

Leah DeVun. *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance.* New York: Columbia University Press; 2021. 315 p. ISBN 978-02-3119-551-5. 33 €

Leah DeVun's *The Shape of Sex* presents a historical account of nonbinary sex starting from late Antiquity to the Renaissance (200-1400 CE). In the book, DeVun explores ideas about nonbinary sex in premodern Europe, demonstrating how these complex ideas informed the contemporary understanding of what it meant (and means) to be human. DeVun shows that medieval writers, theologians, natural philosophers and legal theorists used nonbinary sex to "think with," and demonstrates how concepts of nonbinary sex were crucial in shaping the fundamental categories that organised their world.

The book's first chapter is a careful examination of the biblical Genesis stories and their impact on Late Antiquity Christian thinkers' perceptions of a dually sexed, prelapsarian Adam. In the beginning of the third century, a group of Christian theologians embraced nonbinary sex as an ideal, promoting the idea of Adam and Eve as a "primal androgyne". From here, DeVun initiates their comprehensive analysis of the philosophical use and ascribed meanings of nonbinary sex over centuries and diverse cultural landscapes. The book progresses in a chronological manner, and traces the development of societal perspectives on nonbinary bodies over time, from an initial embrace of the idea in early Christianity to its rejection at the turn of the thirteenth century, eventually culminating in a renewed enthusiasm at the dawn of the Renaissance.

DeVun provides countless vivid portrayals of nonbinary figures in the medieval imagination. Of particular interest to me, they explore how the demonisation of nonbinary sex was used to fixate categories of otherness. Chapter two delves into medieval tales and representations of imaginary "monstrous races," meaning ambiguously sexed peoples in faraway lands, depicted in mappae mundis and travelogues. DeVun shows how these figures played a crucial role in cementing European norms for civilised culture, and defining what could be considered "human". The imagined physical and behavioural differences of the "hermaphroditic races" were used to draw lines across religious, species, spatial, and racial categories, especially related to Christian crusaders' loss of Jerusalem to the Arabs in 1291. DeVun emphasises the impact of religious doctrines in relation to defining the "ideal" human which, more often than not, aligned with the white European Christian. According to DeVun, these discourses not only fuelled anti-Islamic attitudes but also inflicted tangible harm upon Muslim communities.

In chapter three, the author takes a closer look at the Aberdeen Bestiary from the twelfth century. Bestiaries were medieval encyclopaedias of animals, but also contained mythic creatures, fables and moralising tales accompanying the animals. DeVun explores how the Aberdeen Bestiary (c. 1200) portrays the hyena as a nonbinary beast that was considered “unclean” due to its dual nature. The dual-sexed hyena existed within a context that associated Jews with the disruption of established categories and perceived them as potential threats to the Christian population. As Jews had been connected to the hyena, the imagery of the nonbinary animal was used to denigrate Jews, enforcing antisemitic sentiments of the time, here amongst “violent massacres of Jews in England, as well as the expulsion of Jewish communities from the region in 1290” (p. 12).

In chapter four and five, DeVun examines natural philosophy, legal theory, and medical interventions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, employing an array of different sources. Unlike previous medical models which regarded “hermaphroditism” as a less common yet still natural sex, natural philosophers and legal theorists now began to assert a binary understanding of human sex. They argued that nonbinary sex was a natural trait in lower organisms like plants and “imperfect” animals, but impossible in humans. Medical interventions grappled with defining and ‘correcting’ atypical sex anatomies, contributing to (binary) regulation of bodies. This part of DeVun’s analysis offers interesting genealogical perspectives on today’s surgical and hormonal practices within transgender care.

The final chapter highlights the optimism about metamorphosis and nonbinary sex during the first centuries of the Renaissance. DeVun delves into the period’s fascination with alchemy and demonstrates the significance of the emerging figure, the “Jesus hermaphrodite”. Alchemy’s interest in hermaphroditism during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reflected a renewed acceptance of nonbinary sex similar to the early “primal androgyne”, emphasising the perfect dual nature of Christ —both human and divine. DeVun suggests that nonbinary sex in this period was considered capable of bringing opposites together and became a powerful symbol for both physical and spiritual change.

DeVun draws on critical animal studies, multispecies theory and posthuman studies, situating their work within recent feminist scholarship which questions the notion of a singular, unified “humanity” distinct from other species, and even entities. Overall, DeVun employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, incorporating perspectives from contemporary feminism, queer theory and critical race theory. DeVun has successfully and meticulously weaved their theoretical

framework together, offering nuanced perspectives on racialisation, speciesism as well as contemporary and medieval homo- and transphobia.

Throughout the book, DeVun makes use of metatextual cues, guiding the reader through the rather complex research, and also employs a significant amount of (self)reflexivity, actively engaging the reader in their research process and the objectives they aim to achieve. The book is full of fascinating illustrations in both black-and-white and colour, adding layers to the multifaceted analysis. DeVun's writing style is captivating, and absolutely readable, rendering this academic work available to a broad audience. That is in no way to say that the research is simple; on the contrary, DeVun analyses such a wide variety of primary and secondary sources that the notes, bibliography, and index take up a full one hundred pages.

The Shape of Sex presents a comprehensive and impressive historical analysis, revealing profound historical meanings of nonbinary sex through the Middle Ages. The book deeply resonates with contemporary discussions on gender and sex, standing out as a testament to the importance of understanding the diverse history of nonbinary sex to better understand our contemporary conceptions. In my opinion, DeVun unequivocally succeeds in their pursuit to illustrate the origins of conventional notions of binary sex, hereby challenging the naturalised and ahistorical acceptance with which many people think of it today.

Sarah Emilie Lillie Bergen

University of Granada

ORCID: 0009-0007-4168-0590

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En las últimas décadas hemos visto cómo la historia ha sido escrita, desde su nivel más elemental, por una generación de historiadores que ha hecho posible una renovación teórico-metodológica de la disciplina, que parece haberse alineado con lo que realmente demuestra ser: orgánica, viva y en constante movimiento. Los ejes se reconfiguraron, las escalas se redefinieron y, en la inmensidad del horizonte surgido de las fronteras difuminadas, hemos venido contemplando