

Gary Ferguson. *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008. ix + 376 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6377-5.

Gary Ferguson has written a fine book offering new readings — based on original archival research, manuscript consultation, and the secondary critical work of other Renaissance and sexuality studies scholars — of some well-known and lesser-known French sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts. Four central chapters — on Ronsard, the court of Henri III, Montaigne, and Brantôme — are framed by two chapters that describe the Italian inheritance of French Renaissance writing (including an extended reading of Boccaccio's tale of Pietro di Vinciolo) and homoeroticism in religious discourses and practices that pave the way for regimes of sexuality associated with modernity. A fifty-page introduction provides a historical and theoretical overview of the field of sexuality studies and premodern homosexualities, with a final section contextualizing the concept of queerness in his readings.

For Ferguson, the question of whether or not premodern homosexualities are queer is bound up with history in two ways: there are practices and discourses that seem “queer” or sexually strange to modern readers and that denaturalize modern normative understandings of sex and gender. But Ferguson also explores the question of what might have been queer in its historical context, what practices and discourses were marginalized “back then.” Thus he engages in what Susan McCabe calls “queer historicism” (“To Be and To Have: The Rise of Queer Historicism,”

GLQ 11 [2005]: 119–34), a practice that strategically combines the historicist necessity of charting or taxonomizing sexual behaviors and experiences with the recognition that “sexualities are socially constructed and can take multiple forms,” and that “history is riddled by multiple desires” (121), some of them modern ones. Included in the introduction is a discussion of the roles of “nature” and “taste” in early modern discourses of homosexuality (37–49), demonstrating the degree to which modern debates and early modern ones both resemble and differ. Ferguson’s approach is more historical than not, but both queer theorists and historicists will find satisfaction in the judiciousness of an approach that does not sacrifice the talents of either.

In embedding Boccaccio’s story of Pietro di Vinciolo in a whole set of early modern intertexts and histories of textual and cultural transmission, Ferguson is able to provide salutary nuance to the many debates about sexual identity that have attended critical readings of this narrative and to address specifically its transmission and reception in sixteenth-century France. Throughout, he demonstrates the degree to which early modernity necessitates simultaneous analyses of both gender and sexuality to understand the manifold forms homoeroticism takes. In reading the *Essais*, especially Montaigne’s essay on friendship with its extended meditation on love between men, Ferguson carefully tracks the historical layers of editing and addition in the text to illuminate new ways of understanding Montaigne’s engagement with classical traditions of pederastic love. Like others — especially Todd Reeser (*Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture* [2006]) and Marc Schachter (*Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship: From Classical Antiquity to Early Modern France* [2008]) — who have tackled the question of Montaigne’s homoeroticism, Ferguson concludes that Montaigne “equivocates” (243), and that this equivocation mirrors the essayist’s ambivalence about friendship between men and between men and women. Nevertheless, as Ferguson’s readings show, Montaigne’s affective encounters also open up new paths and possibilities of thought.

One aspect of sexual discourse Ferguson is careful to highlight, especially in chapter 5, which deals with the figure of the androgyne or hermaphrodite and with female homoeroticism, is pleasure, particularly the pleasures derived from homoerotic “tastes.” This chapter provides a definitive survey of early modern French adaptations of the Aristophanic myth of the androgyne or hermaphrodite, building upon numerous primary sources and secondary studies of this quintessential figure of sexual and gender ambiguity. He discusses the efforts to heterosexualize the androgyne (in Christian allegorizing interpretations of Plato and in, for example, Marguerite de Navarre, as Reeser’s work has also done), while he also persuasively demonstrates the persistent queerness of the figure, especially in its physical manifestations (in both science and literature, from Ronsard to Montaigne, Brantôme, and D’Aubigné). In particular, this chapter explores the deployment of the myth to imagine sex changes and female same-sex eroticism, engaging the debates about the relative invisibility of lesbianism except when it challenged prevailing norms of gender. There is an excellent discussion of Brantôme’s efforts to come to terms with the mysterious

pleasures of women without men, successfully conveying the degree to which male writers were fascinated, then as now, with what women do together.

In sum, Gary Ferguson's study is rich, informative, and lively. While one might quarrel with particular readings, their strength is to inspire further detailed interpretations of the sexually voluble archive of early modern France as it constitutes — and yet also in many ways refuses — a genealogy of modern regimes of homosexuality.

CARLA FRECCERO

University of California, Santa Cruz