

## BOOK REVIEWS

Clare A. Lyons. *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2006. Pp. 420, illustrations, tables, maps, figures, notes, manuscript source list, index, cloth, \$55.00, paper, \$22.50).

In this dense but intriguing study, Lyons reiterates a now conventional feminist interpretation that gender operated as a crucial component in a nineteenth-century U.S. social system that subordinated people of color, the lower classes, and all women. Her analysis is both bold and ambitious in that she casts cultural understandings of sexuality as the foundation of gender and tries to link both sexual behavior and representations of sexuality to power struggles over individual freedom and social order in the new nation.

Lyons presents an extremely intricate argument—the outlines of which are as follows. Colonial gender culture rested on the assumption that masculine authority within the patriarchal

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family was ordained. Enlightenment ideas, however, fostered challenges to established social hierarchies and prompted people to act on desires for personal fulfillment. The result was a "pleasure culture" in Revolutionary-era Philadelphia which was characterized by a hearty embrace of non-marital sexuality by people from all walks of life. By the early nineteenth century, a conservative reaction had constructed a cultural understanding of sexuality that re-inscribed gender, race, and class hierarchy by positing innate sexual reserve as normative and true for middle class white women while depicting other women as licentious. This new understanding of sexuality stigmatized people of color and the lower classes as immoral and served as a justification for their oppression.

Lyons is an assiduous researcher who has surveyed an exhaustive array of contemporary newspapers, almanacs, and other popularly available printed materials as well as the relevant extant records generated by the legal system and religious and reform organizations. She effectively employs traditional social history methodology to substantiate several important findings. For example, she demonstrates that mothers of illegitimate children had access to child support in late-colonial and Revolutionary-era Philadelphia but that the authorities' responses to non-marital childbearing became more punitive over time. She also shows that prostitutes were seldom arrested and that individual elite women as well as men lustily engaged in non-marital sexual encounters. Still, she often relies on a small number of cases to make strong claims. For instance, she has forty-one advertisements, dating from the 1740s to 1786, from women who responded to husbands who had engaged in self-divorce by advertising them as run-away wives. Lyons uses those forty-one cases to document a decades-long, three-stage pattern in wives' responses that ranged from early expressions of deference to later challenges to patriarchal prerogatives. Despite Lyons' diligent research, her evidence on individuals' engagement in non-marital sexuality is fairly sparse and the pervasiveness of Philadelphia's "pleasure culture" is open to question. While Lyons did laboriously collect evidence that a social historian might use to describe Philadelphia's sexual culture and trace its transformation over time, her primary method is cultural history discourse analysis. Clearly, her exposition of the meaning to be derived from run-away wives' advertisements draws more on her skills in reading texts than on the weight of empirical evidence. In her strongest chapter, "The Pleasures and Powers of Reading," Lyons provides a masterful rendition of changing patterns in the depictions of sexuality in

popular print culture. While Lyons' sensibility and acumen as a cultural historian permeate this study, her discussions of novels, pornography, and debates concerning sexuality and women's proper roles in the New Republic are especially effective.

Lyons' work is intriguing because she not only attempts to historicize sexuality but also claims a central causative role for it. She sees Revolutionary-era Philadelphians as having embraced an expansive pleasure culture that expressed the ethics of personal fulfillment. In her estimation, this transitional sexual culture challenged all women's subordination and especially asserted the right of the lower orders to exercise independent control over their personal commitments. She further views the subsequent cultural "delegitimation" of sexual equality and autonomy as a primary mechanism for social subordination by race, class, and sex. Three inter-related aspects of Lyons' interpretation may strike the reader as problematic, however. First, while she acknowledges women's vulnerability to exploitation and coercion, Lyons tends to view women's engagement in non-marital sexuality as a positive expression of feminine autonomy. Surely, the recognition that women could have acted on such a motivation is a welcome antidote to perceptions of women as passive victims. Still, Lyons' emphasis on autonomy seems overly optimistic considering women's economic and legal disadvantages, as well as the risks of pregnancy. Secondly, her focus on non-marital heterosexuality is an issue. Certainly, it can work to explore the notion of boundary challenges. Nevertheless, to what extent did Philadelphians who engaged in non-marital sexual behavior commonly understand or intend their actions as claims to power, and does this question matter? Furthermore, if sexuality served as the foundation of the emerging nineteenth-century gender system, would not contestations and negotiations within the whole realm of marital sexuality deserve more attention? Third, and most seriously, the relationships between cultural representations of sexuality, sexual behavior, and power struggles among social groups remain nebulous throughout this study.

In conclusion, Lyons may overstate the political significance of sexual practices and the discourse surrounding sexuality in Revolutionary-era Philadelphia. Still, she has written a fascinating study that forces a serious consideration of her contentions. This ambitious and painstakingly researched monograph deserves a place on graduate students' reading lists. *Sex among the Rabble* is a major work. Whether or not other scholars are

entirely persuaded by Lyons' interpretation, she has made a contribution to gender history and to Revolutionary-era U.S. history that cannot be ignored.

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Todd A. Estes. *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 267, notes, index. Cloth \$34.95).

Todd Estes's book is the first monograph on the Jay Treaty, one of the central political conflicts of the 1790s, to appear in thirty-five years. The history of the treaty and its American reception are well known: sent to London in 1794 to settle issues unresolved since the Revolutionary War and keep the United States out of the then ongoing European wars, John Jay returned with a treaty most Americans considered unfavorable to the trade and national interests of the republic. Events in Europe had shaped American domestic politics over the previous three years and the terms of the treaty appeared as a surrender to Britain and betrayal of France. In July and August of 1795, after the Senate had ratified the treaty strictly along partisan lines, the public response was mostly negative. Nevertheless, over the course of the fall, as Estes shows in unprecedented detail, Federalists in and out of Congress slowly but decisively rallied to shape the public debate concerning the treaty. They ultimately triumphed the next April when, following a vigorously orchestrated Federalist campaign to create the impression of overwhelming public support of the treaty, a divided House of Representatives narrowly voted for appropriations to carry the treaty regulations into effect.

Estes concentrates on the public response to the treaty and the partisan efforts to mold public opinion and put pressure on Congress. Two opening chapters which includes the contrasting Federalist and Republican views of the United States' place in the world, as well as partisan attempts to control public opinion and popular politics in the early 1790s, address the international context of the treaty. The book then devotes four chapters to a chronological and topical analysis of the treaty debate, while a concluding chapter describes how the controversy's participants retrospectively interpreted the course and outcome of the public debate and partisan efforts. Estes stresses that as early as 1793 Federalists used letters, newspaper editorials, and town