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Lewis C. Seifert, *Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. xi + 339 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-472-070580-9. \$28.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-05058-1.

Review by Louise K. Horowitz, Rutgers University.

Lewis C. Seifert's volume *Manning the Margins* proposes a thoroughly researched and carefully constructed study of texts concerning gender and sexuality in seventeenth-century France. Seifert highlights "marginalized" forms of masculinity that contest dominant, normative ones. His study, which extends to early modern France a critical approach more often associated with the Renaissance, examines these writings in their time period and for their role as precursors of contemporary analysis pertaining to gender and identity. Seifert is focused on the ways in which dominant masculinity is challenged not only through the voices of women, as three decades of feminist scholarship have shown, but just as significantly through the voices of "marginalized" men.

Seifert argues that early modern France provided a broad diversity of written expression regarding masculinity, and he asks his readers not to assume that the voice of "classical" France and of the absolutist monarchy represented the sole paradigm, an assumption he believes has colored some feminist scholarship. He argues for incorporating into the canon of literary and cultural history less audible discourses that, primarily for ideological reasons, have not always been fully "heard."

Seifert focuses on both the inter- and intra-subjective experiences of the masculine subject. His main theoretical model is Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*, [1] but *Manning the Margins* also deftly weaves into its narrative other important theoretical writings, from both North America and Europe. He has clearly read, absorbed, and integrated a voluminous amount of primary and secondary works. The endnotes are very thorough, and they demonstrate the author's committed intellectual exchange between the seventeenth-century writers under consideration and contemporary cultural directions.

There are six chapters, four of which compose part one, entitled "Civilizing the Margins." Chapters five and six form part two, "Sexuality and the Body at the Margins." There is a well focused introduction, and, in lieu of a traditional conclusion, a clever "Afterimage." (The engraving by Bosse is a useful visual recapitulation of what Seifert has critically embraced throughout his work.) Because the book is intended for an audience beyond one that reads French with ease, the prose citations are provided in English translation alone; in the case of poetry, the presence of both the original French and the English translation assure a smooth reading experience.

Seifert's opening chapter is devoted to Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de Méré, whose extensive writings on the idealized seventeenth-century figure of the *honnête homme* have, in his opinion, been insufficiently viewed through the prism of gender. Méré, argues Seifert, strove to create a new paradigm of ideal masculinity, but his tantalizing goal of portraying an *honnêteté* "that genuinely relied on both heterosociability and homosociality and that seems to put male-female and male-male relations" (p. 52) on an equal plane, was never ultimately realized in the Chevalier's work. Because of his focus on the elusive *je ne sais quoi*, a quality that would ideally serve to distinguish an exclusively male *honnête* class,

but which could not by its very nature be defined or delineated, Méré failed to transcend binary thinking on gender and thus to situate his newly conceived masculinity beyond a heterosexist conceptualization.

In chapter two, “Effeminacy and Its Meaning from Court to Salon,” Seifert examines the role of men in the salon circles of seventeenth-century France. In a battle for power and dominance, the “salon man,” while demonstrating subservience to female authority, had also to deflect the attacks of other male writers within the salon. Seifert looks first at the uses of satirical charges leveled against salon and court culture. The middle section is devoted to a study of the ideal of *galanterie*, which Seifert interprets as revealing “the destabilizing effects of civility’s attempts to refashion the relations between men and women” (p. 11). The “salon man,” who relied on a perceived gentleness, *douceur*, as his preferred modus operandi, was constantly at risk of being judged effeminate. Ultimately, as Seifert writes at the chapter’s conclusion, the anxiety pertaining to effeminacy was projected onto the culturally significant figures of the *précieuse* and later the *petit-mâitre*, as both came to assume the impulses of the salon gentleman trapped between the mandate to “serve” women, while still left to negotiate the intra-male rivalries of that world.

Chapter three, “Vincent Voiture and the Perils of Galanterie,” and chapter four, “Madeleine de Scudéry’s Tender Masculinity,” amplify the concepts developed in chapter two. The critical focus remains on the salon, but through an examination of specific players. Discussing the legacy of Vincent Voiture principally through the account of his nephew, Martin Pinchesne, Seifert emphasizes how Voiture’s person and letters combined to form an indivisible privileging of *galanterie*, specifically in the domain of conversation. Seeking to transcend his bourgeois origins, Voiture moved to deflect attention from his social class, adopting a reliance on performative *galanterie* as the means to cultivate inclusion in the aristocracy. Less sympathetically than Pinchesne, however, Voiture’s critics satirically portrayed him as a quintessentially effeminate frequenter of salons, thereby demonstrating the cultural anxiety Seifert discusses in chapter two. The conclusion regarding Voiture intensifies the earlier one on Méré: “normative masculinity continually adapts itself to keep the edge over both women and subordinate men” (p. 116).

In his fourth chapter, Seifert argues that Madeleine de Scudéry, both in her fictional works (*Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*) and in the *Chroniques du Samedi*, prioritized *douceur*, with its clear connotations of sweetness and softness, and melancholy (in a non-clinical sense). What especially interests Seifert and what increasingly preoccupies him in part two, is a view of gender wherein “the boundaries between masculinity and femininity are blurred” (p.118). Women’s agency could significantly modify virile heroics, permitting an affective richness heretofore denied men. As noted by Seifert and others, Scudéry, seeking to establish “a fluid boundary” (p. 125) between male and female, ultimately proposed the clear possibility of “an affective life beyond gender” (p. 133). Seifert suggests, however, that the idealization of *la tendresse*, much as was the case for the *je ne sais quoi*, limited its potential for transcending binary gender division. Tender friendship was so clearly idealized in Scudéry’s writings that an achievable “state of gender neutrality is itself elusive” (p. 133).

Chapter five, “Writing Sodomy: Satire, Secrets, and the Self,” and chapter six, “Border Crossings: For a Transgendered Choisy,” form part two of Seifert’s study. The elite sodomite and the male cross dresser especially intrigue him as he investigates how these figures affirmed their perceived self-identity in the larger social universe. In the fifth chapter, Seifert offers interpretations of three distinct but related discourses on sodomy in seventeenth-century France. Arguing against Michel Foucault, who suggested that with the end of the Renaissance the voices of homosexuality grew silent, [2] Seifert persuasively demonstrates that “sodomy was audible” in early modern France, “but the loci from which it was spoken (about) have mostly been marginalized by the ideological forces of literary history” (p. 156). Seeking the eclipsed voices not in canonical works, but in manuscripts of poems and songs of lesser known authors or in the ignored writings of more famous ones, Seifert discusses satirical writings attacking “sodomites.” He focuses on the volumes of the *Chansonnier Maurepas*, a manuscript containing a large

number of drinking songs, parodies of operatic libretti, epigrams, and poems, which, Seifert suggests, served to convey the phantasmatic fears of certain members of the public. Such satires allowed for both the repression of *and* the fascination with sodomy, reflecting the period's intense focus on gender issues in general, while nonetheless bolstering through satirical subjection the heterosexual masculine norm.

In chapter five's second section, "Boisrobert's Cabinet and the Seventeenth-Century Closet," Seifert shifts to the concept of secrecy, which he attaches to the French *cabinet*, the ideal metaphor, much like the contemporary "closet," to suggest both the privacy inherent to as well as the disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity. He examines the work of François le Métel de Boisrobert, a poet and playwright in Cardinal Richelieu's entourage, and particularly Boisrobert's writings concerning two sodomitical personal scandals. Boisrobert, exploiting both the "ins" and "outs" of the metaphorical *cabinet*, was able to adopt a relatively open social persona, rare until the modern era. By confining his discourse on sodomy to primarily an intimate group of acquaintances, he managed to attenuate the risks posed by his behavior. As Seifert writes, "Within circumscribed gatherings, the open secret was (daring) boastfulness or gossip; beyond these spaces it could easily become slander, libel, or accusation" (p.180).

In the final section of chapter five, "Théophile and the Trials of the Sodomitical Self," Seifert examines the late writings of Théophile de Viau, particularly those concerning the writer's two-year imprisonment, in which he most directly attempts to explore his sexual persona. This detailed section stresses what Seifert refers to as "intersubjective realization" (p. 205), evoking clearly his goal of interpreting a written experience testifying to a life beyond the parameters of (binary) gendered sexuality and identity. Viau revealed a profound belief in the transformative possibilities of relations among men. Seifert proposes we focus more on the multiplicity of affective ties afforded to men, rather than on homosexuality per se, as he asks readers to consider the implications, evinced by Viau, of moving beyond the question of identity to the more central one of relationality.

The section on Viau leads directly to the book's final chapter, "Body Crossings: For a Transgendered Choisy." Seifert explores and analyzes the writings of François-Timoléon de Choisy, an abbot, a writer and member of the Académie Française, and an ambassador of the king of France. It is not predictably the public faces of Choisy that interest Seifert here. Rather, he chooses to center his interpretation, which extends the work of other scholars, on Choisy's devotion to the idea of cross-dressing. In his novella of two transvestites who fall in love, *Histoire de la marquise-marquis de Banneville*, and in autobiographical fragments collected and edited as the *Mémoires de l'abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*, Choisy, "by depicting men cross-dressing as women invites us to reflect on the meaning of men traversing gender boundaries" (p. 207).

For Seifert, Choisy, the figure that "performs the spectacle of the male transvestite" (p. 208), advanced the conceptualization of an intense transgendered experience in the early modern period. With frequent comparisons to our era, the author strives to present Choisy as a fully realized interpreter of living "between the boundaries of sex, gender, and sexuality" (p. 232). Hewing closely to the field of transgender studies, Seifert determines that Choisy, by exhibiting extensive cross-dressed scenarios, challenged normative assumptions about both gender and the body. Seifert stylistically drives home his point by mixing up pronouns, referring alternately to Choisy as "he" or "she."

This practice, however, is nothing new, and the best model comes in fact directly from the French seventeenth century. Writing in the century's early decades, Honoré d'Urfé achieved precisely the same effect. His multi-volume pastoral novel, *L'Astrée*, dramatically twisted and turned pronouns to great effect, allowing for the experience of travesty turned transvestism in a fashion both amusing and evocative. This offered precisely the effacement of many different normative boundaries, including those pertaining to sexuality and gender. The failure or choice not to reference *L'Astrée* is inexplicable. Although Seifert seems to believe that the era's fictional transvestism typically led to ultimate disclosure of a "true" gendered identity, this was not the case for d'Urfé, who never concluded his novel, instead

simply extending it, part after part and volume after volume, up to his death. (“Resolution” and the return to “normalcy” were the result only of some posthumous and rather dull “tidying up” by d’Urfé’s longstanding secretary, Balthazar Baro.)

Seifert’s book will unquestionably be of interest for its topic, its approach, and its political agenda to those attracted to detailed study of gender matters and the history of sexuality. For this reader, however, it does not open onto anything larger than itself, except insofar as Seifert maintains that the seventeenth-century writers under consideration offer a clear dialogue with contemporary cultural discussions on gender. Suspecting that he might be challenged for such a narrow approach, Seifert states that he is not attempting to extend his prescribed limits. This is fair, of course, and most authors probably tend in the same direction when they argue their case. But it nonetheless seems permissible to ask if intention is good enough. There is little dialogue between his intense probe and any other discourse, whether historical, literary, or political, pertaining to early modern France. Seifert bores deeply into every writer and text he discusses, dissecting each one for those nuggets that will lead to a full understanding of challenges to normative masculinity. The examples are many, as if to convey, much like La Bruyère’s collector, that one can never have too many tulips; but they reflect only back on themselves.

What Seifert offers is a clear example of “triumphal” gender studies. One is always “at war,” unrelievedly obsessed with the acquisition of dominance and power. The next battle is but a chapter away. And someone always has to “win,” to triumph. In *Manning the Margins*, it is the transgendered Choisy who stands to offer the most authentic means for transcending culturally imposed norms and constraints on masculinity. Seifert refers often to what he views as the intense anxieties of seventeenth-century France concerning gender, sexuality, and the body. His study, too, appears bathed in critical anxiety. Some room for considering playfulness, humor, creative exploration, fantasy and imagination might have been made, but in an essentially “political” expose such as Seifert’s, those qualities are simply ignored.

## NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[2] Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

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