Celibacy was considered unnatural in early America. This was as true for those who practiced it as those who critiqued it. With this underlying theme running throughout the book, Kara M. French’s Against Sex: Identities of Sexual Restraint in Early America offers an unusual window into the history of gender and sexuality in the early American republic. On the surface, Against Sex is a close reading of how those who limited their sexual activity—practiced “sexual restraint”—identified in a world that condemned them. Relying on sources from inside and outside of these groups, French explores the ways gender and sexuality were lived out by those who rejected one of the most definitive aspects of their gender in the early republic. Focusing on the lived experience of Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and Grahamites, the text delves deeply into how men and women subscribing to these beliefs experienced the life of sexual restraint and offers up much that is instructive about the lives of the celibate in the early American republic. Yet the greatest strength of this work is that as French outlines the experiences of Shakers, nuns, priests, and Grahamites, the contours of the society they rejected also comes into focus.

What did it mean to choose a life defined by limiting or abstaining from sex in the early republic? Scholars of sexuality and gender in early America have tended to focus on expectations and restrictions for men and women in a society wanting to police excess and inappropriate sexuality. French’s work comes to this topic from the opposite end—focusing on those deemed transgressive for their choice to limit their sexuality—something she calls “sexual restraint.” Like a funhouse mirror that amplifies one’s features to show what is really there, French’s exploration of how Grahamites, Shakers, and Catholic priests and nuns identified and were characterized by others offers a new perspective on how Americans at large understood sex, gender, and the family in the early American republic. For example, the first chapter—“Vinegar Faced Sisters and Male Monsters”—highlights the challenges that those choosing a celibate life had to overcome. The choice to abstain
from sex was not just a rejection of sin or a pursuit of better health but a rejection of marriage, family, and even gender. Without sex, men were feared to be emasculated and prone to deviant behaviors like those depicted in “escaped nun” narratives. The permanent chastity of women religious and Shaker sisters was depicted as destructive to their femininity. At the other extreme, the sexual education offered by Grahamites for women who would plan to practice sexual restraint challenged the sexual passivity expected of them in the first half of the nineteenth century.

From the outside, the sexual restraint of priests, nuns, Shakers, and Grahamites made them simultaneously threatening, pure, fascinating, and repellent. The religious tourism described in the fifth chapter captures the complicated relationship Americans had with the idea of sexual restraint and religious others. On the one hand, Shaker communities and convents became tourist attractions—places where one might experience the same kind of “wonder” felt seeing the mammoth bones at Peale’s museum or the curiosities at P. T. Barnum’s. But what was it that made these places “wonderous”? According to French, it was their celibacy—a practice that imbued the place with both virtue and monstrousness. These were sites of pilgrimage and voyeurism. This ambivalence about celibate communities runs throughout the book. Outsiders vacillated between fascination at the grotesque “vinegar faced” Shaker sisters and confidence in the “purity” of medicines created by chaste Shaker herbalists. Narratives of Protestant girls escaping the clutches of sexually craven mothers superior and confessors ran through the minds of elite young women who also gushed over the relationships they formed with nuns within the walls of the convent schools they attended.

For those choosing the life of sexual restraint, there was much to consider. As French notes, Noah Webster’s dictionary did not offer a word that truly captured the meaning for sexual restraint/celibacy for those practicing it in the nineteenth century. In this respect, French tells us, those abstaining defied social norms in ways that were difficult to explain, but clearly uncomfortable, even for those who chose that path. For Shakers and Catholics, the decision was a spiritual one. Shakers believed rejection of carnal sins would bring them salvation. For priests and nuns, celibacy was more complicated and extensive; it removed a distraction from their religious life, but it also extended beyond sex to include limitations on intimate friendships and familial relationships. Followers of Sylvester Graham, on the other hand, did not practice complete abstinence. Rather, their celibacy was a limitation of sexuality for better health.

Yet sexual restraint did not reshape gender expectations. While Grahamites and Shakers both made the case for equality of the sexes (on very different grounds), the submission of women to men remained steadfast. For example, all three of these groups continued to enact the gender defined roles found outside their communities. Catholic sisters deferred to their male superiors, Shaker women cooked while the brothers built furniture and made medicines, and Grahamite wives used moral suasion to guide their husbands on the right path, even while male followers of Graham decided for their entire household.

A remarkable strength of this work is how French weaves the story of sexual identity and religious outsiders into the broader early republic tale of the marketplace. In the final two chapters, French explores how each of these groups were marketed/commodified for a public that did not share their beliefs and values. While Graham’s dietary products and Shaker furniture seem the most obvious examples of this, French makes a case for Catholic schools, nursing nuns, and Shaker fashions and medicine as equally influential examples. What is really striking about the commodification French describes is the significance of celibacy as a stamp of purity, innocence,
and (in the case of nuns) strength that defied gender expectations.

If there is a critique to be made of this work, it is one that the author acknowledges from the outset: the groups practicing sexual restraint were incredibly different from each other and therefore difficult to group together. While French effectively argues that their commitment to sexual restraint made them suspicious to the broader society in similar ways, the combining of Graham and his followers with those who practiced celibacy for religious reasons is an odd fit that sometimes leads the reader to conflate Grahamism with a religious movement. Graham may have been a minister, but his movement was not a religion (something French makes clear in several places, but she also says that some followers could be religious about it). Theology appears very little in this work, yet it would have been the driving force for Catholic and Shaker celibates. The source of that theology is something that also makes more of a difference than is given credit. For example, Rome’s influence on the practices of American priests and women religious may have been limited by geography, but it was influential and real. While the Shakers were able to make accommodations to the realities of celibacy like “union meeting” conversations between male and female “partners,” American mothers superior and priests would not have had the flexibility to respond to the pressures of American cultural expectations in their schools and convents (pp. 88-89).

On the whole, this is an excellently researched study that sheds new light on aspects of early American views of sexuality and gender. Visual and material artifacts are artfully employed to support the analysis of a wide range of archival and published texts. The lens of sexual restraint is instructive for understanding expectations of male and female sexuality in the early nineteenth century, but the groups at the heart of this study have as much in common with each other as they do with the dominant society. In each case, the reason for sexual restraint was different as was the way they practiced it. Thus, it is difficult to describe sexual restraint as an “identity” except in opposition to the sexuality of those not practicing it.

Readers interested in early American gender and sexuality studies will not be disappointed in Against Sex. Linking the sexual identity and practices of three disparate groups to the larger social forces shaping early American families and culture, French’s work raises a mirror to those who did not engage in sexual restraint in the early republic, and what it reveals is fascinating.
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