

James M. Bromley. *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare*.  
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James Bromley argues that in Renaissance England a variety of nonnormative forms of intimacy, from polyamory to mutual masturbation to masochism, challenged the increasing cultural power of the monogamous, long-term, emotionally intimate, married heterosexual couple. Far from being a historical inevitability, the heterosexual couple gained authority in the Renaissance because “the intimate sphere coalesced around relations characterized by two elements: interiorized desire and futurity” (1). In other words, heterosexual couplehood established legitimacy by laying exclusive claim to emotional depth and to the longevity that comes from the promise of biological reproduction. Nonnormative forms of interpersonal relations came to be viewed increasingly as “failures of intimacy.” Bromley examines how these less interiorized

“pleasures of the body and its surfaces” (14) function as counternarratives that challenge “the authority of couple form intimacy” in Renaissance English literature (2).

Renaissance texts, according to Bromley, contain “intimate scripts” for readers and audiences. By highlighting the many pleasures of the body, these scripts valorize “temporary and situational bonds even when their narrative trajectories ostensibly move toward monogamous coupling” (27). The book’s first chapter uses *Hero and Leander* to illustrate a non-teleological reading practice that resists narrative closure, just as nonnormative intimacies resist the teleological understanding of sex as directed toward heterosexual intercourse-to-orgasm. Chapter 2 argues that *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Cymbeline* both “predicate their male characters’ compliance with marriage upon the repudiation of the anus as a site of receptive pleasure” (49). Chapter 3 examines masochism in plays by Beaumont, Fletcher, and Middleton that “concede representational space” to masochistic pleasures that they ostensibly condemn. Chapter 4, on *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, the *Merry Devil of Edmonton*, and *Measure for Measure*, examines nuns as subversive figures who challenge heterosexual marriage as the site of true intimacy and “imagine alternatives to dominant understandings of the nation as a space” (109). The final chapter argues that Mary Wroth’s poetry and prose, which confront the increasing division between public and private intimacies, represent female homoeroticism in racial terms.

The most refreshing aspect of Bromley’s approach to intimacy is its rejection of the hetero/homo dichotomy common to Renaissance studies. Some queer readings of Renaissance texts merely recast the heterosexual ideal of “coupling, monogamy, and interiority in affective relationships” in same-sex terms (5). For Bromley, the true sites of resistance to the heterosexual couple are those forms of relations that expand our notion of what counts as intimacy.

This book is not a wide-ranging study of intimacy and sexuality “in the age of Shakespeare,” but rather a contribution to queer studies that focuses on the kinds of intimacy and sexuality that Shakespeare’s culture generally marginalized or ignored. This narrower focus is a worthy subject, but it may disappoint readers attracted by the title and hoping for a more comprehensive view. Two more substantial issues may give readers pause. First, Bromley often pushes the limits of textual evidence. For example, his claim that *All’s Well* dramatizes the need for men to reject the pleasures of “anality” depends on taking the king’s “fistula” as an anal fistula. However, as Bromley himself points out, the king identifies the fistula as a cardiac ailment. Bromley negotiates this problem by citing a scholar who claims that “the reference to the heart is part of the play’s general displacement upward of the sexual resonances circulating in it” (50–51); he adds that anal fistulae are commonly discussed in Renaissance medical texts. On this tenuous evidence, which contradicts the only concrete textual evidence in the play, the anus becomes the crux of the plotline of curing the king. To his credit, Bromley recognizes the difficulties of his practice of “reading against the grain.” But it results in the awkward habit of conceding that his texts dismiss or outright condemn the nonnormative intimacies that he wishes to highlight, while insisting that the texts are valuable for their “circulation of knowledge about these queer affections” (1).

The second problem is historical. The book claims that early modern England saw a major “cultural shift in the definition of intimacy” (179). But the argument pays insufficient attention to earlier understandings of intimacy and overstates the significance of the Renaissance as a definitional moment. Bromley implies that individuals previously had access to a more diverse set of intimacies, with monogamous heterosexual couplehood coexisting more easily with other relationships; yet the history of medieval Europe does not support such a notion. The larger point that texts can give “representational space” to nonnormative intimacies is certainly true, but this phenomenon is not specific to the Renaissance. A similar point might be made using Chaucer or Malory. Although Bromley aims to historicize, the project is ultimately more invested in current politics of sexuality. His introduction and epilogue reveal a deep interest in how intimacy is articulated in contemporary debates over marriage equality, in particular how “arguments for the legalization of gay marriage in the US often proceed by way of further marginalizing certain experiences of pleasure, such as *S/M* or promiscuity” (185). This is an important issue, but Bromley’s analyses of Renaissance texts are often more useful for understanding theoretical debates within queer studies than for understanding the texts themselves.

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