

Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time.

Jeffrey Masten.

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\$59.95.

Jeffrey Masten's excellent *Queer Philologies* is the second of two major works in queer Renaissance studies recently published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Following a year after Valerie Traub's *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, Masten, like Traub, offers a sustained defense of historicism as a queer methodology. Whereas Traub launches her analysis of the circulation and construction of sexual knowledge from the premise that sex is inscrutable, Masten hones in on the word—tracking, across a wide range of Renaissance texts, sexual meanings both immediate and subtle. In doing so, Masten aims to queer the often-staid practice of philology. On the one hand, he wants readers and editors to be more attentive to the way glosses “straighten out” queer or sexually indeterminate terminology. On the other hand, he wants

scholars of sexuality to recognize that the history of sexuality, of bodies and desires, is a history of language.

For the most part, Masten concerns himself with the words (and letters, specifically *Q*) that help make up the history of male same-sex relations. He divides chapters 2 through 7 into three units, or “lexicons”: friendship, boy desire, and sodomy. I will not attempt to summarize the claims of each unit or chapter; there is simply too much material here, too many intersecting and text-specific arguments about the wordscape of early modern male same-sex eroticism to offer a concise gloss. Suffice it to highlight a reading of *sweet* as a word that connotes the identity of same-sex friends; a restitution of the critical conversation about Christopher Marlowe’s homosexuality on the way the word *amorous*, in *Hero and Leander*, suggests both active and passive desire; a probative survey of the many desiring and desired boys who ornament early modern print; and a recasting of the “mongrel” genre of tragicomedy in terms of queer kinship. The arguments in these chapters do not so much revolutionize our understanding of male homoeroticism as they texture it, enriching our sense of the words that render that eroticism legible. These arguments are often content to raise questions rather than answer them—questions about when “conversation” comes to mean “sex,” and when “foundation” ceases to sound like “fundament.” As arguments, they succeed as a series of robust speculations about linguistic effects.

Masten’s structural centralization of the lexicons of friendship, boy desire, and sodomy shifts explicitly editorial concerns to the book’s nonetheless satisfying introductory and concluding chapters. Chapter 1, “Spelling Shakespeare,” brilliantly correlates the early and mid-twentieth-century bibliographic impulse to use spelling to isolate and identify the characteristics of Shakespeare’s compositors with the effort to identify the homosexual based on distinct physiological and behavioral markers. The last two chapters argue for a practice of queer philology attentive to the intersecting discourses of eroticism, gender, race, class, and species. To what extent are “tupped” and “topped” synonyms in *Othello*, and what gets lost, in terms of thinking sex between differently positioned bodies, in the routine critical substitution of the latter for the former? Likewise, what gets lost, in terms of the manifold erotic complexities of early modern friendship, in the Norton gloss on “lover” as “friend” in Portia’s description of Bassanio’s relationship with Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*? Finally, what sorts of normative assumptions about authorship, about the stability and coherence of identity, underwrite the identification of Shakespeare as one of the hands behind *Sir Thomas More*?

Much of the material in *Queer Philologies* has been previously published, some of it long ago, and readers who follow Masten’s work may find themselves skimming through familiar sections. At the same time, most of this material has been substantively revised and updated. Great care has also been taken to compile numerous relevant images from and around the texts under discussion. The result is a beautiful, erudite book that secures Masten’s place at the forefront of both early modern philology and sexual history.

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