

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex* by Robert Deam Tobin

Review by: Cyd Sturgess

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Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex. By ROBERT DEAM TOBIN. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2015. xix+306 pp. \$69.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4742-8.

Urnings. Homosexuals. Inverts. The early attempts of sexologists to catalogue the curiosities of human sexual experience during the nineteenth century resulted in frameworks of desire that have fundamentally shaped our contemporary understanding of sex and sexuality. Robert Deam Tobin's latest contribution to the field of (homo)sexual history is an engaging and original attempt to capture what was 'new and distinctive' (p. xiv) about these discourses in German-speaking central Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Charting the development of a scientific and literary lexicon of desire, Tobin's ambitious study is set against a gamut of conflicting cultural, philosophical, and national ideologies, with a primary focus on medico-emancipatory and literary discourses.

Building on the widely accepted assertion that the emergence of modern sexual identities is a corollary of scientific developments in German-speaking countries, Tobin examines the extent to which negotiations of national, racial, and ethnic identities influenced sexual discourses at the *fin de siècle*. While the connection Tobin makes between German cultural and scientific production and modern conceptions of sexuality is not new—indeed, this much is granted in the author's eloquent introduction—his suggestion that sexual identities emerged as the product of an intricate interplay between debates on nationalism and ethnicity after the establishment of the German Empire certainly is an innovative point of departure. Throughout his analysis, Tobin decentres the metropolis as the primary site of sexual modernity and focuses on the cultural and geographical peripheries of contemporary sexual debates. Not only are Hungary, Samoa, Italy, and Palestine presented as the settings for his study on the 'German' discovery of sex, but Tobin's focus on authors and emancipationists at the fringe, such as Elisar von Kupfer and Karl Maria Kertbeny, provides a refreshing insight into constructions of nineteenth-century sexual identities.

At the heart of Tobin's treatise are two competing discourses of desire. The first, presented through the works of Heinrich Hössli, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and Otto Weininger, is distinguished as the 'minoritizing view' of male–male desire. As nineteenth-century medical-emancipationists attempted to harness some of the emancipatory zeal of bourgeois liberals, Tobin argues that they categorized homosexuality as an innate, immutable attraction to the same sex that could be limited to 'a distinct and identifiable group' (p. 123), which ultimately made homosexuality, as a minority position, 'analogous to race, and specifically comparable to Jewishness as a racial identity' (p. 162). In direct opposition to this 'identitarian' framework of desire, Tobin locates the ideals of the 'antibourgeois, antiliberal, anti-feminist, antimicrobial' (p. 79) masculinists in the writings of Adolf Brand, John Henry Mackay, and Benedict Friedlaender, whose appropriation of the broader, more diffuse models of Greek *erōs* enabled them to present homosexual desire as a 'universal' tendency that was flavoured by the fantasy of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*.

While the opening chapters of Tobin's study are dedicated to a careful introduction of these two frameworks, which guides the reader adroitly through the shifting statuses of classical culture and race within wider debates on sexuality, it is the latter half of *Peripheral Desires* that is the most ambitious. Dedicated to the ways in which the identified frameworks can be seen to intersect with nationalist, colonialist, and emancipatory discourses, Tobin's discussions of the works of Karl May, Stefan Zweig, and Ernst von Wolzogen are steeped in an impressive range of anthropological, sociohistorical, and visual material. Examining the colonialist effort in Samoa in Chapter 5, for example, Tobin draws on photographic evidence and excerpts from Augustin Krämer's research in order to show how 'beautiful' and 'pure' Samoan men were objectified, feminized, and ultimately sexualized by the anthropologists and authors writing about them. Tobin is at his best, however, in his analysis of the nuances of narrative and authorial voice in Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912). His expert reading of the novella reveals how Mann's use of 'erotic irony' is able to transcend 'the split between the antiliberal, anti-medical, masculinist perspective and the liberal, sexological, emancipationist belief in sexual identity' (p. 185) and provide a synthesis of these two polar positions as an alternative framework of desire.

I found Tobin's discussion of how the 'Greco-Roman' and 'minoritizing' models of desire can be identified in literary representations of the women's emancipation movement less convincing. For example, it remains unclear throughout the author's chapter on Ernst von Wolzogen's *Das dritte Geschlecht* (1899) why frameworks of male-male desire are being mapped onto literary depictions of *female* experience, when philosophical and cultural constructions of female (homo)sexuality could, and perhaps should, have been discussed in and of their own right. This is particularly frustrating, as Tobin observes in his introduction that 'there is much more to be done on lesbian history' (p. xii) and yet, after deploying frameworks of male-male desire in his analysis, he must come ultimately to the rather disappointing conclusion that it 'remains unclear whether Wolzogen intended his novel to map the varying conceptualizations of same-sex desire current in *fin-de-siècle* Germany' and that there is little other evidence to suggest that Wolzogen was 'at all interested in overt expressions of male-male desire' (p. 184). Furthermore, in what is otherwise an illuminating chapter on the dichotomy of Jewish identities and classical Greek models of *erōs* in Stefan Zweig's *De Vriendt kehrt heim* (1932), Tobin's introduction to the inspiration for Zweig's novella is unfortunately marred by a few distracting errors, such as the title of Jacob Israël de Haan's novel *Pijpelijntjes* (1904), for example, and the name of the protagonist in de Haan's later novel *Pathologieën* (1908), Johan van Vere de With.

These observations, however, do not detract from what is overall an impressive and erudite contribution to the history of male homosexuality that sits deservedly alongside the recent publications of Robert Beachy and Ralph M. Leck. Tobin's innovative shift of the primary locus of sexual discourse from the centre to the margins means that his contribution will certainly not reside at the periphery of the current debate on homosexual histories, and his accessible style makes this study

suiting both to students of the history of sexuality and to those well established in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

CYD STURGESS

'*Habe das Theater immer geliebt — wie fast alle geistigen deutschen*': Klaus Mann und das Theater. Ed. by CLAUDE D. CONTER and BIRGIT SCHUHBECK. (Forum für deutschsprachiges Drama und Theater in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 3) Hannover: Wehrhahn. 2015. xiv+269 pp. €19.80. ISBN 978-3-86525-320-0.

The exile writer Klaus Mann is almost exclusively remembered as the author of prose works. In particular his controversial novel *Mephisto* (1936) has often been at the centre of public attention and is usually regarded as the text for which he is best known. If one looks at Mann's life and oeuvre as a whole, however, it is certainly no coincidence that *Mephisto* is set in theatres and among actors. After all, the beginnings of the young writer's public life in the mid-1920s were in large part coined by the scandals caused by his plays *Anja und Esther* and *Revue zu Vieren*. In both he appeared on stage alongside his sister Erika, Pamela Wedekind, and Gustaf Gründgens (the model for the protagonist in *Mephisto*). He was also well known as an avid commentator on the theatre scene in the Weimar Republic, for a short while even as the official critic for the Berlin newspaper *12 Uhr Blatt*. Yet today most of Mann's seven plays are neglected by researchers, theatres, and the general public. The same is true of his sketches for Erika Mann's cabaret *Die Pfeffermühle* and also of the story Mann drafted for Roberto Rossellini's film *Roma, città aperta*, which was cut out of the final version of the film.

Klaus Mann und das Theater, which presents detailed analyses of all of Mann's plays, his sketches, and the film draft, thus fills a hitherto unexplored gap in the public perception of the author. Indeed, Schuhbeck's chapter on the public criticism of Mann's plays in the 1920s explores the change of focus in the public reception of Mann as a playwright to the dominant contemporary view of him as the author of novels and political essays.

The volume's contributions consist of background information, the history of the texts' origins, and their reception; they also include information about content and attempts at interpretation. Especially when read together, the various chapters give a fascinating overview of and deep insight into Mann's theatrical oeuvre. Analyses such as Schuhbeck's account of *Revue zu Vieren* or Conter's close examination of *Gegenüber von China* in particular show how Mann used the dense, constrained form of a play to accumulate and condense his social, erotic, and later also political ideas, and to present them to a wider public. These contributions offer a new angle on the reception of the author and help to further understand Mann's intellectual background.

What remains unanswered—but is a topic the volume's contributions pave the way for—is the question whether Mann's plays can offer anything to the modern theatre. While some of his plays are very occasionally staged, and while the reception of *Mephisto* was heavily influenced by Ariane Mnouchkine's 1979 theatre