

Andrei Oișteanu, *Sexualitate și societate. Istorie, religie și literatură* [*Sexuality and Society. History, Religion and Literature*], Polirom, Iași, 2016, 664p

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Andrei Oișteanu (b. 1948) is a researcher and lecturer at the Faculty of Letters within Bucharest University and president of the Romanian Association for the History of Religions. Similar to other two volumes written by Oișteanu – one dedicated to the image of the Jew in Romanian Culture,¹ and the other to the topic of narcotics in Romanian literature² – this volume is distinguishable through its interdisciplinary approach to the topic as well, so that the present volume confirms Oișteanu's interest in ethnology, cultural anthropology, history of religion and mentalities.

As the author himself confesses, the book has been written not only “as a tribute to sexuality”,³ but also as an attempt to understand “its delicate and mysterious workings” (p. 5). For the accomplishment of such a goal, a comparative approach has been used, a “absolutely normal, if not obligatory” method. The result has been a comparative approach both on the vertical scale of time - from Antiquity up to the present time - and on the horizontal scale of space – from Western Europe to eastern Asia. Again, as the author himself confesses, at the same time the research has been a self-shaping one: “I have written this book just as it has written me. Maybe thus one can explain the relative stylistic heterogeneity of the volume, with a greater degree of freedom” (p. 6).

The book is structured in 35 chapters which differ in length and approach style. From a thematic point of view, one can distinguish thematically the research on *ius primae noctis* or *le droit du seigneur* (p. 7-15) – that is, the right of the lord to go to bed with the brides from his domain on their

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¹ Andrei Oișteanu, *Inventig the Jew: Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romanian and Other Central-East European Cultures*, Nebraskas 2009; idem, *Konstruktionen des Judenbildes: Rumänische und Ostmitteleuropäische Stereotypen des Antisemitismus*, Berlin 2010.

² Idem, *Rauschgift in der rumänischen Kultur: Geschichte, Religion und Literatur*, Berlin 2013.

³ This, in a way, is a „reparatory act” if we are to consider what Emil Cioran had put down in his diary, when turning 56: „In all I have written, I did not pay sexuality the tribute it deserves...”

wedding night – followed by variations on the same idea: the “right” of the sheikh, sultan and han (p. 16-28), “the right” of the senior and sovereign in Medieval Europe (p. 29-39), in European literature from 17-19 century respectively (pp. 40-51), the “right” of the male (p. 242-250), the “right” of the godfather (p. 402-427), the “right” of the ruler (p. 428-438), the “right” of the overlord (p. 439-451), the “right” of the landlord or of the tenant (p. 452-467), the “right” of the boyar over gipsy servants (p. 468-492), the “right” of the boss (p. 514-526), the “right” of the father-in-law over the daughter-in-law (p. 527-539), the “right” of the prior (p. 540-569) and, finally, the “right” of the guest (p. 570-580). In connection to this topic another chapter discusses the transition from “the right of the senior” to the “tax on maidenhead” (p. 52-66).

Other chapters deal with the connection between sexuality and objects, things or various parts of the human body – see, for example, the sexuality of the house (p. 110-132), of hair (p. 133-161), of the foot (p. 162-168), to which one may add the one pertaining to language (p. 169-174). The research proves the ambiguity of the terms that regard sexuality, that add to the ambiguity with which sexual organs were considered (see particularly the chapter “The Magnificence and Misery of the Vagina”, p. 67-80. To this one may also add other chapters, such as the one regarding the *Vagina dentate*, p. 213-234).

Topics such as sexual potency and impotency, respectively, are indispensable topics from such a book (see p. 251-271, 272-290). The following chapter focuses on the means of treating impotency and especially of enhancing sexual potency by using various aphrodisiac plants and substances (see „The Hospital and the Pharmaceutics of Love”, p. 291-309).

Another important chapter of this research is dedicated to sexual perversions. We mention here zoophile, homosexuality and sodomy. Without going into further detail, we enumerate here other topics pertaining to sexuality: rape (p. 380-401) or sexual initiation of girls (p. 493-505).

In a chapter dedicated to the relationship between *eros* and *ethos* (p. 235-241) Andrei Oișteanu mentioned the antic principle according to which “What is natural is nothing to be ashamed of” (*Naturalia non sunt turpia*). However, the author himself is aware of the difficulty of approaching sexuality, especially if we take into account the fact that moral values are relative, as they vary according to time and space, era and civilisation. In order to defend decency and to reject obscenity, boundaries for the expression and visualisation of topics of erotic nature have almost always been drawn. The merit of the author lies precisely in not letting himself, by any means, be

obstructed by such boundaries in his depictions. We mention here only one example which pertains to the mentality and practices of Romanian interwar society. Namely a campaign against pornography, which led to the admonition of Geo Bogza. As protest, surrealist poet Gherasim Luca, along with three high school students, has published in only 13 copies a journal which was entitled *Pula* [Dick] and which had as subtitle *Universal Organ*. They sent a copy to the academician Nicolae Iorga, one of the foremost supporters of the anti-pornographic campaign, with the dedication “Don’t you have it, too?! You don’t!” Charged after ten days with the accusation of pornography, the four teenagers were arrested, but – as they were all minors – were let go after another 10 days (p. 585).⁴ The confrontation between sexuality and propaganda would otherwise be even more obvious in dictatorial societies, be they Nazi or communist.⁵ Abnormal types of “nationalizing” sexuality took place in these societies: love became pure procreation, a patriotic act or a mandatory rule of work.

In the foreword to his book, Oişteanu has tried to find a common ground for the ideas presented there. The premise of their research would be those mental and behavioural models that had fiercely, miraculously survived, remaining hidden somewhere in the folds of collective mentality, even if as symbolic and metaphoric forms. This makes it possible that people in ancient Sumer think and feel, in what concerns sexuality and to a certain extent, as people in present day Europe feel. The value of this research has thus a universal and perennial value. We can only subscribe the proverb the author quotes: “Old habits die hard”, adding: especially when it comes to eroticism...

⁴ The idea that habits tend to perpetuate themselves over time is also visible from the media scandal that was triggered by exhibiting this avant-garde journal in an exhibition of April 2015 at the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York.

⁵ In this regard see Zoe Petre, „Promoting women or on the Deconstructing the Feminine Model”, in: Lucian Boia (ed.), *Miturile comunismului românesc*, [*The Myths of Romanian Communism*] Bucharest 1998, p. 255-271.