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Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature

Edited by
Jolene Zigarovich

ROUTLEDGE



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Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature

This book discusses sex and death in the eighteenth-century, an era that among other forms produced the Gothic novel, commencing the prolific examination of the century's shifting attitudes toward death and uncovering literary moments in which sexuality and death often conjoined. By bringing together various viewpoints and historical relations, the volume contributes to an emerging field of study and provides new perspectives on the ways in which the century approached an increasingly modern sense of sexuality and mortality. It not only provides part of the needed discussion of the relationship between sex, death, history, and eighteenth-century culture, but is a forum in which the ideas of several well-respected critics converge, producing a breadth of knowledge and a diversity of perspectives and methodologies previously unseen. As the contributors demonstrate, eighteenth-century anxieties over mortality, the body, the soul, and the corpse inspired many writers of the time to both implicitly and explicitly embed mortality and sexuality within their works. By depicting the necrophilic tendencies of libertines and rapacious villains, the fetishizing of death and mourning by virtuous heroines, or the fantasy of preserving the body, these authors demonstrate not only the tragic results of sexual play, but the persistent fantasy of necro-erotica. This book shows that within the eighteenth-century culture of profound modern change, underworkings of death and mourning are often eroticized; that sex is often equated with death (as punishment, or loss of the self); and that the sex-death dialectic lies at the discursive center of normative conceptions of gender, desire, and social power.

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Foreword

Those who lived during eighteenth century were obsessed by sex and death; in this, they were very much like those who lived in every other century, including our own.

I edited a 1990 collection of essays that also focused sex and death. Our discussions were limited to nineteenth-century works, however, in part because the volume grew out of a 1986 MLA panel titled "Coming and Going: Sex and Death in Victorian Literature the Nineteenth Century."

Macmillan of London, the first publishers with whom I'd ever worked, told me only after I'd signed the contract that they were removing the "Coming and Going" part of the title. "Why?" I asked. After all, the contributors, including Garrett Stewart (author of *Death Sentences*), James Kincaid (author of *Annoying the Victorians*) and Elisabeth Bronfen (author of *Over Her Dead Body*) and I thought it was dandy. I was a newly minted Ph.D. and had no idea that distinguished publishing houses, wanting to remain distinguished, would choose to handle the presentation of their products. In those days, one sent aerograms from New York to the U.K. on flimsy blue paper and waited anxiously for replies from the London office. But I received a telephone call—an astonishing aberration since they were still very expensive—and my editor explained that it was impossible for Macmillan to use my original title. I put him on the spot: "Please just explain exactly why it's impossible." He harrumphed and, after a long pause, officiously mumbled, "We at Macmillan feel the phrase is, well, redundant." Since I knew by that point I'd lost, I said cheerfully "Oh! So that's it! Redundant. And all this time I was afraid you thought it was obscene."

Sex and death are obscene. They are the very two acts that happened off stage—and are encompassed within the very origin of the word "obscaena"—where unspeakable and unwatchable occurred. Too disturbing, too messy, too complex, and too powerful be fully represented in classical drama, sex and death had to occur "elsewhere," removed from the protection and context provided by the proscenium. The essays in Zigarovich's new collection on eighteenth-century literature also go "elsewhere," insofar as they take readers into the shadowy, forbidden ground of the sexual, the sinful, the spiritual and the supernatural. During a time when science and exploration

were altering and narrowing the scope of human and religious mystery, the need for something hidden drove the reading public and the writers of the so-called age of reason to seek the truth at the hidden inner recesses of the lives of men and women.

The contributors to this volume initiate a magnificent conversation between aesthetics, theology, literature, history, and philosophy. They understand that, from examining works about how and why people love in conjunction with works about how and why they bury their dead, we come to an entirely new perspective the intricacies and intersections of literature and culture.

Sex and death are dangerous if not contained by rituals; there is inevitable contagion unless some kind of sanctifying rite is performed. Funerals make death and decay respectable, just as marriage makes sex and pregnancy respectable. This doesn't mean, however, that these are necessarily happy or felicitous occasions devoutly to be wished by the individuals involved. Fantasies of sadism and a fetish for sexual domination on the part of a brutal husband turn bridal into bridle, for example, and once supplicating girls can become succubae as quick as a wink and nudge. It's clear, then, that clergy are present at weddings and funerals to protect as well as to bless. The lavish ceremonies serve to disguise and distract; the vulnerability of those present as witnesses and those at the center of the ceremony are equally in jeopardy.

Through ceremony, the individual is absorbed into another state: in marriage, the single person becomes not only part of a couple but becomes one of "The Married"; in death, the individual becomes part of what can be regarded as another collective in becoming one of "The Dead."

The Dead, as James Joyce among others have noted, always appear in the plural. So do The Married. They are demarcated, designated, and dispatched, exiled briefly to honeymoons or the grave, and, for those with long-term plans, to various sites in the afterworld. The married and the dead are no longer individuated; they are no longer, one might say, quite themselves.

Is life's meaning and significance revealed at these times or is it finished? Are weddings and funerals ceremonies where one is woken to joy or where the possibility for joy is forever put to rest? Do those entering the new states marked by sex and death entering a realm where their futures are sealed or where the seal is finally broken? Sex and death are sanctuaries from ordinary life: weddings and funerals are occasions for dressing up and writing down. They are escape routes that consecrate or defile the lives lived around the acts themselves. Only during the ceremonies do calm and order reign; the scripted rite is a stand against the disorder and chaos of sex and death—of passion and disorder, of defilement. Weddings and funerals are moments of the irrevocable where individual worthiness is condensed and reduced to an act of the body; never is one so much a body as during sex or death. And both are rituals whereby men and women reap their rewards—or face their punishments.

Neither sex nor death is divorced from how we think about it any more than it is separate from the character is having it. Like money, the acts aren't "owned" by anyone but are instead transactions. Like gold, the uses for and values attached to sex and death change over time and between societies. These values and uses fluctuate and as a result sex (but yes—sometimes death as well) has been regarded as merely a currency for exchange or a way to achieve basic human contact, while at other times it been hoarded and guarded, worshipped as mysterious and sacred.

The rules governing the cultural treatment of sex and death are like the rules governing everything else: they are so carefully designed and implemented they appear, at first, entirely natural (or else divinely ordained). Of course, when we look closely, as the essays in this collection do, we see they are precisely manufactured and maddeningly choreographed. They reaffirm and/or profit an ideology, institution, or way of life. And they need to be maddeningly choreographed precisely because sex and death are states where the principal figures are unfinished, in-between, and lacking clear definition. They bring into focus the culture's anxiety about the possible threat posed by liminal figures: the sexual and the dying are closely intertwined psychologically (and, in the gothic, sometimes quite literally) because they are on the threshold of a completely different life. They become, through ceremony, part of the sacred and the profane simultaneously but only because of the ritual do calm and order reign; the ritual is a stand against the disorder and chaos of sex and death—of passion and disorder, of defilement. They are figures of gravity, those otherwise ordinary people who become the sexual, or the marrying or the dying, and if they are not treated with some respect, they could well become threats to the community as a whole.

Because sex and death act as a repository for human imagination and the focus of unparalleled emotional, intellectual, and spiritual curiosity, every culture has turned to its writers and artists for illumination of these most paradoxically personal and universal experiences. Because sex and death remained invisible—indeed, keeping sex invisible, offstage is what defined "good" in society—it has been left up to critics and writers to shed light on this series of acts often kept in the dark. We are asked to question whether sex is a low form of emotional expression or the highest form of spiritual communication; we are asked to consider whether death is a door opening or one slamming shut. But when adventuring into the textual landscapes mapped out by the essays in *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, no one is turned away empty-handed; recognizing that the world is built on conventionally masculine, paternalistic forms of intelligence, religion, and control, readers also discover individuals trapped in a maze of feminized unmapped landscapes, unofficial and unspoken languages, and preternaturally heightened intuitions.

The intensity of the two experiences and their sui generis nature bring into relief the complexity and intertwining of sex and death: every act of

sex is a new act of sex, even with the same partner; every death is a new death. Longing for it, fear of it, bafflement about it, secrecy surrounding it, and curiosity about what comes after it: both sex and death arouse emotions that must be guarded against and yet acknowledged. No wonder, as Zigarovich writes, we are eager to learn how sex and death “became unnaturally conjoined.” No wonder, too, that this collection is a welcome and significant addition to scholarship on the subject.

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Introduction

Jolene Zigarovich

The eighteenth century proves a unique period in terms of *eros* and *thánatos*. Sermons, handbooks, funeral, and burial practices all demonstrate the increasing preoccupation with mortality and the corpse, and intense anxiety about bodily dissolution and disruption after death. As a growing secular control over death was seen, a concomitant eroticization of death was deployed. Thus the Western concept of love as a source of pleasure as well as lamentation and emotional torture reemerges from earlier eras (such as the medieval) as a cultural paradigm. Modern society—which values an ideology of individualism yet retains strict social constructs—has at its roots Victorian ideals, and it is this particular culture that found repression to be such a powerful source. For the Victorians, sexuality could never be explicit. For them, sexual expression resulted in a loss of spirit or life force. Characteristic of the Enlightenment, though, the Georgians appear to have been remarkably open in terms of sexual indulgence.¹ Naturally, as Rita Goldberg, George E. Haggerty, Kristina Straub, and others have discussed, this is reflected in their literature. Sexually exuberant characters, especially in the case of men (Wycherley's Horner and Fielding's Tom Jones are fine examples), were often rewarded. In the tradition of amatory fiction, Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina; or Love in a Maze* (1725) depicts a heroine who defies the "persecuted maiden" trope and pursues seducing the man she loves by any means possible, displaying feminine power and sexual desire.² Likewise, Haywood's *Melliora*, Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and Cleland's *Fanny Hill* find happiness in the end. These female characters of sexual experience did not necessarily find death. Although there are several early literary examples that include death—rather than marriage—as a climax, for instance Thomas Southerne's tragedy *The Fatal Marriage; or The Innocent Adultery* (1694) and William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* (1697), from the midcentury on there appears to be a pronounced persecution of lost virtue.³ We see the exploitation of the misery of the abandoned sexual victim, and likewise, death for the whore (as vividly illustrated in William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* [1732]). And for women especially, the primacy of passion had to be depicted not only as amoral, but as a patriarchal threat (especially in terms of uncertain paternity).⁴ Many worried

that sexual indulgence could lead to national corruption, or that a personal punishment, in the present or the afterlife, would result. Thus, for the eighteenth-century writer, love and sexuality explicitly conjoin with death. As this collection will demonstrate, love not only inspires reproduction and life, but also self-destruction and death.

Eros and *thanatos* can be traced to the changing religious, social, and artistic milieus of the eighteenth century. Here the structures of power and sexuality emerged in Western culture, as we find in the work of Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), he writes, "The notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate" (155). Foucault's claim here is that the relationship between power and sexuality is misrepresented when sexuality is viewed as an unruly natural force that power simply opposes, represses, or constrains. Rather, the phenomenon of sexuality should be understood as constructed through the exercise of power relations. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a diversity of discourses on sexuality in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, pedagogy, criminal justice, and social work emerged. This occurred as sex became increasingly an object of administration and management through government inquiry (the law constitutes desire and the lack on which it is predicated). He claims that since the rise of the bourgeoisie, any expenditure of energy on purely pleasurable activities is interpreted as nonproductive. According to the "repressive hypothesis," sex has been treated as a private affair within the confines of legally sanctioned sex: marriage. Thereby, sex outside of marriage is repressed and unspeakable, and political liberation can only come through discourse on sexuality. Foucault maintains that, until Freud, the discourse on sex that scholars and theoreticians engaged in never ceased to hide the thing that they were speaking about. By frequently speaking about it, a widespread avoidance meant to evade the unbearable and too hazardous truth of sex. It began to be spoken about from the rarified and neutral viewpoint of science, a science that refused to speak of sex itself but of its "aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations."⁵ To Foucault, the censorship and taboos on the mentioning of sexual topics are secondary, or perhaps even complementary, to the explosion of discourses on sexuality. In this reading, individuals internalize the norms laid down by the sciences of sexuality and monitor themselves in an effort to conform to these norms. Thus, they are controlled not only as *objects* of disciplines but also as self-scrutinizing and self-forming *subjects*. The body and sexuality are therefore cultural constructs, the direct loci of social control. As many of the chapters in this collection demonstrate, Foucault's "deployment of sexuality" can help us understand and explore the relation between social power and the production of the modern sexual body.

In eighteenth-century culture, burgeoning individualism, alongside Lockean liberalism, resulted in a segregation of political and domestic domains. If sexuality was deemed dependent on the family and death slowly found itself governed by the individual, we can see how the two became unnaturally conjoined in a quite different manner than Jacobean or Restoration manifestations. The most important sign of the shifting sensibilities in the period is the emergence of what Philippe Ariès calls a European “cult of the beautiful dead” or what Terry Castle refers to as a “romantic cult of the dead,” a growing subjective fascination with idealized images of the deceased.⁶ Beautification was used to hide the physical signs of mortality and decay and to overcome any sense of separation for loss of individuation. By 1750, an attitude toward death which Ariès calls “the death of the Other” is securely in place, distinguished by a more secularized philosophy of death. “A new sensibility made the death of loved ones more cruel for survivors,” Ariès claims in *The Hour of Our Death* (1982), “and led to an almost fanatical cult of remembrance.” This sentiment “took advantage of the taste for mummies,” for embalming and coffining, and for the “custom of preserving a body in the home.”⁷ Although the influence of Puritanism simplified funeral rites and resisted sensibility, by the middle of the eighteenth century a complete reversal had taken place. English Puritan funerals were characteristically unceremonious and not costly. Out of fear of emotionally responding to death and incorporating rites resembling papism, Puritans limited their mourning ceremony: funeral sermons were not typically read at the time of burial, flowers didn’t adorn the tomb, attendance was often limited to a few family and friends of the same sex as the deceased, and the dead body was not venerated.⁸ Yet the rise of individualism and the cult of the beautiful death resisted this Puritan model. According to David Stannard in *The Puritan Way of Death* (1979), “the emphasis was now placed heavily on the individual who had been so fortunate as to die, with little said about the community’s loss.”⁹ The increased secularization of death thereby produced a new fascination with the body and corpses, spawning scientific research into the mysteries of death.

Whereas Western man was learning what it meant to be a living body, what it meant to master the body, the fear of death diminished. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Foucault argues that an epistemic shift occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, that a rediscovery is made of the late Renaissance conviction that knowledge is possible on the basis of death. “Death as the absolute point of view over life and opening on its truth,” he argues, “is also that against which life, in daily practice, comes up against.”¹⁰ The perception of death-in-life reemerges, and the conjoining of knowledge and eroticism lets death open up to the “infinitely repeated attempts of language.”¹¹ Yet even as the scientific and philosophic emphasis on rationality tried to combat death by exploration and explanation, a new uncertainty about the status of the body and a return to superstition were equally prevalent. In *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), Elisabeth Bronfen notes

that “the eighteenth century marks an increase in necrophilia, in an anxiety about premature burial and a fear of the living or reanimated corpse, the vampire.”¹² Ariès summarizes this phenomenon:

It was in the depths of the unconscious, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that the disturbing changes occurred. It was in the world of the imagination that love and death came together until their appearances merged.¹³

The eroticizing of death is further testimony to the failure of eighteenth-century rationalism to tackle successfully the problem of death and render it truly a thing of indifference.¹⁴ The emerging sex-death dialectic and its opposition to puritanical notions thereby produced countless motifs in art and literature associating love with death, *eros* with *thanatos*.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, sensibility infiltrated funeral practices, sermons, and consolation guidebooks. Publications of “funeral literature,” the popularity of “death-bed reflections,” and best-selling theological works dealing with death all soared by midcentury. Along with the shift of mourning rites from the public to the private sphere, and the increased production of tombstones and memorials, the preaching of preparation sermons testifies to the erosion of older funeral practices as the individuality of the deceased was more often stressed. The publicized sermon became a literary vehicle of resistance to the growing secular attitude toward death and dying. Pastors reacted to this attitude by publishing sermons full of warnings against not preparing for death properly. Most used the fear of hell and the decay of the body as the main weapon against these changing attitudes. As this puritanical mode gradually diminished, though, preachers turned to popular “how to die well” books for inspiration; these texts place significance on the Christian “good death” and avoid instilling graphic fear in the reader. Several sermons incorporate the consoling language of early works such as Charles Drelincourt’s *Christian’s Defence* (1810) and John Kettlewell’s *Death Made Comfortable* (1702). According to Stannard, “It was becoming the norm, the accepted norm, for the godly to die ‘in Raptures of holy Joy’” as the formal doctrines of Puritanism were withering (150). There is a noticeable change in rhetoric in these more consolatory sermons. No longer are the fires of hell and the corrosion of the body referenced; death is portrayed as a marriage and directions are given so that we can enter the eternal world, as minister Daniel Turner phrased it, “with safety.”¹⁵

The funeral also became a pulpit for the preacher: he used the death of another to remind survivors that they must follow particular steps in order to ensure a good death and afterlife. Thus the sermons became guidebooks for dying properly, and imply that without these provisional steps, we are all at risk of living in eternal fire. As we have seen, by midcentury Puritan influence on mourning (in terms of stark ritual) was losing its hold, and the