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Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex by Robert
Deam Tobin (review)

Harry Oosterhuis

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notably absent.² In addition, there is no mention of critical social issues, including race and racism, that have stymied the profession. The activism of non-nurse midwives is also dramatically downplayed; despite the existence of archival records on individuals and organizations (such as MANA, or midwife Carol Leonard, both housed in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College), they do not appear to have been consulted. The story of Kate Bowland, whose arrest in 1974 galvanized the lay midwifery community into action and resulted in a hearing before the California Supreme Court, is briefly but inaccurately described (and her name is misspelled). Finally, although the authors hope that the book will reach not only midwives and midwifery students but “members of the public who are interested in history” (p. xvi), the steep price (\$110) will undoubtedly keep some from reading this book. Nonetheless, *A History of Midwifery in the United States* provides important and original material that attests to the wide-ranging and important work of those involved in the midwifery profession.

Wendy Kline
Purdue University

Robert Deam Tobin. *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. xix + 306 pp. Ill. \$69.95 (978-0-8122-4742-8).

The modern conceptualization of sexuality in terms of basic categories and identities, such as hetero- and homosexuality, was largely articulated in central Europe during the nineteenth century. New notions were introduced by German-speaking physicians, lawyers, activists, writers, and artists. Most of these pioneers and the movements in which they were involved are well researched. In particular gay and lesbian or queer studies have contributed to an avalanche of publications about the ways in which “peripheral desires,” to quote Robert Tobin’s book, were framed in biomedical, politico-legal, and cultural discourses and how these affected society and the individual lives of those concerned. To add fresh insights to the available studies is a challenge, and Tobin’s illuminating history of ideas succeeds in meeting it. Based on a wide variety of sources, including literary fiction, the book not only synthesizes established knowledge, but also sheds new light on the wider political and cultural backdrop in which diverse understandings of (homo) sexuality emerged. The fertile ground was, according to Tobin, “the complexity of ‘German’ identity” (p. xvi): the particular constellation of liberalism, nation building, the fight against the criminalization of homosexuality, colonialism, and a preoccupation with nationality, race, and Jewishness.

2. Paula Michaels, *Lamaze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jacqueline Wolf, *Deliver Me from Pain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Homosexuality was the pivotal topic of a series of debates that started in the first half of the nineteenth century and crystallized into an essentialist biomedical and a cultural-aesthetic perspective. These rival views were rooted in dissimilar styles of thinking and contrasting gender models, as well as divergent sociopolitical aspirations. The German homosexual rights movement, established around 1900 and the first in the world, was polarized from the beginning. Relying on scientific insights and the values of the Enlightenment, the essentialist position presented so-called “uranism” and “sexual inversion” as an inborn physical and mental, either morbid or normal, condition of a minority showing a mixture of male and female features—a “third sex,” in the words of the sexual reformer Magnus Hirschfeld. The assumption of innate sexual identities was analogous to the perception of race and ethnicity as fixed in nature. Politically this approach was aligned to enlightened, liberal calls for emancipation on the basis of individual self-development, civil rights, and equality of men and women.

The opposing perspective, characterized as “masculinist” (p. 53) by Tobin, vehemently denied the existence of natural sexual categories and stressed the cultural and political significance of a more diffuse homoeroticism among men in general, which was associated with true masculinity rather than with gender inversion. Proponents of this perspective found inspiration in ancient Greece, Nietzsche’s philosophy, aestheticism, and male bonding in political and military associations, intellectual and artistic circles, youth movements, and educational practices. All of this implied a rejection, not only of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also of liberal-democratic values, which were equated with bourgeois mediocrity, superficial materialism, and cultural feminization. The masculinists tended to elitist anarchism as well as to the political right: their ideals overlapped with prevalent antimodernistic trends and militaristic nationalism and, more often than not, also with misogyny, racism, and anti-Semitism. Their ideas were far from marginal in German culture: apart from a vocal section of the homosexual and youth movements, they were shared by widely read authors such as Thomas Mann and Otto Weininger, and even, to some extent, Sigmund Freud.

Whereas the biomedical-essentialist and the cultural-masculinist angles were presented as distinct from or in opposition to each other in scientific and political texts, authors of several literary works intermingled them, ironically questioned them, and put them into perspective, as Tobin shows in his ingenious analysis of Ernst von Wolzogen’s *Das dritte Geschlecht* (1899), Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912), and Arnold Zweig’s *De Friendt kehrt heim* (1932). An omission is, however, that he does not consider the prominent role of the so-called pedagogical Eros in early twentieth-century German educational reform and youth movements. This aspect is much more directly relevant to his overall argument than the German perception of eroticism in non-Western cultures, the topic of the weakest chapter of Tobin’s study. Two other (minor) flaws are the repetitive phrasings and the scarcity of references: he could have shown more acknowledgment of the work of scholars who paved the way for his book.

Harry Oosterhuis
Maastricht University