

H-France Review Vol. 13 (May 2013), No. 46

William A. Peniston and Nancy Erber, eds., *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*. Lincoln, Neb. and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 292 pp. \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8032-6036-8.

Review by Scott E. Gunther, Wellesley College

William Peniston and Nancy Erber have assembled and translated from French a fascinating collection of texts in *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*. The book includes an introduction written by Peniston and Erber followed by eight “queer” men’s “autobiographies” from nineteenth-century France. The word “queer” is in quotes here, not only because of its anachronistic use, but also because it is difficult to know what term would apply best to the emerging sexual identities of the time. “Autobiographies” is also in quotes, because as Peniston and Erber point out, almost all of these texts were produced under some form of duress, whether they were written by “men incarcerated in prisons or interned under the direction of a prosecutor or under the care of the physician” (p. xiii). Indeed, in the introduction to the book, Peniston and Erber provide readers with extensive information on the environments in which each text was written and are keenly aware of Foucault’s advice that “instead of adding up the errors, naivetés, and moralisms that plagued the nineteenth-century discourse of truth concerning sex, we would do better to locate the procedures by which that will to knowledge regarding sex, which characterizes the modern Occident, caused the rituals of confession to function within the norms of scientific regularity.”

[1]

The book is divided into three parts, each with its own short introduction: the first, “The Dramatization of the Self,” has the longest autobiography, written by Arthur Belorget, also known as “The Countess;” the second, “Autobiographies as Case Studies,” includes texts written specifically for an audience of medical experts of the time; and the third, “Literature, Medicine, and Self-Expression,” contains letters sent from an anonymous writer to Emile Zola who hoped that Zola would be able to find useful material in them for a future novel.

The book begins with Arthur Berlorget’s “The Secret Confessions of a Parisian: The Countess, 1850-1871,” which according to Peniston and Erber is one of the earliest accounts from a French man who was sexually attracted to other men. Though this text seems to have been written freely, without the oversight of medical or legal professionals, the author does show an awareness of prevailing attitudes toward homosexuality of the time. Stylistically, his work is most explicitly influenced by Rousseau’s *Confessions*, but with a narrative that imitates the romantic literature and the *Bildungsroman* of the nineteenth century. His reflections on the origins of his homosexuality point to environmental influences and in particular to his strong relationship with his mother from childhood on: “It is clear that a young man who was brought up from a very early age by a stern father will not develop into a man like the ones whose lives I’m describing here. As to the adolescent who is constantly—every day and every hour—under the influence of the refined, passionate, and sentimental ideas of a loving mother—a woman who is sometimes lost in fantasy, who is always too indulgent or too weak—it’s common knowledge that such early influences will instill a taste for calm, solitude, and feminine pastimes that comes from the mother’s ideas and teaching” (p. 26).

Similarly, he believes that the cause of the specific role he would eventually play in homosexual relations can be found in the environment of his adolescence, and specifically in the fact that his first sexual relation occurred with a boy older than he: "By starting with a boy four years older than myself, I was destined always to play the woman's role--the role of the *mignon* [i.e., an effeminate homosexual]--that distinct and separate type among all men with similar passions...When a young adolescent complies with the request of an older, bigger boy, therein lies the danger" (pp. 22, 25).

Though he does believe that his sexuality was shaped by events during his childhood and adolescence, he does not think that it could ever change later in life--one thing that is clear from his account is that his identity as an effeminate homosexual man is fixed. Moreover, the extent to which Berlorget's conception of his own sexual identity and its origins might be generalized for other men of the time is an open question, but in his descriptions of the social circles he frequented, he explains that other men imagined themselves in similar ways, leading the reader to believe that Berlorget's understanding of homosexuality was hardly unique at the time.

In the second part of the book, Peniston and Erber provide texts, arranged chronologically, from medical doctors from the second half of the nineteenth century who studied men who were sexually attracted to other men. The first, from 1861 was written by Doctor Ambroise Tardieu, who is best known for his studies of men's bodies in which he claims to have found the physical traits associated with homosexuality, such as the size and shape of a man's penis. The text that Peniston and Erber have included here does not focus on bodies, but on the moral vice of homosexual practices, and is based on a series of short testimonies from an anonymous man who tells four short stories of men he loved passionately. From these accounts, Tardieu concludes that "it is difficult not to recognize in pederasts [i.e., homosexuals] a genuinely unhealthy perversion of the moral sense" (pp. 85-86).

The next text comes from Doctors Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin Magnan, who in 1881 no longer describe homosexuality as a moral vice, but as a mental illness. Unlike Tardieu, they did not believe that one could identify a homosexual by physical features, especially since the man in their study was "dark, tall, well built, with a normally shaped skull...He stands up straight; his walk his firm, even a little stiff; and he has no trace of femininity" (p. 90). They conclude that the "penchants" for homosexuality "could not be the product of the influence of vice, [but] reveal a pathological impulse" (p. 100).

There then come two texts, one from 1890 and the other from 1895, written by Doctor Garnier, a medical expert whose work was used in criminal proceedings, and who was particularly interested in studying men with fetishes. In the first text, he describes a man obsessed with the clothes of working-class men and in the second, a man whose fetish was shiny boots. Like Charcot and Magnan, Garnier does not associate physical traits with homosexuality (he makes a point of saying that both men are physically normal) but with mental illness, and in both cases, he argues that criminal charges should be dropped against the men and that instead, they should receive treatment for their mental pathologies.[2]

The book concludes with two texts. The one, written by Doctors André Antheaume and Léon Parrot in 1905, tells the story of a young man named Antonio who was committed to an insane asylum after an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Here, the doctors seem most concerned with finding anatomical or hereditary causes, rather than mental ones. The final text in this section was written in 1905 by Charles Double from prison at the request of Doctor Alexandre Lacassagne who was conducting a study on the motivations for criminal acts. Double killed his mother after she disinherited him, because he was afraid that this meant he would end up "in abysmal poverty" for the rest of his life, since he could not find a job on his own (p. 157). He blames his professional failure on his inability to behave like a man, and in this rather convoluted way, relies on his homosexuality to explain the murder of his mother. It is an odd account, and it is precisely the foreignness of it to contemporary readers that should provide fertile ground for historical questions.

The third part contains letters from an Italian man who wrote to Emile Zola in 1889 in hopes that the autobiographical information he provided would be used in a future novel. The author labels these letters “confessions,” a clear allusion to Rousseau, just like in the first text in *Queer Lives* (p. 170). However, the tone of these letters, written nearly half a century after Berlorget’s “The Secret Confessions of a Parisian,” is patently different. The letters’s author exhibits a confidence, a cockiness even, along with an unapologetic hedonism that is lacking in Berloget’s text as is apparent in the following two excerpts: “I love being admired and I’m proud of my beauty....I’ve always been very arrogant....I hate everything that is ordinary, especially everyday things, and I adore the extraordinary and the impossible in all things....I’m cunning and treacherous, but at times I’ve a silly ingenuousness. Everyone who meets me adores me and nobody resists my charms” (from the author of the letters to Zola, pp. 220-221) and “All my past struggles have proven one thing to me: I was never happy even when I was celebrating the joys that I’ve chosen for myself....I was thin and weak, with an ambiguous sort of beauty, and my regrets always contended with the meager joys that I experienced” (from Berloget, p. 32). The question is how much of this difference can be ascribed to differences between these two moments in time as opposed to the differences between two individuals, providing another intriguing opportunity for historical analysis.

The stories told in *Queer Lives* are accessible and would be of interest to a broad audience but should draw the attention of professional historians as well. The primary texts are enjoyable to read, but to the extent that they raise more questions than they answer, they are ripe for serious historical inquiry. As a side note, I should add that the translation is masterfully done, with a language so natural that at no moment is one aware that the text has been translated. It is a welcome addition to our understanding of nineteenth-century European sexualities.

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), translated by Robert Hurley as *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 69, cited in *Queer Lives*, p. xiii.

[2] Note that neither man was arrested for homosexual acts since such acts were not criminalized in France at this time. One had been charged with attempted murder, the other with indecent exposure.

Scott E. Gunther
Wellesley College

sgunther@wellesley.edu

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172