



Review of David M. Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis* (London: Robert Hale, 2003), 282 pp.

Wisam Mansour

Friedman's *A Mind of Its Own* traces Western man's perception of the penis through different historical periods. In a scholarly manner coupled with a sense of humor, Friedman follows the penis's odyssey through paganism, Judaism and Christianity. The book delves into the etymologies of various daily terms and attributes them to the penis and its peripherals. In "The Demon Rod," the first chapter, Friedman provides an informative account of the cultural history of the penis grounded in myths, tales, legends, literature and language constructs. The reader learns, for instance, that the word "fascination" is derived from "fascinum," a miniature erect penis worn around the neck by teenage Roman children to protect them from the sexual advances of adult males. The reader may be surprised to learn that during the First World War, the Italian prime minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, "wore a fascinum on a bracelet to ensure victory by the Allies" (p. 20).

After the first chapter, the book loses some of its initial immediacy as the focus of the narrative in the second chapter shifts from the penis to particular individuals associated with it. Though the aim is to trace the transformation of the penis from divine and demon rod to a mechanical device "colonized by anatomists" (p. 55), the chapter focuses more on the personal histories and achievements of figures such as da Vinci, Vaselius, Gabriello Fallopio, Regnier Graaf and Roberto Dandeler. In the end, however, the narrative regains its immediacy and sense of humor as Friedman repositions the penis in Melville's narratives and Whitman's poetry.

"The Measuring Stick," the third chapter, is devoted to penis size among white and black men. It ostensibly argues that the large black penis has shaken the white man's ego and sense of manhood. As a result, the white man has demonized the black man's penis, exacting vengeance upon the slightest provocation. The chapter is replete with reports about black men who suffered castration or other genital mutilation at the hands of angry white men.

In spite of the wordiness and repetitions of "The Cigar," the fourth chapter provides insights into the signification of erection, flaccidity, masturbation and circumcision. Remarkably, the Freudian era psychoanalyzed the penis, with consequences to the perceptions of Jewish male genitalia. Based on his analysis of the white man's fear of the black man's potency, Friedman observes that the "racializing, criminalizing and, even on occasion, excising" (p. 125) of the Jewish penis happened on account of circumcision.

“The Battering Ram,” the fifth chapter, is more feminist in content. It demonstrates how the penis, in the words of commentators such as Marie Bonaparte, Anne Koedt, Kate Millet and Susan Brownmiller became politicized and turned against its owner. The penis was seen mainly as a tool of crime and rape. Bonaparte describes intercourse as “a beating by a man’s penis” (p. 157); Brownmiller sees the penis as a weapon of assault to “keep all women in a state of fear” (p. 165); and Koedt undermines the role of the penis in female orgasm. Friedman wittily remarks: “Man has suffered the ultimate humiliation. He has become expendable and his penis irrelevant, replaced by his ‘superior,’ the vibrator” (p. 161).

The final chapter places the male genitalia back into man’s hand and into the hands of the manufacturers of “erections.” The latter, Friedman writes, no longer see the penis as an entity with a “mind of its own” (p. 53), as did, for example, da Vinci. Viagra and similar drugs have turned the penis into an abject slave of his owner’s whims and desires. Unfortunately, this chapter often digresses into minute scientific details about medical and drug experimentations and penis surgery; these details can alienate a reader who is less interested in scientific terminology.

This reviewer believes that *A Mind of Its Own* would have become a stronger book if it considered the role of the penis in some major non-European cultures. Also, the book would have benefited from a more careful editorial work, condensing or deleting some of the extensive elaborations on the personal traits and histories of individuals as well as detailed scientific experiments associated with the penis.

Wisam Mansour, Department of English Literature
Fatih University, Istanbul/TURKEY
e: wmansour@fatih.edu.tr