The Reformed tradition remains an important subject of study—not because it explains the entire psychology of our modern capitalist world, but because it offers the basis for understanding Protestant Christianity in an increasingly secular world.

An exhaustive, almost encyclopedic, display of information will leave readers feeling a bit overwhelmed, so many may find that the book is best read in sections and used as a reference work, especially because the index and notes are complete, accurate, and helpful. Nonetheless, Benedict's writing is not dry; amusing anecdotes frequently help to lighten the writing style and to provide poignant illustrations of his points. *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* is a welcome reference work for anyone interested in the development of the Reformed tradition in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.

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Laura Gowing. *Common Bodies. Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. viii, 260.

In 1996, Laura Gowing published the pioneering and oft-cited *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London*, a work which transformed the study of court records in women's history. In that work, Gowing showed how the law was accessible even to women of modest social status as a means of resolving personal grievances: women used words in the everyday settings of the street, the alehouse, and the marketplace to stake out their own sexual reputations, and to regulate the conduct and social standing of their female neighbours. In her new eagerly-awaited book, Gowing has gone one step further: she has shown how women's touch was "one of the controlling mechanisms of early modern society, and one of the most intimate instruments of patriarchal regulation" (p. 80). It is a work that will appeal to early modern historians and literary scholars alike; it deserves an audience beyond these disciplines, as well as a wide general readership.

The introductory chapter, "Uncertain knowledge," maps the diagnostic tools that were applied to understanding human physiology in the seventeenth century, illustrating the competing modes of interpretation (which did not all conform neatly to Laqueur's "one-sex" model) and the importance of seeing and touching as primary diagnostic tools. "The politics of touch" charts the range of power relationships in which tactile exchange given and received by women was licensed—and enforced—in numerous social situations, such as the bedchamber (in which female servants often shared the same room, if not the same bed, as their employers). In "Consent and desire," sexual touch come into focus, as Gowing illustrates sex, consensual and otherwise, between women and men, and also those cases of erotic touch between women. This chapter is especially

insightful in highlighting the historical importance of a change in the conduct of rape trials during this period. Up until the end of the seventeenth century, a prosecutor had to prove that a husband's "property" (that is, his wife) had been "damaged" by the sexual interference of another man. After this period, the issue of female consent was of primary concern in proving whether or not a rape had occurred. The final three chapters consider pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing: from "Perceiving pregnancy" (in which Gowing explores the fascinating question of how women thought about and interpreted their own pregnancies, and other women's, in the era before ultrasound and *in utero* photography) to the disturbing evidence of "Childbed conflicts," where midwives could and did take advantage of the suffering of the unmarried woman in labour to extract information about the father of the baby. Though she cites the full range of social experiences, including the sexual preferences of Queen Anne and her inner circle of noblewomen, Gowing's concern is never far from the poorest women in society. Her final chapter "Precarious parenthood" exposes the "fragile economy of mothering," in which parishes even calculated the cost of allowing a poor and low status woman, especially one who was unmarried, to breastfeed her own child (p. 201).

Though "feminist" in its constant insistence upon the imbalance of power in the patriarchal society under scrutiny, Gowing's analysis debunks many of the favourite myths of women's history: lying-in, for example, was not always a cosy opportunity for sisterly gossip; it was sometimes an opportunity for the father to "redistribute" his sexual attentions from his wife to her servant (p. 173), while midwives and gossips could also abuse the mother in their care. The "collectivity of women," Gowing observes, "was never simple" (p. 51). Using the court records that are her *métier*, Gowing shows how, in the realm of sex and reproduction, women's bodies were both the subject and object of tactile scrutiny by other women. Sometimes, this was manifest in the work of "searchers," the teams of experienced midwives who prodded women's bellies and milked their breasts to detect a range of hidden crimes, from unchastity to prenuptial pregnancy and infanticide. For a woman, the degree of modesty which she enjoyed was contingent upon age, the life cycle and marital status: post-pubescent single women, especially servants, belonged to no man, and potentially belonged to all; they were subject not only to the sexual advances of their masters (which we already knew), but to physical examination by their mistresses (a new insight which Gowing fruitfully and startlingly explores). The elderly and the poor did the dirtiest and most intimate jobs, sponsored by their parish to wash and nurse the sick. Though these are not her main sources of evidence, Gowing complements the legal records with an exploration of other contemporary insights, signalling the influence of oral tradition and literary genres upon eyewitness narratives, for example, where sex scenes were described (pp. 106-7), and where early modern jokes provide a rich seam of insights into this distant culture. Some basic and arresting detail emerges in these sources about attitudinal differences towards the body in the seventeenth century. "Naked" for men and women meant wearing

one's shift, an undergarment that was seldom removed. The lack of underwear without breeches emphasised women's "openness" and the ease with which their "privy parts" could be exposed both accidentally and deliberately. In the court records we find Mary Combe, an alehouse keeper's wife from Somerset, who was prosecuted for her "beastly behaviour" in May 1657, when she lay down in the highway and exposed herself, on another occasion "shewing her commodity" to a man who was not her husband, and urging him to have sex with her (p. 39).

This is in many ways a pessimistic book, a reflection of the nature of the primary evidence it deploys: court records by their very nature document failed community and family relationships, violence, infanticide, rape. The book's core polemic is the history of the systematic and unrelenting subordination of women, one where, for example, an expectant mother could be regarded merely as "the ecosystem which determined their future child's health," revealing attitudes towards pregnancy which acted then "as they can do now" to "control women's bodies and undermine women's autonomy" (p. 122). That they *can* and *could* is certain: that this is the most characteristic view of pregnancy today, or in seventeenth-century society, is another matter. Though it sounds even-handed and cautious, did childbirth rituals *really* divide women "*as much as* they bound them together"? (p. 154, my italics) The often primary and mutually supportive relationship between mothers and daughters, or other close female kin, which is evident if one reads different contemporary sources such as women's correspondence, is underplayed here. While the "sisterhood" angle was undoubtedly overplayed in many early feminist histories, understating the potential for compassion between women seems a step too far in the other direction.

The range of responses which are provoked by Gowing's political stance on this and other controversial issues will stimulate much further research and discussion. Not least here is one of the most useful and important assertions in her book: that same-sex desire between women was not officially "unimaginable" before the modern period (p.108), an idea which is often reiterated as a commonplace in the historiography of sex and gender from the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century. This is a provocative and richly rewarding addition to the historiography that I hope and anticipate will be in print for many decades to come.

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John A. Quitslund. *Spenser's Supreme Fiction: Platonic Natural Philosophy in "The Faerie Queene."* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. 432.

Some works are the product of a life-time of learning—and this is clearly one of them. John A. Quitslund's *Spenser's Supreme Fiction: Platonic Natural Philosophy in "The Faerie Queene,"* which explores the crucial influence of Plato and Platonism on Edmund Spenser's epic, argues that *The Faerie Queene's* encyclo-