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*Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England: Illicit Sex
and the Nobility* (review)

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Rickman, Johanna, *Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England: Illicit Sex and the Nobility* (Women and Gender in the Early Modern World), Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008; hardback; pp. 244; 11 b/w illustrations & 5 tables; R.R.P. £55.00; ISBN 9780754661351.

Johanna Rickman's study of illicit sex and the nobility is published as part of Ashgate's *Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* series. Establishing its place within this collection, Rickman weighs into current debate surrounding 'competing notions of gender and alternative gender ideals' (p. 12), with a specific focus on what she terms 'the courtly love ideal' (p. 13). Referencing the work of such scholars as Barbara Harris and Merry Wiesner, Rickman suggests another approach to understanding notions of gender in the Early Modern world.

Specifically, Rickman considers what happened to noblemen and women in Elizabethan and early Stuart England who engaged in extramarital sex, through an investigation of cases of fornication, adultery and bastardy. Rickman suggests the study of these cases of extramarital sex illuminate understandings of sex and gender in this period, whilst also providing 'a better understanding of the *place* of women in early modern aristocratic culture, both as historical subjects (considering personal circumstances) and as a social group (considering social position and status)' (p. 2). Rickman argues that there were two different gender ideals operating simultaneously in this period; one a largely religious ideal, promoting silence, chastity and obedience, and another, here termed 'the courtly love ideal', exhorting wit, beauty and bravery – a more secular ideal (p. 13).

In early modern England, sexual sins were technically under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts, but the nobility did not usually appear before these courts. Legal sources are, therefore, supplemented here by family papers (mainly letters). The collections of the Sidney, Cecil, Bacon, Dudley, Devereux, and Talbot families are engaged extensively. Rickman also draws upon state papers, both domestic and foreign, and contemporary literature. From these records, Rickman 'seeks to explain the circumstances – including gender expectations, social privilege and personal situations – that either allowed for a limited acceptance or prompted condemnation of illicit relationships among the nobility' (p. 2).

Chapter 1 considers illicit sex at the court of Elizabeth I, while Chapter 2 examines illicit sex at the court of James I. Rickman considers these topics

within the context of the gender and marital status of the reigning monarch, concluding that 'illicit sex was very risky during Elizabeth's reign, since the queen punished offenders severely, while it usually went unpunished during James' reign' (p. 4). Of course, marital status, political roles at court, family and social connections, monetary considerations, even public standing and public opinion, all contributed to the punishment, and these factors are also considered. Women too, were usually subject to greater social humiliation than men if they were involved in illicit sex. Rickman also discusses differing attitudes towards illicit sex throughout the period: to some it was a serious sin, to others, a minor indiscretion. Reactions to illicit sex during this period were, therefore, shaped by a multitude of factors.

The final three chapters are highly readable accounts of specific examples of illicit sex amongst the nobility. 'Conscience and Contention: Penelope Rich and Charles Blount' analyses a relationship encompassing affair, divorce and remarriage, demonstrating the protection offered by a strong social network, along with popular moral reactions when this relationship became public. 'Love and Letters: Mary Wroth and William Herbert' considers Mary Wroth's defiance of perceived gender roles through both adultery and literary publications on love. 'Preserving Honour: Frances Villiers and Robert Howard' offers a detailed exploration of the idea of female honour, crucial to understandings of competing notions of gender.

Rickman finds a variety of outcomes for nobles who engaged in illicit sex, and presents explanations for the circumstances surrounding these outcomes. Her examples are well chosen, and recounted in a manner which displays considerable narrative skill. Each chapter is absorbing in its own right. Overall, they work together to present a thorough consideration of the topic. Rickman makes a solid argument in regard to two different gender ideals operating simultaneously at this time. This study reinforces the complexity of notions of gender, along with the need for further research into this area.

An appendix presents the simplified genealogies of the five noble families who feature most heavily in the study. These genealogies highlight Rickman's observation that some families were more likely than others to engage in illicit sex. On this, Rickman refers to Peter Laslett's theory of a 'bastardy-prone sub-society' (p. 204), noting the possibility of further research into this area. This is an interesting sub-theme of the book.

A minor irritation was the shift from the use of 'I' in the introduction (p. 1) to 'we' (p. 77), as Rickman's choice of personal pronoun. The use of

terms such as 'drunken love fests' (p. 71), 'pushed the envelope' (p. 174) and 'in hot water' (p. 178) were also distracting from an otherwise well-written work. The footnotes are thorough.

This book gives the impression that it seeks an audience beyond the academic realm, and there is no reason to suppose it would not achieve this. This is not, however, to detract from its academic merit. I would recommend this book to students or specialists pursuing research in Early Modern history, particularly within the specialities of gender, sexuality, and life at court, along with those interested in the specific case studies simply for their own sake.

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Simpson, James, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, hardback; pp. xii; 346; 3 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. US\$27.95; ISBN 9780674026711.

James Simpson's study of English evangelical reading habits between 1520 and 1547 is a polemical work that is bound to divide readers. It is, in effect, a refutation of a particular historical narrative that paints the Reformation as a decisive step in the West's evolution from medieval superstition to modern liberalism, in which the act of private reading (not having the text mediated by an institution) is celebrated as pivotal.

In the first chapter, Simpson sketches the scholarly stand-off existing between those advocating this position (e.g. David Daniell) and those English Reformation revisionists who raise doubts about the loss of Catholic forms of piety and bonds of community (e.g. Eamon Duffy). He then examines the process of translating the Bible into English and the heroic status accorded to William Tyndale and other Protestant martyrs who died in the fight to make the Bible available to the common reader. Simpson introduces Thomas More's arguments against Tyndale and reconsiders the way in which 'More and the bishops seem so behind the times, whether intelligently or not ... because the vernacular Bible was so unstopably popular' (p. 56).

In Chapter 3, 'Salvation, Reading, and Textual Hatred', Simpson shows his hand; evangelical reading, he argues, gave rise to four paradoxes which made it a negative, rather than a positive, experience. These are summarized