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## Doctor Knew Best

Suzanne J. Kessler

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Book Review

Doctor Knew Best

Suzanne J. Kessler

***Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*** Alice Domurat Dreger Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. 320 pp. \$35.00

Many of us studying gender in general and intersex issues in particular sometimes forget how critical it is that we move outside the psychology and sociology of contemporary life and read history. Historical analyses can confront us with fascinating instances of how reality has been produced as it reinforces our understanding that the givens of gender have not always been given. Alice Domurat Dreger's *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* is an excellent example of history as reminder.

Dreger documents encounters between hermaphrodites and medical professionals in late-nineteenth-century France and Britain. We learn about how physicians and medical men used (and still use) hermaphrodites (now referred to as "intersexed" people) for theory building and professional promotion and how hermaphrodites used medical professionals to help them repair their "doubtful status." Dreger allows us to see—very concretely—that the meanings of "female" and "male" have been different at different times and even at the same time in geographically proximate places. Her book is in the tradition of scholarship that tries to elucidate the (presumably) unproblematic categories of "female" and "male" by focusing on those who violate them.

Anyone who writes about intersexuality is used to being asked, "How common is it?" While offering published estimates of various conditions and presenting dozens of stories about "real" hermaphrodites, Dreger makes the important argument that any statistic is culture-specific and that determining that someone **[End Page 343]** is a hermaphrodite is a social decision that depends on what a culture counts as acceptable variations of malehood or femalehood.

Dreger begins with the case of "Sophie," reported in an 1886 medical journal:

Sophie had testicles and a penis; she was surely a man; she was therefore not really married (no matter what she and her husband and their friends and families thought), because no marriage between two men was a true or legal marriage. She—or rather he—should have her civil status formally changed to male, her marriage officially annulled, and should start acting her "true" sex. Sophie was a man. (3)

This quotation illustrates Dreger's accessible writing style and the intriguing "problems" that she draws on. Sophie was a victim of the gonadal definition of sex (a definition whose history Dreger traces in a later chapter), just as we today are victims of the chromosomal definition of sex. The fact that those of us who are not transgendered do not experience ourselves as victims is, of course, interesting and a credit to the power of the social construction of reality.

Dreger points out that one of the reasons medical professionals then and now were and are so "driven to seek a stringent, convincing, and permanent definition of 'true' malehood, femalehood, and hermaphroditism" (11) is that without clear definitions it is impossible to know for sure whether a sexual act between any two people is heterosexual or homosexual. Dreger devotes a chapter to the disturbances created by the conceptual and practical messes of hermaphrodites' love lives.

The story gets complicated, because even in the same historical period and location it was not necessarily agreed what constituted a "true" male or female. Testicles and ovaries were the essential signs, but they were never considered the only signs. Many physicians believed, for example, that behavior could reveal the hermaphrodite's "true" sex. Dreger's review of medical reports documents the negotiations among groups of medical men trying to reach consensus about the essential sex signs. In a wonderful section titled "Tricky Genital Geography" she details the discussions about what labia "really" are, how big a clitoris

can be and still be a clitoris, whether a misshapen penis qualifies as a penis, whether the penis and clitoris act significantly differently, and whether the layout of pubic hair can be trusted as a clue. All of these considerations make it painfully...

*Book Review*

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