

Diane Wolfthal. *In and Out of the Marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. viii + 252 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$55. ISBN: 978-0-300-14154-2.

The specialization and segregation of space tells us much about psychic life as well as social organization. Hence Diane Wolfthal attends to the representation of sex in five specific locations, the bed, the dressing area, the window (and doorway), the bath, and the street. Citing canonical and moralizing literature, the book treats marriage as the fulcrum around which was structured a spectrum of activities extending from chastity to adultery, prostitution, and sodomy. The meaning of sex is taken to encompass both desire and bodily contact, though the emphasis is on the latter, while the images are almost never genitally explicit. Rather, Wolfthal's study concentrates on images said by the author to be sexual in content but which have been ignored, misread, or found puzzling. Most of the argument uses iconographical method based on the symbolism of motifs and drawing on texts from such fields as theology, fiction, and poetry. For example, the two men reflected in the mirror depicted within Petrus Christus's *Couple in a Goldsmith's Shop* (1449) are identified as lovers due to the presence of a falcon, interpreted as a sign of erotic

bonding, and the empty street around them may signify the sterility of sodomitical relations.

The chronological sweep is ambitious, and images range from the view of a conjugal bed in an eleventh-century manuscript to a page from *The New York Times* in which images of couples celebrating weddings include the union between two men. The geographical coverage spans north and south of the Alps, chiefly the former, and the objects discussed include ivory combs, stained glass scenes from Chartres, Altdorfer's fragmentary murals of bathing from the Bishop's Palace in Regensburg, and numerous Franco-Flemish manuscripts.

Architectural history is not a focus, since the book studies two-dimensional representation and metaphorical spaces. The toilette scenes presented in chapter 2 on the dressing area are often set in noticeably large rooms rather than small chambers, suggesting the place of a spectacle, yet the book tends to assume a clear, modern division between public and private realms along with the value of privacy. The chapter concentrates on an entrancing, anonymous portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton (ca. 1600) shown partly undressed and in the act of combing her long red hair, looking out at the viewer, whom the author believes is exclusively her husband caught in a private fantasy (however, she bequeathed it to a female relative, and other portraits seem to refer to the image as though it was renowned or at least of a type). Her sexual availability is surely indicated, not only by touch and sight, but also by the suggestively repetitive, rhythmic action of the comb, and the implied susurrant of hair and fabric as she gently moves. In many ways, it is behavior as much as place that is investigated in the book, and sensuality alongside outright sex.

The bibliography is informative, although the characterization of scholarship as frequently censorial about sexual matters is somewhat outdated. The conclusion of chapter 5 that images of same-sex lovers "make the invisible visible" (185) is a point already made over fifteen years ago in work not cited. One of the values of the analysis is that many languages are called upon; nonetheless, literary conventions are not always recognized.

An admirable commitment to diversity drives the explications and eclectic mix of material. At times the study is so expansive that coherence suffers, especially in relation to the parameters of sex and of space. It is not clear why the outdoor setting of rural frolic and pastoral fantasy is missing. A panel from a Polish altarpiece of ca. 1505 shows female adulterers, punished in a square by having to suckle puppies, yet numerous other images of punishment or breastfeeding are not considered pertinent under the rubric of "sex."

Overall, the deft interweaving of themes, media, regions, metaphors and spaces is akin to other such well-illustrated studies as Lynne Lawner's *Lives of the Courtesans* (1987) or Michael Camille's *The Medieval Art of Love* (1998). Accompanied by 140 illustrations, many in color, the clear exposition with frequent passages of summary offers a useful synthesis that would also be appropriate for classroom use.

PATRICIA SIMONS

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor