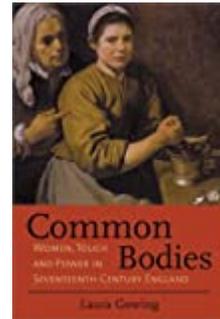
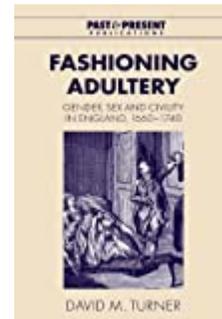


**Laura Gowing.** *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. x + 260 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10096-9.



**David M. Turner.** *Fashioning Adultery: Gender, Sex and Civility in England, 1660-1740.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xii + 236 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-79244-8.



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## **Touch (Real and Imagined) in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England**

In their very different ways, both of these books are about touch. Laura Gowing's excellent study of power relationships between primarily working women in seventeenth-century England uses the roles and meanings of touch, the touch of other women, and occasionally of men, to explain how patriarchal structures were enforced on women, and policed by women. David Turner's equally compelling volume on adultery is also about touch—the touch of illicit lovers. Both seek to understand the meanings invested in the very physical act of laying hands on another, but they strive to do so in very

different ways. Whereas Gowing is concerned to analyze the specifics of a physical touch, to work outwards from recorded gestures to systems of power and imagination, Turner starts with published accounts of adultery and published condemnations of irregular sex, seeking to work from “representations” of illicit sex, towards their broader understanding. Together they exemplify two excellent models of modern scholarship. At the same time, they also draw our attention to a growing chasm of divergent practice at the center of early-modern western historiography.

*Common Bodies* is largely based on court records, on the records of Bridewell and the church courts. In this book, and in her previous volume, *Domestic Dangers*, Gowing has helped to pioneer a new way of reading court records across the grain and of using their very structure to illuminate the actions described. For Gowing a description of a midwife feeling the breast of a pregnant woman for signs of engorgement and the production of milk is both evidence of real and knowable behavior and a reflection of a complex power relationship practiced between women. The world that emerges from this analysis is one in which prods and pokes were an everyday matter—in which single women in particular, and poor single women more than any others, were subject to continual oversight and investigation.

The physicality of this regulatory touch, however, forms only the starting point for Gowing's analysis. On the basis of these very real gestures, Gowing builds a complex framework of power and authority. In this analysis, seventeenth-century England was a world in which women were often in conflict with other women, and in which they frequently had authority over their sisters. It was a world in which gender combined with age and social position, reputation and physical presence, to determine what each individual could do, and to whom. Far from the world of sisterhood and mutual support that forms such a strong sub-theme of much older women's history of this period, Gowing depicts conflict and anxiety in which young, single women, are at the bottom of the heap, and older married women frequently strove to keep them there.

Gowing finds the justification for this power structure, and struggle, in the contemporary understanding of women's bodies. For seventeenth-century commentators, women's bodies were unfinished, open and in need of external control; while men's bodies were seen as complete and closed. The very form of female genitals and breasts (open and leaky) was used to re-enforce this image, and to enforce the need for constant surveillance and oversight. Whereas men could be left to regulate themselves, women needed to be regulated by others.

This openness, and the need to regulate it, both gave power to older women, and placed all women in a patriarchal catch-22. Matrons and midwives became the enforcers of this society. Empanelled as officers of the court, they were given the job of physically assaulting young women to determine if they were pregnant or sexually active. Charged with saving the parish the expense and trouble of looking after "light" women and their bas-

tard children, Gowing depicts the married women of this society as willing cogs in a machine of social oversight.

Even where pregnancy and birth were experienced within the more secure bounds of a legitimate marriage, Gowing sees the hand of the midwife and the authority of the gossips as often more intrusive than sisterly. Parenthood is uncertain (for both men and women), and the whole process, from conception to household formation, needed to be observed and regulated. As a result, and in contrast to the image of a mutually supportive network of neighbors and friends so often celebrated by the literature of this period, Gowing finds the birthing room and a broader female culture riven by conflict.

Perhaps the clearest example of the contradictions which so often generated anxiety and antagonism in seventeenth-century women's lives is the issue of consent and sexual desire. In a wonderful chapter on this theme, Gowing uses the language of the court to unpack the emotional strategies of victims of rape and assault. And suggests that the very nature of contemporary beliefs about female sexuality (that it was both hugely powerful and out of control), contrived to reinforce (even in women) a profoundly misogynist set of expectations, that in turn forced women to present themselves as sexually passive. By analyzing the rhetorical strategies of women who described sexual assaults in terms of clothing and furniture, she comes closer than any historian I am aware of, to a plausible account of the internal lives of seventeenth-century working women.

For a modern audience, the world of touch described by Gowing is difficult to comprehend. Perhaps only expectant mothers and recent parents will readily recognize the right of others to pinch and poke. But, in the process of exposing this visceral world of touch, Gowing has fundamentally rewritten much of women's history; and as importantly, created a methodology that ties the material world of the body in to a broader meta-narrative of the history of gender and sexuality.

David Turner's book takes a very different approach. Whereas Gowing starts with the outstretched hand and insinuating finger, Turner begins his analysis with advice literature and the bitter words of late-seventeenth-century clerics. Detailing the development of attitudes towards adultery, in a period that overlaps but then extends beyond that covered by Gowing, *Fashioning Adultery* has taken the hard-won lessons of literary history to heart and has used textual deconstruction and the practices of the linguistic turn to chart the "representation," rather than the feel, of the adulterer's touch.

Sermons and plays, diaries and advice literature, published accounts of criminal conversation, and newspaper reports, are all used to depict a gradual transition in the language of illicit sex. Turner starts with Restoration advice literature, and surveys a body of work in which adultery is seen as a sin rooted in community and religion. In this section, Jeremy Taylor and the late-seventeenth-century reformation of manners campaigns are unpacked, and their moral underpinnings analyzed. In a particularly impressive use of a familiar source, Turner also explores Samuel Pepys's peculiar use of language when describing his many adulterous relationships and adds a welcome new twist to the growing historical literature on the rhetoric of "whoredom."

From this starting point in seventeenth-century religious rhetoric, Turner then charts the evolution of a new civility, mapping this, in turn, on to a history of the "privatisation" of sex and adultery. Theater and the newly public texts of Grubstreet are used to provide evidence for a set of changing attitudes, and the suggestion that adultery moved from being a crime against the social order (and against the property rights of a husband) to being a sexual crime against marriage (and essentially a private matter). Turner locates this transition in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution (although he also uses Restoration play texts as evidence for it).

Perhaps the most innovative chapter in Turner's book is on the "Cultures of Cuckoldry." Here, he makes the observation that cuckolds were "funny" in the seventeenth-century, and essentially tragic in the eighteenth. The chapter convincingly argues that the humor of cuckoldry was based in the self-delusion of the cuckold—in the clear water that existed between a fully formed seventeenth-century masculine identity, dependent on the ability to control a wife, and the blindness of the cuckolded husband. By the mid-eighteenth century, Turner argues, cuckolds had become tragic victims of other people's duplicity, and that they had largely lost their humor as a result.

The second half of the book is taken up with church court cases involving adultery, and with the published accounts of trials for Criminal Conversation. But whereas Gowing uses criminal records as a point of access to real behavior, Turner is more concerned with the construction of the texts. It is the public face of adultery and how it could be read in the coffee house and at the tea table, that are most central to Turner's analysis. In the end, Turner maps adultery onto the landscape of politeness and civility. He adds an analysis of illicit sex to

the large body of literature about the eighteenth century that has argued for the creation of a newly private sphere and, by extension, newly public politics. His arguments are not simple, and he shies away from concluding that actual behavior shifted in response to the changing representations of adultery. Instead, Turner seems to suggest that the privatization of adultery was much more a literary than a sexual phenomenon and that, in any case, sex was (and is) too complex a series of negotiations and relationships to be encompassed within the neo-liberal theories of rhetorical creationism that have come to dominate eighteenth-century studies.

Between them, the two volumes reviewed here represent distinct strands in the current historiography. Both contain powerful and sophisticated arguments; but as history they seem to perform very different functions. In Laura Gowing's book we can see the influence of Natalie Zemon Davis and Lyndal Roper, of Keith Wrightson and Keith Thomas. She is writing a history of power and social relations embedded in the practice of everyday life. Her literary style, if nothing else, continually asks the reader to believe in the experiences she is describing. And if we believe her, if we believe that we can know what a seventeenth-century working woman felt about the intrusive fingers of her mistress, then we have the opportunity to produce (at some point in the future) a new model of the development of Western culture, in which the lived experiences of non-elite people forms a strategic component. For many people, however, the difficulty will be to accept the relationship between text and reality quietly assumed in Gowing's work. For a generation, we have been schooled to unpack texts of all kinds, to distrust authorship and meaning. The ambition to reconnect moldering texts to the pains and pleasures of a lived human experience is a wonderful goal, which I believe Gowing has achieved in full measure, but it is certain that many historians of a more literary bent, will remain unconvinced.

I suspect that one of those doubters will be David Turner. Despite being influenced by many of the same people as Gowing, and sharing many of the same intellectual assumptions and aspirations, Turner's work seems more taken up with the questions posed by Jurgen Habermas, John Brewer, Dror Wahrman, and Kathleen Wilson. Where Gowing is interested in how individuals behave, Turner is more concerned by the limits imposed on behavior by the languages and rhetorics available to any given society. His analyses are insightful and compelling, but they reflect most strongly on the intellectual contexts in which people act, rather than on their experience

of, or agency in, historical change. As historians, these books challenge us to ask whether we actually believe in a knowable past; whether it is better to accept the artificiality of the complex models we construct from the literary texts that form the single most compelling artifact of the past; or whether we suspend our niggling disbelief

long enough to empathize with people long dead?

For myself, works such as Gowing's *Common Bodies* and, in a different way, Turner's *Fashioning Adultery* has convinced me that the linguistic worm has turned, and that it is time for the profession to take stock of what it can know, rather than concentrating on what it cannot.

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