

pageantry, makes for a distinctive monograph that models an inspiring comparatist methodology for future work in theatre and performance studies. Rare, after all, is the book in this field that can stretch its illustrative canvas across several periods, geographies, and generic affiliations with the sprightly spirit at work here. All the same, rather than her case studies, it is Walker's five-step heuristic – ultimately in serious need of further elucidation and exemplification – that is likely to become the book's central node of critique for scholars, both in her field and in the neighbouring disciplines of intellectual history, philosophy, and sociology. The extent to which mechanics of cultural change can be transhistorically schematised remains an open-ended question. But Walker has thrown down a bold gauntlet for performance scholars to take up in considering some answers.

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A Mirror and a Razor Lay Crossed

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Circumcision on the Couch: The Cultural, Psychological, and Gendered Dimensions of the World's Oldest Surgery by Jordan Osserman. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. £81. ISBN 9 7815 0136 8165

SOMETHING IMPORTANT HAS GONE MISSING from the nether regions of the American body politic. So, at least, thought one man attending the 6 January protests in Washington, DC. There, amongst the rabble of assembled Proud Boys, election disbelievers, and Q-Anon conspiracy theorists, stood a grey-haired man armed with a peculiar message: a set of placards reading 'Make America's penis great again, with a foreskin! No foreskin, no peace!' This was an extreme example of the language of contemporary anti-circumcision activism, or 'intactivism' as its proponents have dubbed it. The slogans wielded by this particular intactivist invite an uneasy mix of baffled concern and amused fascination. They are enthralling in part because their forms are derived from a confusing muddle of seemingly opposed ideas; a clunky variant of Donald Trump's famous campaign slogan daubed alongside an appropriation of the anti-racist chant 'no justice, no peace'. This is just one of the many kinds of opposition

which spark Jordan Osserman's interest in *Circumcision on the Couch*, a book preoccupied by the conflicting fantasies, ideologies, and intellectual traditions which converge when projected onto the foreskin and its absence. Osserman proposes that psychoanalysis can help explain how and why the cut penis has become a site upon which these 'deadlocks of symbolic identity' combine and clash (p. 209). The result is a sensitive and sweeping study of the theoretical tangle left behind by those who have tried to fix circumcision's meaning.

It is no wonder early psychoanalysis was compelled by the ceremonial splitting of a sex organ usually performed on young children. From the discipline's own infant years through to the mid-twentieth century, a succession of psychoanalytical heavy hitters took turns trying to decipher circumcision, often settling on wildly divergent explanations. Freud was suspicious of the way ancient Jews adopted circumcision as a marker of identity because it was already 'practised in Egypt by the people as a general custom'.¹ He proposed that Jewish circumcision could be viewed as a left-over fragment of an old secret, a tell-tale sign pointing back to the Hebrews' murder of Moses. With a similar patrilineal focus, Theodor Reik offered that circumcision sometimes served as a punishment passed down from father to son, inflicted in order to stave off the threat of parricide. Bruno Bettelheim said it had more to do with 'vagina envy'; the bloodiness of some circumcision rituals, he thought, betrayed their jealous emulation of menstruation. The polarity of these theories, and the numerous others efficiently digested in chapter 1, is not the fault of their creators. Rather, Osserman argues, such differences arise because circumcision is a 'fundamentally ambivalent' act, 'moebius-like' in its invitation of both 'masculine' and 'feminine' readings (p. 50). On the one hand, it marks a 'boy's social and symbolic initiation' into a male (and in the case of *brit milah* Jewish) community (p. 30). On the other hand, it physically removes something in order to do so and therefore also 'confronts' men with lack (p. 50).

James Joyce was alive to this paradox. In *Ulysses*, he presented an inverted understanding of what Osserman, a century later, now calls circumcision's ambivalence. Leopold Bloom has a foreskin, a fact which disturbs his feelings of initiation into a patrilineal version of Jewishness. In the novel's 'Circe' episode, for example, Bloom hallucinates a parody of the blessed begats, the section of Genesis which scrupulously charts a chain of Jewish descent. Joyce's retelling begins: 'Moses begat Noah and Noah begat Eunuch'.² The word 'begat' emphasises the role of the male sexual organ in the creation of new Jewish generations. But the 'Eunuch' figure disturbs that sexed genealogy. Bloom worries that problems of the penis might

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London 1939) p. 45.

² *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (London 1986) p. 404.

hinder his ability to affiliate with and help further perpetuate Jewishness. Later he feels a father's 'remorse' that he 'treated with disrespect' traditions like 'the circumcision of male infants'.³ So Bloom gets to keep his foreskin but at the cost of enjoying a coherent grasp on his religious identity. That Joyce gets no mention in Osserman's survey of early twentieth-century meditations on circumcision is understandable. Osserman, at least initially, is more focused on the foreskin's absence than the problems posed by its presence. Yet what Joyce was getting at through Bloom's sexuo-religious anxieties was a roundabout anticipation of Osserman's central argumentative framework. The prevalence of confused and eccentric reactions to circumcision might be explained by how the act simultaneously elicits the sense of something lost as well as the sense of something gained.

Does reading Bloom's foreskin in this way tell us more about Joyce's own preoccupations than it does about the nature of circumcision? Which party illuminates the other when an encounter is staged between this rather niche subject and the different disciplinary angles from which it is approached? Osserman arrives at a particular balance of critical illumination in which circumcision's ambivalence often emerges out of what it can reveal about its interpreters. A case in point is chapter 2, which compares two contemporaneous theoretical perspectives on St Paul: Daniel Boyarin's *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (1994) and Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: La Fondation de l'universalisme* (1997). Paul's idea of circumcision extended beyond the physical rite to imagine 'real circumcision' as 'a matter of the heart'.⁴ This view, for Osserman, is the point at which divergent lines of more recent philosophical argument intersect and, in their meeting, come into clearer focus. Under his treatment, the difference between Badiou's and Boyarin's readings of Pauline circumcision momentarily transforms them into representatives of a wider opposition between 'those who advocate an unapologetic, anti-identitarian universalism' and 'those who prioritize cultural and historical specificity' (p. 63). Though this is Osserman's densest chapter, it nevertheless performs an important methodological function, one which helps champion, through demonstration, circumcision as a productive subject of study. Turning our minds to circumcision need not mark an intellectual narrowing. When understood as a crash site for theoretical conflict, circumcision has the potential to shed new light on as many broader fields as have tried to understand it.

Although this is a book about cutting, its method is one of critical sewing; Osserman likes to forge creative connections and expose hidden affinities across disciplines. Daniel Boyarin is a well-known figure within the

³ Ibid., p. 595.

⁴ Romans 2: 29. Quoted by Osserman, p. 66.

relatively small world of Jewish studies. Many readers may well encounter Boyarin's work for the first time through Osserman's analysis of it. Boyarin's early career was preoccupied by a tight research focus on the Talmud. Later, he began to apply his Jewish expertise to fields like queer theory and psychoanalysis. It is fitting, then, that Osserman's most detailed engagement with Boyarin's thinking considers how its particularism sits alongside Badiou's universalism. In bringing Boyarin's work into conversation with that of as major a contemporary intellectual figure as Badiou, Osserman universalises the theoretical value of specifically Jewish scholarship. In turn, Osserman contributes to Jewish studies in his own right. The book does not advertise itself as necessarily doing so much, calling its Jewish emphasis a 'noticeable limitation' (p. 16). Nevertheless, Osserman is as at ease mulling over an ancient piece of rabbinical writing (p. 80) as he is explaining the social and legal complexities of modern Jewish practice. In a particularly compelling section (pp. 196–201) of the book's final chapter, Osserman reckons with the controversial process of *metzizah b'peh* (oral suction of a newly circumcised penis) in order to put pressure both on the limits of liberal legislation and on those community leaders who have 'transformed the rite into a symbol of Jewish resistance' (p. 200).

While Osserman is happy to bring psychoanalysis to bear on a vast range of disciplines, he is less quick to borrow the methods of these varied disciplines. When explaining a central point early in the book, that 'for any one meaning that circumcision accrues in a particular context, its inverse always threatens to emerge', Osserman notes that this 'is the case with signification as such' (pp. 50–1). Yet more literary-minded readers may wish that Osserman had lingered longer on the interpretative ambiguities latent within the language of his sources. Notably, an intertextual ambivalence can be traced in some of the quotations presented in chapter 3. This chapter draws on extensive archival research to tell the story of circumcision's medicalisation as a catch-all cure in the nineteenth century. In 1870 the surgeon Lewis Sayre argued that circumcising a 5-year-old boy did the job of 'quieting his nervous system by relieving the imprisoned glans penis' (p. 100). On the one hand, 'quieting' recalls the peculiar vocabulary through which Maimonides explained circumcision as a diminisher of sexual desire because it put the penis 'in as quiet a state as possible'.⁵ On the other hand, and disturbingly, Sayre's liberatory description of relief via exposing the glans penis almost resembles a would-be description of sexual pleasure, of a pleasing retraction of the foreskin ordinarily associated with intercourse or masturbation. We might think again of Joyce's Bloom who, after bringing

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed, Volume Two*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago 1963) p. 609.

himself to ejaculation, remembers a line from *Hamlet's* opening, 'for this relief much thanks', and then proceeds to retract his foreskin.⁶ Though providing a wonderfully detailed close reading of an illustration in this chapter (p. 119), Osserman rarely goes in for the kinds of textual examination which his rich materials invite. This is hardly a criticism, busy as Osserman already is with weaving a psychoanalytical argument. But the relation between ambivalence and linguistic indeterminacy in circumcision writing should now be explored further.

Osserman intentionally pursues a morally neutral tone throughout the book, exposing arguments both for and against circumcision in roughly equal measure. The strategy is pulled off effectively on the whole, but it is put under acute pressure when Osserman brings his study up to the present day. The book's final chapter makes clear that contemporary, popular engagement with circumcision is more a heated ethical debate than the less charged theoretical exploration once enjoyed by early psychoanalysts. At first, Osserman considers the fantasies of intactivists, the loudest subset of anti-circumcision activism today, with his characteristically unprejudiced approach to disparate source material. A post from an internet forum advocating foreskin regeneration receives as sensitive and serious a reading as the quotations from Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek which follow. But Osserman also accurately highlights the distressing links between intactivism and the men's rights movement, particularly its ugliest online manifestation: 'intactivists' discourse on the absent foreskin as the cause of their social and sexual deficiency closely mirrors the language and meme-culture of "incels"' (p. 178). In deconstructing both pro- and anti-circumcision arguments, Osserman's book inevitably inflames both sides. It has already been the subject of violent review comments online, which are unpleasant but also symptomatic. For perhaps the strongest evidence supporting Osserman's argument about how circumcision invites contradictory readings are these inconsistent celebrations and denunciations that form in response to his study.

This suggestion about the post-publication life of Osserman's book leads to a concluding point. A crucial component of this book's strength resides in the possibilities for further study it creates. A subject as particular as circumcision might lure some academics into striving for a certain conclusiveness that seals the topic off for a decade or two. But while thorough and historically wide-ranging, Osserman's book never makes circumcision seem a subject that is being unnaturally stretched across 250 pages. Rather, it becomes a critical focus calling out for yet more investigation from yet more disciplinary angles. Through *Circumcision on the Couch*, and in light of

⁶ *Ulysses*, p. 305.

A. W. Strouse's recent, energetic, study of *Form and Foreskin* in medieval literature, circumcision is now emerging as an urgent case study and theoretical model relevant to all those interested in tracing the kinks and crosswires that mark the history of interpretation.

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Romantics De-Romanticised?

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POETICAL HISTORIES of the present day have in common with critical histories that their ambitions are often unrestricted to relations between poetical or critical texts; they serve to articulate texts, the authors of texts and their audiences with the larger patterns by which we configure our social, political, and cultural past. Historians of poetry aspire to say how old poetry came into being, how much of it there once was, how poetry emerged from the surrounding society, informed that society, and was informed by it. Their histories are indispensable conduits of literary knowledge; but they are also forums for critical practice, exhibitions of taste, interpretation, and literary judgement. As far as they are historical as distinct from encyclopaedic, they tell a story, and may reveal ironies of historical change.

One irony in particular has caught the eye of literary historians and critical theorists alike. This is the disavowal by poets writing in the early nineteenth century of their life-giving roots in the period preceding their own, thus promulgating a tendentially negative reading of their predecessors' achievements. As H. A. Mason has pointed out in examining the role played by a subconscious memory of Pope's *Homer* (1715–20) in Wordsworth's 'A Night-Piece' (*Poems*, 1815), Wordsworth 'concludes of both Pope and Dryden that they "could habitually think the visible universe was of so little consequence to a Poet, that it was scarcely necessary for him