

Book Reviews

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Stephen Guy-Bray. *Homoerotic Space: The Poetics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. x + 265pp. \$60.00 (Cdn). ISBN 0802036775.

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The term “Renaissance” is largely out of critical fashion, but Stephen Guy-Bray makes it matter here. His intriguing book deals with the cultural rebirth of a classical elegiac mode in early modern England, and with the “homoerotic space” that this mode opened, and can still open, for writers and readers alike. The literary mourning of men by men, he argues, provides a socially safe means of celebrating homoeroticism: “By testifying to the fact that what he documents has come to an end, the poet can declare his distance from the potentially dangerous story he tells while in substituting a poem for a homoerotic attachment he grants that attachment a textual survival” (22); this in turn grants to later readers a means of articulating such attachments, and such losses. On the other hand, Guy-Bray’s use of the term “Renaissance” in the book’s

title is also misleading, since two of the book's five chapters deal only with the classical sources, to the exclusion of "Renaissance Literature." These chapters provide necessary background to the rest of the book, and are interesting in themselves. Still, it seems ironic that a book that unclosets past readers and imitators of classical literature, or at least their reading practices, should itself hide a closet classicist. In the "Renaissance" chapters (one of which, incidentally, deals at length with the Italian Castiglione's Latin poetry before moving on to Surrey and Milton), Guy-Bray occasionally neglects to translate individual Latin words and phrases on which his argument depends, which might put off some potential readers, including more than a few students of early modern English literature, and more still of the history of sexuality. And this would be unfortunate, since the book has much to offer even, or perhaps especially, to those with "no Latin and less Greek."

While the homoeroticism of Virgil's second eclogue is well known, even infamous, that of the *Aeneid* remains a surprise to surprisingly many. In his Introduction Guy-Bray notes, "I concentrate on the most famous classical texts precisely because they are the most famous: they have been most often read, studied, and used as models for literary composition; indeed, they are the basis for later ideas of the classical tradition and, to some extent, of homoeroticism" (5). However, more readers now know Virgil's work by reputation and allusion than have actually read it — in translation, much less in Latin — and fewer still have read the idylls of Theocritus. Now, far more than in early modern England, "Latin is a 'safe' language that is only understood by the educated" (4); however, it is no longer "the language of sexual knowledge" (4, quoting Bruce R. Smith), and its sexual secrets have largely fallen beyond safety into total darkness. Analyzing these classical works alongside their early modern descendants, both famous and obscure, written both in Latin and in English, sheds light all around. Guy-Bray does a service to classicists, as well as to early modern scholars, in demonstrating how those earlier works were later read, and used, both to open up and to regulate homoerotic possibility.

It is much to Guy-Bray's credit that, despite his subject matter, all of which concerns sorrowful loss, this is not a morose book. Still, one might wish for more than the occasional flash of his dry wit here, since he uses it to such excellent critical advantage. Take, for

instance, his discussion of sexual metaphor in Milton's Latin elegy for his friend Charles Diodati: "the most obvious reason for using sexual metaphors to describe a relationship is that the relationship was or is sexual ... I propose to give Milton the benefit of the doubt and assume that he and Diodati were lovers" (119). Guy-Bray's argument does not depend upon any such assumption; indeed, he later discusses the poem's insistence on Diodati's virginity (129-30). However, by proposing the assumption, he allows the reader of Milton not only a laugh, but also the same homoerotic possibilities that Milton and his contemporaries would or could have found in the classical works that so clearly influenced their work. That is, he opens up a "homoerotic space" for the modern reader and scholar in some seemingly unlikely places.

Like its primary source material, this book is a personal response to a particular time and particular events. In his Postscript ("one motivated partly by my desire for a happy ending" 6), he writes, "the rise of the AIDS pandemic has strengthened the connection between homosexuality and death" (217) — a connection evident in all the works he deals with here, from the poetry of Theocritus and Virgil to the plays of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher. When he argues, in relation to the *Aeneid*, "that one of the lessons Renaissance writers learned from the ending of the poem is that death is the price paid for the embrace of two men" (84), he is also making an argument regarding present readers of ancient and early modern poetry. However, this same lesson is one that the book seeks to supplement or subvert. While the *Aeneid*, like a wide variety of other works across time, suggests that "the price of male beauty is death" (69), poetic beauty grants a form of immortality. The book thus ends on a celebratory note, with a return to a work discussed at the outset: "As I see it, Theocritus's point is that love between men is something that occurs in all places and at all times and is passed on orally: by poetry and by kissing" (224). Guy-Bray's book embraces the past in order to bring past embraces between men to life in the present.
