

Mysteries of Sex

Tracing Women and Men through American History

By Mary P. Ryan

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. 432. Notes, bibliography, index. \$37.50.)

Mysteries of Sex is a remarkable synthesis that covers vast chronological, geographical, and topical terrain. Mary P. Ryan's intriguing analysis ranges from the sixteenth century to the opening of the twenty-first, exploring subjects as varied as the European conquest of the Americas, the emergence of domesticity, slavery and race, citizenship, work, social and sexual revolutions, and immigration. Her bibliography alone, amounting to nearly fifty pages, is testament to the enormity of her accomplishment.

Seeking to unravel the "process whereby the distinction between male and female is created, adapted and repeatedly recreated" (p. 3), Ryan conceives of her project as a series of "mysteries" for the historian-detective to solve. As chapter titles such as "Where Have the Corn Mothers Gone?" "What is the Sex of Citizenship?" and "Where in the World is the Border between Male and Female?" indicate, Ryan (like many of the scholars on whose work she draws) sees "mysteries of sex" as central, not tangential, to American political, social, and economic history.

The greatest strength of Ryan's book (and there are many) is its ability to persuasively piece together the *longue durée*, and hence to illuminate important continuities where other

scholars perceive dramatic change—and vice versa. In the process, Ryan boldly transgresses traditional chronological boundaries. Her chapter on wage work, "How Do You Get from Home to Work to Equity?," is a case in point. By tracing the history of women wage earners (a story usually told in more truncated segments) from 1900 to 1960, Ryan challenges interpretations that stress women's "sudden" entrance into the paid labor force. "New Women" of all classes flocked to the workforce in the 1910s and 1920s, seeing wage earning not as drudgery, but as the key to social and economic independence. Indeed, Ryan argues, employment had become so commonplace and so desirable that these same women eagerly reentered the labor force when opportunity or economic need arose. The typical World War II "Rosie" was not the young novice wage earner of popular imagination, but rather a middle-aged married woman. Raised in families in which working wives and mothers were the norm, her daughters—hardly the unhappy full-time housewives portrayed in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)—worked after marriage in large numbers (married women accounted for 60 percent of all female wage earners in 1960). As their ranks

expanded dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, it was wage-earning women—simultaneously exhilarated by their relative economic independence and frustrated with unequal pay and limited career opportunities—who made second-wave feminism a mass movement. Conversely, Ryan's analysis of immigration, which compares turn-of-the-century Eastern and Southern Europeans to a second, post-1965 wave of Asians and Latinos, emphasizes change. Rejecting simplistic descriptions of immigrant families as rigidly and unchangingly patriarchal, she shows that by the late twentieth century, Korean, Vietnamese, Mexican, and Filipina wives and mothers were nearly as likely to hold jobs as were their native-born counterparts.

A brief review can only hint at the richness of this book. *Mysteries of Sex* is best read as a series of loosely

connected essays that do not necessarily add up to a whole. Nor should they, for as Ryan persuasively demonstrates, sex, gender, and sexuality operate on multiple levels and in multiple contexts. In the end, I'm not quite sure that her title is apt. Perhaps because Ryan so convincingly solves the puzzles she puts before the reader, little sense of mystery remains. While the case is far from closed, *Mysteries of Sex* is likely to remain the most compelling and definitive interpretation of its subject for decades to come.

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