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Katherine Crawford, *The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xvi + 295 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-76989-1; \$33.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-521-74950-3.

Review of Gary Ferguson, University of Delaware.

In her preface and introduction, Katherine Crawford sets out her project to explore the specificity of the sexual culture of the French Renaissance, paying attention to the “cultural processes through which subjects (in the monarchical and modern senses of the term) constituted themselves in relation to power, configured and understood as potency, sexual desire, and control over bodies” (p. 22). A weakening of the dominance of the Church is central to this account, as is the encounter with Italian humanism and the writings of both ancient authors and more modern ones, notably Petrarch. Crawford’s book thus shares the interest of my own study, *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance*, in the processes of appropriation and rewriting so central to the representation of sexuality in the Renaissance, as well as to its literary and cultural production in general.[1] Both books in addition seek to combine traditional historiographical methods with insights and methodologies from the domains of feminist, gender, and queer studies. In Crawford’s case, this involves drawing on the concepts of “homohistory,” proposed by Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, and of spectrality or haunting, formulated initially by Jacques Derrida and developed in an early modern context by Carla Freccero.[2]

Crawford offers a study that is suggestive and potentially useful but also problematic and unreliable due to the frequency of misunderstandings and misuse of sources, in particular literary, on which it draws extensively. While mis-readings do not always undermine the overall argument, in a significant number of cases they do. Pervasively French extracts are plucked from their context, rendering them impossible to construe. At times, this procedure no doubt contributes to the innumerable mistranslations, frequently egregious, that are found on almost every page, printed prominently in parallel. The nonreader of French will be puzzled or outright misled. For the reader with a command of Middle and Old French, the translations serve all too often as an index of the limits of the author’s grasp on her material. Less serious, though nonetheless irritating, is the introduction of quotations without regard for maintaining syntactical coherence between the inserted text and the author’s prose. Neither was this reader enamored of abrupt shifts in register (e.g., the French, regarded as “prudish” in the late fifteenth century, had become, by the beginning of the seventeenth, “the randy bastards of Europe” [p. xii]) or of the occasional buttonholing (“But, you say, your book is supposed to be about...” [p. xi]; “To explore these implications, dear reader, please read on” [p. 22]). The verb “invoke,” frequently used for “evoke,” is repeated to the point of becoming a stylistic tic. In the context of a review—even of the generous proportions allowed by H-France—it will be possible to signal only a small representative fraction of both the larger and the more detailed problems associated with each chapter, following a summary of its principal arguments.

Chapter one examines the commentary on and reworking of the figure of Orpheus. Emphasizing the ambiguities of the story as transmitted by Virgil and Ovid that undermine Orpheus’s

currency as an example of marital fidelity, Crawford reads him as a sexual failure, a misogynist turned pederast, “who decided at the last minute that he did not want his wife back after all” (p. 14). The twin thesis developed is that the unsettling elements of ancient versions of the story, in particular its homoeroticism, were either denounced or elided in one way or another and that Orpheus was made to serve French nationalistic claims to linguistic and cultural prominence. Problems are evident immediately with the presentation of literary evidence. The first example cited is from Guy Le Fèvre de La Boderie’s *Galliade* (p. 23), which is said to represent France as the heir to ancient civilization, with Orpheus transmitting to the Gauls the wisdom of the past: “Thus the Gallic Bards in following the trace / Mount by the instrument of the great Harper of Thrace.” The French however reads: “Donq des Bardes Gaulois en ensuivant la trace / Monta [singular verb] son instrument le grand Harpeur de Thrace,” i.e., “Thus, following in the tracks of the Gallic Bards, / the great Harper of Thrace strung his instrument.” La Boderie thus presents the Gauls not as the inheritors of ancient wisdom but as its source. The two previous verses, not quoted, are equally explicit (“The sounds of heaven ravished our ancient Bards / Both before Orpheus and before David”), and La Boderie’s preface sets out the argument that the Gauls reestablished the arts and sciences following the Great Flood.[3]

Ronsard is equally misrepresented, to give just one further example (p. 58). While it is true that the leader of the Pléiade was not, in general, given to modesty, it is not the case, in the sonnet quoted, that he places Orpheus, with whom he identifies, above Pindar and Horace in order to assert his own primacy. Writing in ostensibly self-deprecating and conditional mode (“que n’ay-je ... la grace” means not “have I not the grace” but “why have I not the grace”), Ronsard gives the primacy to Orpheus (stanza 1), Pindar, Horace, even Du Bellay (stanza 2), and to Petrarch (stanzas 3-4). Such a position is not without implying rivalry, of course, but to translate Muret’s commentary: the poet “regrets not having the grace to write as he would wish, for then, he says, he would surpass all the best poets, both ancient and modern.”[4] The verb “j’appenderois” means not “I understand” but “I would hang up,” as Muret again explains, in the sense of making an offering in a temple. The *Amours* were only organized into a first and second book in 1560. To say that the first book dates from 1553 is therefore misleading, even though this poem does. The sonnet discussed on pp. 59-60 dates only from 1555, and the commentary is not by Marc-Antoine Muret (in exile at the time) but by the so-called pseudo-Muret. Old French fares even less well in the translations than does Middle French. The early fourteenth-century verse *Ovide moralisé* glosses Orpheus’s aversion to “female nature” as “tous ceulz qui metent lor cure / En vaines cogitations / Et aus vilz delectations,” i.e., “all those who place *their care* / In vain thoughts / And vile pleasures,” which clearly has nothing to do with “all which *gold can cure*” (p. 37, my italics)! [5] “Si” does not mean “if” in Old French (which is “se”); it means “so” or “thus” and often simply adds emphasis.

Chapter two explores the currency of astrology in sixteenth-century France, which continued strong, even if it was contested and destined ultimately to wane. Crawford concludes that predicting the future might offer people a sense of reassurance in an unstable world through its mostly normative pronouncements about marriage and procreation. The material presented is illuminating, though again not without misrepresentation. It is an exaggeration, for example, to say that “merely accompanying a man is adultery for a woman” (p. 78). The verb “accompaigner,” like “congnoistre” (“to know”) in the same passage, is a euphemism signifying to have sexual relations. The elision of context continues to be a problem: Desportes’s supposed “tempered reference emphasizing the grandeur of cosmic fertility” (p. 105) is based on a garbled translation of part of a sonnet addressed to God, in which a series of actions, including “Establishing, over the empty abyss, the foundations / Of the earth, solid, immobile, and fruitful, / Scattering the stars throughout the heavens, in a word, creating the world,” are presented as effortless for the divinity.

Chapter three turns to Neoplatonism in order to argue that the male homoeroticism of the Florentine variety was variously elided or displaced in France and ultimately transposed to a male–female context in the interests of “articulating heterosexual normativity” and “a sexual politics of fertility.” The material’s “queer presumptions” were never completely removed however, and bringing women into the picture created its own ambiguities (p. 112). Again, the reader will need to exercise caution regarding the textual evidence presented. The example of Charles de Sainte-Marthe must suffice. “Or ne peut donq’ estre Amour deshonneste” means “Thus Love cannot be dishonorable.” It does not mean “Now Love can not help but be dishonest” (p. 120). The final line of the octave thus confirms rather than contradicts its title—presented here as if it were the first line—and the speaker does not “[vacillate] between regarding his desire as pure and fearing its profane dimension.” Furthermore, while the octave may describe love in Neoplatonic terms, it is questionable that it is addressed to anyone in particular, since the dedication “A P. de Marillac” prefaces the previous poem on Fortune. Even if we were to take this second one as being similarly dedicated, it presents a description of the qualities of love in the abstract, devoid of any first-person speaker or addressee. Nor does Sainte-Marthe claim that “Love for the Good is always harsh” but that “Love is always readied for Good” (“aprester”/“apprêter” seems to be confused with “âpreté”); similarly, love is not “arrested at its end” but “fixed on” its end or ultimate goal, which is perfection. The following poem analyzed fares little better, and it is difficult to see how, addressing the beloved of a friend, Sainte-Marthe “in effect tells Tolet’s girlfriend that he loves Tolet more than she does” (p. 121). The poem praises the spiritual love and qualities of the object of the friend’s affection, who has nonetheless entered a convent (“desert”).

Chapter four, concerning the reception and imitation of Petrarch, is the most exclusively literary of the book, and, for this reader, the least successful. It is the case that Petrarchan verse was relatively less idealizing and more sexually explicit in France; it is also the case that frankly obscene poetry was written throughout the century, particularly in its final decades and in the early 1700s by the *libertins*. Crawford’s analytical strategy is to designate a category of “bad” poetry, defined as either trite or obscene (“raunchy”) or both. While the former quality is not addressed, the latter is presented in large measure as a reaction against Petrarchan idealism (even if mitigated in France). Such an approach serves to minimize two important factors: first, the wide chronological separation—and therefore the question of evolving tastes, fashions, intellectual climate, and so on—between the reigns of François I and Louis XIII, even if some of the earlier productions were reprinted later; and second, the question of the different poetic genres being practiced. While it is legitimate to compare poetry of different periods and genres, it is more revealing to do so in the light of formal and historical specificities. The choice to categorize the obscene as “bad” seems to me unhelpful, especially since the author argues ultimately that “bad” poetry is good in as much as it reveals a “concern about truth,” “taking on the Petrarchan lie about chaste desire” (pp. 192 and 176). Equally Ronsard is said to have “lied” (pp. 172–173) in advocating decorum while simultaneously penning the *Folastries* and other licentious verse. The criterion of sincerity is inappropriate and not the equivalent of poetic strategy (p. 172, n. 74). Ronsard wrote in different genres and registers; like many of his peers, he imitated not only Petrarch but ancient poets such as Catullus and Martial and ancient forms like the *priaepe*.

The analysis of ten sonnets from the edition of Etienne Jodelle by Enea Balmas is particularly problematic (pp. 190–192). It is certainly true that many contemporary poets wrote variously within and against Petrarchan conventions and that Jodelle’s relationship to this poetic tradition is ambivalent. Nonetheless, for both semantic and formal/historical reasons, it is not possible to see in these poems—which would hardly constitute a “sonnet sequence,” even “brief”—a “subversive rewriting of the Petrarchan tradition” and a “deliberate mocking of the narrative construction of poetic subjectivity.” First, the narrative proposed by Crawford involves explicit

descriptions of sex, including “[e]jaculation,” an acknowledgement of the dangers of contracting venereal disease—“the flowers of dirty sex” (seen as “worth it”), and the “honor in being a good whore.” The problem is, to work backwards, that the “heroic honor” of the whore expresses a caustic irony directed against a woman portrayed as so degenerate as “to surrender her ass” to sodomites (“prester le C...l [= cul]” does not mean “squeeze the cock”). While sexually transmitted diseases are evoked, there is no suggestion of their being acceptable, and the “flowers” appearing monthly on her sex are a reference to menstruation, presented as disgusting. The “moiteuse colle” (“wet glue”) that signals female arousal is presented not positively but in the context of a denunciation of a lascivious woman’s enormous vagina. Neither is the “mousse bout” the “foam tip” of the penis but its “blunt head.” “Au reste, elle se dit belle par tout le corps” does not indicate that “the speaker allows that the rest of her, meaning apparently her feet, is beautiful.” It mocks her further because she claims to be beautiful. The list could go on.

Second, in formal terms, since Jodelle never published his poetic corpus or organized it into formal sequences, his love poetry in general lacks a speaker with a consistent persona and any evolving narrative.[6] In the case of these ten sonnets, they were never arranged as a group by the poet himself; this was done by his mid-twentieth-century editor.[7] In the two surviving manuscript copies (neither by Jodelle), the first five *blason*-like poems, describing the male and female genitals and their sexual joining, are presented as being excerpted from an unknown collection of *priapea*, that, if it in fact existed, is now lost. Sonnets six to eight figure under a separate title and, in the tradition of the *contre-blason*, proffer a viciously misogynous invective focused on the sexual organs of a lascivious female. Sonnets nine and ten, most like the *Contr’Amours* and attacking a woman for her physical ugliness, are found together elsewhere in one of the manuscripts, each with its own title.

With the issue of royal fertility and the sexual image of the French kings, Crawford is on surer ground. The merit of chapter five is to survey the entire century, from the reign of François I to that of Henri IV, in order to reveal the ways in which all of the Renaissance monarchs struggled with “circumscriptions around male homosociality, the requirements of productive and reproductive masculine achievement, and the force of sexual polemic as ‘truth’” (p. 195). For François I, Henri II, and Henri IV this involved principally managing the image of the royal mistresses, complicated in the last case by the question of the desired divorce of the queen and remarriage to Gabrielle d’Estrées. With François II and Charles IX, the central issue became that of producing an heir to the throne, a problem that would subsequently and notoriously bedevil Henri III. Crawford reviews the question of Henri III’s *mignons*, restating her argument that the king deployed a homosocial Neoplatonic strategy. While this interpretation, following the lead of historians such as Jacqueline Boucher, Pierre Chevallier, and Nicolas Le Roux, contributes to a welcome corrective to polemical accusations of depravity, it can also serve a project of (sexual) normalization. To my mind, Henri III escapes a strictly Neoplatonic frame: some of his actions seem truly self-defeating; the language used by court poets writing for him is not one of transcendence and not simply one of love but of burning erotic passion; the excessive nature of his devotion was not only formulated by his enemies but thematized within his circle as willful difference. As a political strategy this seems, in the end, to miss or overshoot the mark and to fail not merely through a coincidence of adverse circumstances.[8] Mistranslations continue to be rife. Royal fertility is one thing, but the “generous bosom” attributed to Henri IV (“our Jupiter”), in a poem by Guillaume (not Gabriel) Du Peyrat, must be restored rightly to the earth (p. 237).[9]

*The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance* is an ambitious but flawed study. While it offers a number of ideas with the potential to prove fruitful, these frequently require further and more careful substantiation. In terms of the presentation of early modern materials, pervasive errors

make the book an extremely unreliable guide. Readers without a firm command of the language, literature, and culture of the period will need to exercise particular caution. Its usefulness in a pedagogical context is severely compromised.

## NOTES

[1] *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). Reviewed in *H-France Review*, vol. 9 (August 2009), pp. 462-466 (<http://www.h-france.net/vol9reviews/vol9no110schachter.pdf>). *Queer (Re)Readings* is not one of the titles from 2008 that figure in Crawford's bibliography.

[2] Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History," *PMLA* 120 (2005): 1608-1617; and Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

[3] The originality of La Boderie's vision is emphasized by Françoise Joukovsky, *Ophée et ses disciples dans la poésie française et néo-latine du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1970), p. 98.

[4] Ronsard and Muret, *Les Amours, leurs Commentaires. Texte de 1553*, ed. Christine de Buzon and Pierre Martin (Paris: Didier, 1999), p. 107.

[5] It is necessary to supply the preceding verse: "Or het femeline nature."

[6] For an excellent brief presentation of the poet and his work, see the introduction by Emmanuel Buron to his edition of Etienne Jodelle, *Les Amours. Contr'Amours. Contre la Riere-Venus* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003).

[7] See Etienne Jodelle, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Enea Balmas, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 531-533.

[8] See *Queer (Re)Readings*, chapter 3 (inc. n. 156, p. 184) and chapter 6.

[9] The omitted grammatical antecedent of "son sein plantureux" is "la terre."

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