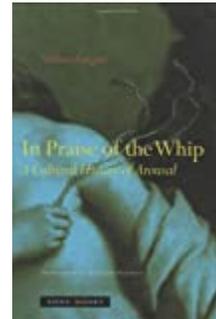




Niklaus Largier. *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal.* Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007. 526 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-890951-65-8.



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Published on H-Histsex (October, 2007)

In Praise of the Whip

Niklaus Largier's *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal* is a substantial and compelling history of voluntary flagellation in Europe. What makes Largier's study particularly refreshing is that he reads a variety of flagellation practices, from the purportedly religious to the unabashedly sexual, as part of the same continuum. This allows him—and the reader—to investigate the meaning(s) of flagellation itself, rather than flagellation as simply a symptom of pathology or sexual non-conformity.

While vast in scope—Largier analyzes everything from medieval texts to James Joyce—*In Praise of the Whip* does not lack detailed textual analyses. Largier accomplishes this balance of breadth and depth by taking what is essentially a case-study approach. Most chapters focus on a particular text, ranging from medieval defenses of flagellation as a Christian practice, written by religious leaders, to the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Algeron Charles Swinburne and Marcel Proust. Sometimes he selects a critical-theoretical text, such as Ian Gibson's seminal study, *The English Vice: Beating, Sex, and Shame in Victorian England and After* (1978).

Largier focuses not only on flagellation itself, but, more precisely, on flagellation as a practice that is always theatrical and ritualistic. This perspective aligns him with Lynda Hart, whose *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadoomasochism* (1998) uses theater studies as a method and vehicle for exploring (and defending) sado-masochism as a sexual practice. Largier uses the theatricality of flagellation in a somewhat different way, using it as the basis for his argument that the action of flogging “does not aim at any sort of meaning, but rather at what might be said, yet cannot be said” (p. 15). Furthermore, the “ritual gesture and pictorial drama [of flagellation] deploy a physicality or emphatic sense of performance that undermines both words and the order of representation more generally” (p. 15). Nonetheless, flagellation literature (of which Largier discusses a plethora of examples) attempts to describe this practice, while always also showing that it can't really be narrated. Flagellation narratives, Largier argues, tend to be imitative, but of fantasy, rather than of reality, and they represent the possibility of an experience that cannot necessarily be actualized. Voluntary flagellation, then, is not always about sexuality, nor is it ever exclusively sexual; rather,

“voluntary flagellation and the text that cover it are concerned not so much with asexuality (as all the sexual psychopathologists hold), but with the arousal of emotion and imagination” (p. 30). This approach makes sense of Largier’s decision to examine religious and erotic flagellation in a single study, as both are essentially:

“rituals that aim to unfetter desire, imagination, and the passions. In both the erotic and religious realms, what is at stake is an ecstatic experience through which imagination—whether through the experience of God or the drunkenness of the senses—attains absolute freedom

and transcends the finitude of the real (p. 30).”

Likewise, Largier helps to unfetter flagellation from its status as an emblem of either sexual deviance or religious fanaticism. *In Praise of the Whip* shows the relationship of flagellation to both imagination and language, and should be of interest to a wide academic audience, including those interested in religious, literary, and historical studies, as well as to those working on either the history of sexuality or theorists of current sexual subcultures. Highly recommended.

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Citation: Robin Chamberlain. Review of Largier, Niklaus, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

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