

Gisele Mathieu-Castellani. *Narcisse, ou, Le sang des fleurs: les mythes de la métamorphose végétale*.

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“Dis-moi quelle figure mythique te hante, je te dirai qui tu es, quel est ton désir” (248; “Tell me which mythological figure haunts you, I will tell you who you are, the nature of your desire”). This Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani claims to do with the poets of the second half of the sixteenth and first decades of the seventeenth centuries in France: because myths are collective dreams and the poet’s phantasms, like a waking dream, reveal his desires and make up for the disappointments of real life. Two distinct groups of poets, for Mathieu-Castellani, occupy the period: the baroque (Sponde, D’Aubigné, Nuysement) and the mannerist (Ronsard, Tyard, Jamyn, Desportes, Théophile, Tristan). Given to categorical assertions, truth, and figures of daring — Prometheus, Sisyphus, Ixion, Tantalus — the former reveal their virility. Preferring young men turned into flowers — Adonis, Hyacinth, Ajax, and especially Narcissus — the latter express an aesthetic vision grounded in illusion, instability, discontinuity, melancholy, and a different Eros: homosexual, or bi- or transsexual, in the last case expressing a writer’s feminine side (“part de féminité,” 170); “féminité secrète,” 131) or dream of femininity (“féminité rêvée,” 16). Mathieu-Castellani develops these arguments in almost complete isolation from other literary critical or historical studies. Her bibliography of principal secondary sources runs to no more than thirteen entries (including Abraham and Freud, Gide and Valéry); the handful of critical works dates mostly from the 1960s and ’70s (Odette de Mourgues, Marcel Raymond, V. L. Saulnier); only the preface to a critical edition brings us into the early 1990s.

Flowers in this study are unmitigatedly feminine. Ajax might seem to resist this formula, but even he is said to be feminized by his metamorphosis. That warriors in their deaths were frequently compared in ancient epics to flowers cut down or languishing is not considered (the *Iliad*'s Gorgythion and Euphorbus; the *Aeneid*'s Pallas and Euryalus) nor that flowers might speak also of youthful male beauty. Adonis, Hyacinthus, Narcissus are simply figures of femininity; Adonis's beauty is "all feminine" ("toute féminine," 134) and this, curiously, after the author notes Ronsard's detailing of the adolescent's nascent beard, a marker that returns in his celebration of the young King Charles IX. This is a topos from ancient pederastic poetry, the *lanugo* (see chapter 2 of my *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture* [2008]). Yes, there is sexual ambiguity here, but not straightforward femininity or effeminacy. More precise distinctions are needed.

Yet more egregiously, Mathieu-Castellani simply conflates ancient pederasty, same-sex desire in the Renaissance, and modern homosexuality. Orpheus might have been figured as the "inventor" of pederasty, Thamyris does not dispute with him the privilege of having been the "first homosexual" ("le premier homosexuel," 52). Yes, Catullus sings the charms of a beautiful youth while accusing another man of being a catamite (*cinaedus*); yes, Ronsard turns the charge of sodomy back on those who level it against him. These are not examples of homosexuals bickering ("un homosexuel peut à l'occasion trahir injurieusement d'inverti un adversaire," 138); they must be read in the light of different cultural understandings of sexual acts and roles and their social significance.

Mathieu-Castellani's book appears in Droz's *Seuils de la modernité* series, inaugurated so brilliantly by Terence Cave's *Pré-histoires*. The barely sketched argument here concerning modernity raises questions. It involves an evolution from Pléiade erudition and the reality accorded to myths to their vulgarization and reduction to mere ornament and toward an aesthetic of negligence and the discontinuous. The latter criterion was said to be typical of all mannerists, however, including the earlier poetry; the former is illustrated with reference to Desportes, Théophile, and Tristan, yet the disappearance of a bloodthirsty Diana is established not with reference to Ronsard and earlier mannerists, but Scève, Jodelle, and D'Aubigné, the last in particular identified with the baroque, always more violent — and more virile.

Mathieu-Castellani has a prodigious knowledge of this poetic corpus; as a result, even seasoned readers are likely to discover examples of which they were unaware. It is also certainly the case that early modern writers used ancient myths to express forms of desire considered illicit. Unfortunately, devoid of any engagement with the work of historians of ancient and early modern sexuality and gender (Foucault, Halperin, Bray, Rocke, Ruggiero, to name only the most obvious) or of scholars bringing these issues to bear in French Renaissance literary and cultural studies (myself, Poirier, Long, Kritzman, Freccero, Yandell, and many others), Mathieu-Castellani's book ultimately offers, from these perspectives, more confusion than insight.

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