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Gary Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture*. Burlington, Vt., and Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. ix + 375 pp. Acknowledgements, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$114.95 (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6377-5.

Review by Marc Schachter, Villa I Tatti/Harvard University.

Gary Ferguson's handsome *Queer (Re)Readings* is one of three books published by Ashgate in the second half of 2008 considering questions of sexuality and gender in early modern France.[1] Whereas the other volumes largely focus on a more limited number of key texts, Ferguson's 375 page tome offers in its introduction and six chapters a panoramic, almost encyclopedic overview of materials related to homosexuality in early modern France. The book is intricately, even meticulously argued yet often bold in its ambitions. Like Guy Poirier's *Homosexualité dans l'imaginaire de la Renaissance*, the volume draws on and identifies for other scholars an important archive of materials.[2] In the case of *Queer (Re)Readings*, the judicious use of scholarship focusing on the history and historiography of sexuality in early modern England and Italy as well as France should make the book appealing to readers interested in comparative approaches to the study of the history of sexuality. The substantial bibliography and often careful mapping of scholarly terrain will make the book a welcome resource for graduate students and for those putting together reading lists and syllabi. Sections of individual chapters could also be put to good use in undergraduate courses in areas such as sexuality studies, French studies and religious history.

The introduction offers a sensible overview of vexed issues in the study of the history of sexuality. Ferguson deftly orients readers not versed in the often passionate and sometimes knotty debates characteristic of the field while detailing for the initiated what his book adds to the enterprise. Frequently, this involves nuancing what have become commonplaces in many accounts of pre-modern "sexuality." Throughout *Queer (Re)Readings*, Ferguson seeks to expand our notion of what forms of desire were thinkable and perhaps even livable in early modern France. For example, he addresses at several points the influential idea that sodomy was an act potentially committed by anyone and the idea that beautiful boys could under the right circumstances be appreciated by pretty much all men. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick's work, Ferguson demonstrates that alongside such universalizing ways of understanding same-sex desire, minoritizing discourses targeted individuals or groups even as they sometimes offered a conceptual framework in which men could express what they understood to be their natural proclivity or taste for other males.[3] At the same time, throughout the book, Ferguson tracks developments in the organization or expression of early modern desire that he suggests anticipate or contribute to the consolidation of modern forms of homosexuality.[4] The sophistication with which Ferguson pursues these two axes—one focused on synchronic diversity, the other on diachronic continuity—constitutes one of the book's great strengths. In my summary of the contents of each chapter, I will pay particular attention to this dimension of *Queer (Re)Readings* and to some of the ways the book invites further research and analysis. The Introduction concludes with a helpful discussion of methodology. Observing that "the term queer denotes necessarily a relational stance, indeed, ... a contestatory one" (p. 49), Ferguson emphasizes that "in different historical periods not all forms of

homosexuality are necessarily queer in the same ways or to the same degree, if indeed they are so at all” (p. 50), before explaining the range of ways in which “queer” will operate in his exegetical practices.

Chapter one, “Italian Imports,” complements the introduction insofar as it contributes to an ongoing debate in the study of the history of sexuality. Until Ferguson’s book, the debate focused on a tale in Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass* and its reworking in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Engaging with the work of David Halperin and to a lesser extent with recent interventions by Jonathan Goldberg, Madhavi Menon and by Carla Freccero, Ferguson substantially expands the range of primary texts under consideration by addressing a retelling of the Apuleius tale by Girolamo Morlini; two early French translations of the *Decameron*; echoes of Boccaccio’s retelling of the Apuleius tale in Brantôme’s *Dames Galantes*; a novella by Bandello; and Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*.^[5] This list of authors suggests the cornucopian exuberance of Ferguson’s book, and most of the chapters are similarly wide-ranging. In his analyses, Ferguson is particularly critical of Halperin’s take on the *Decameron* and argues that in some ways there is more continuity between modern homosexuals and medieval sodomites than Halperin is willing to entertain. Nonetheless, Ferguson’s goals in the chapter and in the book as a whole are, I think, closer to the vision for the study of the history Halperin offer—if not necessarily to Halperin’s own practice—than Ferguson’s criticisms might suggest. Halperin frequently describes broad patterns and dominant forms of desire and sometimes acknowledges simplifying literary texts to do so. ^[6] Ferguson on the other hand seeks to highlight the existence of unanticipated modes of same-sex eros that sometimes work counter to dominant models. For him, a significant part of the *historical* significance of literary texts lies in their complexity and their queerness lies in the ways in which they do not adhere to cultural norms. Nonetheless, *Queer (Re)Readings* seems at times to answer Halperin’s call for thinking about how sex might be linked at different historical junctures and in different cultural contexts to “partial identity, emergent identity, transient identity, semi-identity, incomplete identity, proto-identity, or subidentity.”^[7]

In an ingenious and refreshing turn, chapter two considers the function of various corporeal manifestations of hair in early modern erotic imaginaries particularly as they relate to pederastic desire, sexual difference and the gendering of men. Ferguson’s analyses of literary texts by figures such as Pierre Ronsard and Marc Antoine-Muret are enriched by his discussions of contemporary portraiture, career aspirations and competition at the court, Renaissance classicism, and the implications of universalizing and minoritizing modalities of accusations of same-sex impropriety. Ferguson’s interest in the unstable and/or disparate forms of same-sex desire manifests itself in particular in his attention to the remarkable mobility of allusions to hair and to its ambiguous semiotics where the same attributes (long hair, smooth cheeks, hirsute buttocks) potentially signify differently in different contexts. The synchronic and diachronic dimensions of Ferguson’s project come together when he suggests that early modern poems potentially celebrating the hairy male body as desirable not only “shed an oblique light on some unarticulated aspects of Renaissance sexual realities” but also “point toward future developments” (p. 145) less invested in pederastic forms of homosexual desire.

One major contribution of Ferguson’s study of Henri III, which is split between chapter three and chapter six, is his careful attention to overlapping elements found in satirical materials condemning the king and in works more than likely seeking to curry the king’s favor and perhaps even commissioned by him. In chapter three, “Mourning/Scorning the *Mignons*: Representations of Heroism and Favouritism at the Court of Henri III,” Ferguson deftly navigates between the Charybdis of homophobic readings of Henri III’s court that sometimes identify with anti-Valois propaganda and the Scylla of more recent work that sees Henri III’s *mignons* in terms of social transformation and conflict between the king and the aristocracy. The problem with the latter kind of studies, Ferguson argues, is that they can’t or won’t engage effectively with the affective dimensions of (the representation of) the relationship between king and favorite. For Ferguson, this affective dimension, which exceeds any utilitarian explanation, is particularly visible in Henri’s intense public mourning for some of his *mignons*. Ferguson

details how, to borrow a phrase from earlier in his book, much of the material circulating around Henri III might “denaturalise heteronormative understandings” (p. 51) of the monarch.

The fourth chapter, “Montaigne’s Itchy Ears: Friendship, Marriage, (Homo)sexuality, and Scepticism,” offers a sustained consideration of homosexuality in Montaigne’s textual corpus. Ferguson’s analyses attend carefully to the evolution of the *Essais*; explore intriguing parallels between friendship, pederasty and marriage; and consider with finesse Montaigne’s engagement with Plato and Plutarch. One of the more intriguing suggestions in the chapter is Ferguson’s demonstration that “Montaigne is making the case for a more historically accurate contextualisation of the [Symposium]—which is also an apology for allowing Plato, in the Renaissance, to become more queer” (p. 229). An inquiry into the history of the politics of historical contextualization would be an interesting direction for further reflection and might offer additional insight into current imperatives to historicize discussions of sexuality in certain ways.[8] But the most surprising part of the chapter—and the section of the book most likely to provoke debate—takes Montaigne’s mention in his *Journal de Voyage* of a group of Portuguese men rumored to have been married in Rome before being put to death as the point of departure for a discussion of “gay marriage” in the Renaissance. Scholars not versed in Montaigne studies might be familiar with the incident from John Boswell’s *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* where, unfortunately, a tendentious translation mars Boswell’s analysis.[9] In contrast, Ferguson is very attentive to nuances in the meaning of the French and also takes into consideration issues of textual transmission while nonetheless reaching a bold conclusion. Hypothesizing that the Portuguese men might have been using *affrèment*, or the ritual and often public binding of two unrelated men in symbolic brotherhood, “to serve their own considerably queerer design: that of living and sleeping together as a couple” (p. 233), Ferguson argues that “the idea of same-sex marriage was quite ‘thinkable’ in the sixteenth century because it could be assimilated within traditional beliefs and practices” and that “men who wished to give to their (sexual) relationship the idea of a standing that, even in the absence of legal recognition, might come from a semi-public (religious) enactment, had at their disposal the means by which they might do so” (p. 232). Ferguson has continued to present ongoing research on the Portuguese men at conferences and the eventual publication of the results of his inquiries promises to be a major event for historians of sexuality and for those interested in a usable history of same-sex unions.

The fifth chapter, “Androgynes, Hermaphrodites, and Courtesans: Women, Queer Nature, and (Queer?) Pleasures,” argues in part that the androgyne and the hermaphrodite “are particularly illuminating with regard to affective and sexual relationships between women and to the differences regulating the conception and practice of female and male homosexuality” (p. 245). This proposal offers an intriguing new direction for work on female same-sex eroticism. One of Ferguson’s goals in analyzing references to Aristophanes’ myth of the origin of desire in same-sex contexts in works about friendship or love between women is to argue that they certainly *could* have been read as sexual. Once again, it is a question of what was thinkable, and as Ferguson puts it, the question of how to interpret such poems “becomes something of a question of how one wants to read them” and that this “was probably the case already in the sixteenth century” (p. 262). Ferguson’s discussion of “lesbianism” in Brantôme’s *Dames galantes* shifts the focus away from the well-studied issue of male anxiety and to the possibility that the *Dames Galantes* might be celebrating a “proliferation of sexual pleasures” (p. 283) beyond those offered by the phallus. As Ferguson observes, the import of such proliferation “should not be underestimated, since it is precisely what is of concern in almost all descriptions of ‘deviant’ sexuality. It stood, notably, at the root of the theological definitions of sodomy, which proscribed all sexual activity that was not potentially procreative” (p. 283). In a brief passage that would seem to point to another underexplored direction for the study of the history of sexuality, Ferguson proposes relating non-normative pleasure such as those found in Brantôme with the work of scholars such as Mark Jordan on sodomy and Michael Bronski on modern gay sexuality and the pleasure principle.[10] (There is one mistake in this chapter should be corrected. The first French version of Plato’s *Symposium* was that of Mathurin Heret published in 1556 and not Louis le Roy’s better known 1558 translation.)[11]

The sixth chapter, “Towards Modernity: On Kissing, Whipping, Confession, and the Closet—François de Sales and Henri III,” is a particularly dense and ambitious chapter and a fitting conclusion to the book. Ferguson explores in detail the intricate relationship between devotional practice and forms of queer desire. He first addresses confessional practice and rules, taking as a point of departure Sales’ description of an ecstatic encounter with a penitent, before turning to Henri III and flagellation. Ferguson draws on a wide range of material to contextualize his analyses, including social histories of kissing, scholarship on the confession including that of Michel Foucault, and histories of the emergence of private space and interiority. One of the most profound and provocative suggestions of the chapter is that the queer presence in and appropriation of devotional practices during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries contributed to the emergence of psychic interiority *and* the closet. Ferguson’s readings in this last chapter thereby aspire to track the trace of the queer in some crucial developments leading towards the constitution of modern subjectivity.

A passing remark in chapter six left me with a question. Ferguson writes that at times “normative discourse can be seen as drawing on queerness in striving to obtain its most powerful effects” (p. 294). What, I wondered, are the implications of putatively normative discourse drawing on queerness? Ferguson’s response is largely to detail potentially subversive—and perhaps even politically enabling—consequences. Ferguson’s book will hopefully stimulate further research into how the queer might also be used to consolidate—however ambivalently—hegemonic or reactionary social forces in the early modern period. In any case, as these chapter summaries suggest, *Queer (Re)Readings* is an impressively wide-ranging and daring book certain to spur further study of its vast archive of materials and incite engaged responses to its bold and often brilliant analyses. Indeed, I would go so far as to say it is a groundbreaking book in the consolidation of the field of queer early modern French studies.

NOTES

[1] The other two are David P. LaGuardia, *Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature: Rabelais, Brantôme, and the Cent nouvelles nouvelles* (Burlington, Vt., and Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008) and Marc D. Schachter, *Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship: From Classical Antiquity to Early Modern France* (Burlington, Vt., and Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

[2] Guy Poirier, *L’Homosexualité dans l’imaginaire de la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 1996).

[3] Sedgwick’s influential discussion of “minoritizing” and “universalizing” discourses is found in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1990).

[4] A different queer model for thinking about the relationship between the past and the present that also focuses largely on early modern France is found in Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

[5] See David M. Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality,” *Representations* 63(1998):93-120 and *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Carla Freccero *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); and Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PLMA* 120 (2005):1608-1617. For a mapping of the disciplinary investments in the debate and in the study of the history of sexuality more generally, see Valerie Traub, “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography” in George Haggerty and Molly McGarry eds., *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 124-45.

[6] Halperin, *How to do*, p. 38.

[7] Halperin, *How to do*, p. 43.

[8] On this, see Goldberg and Menon.

[9] See John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994) pp. 264-5. Ferguson addresses Boswell's translation of the "gay marriage" discussion in Montaigne's *Journal de Voyage* on page 232 of *Queer (Re)Readings*.

[10] Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, Ill., and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998). Among the more intriguing possibilities raised by Ferguson's passing suggestion is that it would offer a new way to tell the history of female-female sex(uality) in relationship to male-male sex(uality).

[11] Plato, *Le Banquet de Platon traictant d'Amour & de beauté, avec argumens sur checune oraison, sommairement deduits*, trans. M. Heret (Paris: Guillaume Guillard, 1556).

Marc Schachter
Villa I Tatti/Harvard University
mschachter@itatti.it

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