

Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell.

Katherine Angel. Allen Lane: London, 2012

Reviewed by Alex Dymock

In 2011 I attended a seminar on sexuality and media at the Open University, where a Wellcome Trust post-doctoral research fellow named Katherine Angel read sections of her new book project aloud to a group of academics.

One night, as early morning light grew outside and we lay entangled, a blur of skin and limbs and mouths, I spoke dreamily of how I loved his big frame towering over me during sex; how much I loved his powerful arms around my neck while he came into me behind; how I loved feeling the strength of him as he fucked me – yes, as *he* fucked *me*, because – let's not be coy or disingenuous – that is definitely what was happening.

I trailed off in my reverie. He looked at me, shifting his head back as if to get a clearer view, and said, You're not really a feminist, are you?

I laughed.

I didn't explain why. (9)

To hear this very personal narrative spoken in the context of an academic seminar felt arresting and unfamiliar, divorced from the familiar grammar of sexualities scholarship we might otherwise anticipate in such a setting. Yet it is also entirely apt that Angel's text was presented to an academic audience. *Unmastered: A Book On Desire, Most Difficult To Tell* has, since publication, travelled far outside those close-knit academic circles, but its relevance and importance for scholars of sexual ethics and politics cannot be underestimated.

Many scholarly texts have been devoted to the question of sexual desire and sexual politics, of the tension between living with one's desires and what one's political commitments, borne out in our scholarship, seem to command and prohibit. Angel's debut meditates on this question for all of its 336 pages. But despite its author's academic credentials, *Unmastered* offers no obvious polemic and evades easy description. Described as 'literary non-fiction' (Angel 2012), the book charts a serpentine path through the crests and troughs of sexual desire in a heterosexual relationship between Angel and her Man ('My Man' (329)). While the book has been touted as a 'sexual memoir', the relationship at its centre is really a vehicle for a range of broader questions that address the dilemma of how we talk about female sexuality in the public realm, and how desire is contained and stymied by the production of discourse. How should we understand our desires, the 'things that are hard to say'

(48), in the context of a 'post-feminist' culture, particularly when feminism has had such an arresting presence in contemporary sexuality studies within the academy? 'What is it to define, or even to know, our desires – to identify which are our own, and which result from a kind of porousness?' (22), Angel asks.

For the first portion of the volume, as Angel grapples with the question of how to accommodate her Man, of her desire as 'proof of [his] masculinity, of [his] endless potency' (30), it is feminism that seems her adversary in this project: '[a]n imagined audience looms: a forbidding aunt, perhaps, with a wagging finger, a stern eye' (48) writes Angel, and later: 'I want to throw off my fabric feminism, my stitched up head. I want to be free!' (223). But despite this initial desire for divergence from the feminist project, Angel instead suspends these 'canon[s] we choose' (205) and holds them in tension with one another. In a caustically funny section of the book, she recalls breaking the mood in the room at another academic research seminar on pornography by resisting the now-familiar discourse first formulated in the 'sex wars' of the 1980s that pornography is educational, that it counters heteronormativity and undoes the stigma of non-normative bodies and sexual identities. At first, this seems an obvious obverse to her apparent divergence from feminism to pursue her desire, but the very recollection of this obverse is part of Angel's project. The inability to make space for ambivalence amongst the discourses that strive to contain desire, to quantify it, make evidence out of it, will be familiar to many readers who have also struggled to perforate these discussions and find a locus for their own desires within them. But of course, this ambivalence is precisely the point of the book. The very real desire to express ambivalence is what sexualities scholarship often fails to accommodate.

Unmastered instead resists easy containment in any overarching cultural narrative of female sexuality or the critical responses that are devoted to it. Far from imagining that desire can be suppressed into the internal vacuum of personal disclosure at a once-remove from sexual politics – despite some reviewers' insistence that Angel is merely 'oversharing' (Dunn 2012) – the form the narrative takes feels both closely intimate and munificently expansive. Words are scattered across its length in short aphorisms, questions and exclamations. The volume's sparseness has led some reviewers to complain about the scarcity of text (Dunn 2012; Stevenson 2012; Nehring 2013), as though the book does not offer enough bang for its buck; but the suffusion of expanses of white space seems entirely deliberate, coaxing the reader to inject their own experiences, feelings and responses onto the page, to plot their own desires.

Interestingly, it is seemingly Angel's academic credentials that have most incensed reviewers, and yielded the most damning appraisals of her book. In a *Guardian* review, she is disparaged for unoriginality, as if an academic trained in the history of sexuality should pay greater homage to, or seek to deviate further from, her foremothers. 'There is little in the sensual connoisseurship and conflicted girlishness of *Unmastered* that the novelist Anais Nin didn't explore more eloquently in her six-volume diary' (Stevenson 2012), they sneer. But while Nin is a notable omission from *Unmastered*, the diaries of Susan Sontag, another clear influence, are often mentioned and quoted in the text, alongside Foucault, Freud, Barthes, Woolf and even the lyrics of Steven Morrissey. Other reviewers seem bewildered as to why an

academic would choose to disclose so much of her own sexual experience, foreclosing Angel's project as nothing more than 'adolescent narcissism, excruciating erotic overshares ... pretentious academic jargon' (Nehring 2013). Yet it is precisely these projections of what a woman's book about desire *should or should not be* that frames *Unmastered*. To reject or rebuild them in the particularity of the cultural and critical moment in which we live *now*, is in part its project.

Further, Angel questions the limitations of researching and writing about sexuality in the academy, of the ways in which discourses are sealed up, compressed and endlessly repeated. How should the academic asking these questions become 'unmastered' by these discourses, or interpolate their own desires amidst these repetitions? As Angel so lucidly puts it, '[t]he desire to speak desire is a desire to burst through silence, to puncture. As such, it is also erotic; it contains its own excitement' (205). *Unmastered* is the kind of book many researchers of sexual ethics and politics may initially dismiss as irrelevant to their scholarship, but the questions it raises, of what our investments in desire are and should be, of how we live our own desires through our scholarship, are too important to ignore.

References

- Angel, K., 2012. On Desire and Reflections of Self. *Wellcome Trust*, [online] 11 September 2012. Available at: <www.blog.wellcome.ac.uk/2012/09/11/on-desire-and-reflections-of-self/> [Accessed: 25 June 2013].
- Dunn, D., 2012. Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell (...or Read). *The Spectator*, [online] 26 September 2012. Available at: <www.blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2012/09/unmastered-a-book-on-desire-most-difficult-to-tell-or-read/> [Accessed: 25 June 2013].
- Nehring, C., 2013. Lust Never Sleeps: An Academic's Sexual memoir Puts the *ire* in *Desire*. *Bookforum*, [online] June/July/August 2013. Available at: <www.bookforum.com/inprint/020_02/11683> [Accessed: 25 June 2013].
- Stevenson, T., 2012. Unmastered by Katherine Angel – Review. *The Guardian*, [online] 10 August 2012. Available at: <www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/aug/10/unmastered-katherine-angel-review> [Accessed: 25 June 2013].

Notes on Contributors

