

Cyd Sturgess, *Different from the Others: German and Dutch Discourses of Queer Femininity and Female Desire, 1918-1940* (New York: Berghahn, 2023, 370 pp., ISBN 9781800730939).

When asked to imagine the stereotypical lesbian, many undoubtedly think of the so-called ‘butch’: a short-haired, masculine woman. Likewise, when historians have studied queer women in the past, they have often focused on women who defied traditional gender presentations. Studies of homosexuality in the early twentieth century, for instance, have unveiled how masculine women carved out a subcultural space for themselves, as well as how central these women were to the projects of defining and labelling queer desires in the new discipline of ‘sexology’, the science of sex. Yet in *Different from the Others*, Cyd Sturgess takes issue with this singular focus on masculine women and redirects our view toward queer feminine women. Studying German and – more challengingly – Dutch queer subcultures, sexological treatises, magazines and fiction in the early twentieth century, Sturgess argues that paying attention to queer female femininity helps us to depict the ‘irreducible plurality’ of the history of women who loved women.

The history of gender and sexuality, to which Sturgess’s book contributes, has received renewed attention in recent years. Pioneers of the field from the 1970s to the early 2000s were often enthralled by the promise of recovering a past that was recognisably queer in the present. Inspired by Foucault’s argument about the making of ‘the homosexual’ as a person in the late nineteenth century, historians have paid much attention to the sexological studies that made this *mise-en-discours* possible. Over the last two decades, however, they have moved away from this focus on a ‘great paradigm shift’. At the same time, they have also opened up the study of identities and desires that are not so easily recognisable as ‘homosexual’ today. This double movement owes not only to theoretical interventions from the field of queer theory, but also to the redefinition of queer identities and communities in the present, as gender and sexuality are being conceived of in novel ways. Homosexuality, it seems, is losing its dominance as a category, making way for the more vague and capacious term ‘queer’. Sturgess’s book fits into this new approach. It decentralises the masculine woman who has become the symbol of the lesbian and instead revalues the potential of gender conformity for female same-sex history.

More than with any other place, the making of ‘modern homosexuality’ is associated with Germany, and with Berlin in particular. German sexologists were the first and most prominent to outline theories of homosexuality and sexual inversion around 1900. Moreover, the German

capital was a global symbol for both queer nightlife and sexual science during the 1920s. It therefore makes sense for Sturgess to return to this canonical site. The choice to compare the German case with the Dutch situation is more unique. Sturgess indicates in the introduction that their original intention was to study the extent to which German ideas about sexuality were also adopted by queer women in the Netherlands, thus providing a case study in the cross-cultural circulation of sexual ideas, practices and identities. However, they abandoned that project because it would mean ignoring evidence that points to 'alternative queer modalities'. For instance, Sturgess remarks, in contrast with Germany, 'markers of masculinity in female-bodied subjects in the Netherlands during the interwar period were not yet primarily coded as a sign of sexual nonconformity' (3). Queerness operated under different expectations than those of gender inversion. In order not to discount this Dutch alternative as simply 'backwards' compared to the situation in Germany, Sturgess has opted for a comparative approach.

Sturgess's analysis is structured around three types of discourse. The first part of the book, concerning 'sociomedical discourses', starts with an analysis of queer subcultures in interwar Germany and the Netherlands. Synthesising existing studies, Sturgess juxtaposes the social histories of Dutch and German queer lives. In Berlin, Sturgess sees relative openness for women on the labour market, queer movements and nightlife and legislation against homosexuality that did not target women (the infamous §175). In Amsterdam, in contrast, there was moral strictness and pillarisation, limited activism and nightlife for queer women, and legislation against homosexuality that could target both men and women (the infamous art. 248bis). In a similar vein, the second chapter analyses mainly medical and sexological writings on queer femininity. Sturgess discusses canonical German authors – including Westphal, Hirschfeld, Krafft-Ebing, Moll, Freud and, less canonically, Johanna Elberskirchen – but highlights their lesser-known theories of queer femininity, which were often at odds with the dominant ideas of sexual inversion propagated by these same authors. These views are contrasted with those of the less canonical (at least internationally) Dutch authors, such as Ina Boudier-Bakker, Theodoor van de Velde and Benno Stokvis. Overall, Sturgess finds that Dutch authors leaned more towards psychoanalysis in their explanations of queer desire rather than to theories about inversion.

The second part focuses on discourses about femininity found in magazines: queer women's magazines in Germany, and, since no Dutch equivalent to these existed, mainstream women's and queer men's magazines in the Netherlands. Sturgess highlights the inconsistencies and contradictions in these magazines. In German queer women's magazines, for instance, the feminine woman was 'both denigrated and desired' (175). Feminine women in these magazines could use their beauty to secure an independent existence, but were also complicit to patriarchal gender norms. Analysing Dutch

magazines and other publications, Sturgess highlights that many Dutch women in the interwar period did not see their queer desires as part of their identities. In both queer and non-queer writings about femininity, women were predominantly portrayed as mothers.

In the final part of the book, Sturgess moves towards literary analysis, discussing two German and two Dutch novels in which feminine women figure either as queer protagonists or as objects of queer desire. These novels add an interesting perspective to the discussions found in sexological literature and even queer magazines: they show that alternatives existed to the sexological figure of the invert and the idea that queer feminine desire was curable and transient. Sturgess highlights the differences between the German and the Dutch novels: in the latter, the influence of psychoanalysis is again more clearly visible than object-based sexual identities. In all four novels, however, Sturgess shows the central place of maternalism – the longing *for* a mother and *to be* a mother – as a means to articulate queer female desires.

Sturgess successfully reinscribes femininity into the history of queer female desire. They use historical methods, but are at their most original when they apply literary analysis to canonical texts. With this interdisciplinary approach, the project remains a difficult one that also challenges the reader. The author's quest for nuance has resulted in a sometimes dense academic text. Moreover, while the comparative approach is highly insightful, it would have been interesting to find firmer conclusions about the cross-cultural circulation of queer modalities as well, as had been Sturgess's original intent. This could have made more explicit to what extent Dutch queer people related to the developments in Germany. Still, the careful and extensive contextualisation of the novels, magazines and sexological treatises under discussion makes this into a reference work that can be an excellent starting point for future scholarship, especially given the dearth of existing research on the queer history of the Netherlands in the interwar period. At a time when gender and sexual identities are once again coming under increasing scrutiny, it is vital that historical analyses such as Sturgess's continue to shed light on the manifold and contradictory ways in which people have practised queer love in the past.

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