gland—in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* was, in fact, first published in a 1997 collection that MacDonald herself edited—*Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance* (inexplicably, Archer’s important essay is never even cited by MacDonald).

Still, the book, while it doesn’t live up to its own billing or the historicist expectations this reader brought to it, contains some important arguments. MacDonald’s oft-reiterated assertion that determining race by skin color is a modern and not a Renaissance phenomenon leads to some very insightful, and original, readings of early modern texts that read race in the body and bodily behaviors as well as in social institutions like marriage and the family. My sense is that in this way MacDonald’s work has already opened the field to important reevaluations of race in early modern texts. Furthermore, her discussion of early women writers like Philips and Behn, who she shows to be at best ambivalent about issues of both race and gender, also contributes valuably to other recent work that is providing a much-needed correction to a field that has sometimes devoted too much energy to establishing a female literary tradition and ignored the differences, as MacDonald puts it, “not only between, but sometimes even within women” (148). Yet in the end the book’s methodological weaknesses will mean that *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* is not likely to have the impact on the field of early modern studies that its capacious title—and its introduction—seems to promise.


*The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* provides an encyclopedic account of the transformation of the cultural representation and ideological significance of female homoeroticism in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Traub’s compellingly argued study contributes significantly to early
modern scholarship not only on sexuality but also on gender, anatomical science, marriage and the family, poetic and dramatic texts, classical mythology, women writers, and royal iconography. Collecting a vast range of primary and secondary sources, and demonstrating an impressive fluency with theoretical, historical, and literary critical modes of analysis, Traub constructs a diachronic narrative of the shifting meaning of female same-sex relations throughout the early modern period. In the sixteenth century, Traub argues, representations of female-female desire were split between the positive image of the friend and the negative image of the tribade. Whereas the “feminine” friend represented the “chaste” and “unexceptional” love between (English) women (19), the “masculine” tribade was usually depicted as a foreign woman who penetrated another woman with an enlarged clitoris or dildo. Yet as images of female sexuality proliferated during the seventeenth century in scientific treatises, travel narratives, and the arts, the once distinct types of the friend and the tribade became conflated, thus “contaminating” female same-sex desire in general with the stigma of immorality and irrationality formerly reserved for the tribade. This stigmatization “provide[d] the condition of possibility for modern erotic identities” to emerge during the eighteenth century (20).

Traub describes her project not as a quest to discover “the lesbian” in early modern texts, but as a “genealogy” of the “conditions of intelligibility” through which lesbian desire gained “cultural signification” during this period (28). Throughout the book lesbian appears in italics to mark its function as a contingent, inadequate “rhetorical figure” or “discursive effect” rather than as a “stable epistemological or historical category” (15), let alone a transhistorical category of personhood or sexual orientation. In chapters 1–4, Traub examines the contradictory rhetorical strategies Renaissance writers used to render lesbianism visible or intelligible at the same time that they figured it through the tropes of insignificance or impossibility. The second half of the book (chapters 5–7) traces the uneven historical process by which this discourse of impossibility was displaced by an emergent discourse of “suspicion and
possibility” (20). In the final, most self-reflective, chapter regarding the “quest for origins” of modern lesbian identity, Traub uses the psychoanalytic distinction between identification and desire to advocate that we “move beyond identity” as a mode of encountering the lesbian past, and instead recognize our own desires—particularly the desire for a “lesbian-affirmative future”—as a resource for “historical engagement” (353).

From the vantage point of a genealogical stance that allows her to “look simultaneously backward and forward” (353), Traub brilliantly rewrites the renaissance in terms of female homoeroticism. By referring to the “renaissance” of lesbianism, Traub means to indicate both the proliferation of representations of female homoeroticism during this period and the indebtedness of these representations to classical sources and models. More polemically, she also wishes to expose the inadequacy of the traditional view of the Renaissance as an organically coherent, ideologically homogeneous culture, an account that is belied by the “dynamic interactions of a range of knowledges” about lesbian desire during this period (10). It is through her meticulously rendered, deeply informed, exposition of this range of knowledges that Traub makes her greatest contribution to seventeenth-century studies.

The first four chapters establish conclusively that, whatever recourse early modern writers had to tropes of the “impossibility” of lesbian desire, their texts mapped out the scientific, ideological, and imaginative terrains through which the articulation of that desire became possible. Chapter 1 establishes a foundation by outlining the medical, theological, and legal discourses that informed understandings of lesbianism in early modern Europe and by revealing the circulation of these discourses in a canonical literary text, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with its allusions to female bedfellows, Amazons, and convents. Turning to “the production of cultural knowledge (scientific and obscene) about women’s eroticism” (79), Chapter 2 argues that female erotic pleasure was considered “a central component of reproductive, marital chastity” in the period (78). Yet male anatomists and writers of obscene poems such as Thomas Nashe also recognized that the
clitoris (newly “discovered” by anatomical science) could give women access to an erotic pleasure detached from any purely reproductive ends. Provocatively titled “The politics of pleasure; or, queering Queen Elizabeth,” Chapter 3 extends the previous chapter’s exploration of “the potential for female erotic agency from within the confines of patriarchal ideology” (125) to a consideration of female erotic agency outside of marriage. Like the pudica (a naked woman protecting her genitals with her hand) found in the period’s anatomy books, portraits of Queen Elizabeth that center the gaze on her concealed genitals paradoxically “perform feminine modesty while also calling attention to erotic potential” (125). Chastity is not equivalent to asexuality, as many critics have wrongly assumed; rather, Elizabeth’s erotic self-display, which was justified in terms of her sovereign power, was “determinedly fetishistic” and “delightfully polymorphous” (150). Chapter 4, a revised version of Traub’s influential essay “The (in)significance of lesbian desire,” demonstrates how an “imagined golden age of female intimacy” (188), encoded in the pastoral representation of love between conventionally “feminine” women, allows the elegiac expression of a lesbian desire that is ultimately displaced by the imperatives of reproductive marital alliance and its ostensible basis in women’s “natural” attraction to men.

Positing the mid-seventeenth century as “an inaugural period in the construction of the erotic meanings of modernity” (231), the second half of the book explores how female same-sex behavior in general began to be represented as overtly sexual, hence as morally and socially transgressive. In Chapter 5, “The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris,” Traub returns to the common early modern linkage between the clitoris and the tribade described in Chapter 2. Anatomy texts and travel narratives, she demonstrates, express anxiety about strange women who “abuse” the clitoris to achieve pleasure outside masculine control. As the century progressed, however, even friendships between English women were in danger of being interpreted as sexually illicit, an ideological development that Traub calls the “perversion of lesbian desire” and that she examines in poetic, pictorial, and theatrical representa-
tions of the Ovidian myths of Diana and Calisto (chapter 6) and Iphis and Ianthe (chapter 7). In these mythological narratives, the kind of intimacy once regarded as “chaste feminine love” becomes “imbued with associations of tribadism” (278), and the lament over an amor impossibilis voices the frustration of experiencing a desire perceived as “unnatural,” because not able to be consummated through patriarchal marriage and sexual reproduction. Appropriating the trope of amor impossibilis to lament not the unnaturalness of lesbian desire but the absence of the beloved, the poet Katherine Philips employs a rhetoric of idealized friendship to legitimate female homoerotic subjectivity as natural. At the same time, however, discourses of lesbianism were moving away from a paradigm of the “natural” and towards the “more scientific, biologically based concept of normality and its deviations” that would come to define the parameters of modern sexual identity in the eighteenth century (324).

*The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* is a challenging, demanding book. Each of its long, dense chapters shuttles back and forth between various discursive registers and interpretative modes: explications of Renaissance texts produced within distinct generic and aesthetic traditions; accounts of findings from the fields of social, sexual, and political history; critiques of current developments in literary and cultural scholarship; and theoretical engagement with historicist, psychoanalytic, feminist, and lesbian methodologies and critics. Patiently unfolding her expansive, complexly layered, argument, Traub produces a compelling narrative of historical change that should profoundly impact future scholarship on Renaissance sexuality. Precisely because of the impact her study is likely to have, however, it will be important to keep in mind Traub’s own gracious acknowledgment, in a brief “Afterword,” of the contingency of her findings (355): many Renaissance texts await reinterpretation through a lesbian-affirmative methodology, and archival materials remain to be discovered. Moreover, in strategically focusing on the figures of the tribade and the friend, Traub, as she readily admits, bypasses other lesbian figures like the lusty mistress or “female procuress” (26), the kinds
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of texts in which these figures typically appear (e.g., Jacobean tragedies and satiric comedies), and the particular social and economic tensions informing female same-sex relationships that they typically express. Traub might not have exhausted the subject of Renaissance lesbianism, then, but she has undeniably given us a wealth of knowledge about its history and a model of scholarship for interpreting its significance that cannot be ignored.


Mitchell sets out firmly new historicist aims for her book. She wants to explore the ways in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammar texts—long regarded as nothing more than straightforward guides to conjugations and declensions—are actually implicated in key social, political, and religious issues of their day. These texts also come to shape contemporary ideas about the teaching of grammar and, to some extent, even the politics of gender and class in the contemporary classroom. She bases her conclusions on readings of over 300 early modern grammar texts—one of the book’s primary values is as a compendium of these works. If you want to know what Thomas Blount thinks about the education of women (fine, within narrow limits, as long as they are not “loose” (144), or how Charles Butler defines grammar (the “art of speaking and writing well” (2), Mitchell is sure to provide a few paragraphs summarizing their points of view.

The book is organized—somewhat loosely, as Mitchell is wary of pinning herself down—around five grammatical controversies that have wider social implications: standardization of the vernacular, pedagogy, writing instruction, universal language schemes, and social position. She begins with the triumph, by the end of the seventeenth century, of the vernacular over Latin as the language of the learned, and the debates this engendered over the teaching