, Gleixner finds an attempt to reinsert women into the history of Pietism, a history from which they were gradually erased in the nineteenth century. “With her historiography [Zeller] fought for a representation of the female role in the memory of Pietists as a group” (p. 252). Citing letters and diaries of female relatives at great length, Zeller,

employing intertextual compositional practices, was able to make the voices of deceased relatives audible again. She carefully selected those passages for inclusion which established a tradition of female piety and so created a pendant to the far more numerous biographies of male Pietists. In the volume’s final chapter, Dagmar Freist studies the fascinating and important subject of confessionally mixed marriages in “One Body, Two Confessions: Mixed Marriages in Germany.” As she sketches out in her accounts of three cases spanning the eighteenth century, mixed marriages often brought the established gender hierarchy into direct conflict with religious conscience and the Imperial right of religious freedom. She shows how such conflicts “could result in violence, threats, the abduction of children and legal prosecution” and could spill “over into the local community and involved neighbours, clergy and local officers” (pp. 297-98). To date, this topic has received only limited scholarly attention; one wishes that subsequent work might proceed with Freist’s sensitivity to the ways in which attention to gender enriches the discussion of this thorny issue.

It can only be hoped that this volume will alert those interested in gender and early modern studies to the exciting work being undertaken in the German context.[2] To what extent gender history has become a regular feature in the early modern German scholarly landscape may be indicated by the omission from this volume of an extended meta-discussion. Yet, as Ute Daniel remarked last summer at a conference held by the Working Group on Gender History in the Early Modern Period (*Arbeitskreis Geschlechtergeschichte der fruhen Neuzeit*), “It has not yet been possible to write gender history without making it explicit in the book’s title.”[3] This situation is certainly confirmed by this volume’s title, yet it is a situation that this volume—with its refusal to engage the history of “gender”—does little to redress.

Notes:

[1]. Joan W. Scott, “Millennial Fantasies: The Future of Gender in the 21st Century. Die Zukunft von Gender: Fantasien zur Jahrtausendwende,” in *Gender. Die Tuecken einer Kategorie. Joan W. Scott, Geschichte und Politik—Beitraege zum Symposium anlässlich der Verleihung des Hans-Sigrist-Preises 1999 der Universitaet Bern an Joan W. Scott*, ed. Claudia Honegger und Caroline Arni (Zuerich: Chronos Verlag, 2001). See also Biljana Kasic, “Is Gender - Women’s Destiny? A Postsocialist Perspec-

tive. In response to Joan W. Scott's article: "Millennial Fantasies—The Future of 'Gender' in the 21st Century," *L'Homme. Zeitschrift fuer Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 13/2 (2002).

[2]. Those proficient in German may wish to consult the rich collection edited by Heide Wunde and Gisela Engel, *Geschlechterperspektiven: Forschungen zur fruhen Neuzeit* (Koenigstein/Taunus: Helmer, 1998).

[3]. My translation of Daniel's statement as quoted in Angelika Epple, "Tagungsbericht. Neue

Perspektiven: Geschlechtergeschichte nach dem linguistic turn. Weingarten, 13.-15. Juni 2002," <http://www.hb-electronic.de/akgg/Archiv/Berichte/berichte.html>

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Bethany Wiggin. Review of Rublack, Ulinka, *Gender in Early Modern German History*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8098>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.