

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky:

*Between Men: English Literature and
Male Homosocial Desire.*

New York: Columbia U. Press, 1985. 244 p.

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This is an important book. Concerned with the entire range of bonds between men, including but not limited to genital desire, 'Between Men' marks a new stage in the analysis of sexuality and gender. Sedgwick breaks through the dichotomy of condescension and celebration that has heretofore characterized examinations of affective and erotic ties between members of the same gender, presenting a sophisticated model for theorizing about any form of desire and its relation to gender, class, and race.

Sedgwick's argument depends on two interrelated paradigms. Firstly, the exchange of women between men (through institutions such as marriage) is both heterosexual and homosocial; it enacts the triangulated desire of men "to consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females" (p. 38). Secondly, the "homosocial continuum" of male bonds was, at a specific historical moment, arbitrarily (but intentionally) disrupted by the institutionalization of homophobia. The homosocial exchange of women is reinforced by this excoriation of a "deviant" male minority.

Through her analysis of eight "fictions" (framed by an interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnets and of Whitman as cultural icon), Sedgwick charts the growing rift in the homosocial continuum as instigated by changes in gender, class, and racial ideologies. Shakespeare's eroticized portrayal of an older poet and younger man, for instance, exists in full congruence with the heterosexuality of Renaissance England. Although "sodomy" and "buggery" were prosecuted as "unnatural" acts, the generalized opprobrium of an identifiable group of erotically-defined individuals had not yet appeared. The decisive shift in the social meaning of homosocial desire from a value-neutral affective tie to negative-laden gender confusion (a shift related to both the growing homosexual subculture and the bourgeois nuclear family) was nascent in Sterne's 'Sentimental Journey', and found its most anxious generic expression in the thematic linkage of homoeroticism and paranoia in the early Gothic novel. Our modern understanding of homosexuality - both literary and social - is mediated through homophobia.

What becomes startlingly clear through this historical / literary journey is that "homosexuality" - indeed, "sexuality" itself - is not an essence, but rather a social construct, easily used to control and manipulate men across the homosocial spectrum:

"Obviously, it is crucial to every aspect of social structure within the exchange-of-women framework that heavily freighted bonds between men exist, as the backbone of social form or forms. At the same time, a consequence of this structure is that any ideological purchase on the male homosocial spectrum - a (perhaps necessarily arbitrary) set of discriminations for defining, controlling, and manipulating these male bonds - will be a disproportionately powerful instrument of social control. The importance - an importance - of the category 'homosexual', I am suggesting, comes not necessarily from its regulatory relation to a nascent or already-constituted minority of homo-

sexual people or desires, but from its potential for giving whoever wields it a structuring definitional leverage over the whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution." (p. 86)

To sum up, in a sentence breathtaking in its implications: "Not only must homosexual men be unable to ascertain whether they are to be the objects of 'random' homophobic violence, but no man must be able to ascertain that he is not (that his bonds are not) homosexual" (p. 88-89).

Such analytical reversals are to be found throughout Sedgwick's discourse. She reminds us, for instance, that Freud's often-referred-to link between homosexuality and neurosis is based on the repression of homoerotic desire; homophobia, not homosexuality, is the causal factor. Another reversal: rather than any necessary correlation between homosexuality and misogyny or paranoia, it is the homosociality of the exchange-of-women framework that is paranoid and misogynistic.

Sedgwick's intellectual forebears are diverse, including: René Girard's 'Deceit, Desire, and the Novel', Foucault's 'History of Sexuality', Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women', Alan Bray's 'Homosexuality in Renaissance England', and Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence'. It is no small accomplishment to integrate and transform these antecedents into a convincing synthesis of Marxist-feminist, Radical-feminist, Structuralist, and historical analysis. Whatever interest a reader may have in Sedgwick's interpretation of particular texts (including Hogg's 'Confessions of a Justified Sinner', Tennyson's 'The Princess', Eliot's 'Adam Bede', Thackeray's 'Henry Esmond', Dickens' 'Our Mutual Friend' and 'Edwin Drood'), 'Between Men', like 'Deceit, Desire, and the Novel', is most likely to be remembered for its methodological breakthrough. The sum is much greater than the parts.

Finally, as Sedgwick makes so much of the constitutive power of gender in framing sexuality, I wonder how she would respond to Rubin's charge that feminism (as gender analysis) is not the proper lens through which to examine sexuality. Can we usefully separate sexuality from gender in our analytical categories? (See "Talking Sex" in 'Pleasure and Danger', ed. Carol Vance.) Also, can we move beyond the dualistic categories of masculine / feminine, toward a deconstruction of gender?

We may look for Sedgwick's responses in her future work. In the meantime, 'Between Men' has already begun to influence scores of scholars, whose work on sexuality, gender, class, race, and power can only benefit from the analytical, political, and emotional intelligence of her book. We have good reason to expect that the analysis of homoeroticism will never be the same.