

[Cock on Matthews-Grieco and ed., 'Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe \(15th-17th century\)'](#)

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Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, ed. *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)*. Visual Culture in Early Modernity Series. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. Illustrations. 326 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4724-1439-7.

Reviewed by Emily Cock (Swansea University) **Published on** H-Histsex (November, 2016)
Commissioned by Katherine Harvey (Birkbeck, University of London)

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This interdisciplinary collection of relatively brief essays proposes to redress what the editor asserts has been an imbalance of scholarly focus on female adultery at the expense of cuckoldry. The collection is weighted toward Renaissance Italian case studies (seven essays), but also features chapters on England, Switzerland, and France, and authors engage with secondary and primary sources from wider early modern Europe. The book works well as a whole with overlapping themes and sometimes individual characters across chapters, though it would perhaps have benefited from a slightly longer introduction to situate the study in the booming field of sexual histories, and especially the turn toward masculinity studies and male sexualities.[1] Chapters also refer to each other directly where relevant, which suggests good editorial direction and increases the sense of coherence across the volume.

The book is divided into three sections: “Defamed Buildings and Shamed Bodies,” “Impotence, Magic and Medicine,” and “Horns and Visual Innuendo.” In part 1, Molly Bourne’s and Jacqueline Marie Musacchio’s essays follow the adulteries and political sexual arrangements of overlapping elite families in Italy. Each chapter offers an illuminating study of the roles of female chastity and both parties’ ability to produce legitimate heirs in a patrilineal society, especially within marriages that were also important political alliances. Musacchio examines the house-shaming rituals enacted against Bianca Cappello, wife of Piero Buonaventuri, among other popular responses to her affair with Francesco I de’ Medici. Musacchio traces the position of such attacks on houses and their affiliation with other ritualized assaults on sexualized transgressors. An interesting point here is the balance required by the “wittol”/“contented cuckold,” whose honor was at stake but who might also serve to reap benefits from his wife’s sexual and political connections, as Piero did from Francesco. Another point, which is repeated throughout the book, is that the cuckolded husband was generally assumed to be at some level impotent, and several chapters discuss at length the different types, causes, and ramifications of impotence in the period. Bianca Cappello, now married to Francesco, also makes an appearance in Bourne’s chapter as the prospective mother-in-law of Vincenzo Gonzaga. This is a fascinating case study for the importance of male virility and honor in elite marriages, and also treats the ambiguities and effects of male and female impotence. The final essay in this section, by M. A. Katritzky, considers the social shaming ritual of the skimmington ride and its representation in the second part of Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* (1664), which was to steer popular understandings of the ritual from thereon. She highlights that although skimmingtons were primarily

used to shame sexual transgression (especially cuckolds or bawds), they were also employed for other antisocial behaviors, thus complicating their meaning. Katritzky draws particularly on the ritual's political role within *Hudibras*, and its contribution to "Butler's favored themes of individual and collective social responsibility" (p. 74).

Part 2 features essays on impotence from Metteo Duni, Laura Gianetti, and Meredith K. Ray. Like Bourne and Musacchio, Duni examines the effects of alleged impotence on an elite Italian marriage: in this case, Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, and Isabella of Aragon, in 1489. The duke's impotence was suspected to be caused by magic, and Duni examines the debate around this case and magical impotence more broadly. Gianetti's essay takes a more medical view of impotence, and offers an interesting comparison of impotence and its treatments in medical texts and on the comedic stage. She focuses on the *satirión*, an aphrodisiacal potion made from a special *Satyrion* orchid and sold by European apothecaries. She finds that in spite of the widespread inclusion of aphrodisiacal ingredients and concoctions in recipe books, the jokes about such matters in comedies suggest that their efficacy was by no means considered axiomatic. Moreover, these comedies featuring old men attempting to woo young women using such potions, who are nevertheless thwarted by younger rivals, fulfill a fantasy victory for younger men over the powerful patriarchs.

The final essay in this section, by Ray, examines how physiological aspects of sexual function are described within a selection of early modern Italian books of secrets. Particularly of note is Ray's focus on a manuscript thought to have been compiled by a woman, Caterina Sforza (1463-1509). She highlights how alchemical principles of transformation and simulation are drawn on in the books' medical recipes, and how these are utilized in regard to sexual matters, such as determining and falsifying female virginity and male virility. Ray makes the interesting argument that the coding of some recipes in an easily broken cipher "suggests less a desire to restrict the flow of information than an effort to highlight the unique and precious nature of the recipe" (p. 131).

The authors in part 3 turn to visual sources, many of which are included in high-resolution color plates (and several then, somewhat oddly, repeated in black and white). This section also offers the widest geographical scope, with the authors drawing on materials from across western Europe. Francesca Alberti opens with a discussion of the period's most prominent "divine cuckolds": Joseph and Vulcan. She offers an intriguing discussion of the ambivalent depictions of Joseph, who had to be simultaneously strong enough to fulfill his role as Mary's protector and sufficiently impotent-looking "not to sow any doubt concerning the miraculous nature of the conception of Jesus" (p. 159). She then turns to depictions of Vulcan, cuckolded by Venus with Mars, and considers how depictions within the two traditions may have influenced each other. Christiane Andersson examines Swiss art from the second decade of the sixteenth century for its engagement with the fragility of male sexual and military honor, and their vulnerability in these fields. She draws on wonderful images of soldiers (in particular those by Niklaus Manuel Deutsch and Urs Graf), with a productive balance of published and more informally drafted images. This chapter is also interesting for its discussion of sexual honor among the lower-ranking mercenary soldiers, after the aristocratic focus of the Italian chapters. Louise Rice then provides a detailed discussion of the imagery in Baccio del Bianco's series of comic drawings, *mondo dei cornuti*, especially in light of their echoes of Giovanni Battista Modio's satirical dialogue on cuckoldry, *Il Convito* (1554). She reads the series as a carnivalesque satire on sexual mores, designed to amuse the Florentine gentry. The editor, Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, closes the book with a discussion of mass-produced images of cuckoldry in mid-seventeenth-century France and

their relationship to broader social and political concerns. Her central archive is the *Illustres Proverbes* of Jacques Lagniet, an eclectic collection of satirical prints that provides “a visual catalogue of social ills attendant upon domestic disorder” (p. 275). Several images feature men whose cuckoldry and domineering wives are framed as punishments for their failures to abide by other social mores by spending time in taverns and idleness, and Matthews-Grieco links these images of domestic disorder to wider critiques of the king as “*pater patriae*” (p. 266).

In addition to historians of sexuality and those studying the literature thereof, historians of medicine will find the chapters in section 2 (especially Ray’s and Giannetti’s) of particular interest. Art historians will also find the visual cultures essays of the third section fruitful, while discussion of shaming practices (for example, Katritzky) will be particularly relevant to those working in the histories of emotions.

The index is disappointingly limited to people and places, which does not fully reflect how particular themes repeat across chapters. Finally, although the production values are of the high standard generally expected of Ashgate, the font used for the chapter endnotes is surprisingly small, which may present an accessibility issue.

Note

[1]. Notable recent contributions on the subjects treated here include: “Infertility and Early Modern Medicine,” ed. Daphna Oren-Magidor and Catherine Rider, special issue, *Social History of Medicine* 29, no. (May 2016); Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Gerry Milligan and Jane Tylus, eds., *The Poetics of Masculinity in Early Modern Italy and Spain* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010); Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007); Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and David M. Turner, ed., *Fashioning Adultery: Gender, Sex and Civility in England, 1660-1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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