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The Rainbow Chameleon

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Klawitter, George, *Andrew Marvell, Sexual Orientation, and Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017. 280 pp.

Reading George Klawitter's *Andrew Marvell, Sexual Orientation, and Seventeenth-Century Poetry* is like sitting at a bar listening to someone recount the escapades of an old friend, musing on his attitudes, brilliance, proclivities, and intentions, intentions that perhaps many have never considered. His six-chapter study is the fruit of over three decades of research in Early Modern literature, particularly in queer studies, and the depth and breadth of his interests are evident throughout.

Klawitter's intentions are straightforward enough: he attempts to "explore the various possibilities of sexuality as reflected in Marvell's poetry, not with the hope of settling the question of was he or wasn't he this or that, but rather opening up for readers the rich reach of his creative charm and genius as he plays with sexual innuendo" (22). He joins the growing number of scholars of Renaissance gender theory, particularly those who interpret Renaissance literature through the lens of gay studies, including Jonathan Goldberg, Alan Bray, Will Fisher, Stephen Guy-Bray, Paul Hammond, Mario DiGangi, and Claude Summers, but wishes "[t]o take Marvell farther and deeper into literary sexual experience than he has yet been taken" (9). The book expands his work on same-sex love in the poetry of John Donne in his 1994 *The Enigmatic Narrator: The Voicing of Same-Sex Love in the Poetry of John Donne*[1] to provide a fuller explanation of the slippery

[1]New York: Peter Lang, 1994.

concepts of gender and sexual orientation in the Renaissance, one that includes multiple writers in comparison or contrast. In this earlier "study in gender attribution" (*Enigmatic*, 108), Klawitter interprets the gender of the speaker of Donne's and others' poems either by ignoring the apparent gender-specific pronouns most readers accept as male or female or questioning the assumed gender of the speaker. For example, he suggests that Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" could just as easily be imaging a homosexual debate as the assumed heterosexual one.[2] Donne's similar "The Baite," he argues, can also be read as male speaker to male audience since any pronouns are not gender-specific. Klawitter's main argument here relates directly to his study of Marvell:

> Within a given poem how can we be certain that the pronoun "she" refers to a woman? Unless an author tells us specifically, for example, in a television interview, that pronouns in specific poems are gendered exactly as written, we can only presume that "he" means man and "she" means woman. But without authorial assurance, readers can presume too much, sometimes for centuries.[3]

Klawitter maintains this position throughout *Andrew Marvell, Sexual Orientation, and Seventeenth-Century Poetry,* thereby opening an extremely rich variety of interpretations of relationships expressed.

Each chapter focuses on one aspect of Marvell's possible sexual attitudes in his writing, from heteronormativity to the more intriguing indeterminate, homoerotic, autoerotic, celibate, and devotional indications in the works. To give necessary context, Klawitter offers a full background of sexual attitudes, especially the "fluidity" (more recently termed "flexuality") of gender norms in the Early Modern Period, a context that differs from our 21st-century concepts of sexuality (78). He widens his scope to Marvell's predecessors and contemporaries to offer comparison, contrast, and affirmation, including fellow bachelor Robert Herrick, Shakespeare, George Wither, Sir John Suckling, Richard Crashaw, Donne, Richard Edwards,

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[2]*The Enigmatic Narrator*, p. 68.

[3]Ibid., p. 108.

Erasmus, George Herbert, and Richard Barnfield. Klawatter's analyses of Marvell's poetry will probably confirm many readers' long-held views but most assuredly will challenge the strongly-held biases of some.

Chapter 1, "The Heteronormative Paradigm," argues that Marvell "did write ostensibly heteronormative lyrics, but few of them are satisfyingly heteronormative in that he rarely shows relations between opposite sexes in a favorable light" (25). Not that all women are scorned—some are praised (like Cromwell's daughters) and some are pitied (Chloe and Clora, whom Nigel Smith identifies as Mary Kirke in "An Elegy upon the Death of My Lord Francis Villiers" and Klawitter connects with the Cloras in "Mourning" and "The Gallery," though with different personalities).[4] Klawitter gives more attention to "Two Songs at the Marriage of the Lord Fauconberg and the Lady Mary Cromwell" than most, acknowledging that Marvell indicates "a happy, if traditional, reverence for heteronormative relations," though acknowledging that the praise is more constrained than in "Horatian Ode." As much as Marvell was capable of celebrating heterosexual love, Klawitter admits, "he never celebrated personal feelings" in these poems, "if indeed he ever experienced such feelings" (33). Other poems offer evidence: "The Fair Singer" is a "the reaction of some sensitive person to a song sung by a beautiful woman" but not a personal enchantment of the poet (37). Though "The Gallery" and the three Clora poems celebrate heteronomative love, Klawitter does not find the poet anxious to participate in these relationships. Instead, Marvell serves as a "court reporter" recounting the scenes (45). This in contrast to "fellow celibate" Herrick, who portrays "glorious and glorified heteronormativity, presumably . . . Herrick's own" (46). Even Damon of the Mower poems, whom Klawitter thinks we can link to Marvell himself (57), indicates frustration and not acceptance of herteronormative love.

In Chapter 2, Klawitter turns his attention to "The Indeterminacy of Voice," exploring possible interpretations of genderless speakers in Marvell's poetry to expand what are usually interpreted as heterosexual encounters, including "The Definition of Love." Though he

[4]Klawitter, p. 41; Smith, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003; rev. ed. 2007), p. 16, note on line 69.

admits Fate in this poem is a woman, the poem never specifies gender, and we are never told whether Fate's jealousy in keeping these loves parallel and apart is heterosexual jealousy: "she could be jealous of the narrator's loving a man she wants for herself or she could be jealous of the narrator's loving a lady other than Fate." The interpretation is totally the reader's own (73). Klawitter offers another intriguing reading in his discussion of "Young Love," attempting to "rescue Marvell from the scum of sexual infelicity" in this seemingly pedophilic poem (75). Interpreting the term "infant" in the line "Come, little infant, love me now" (line 1) as the manner in which we reference another adult as "Baby" or "Babe," he assumes the addressee is fifteen years old ("Common beauties stay fifteen," line 9), not a toddler, so older than Juliet in Shakespeare's play and not a victim of deviant sexual advance.

Although Klawitter warns against political interpretations of all of Marvell's works ("it is dangerous to read a rug of Caroline subtext under all of them," 74), he does present a political reading of "Young Love" as praise of and warning to King Charles as well as Marvell's own "attempt to rewrite his Royalist feelings as he dallied with Parliamentarianism" (76). Here again pronouns of indeterminate gender allow diverse readings as evidenced in the subsequent discussion of Thomas Campion's lyrics. Klawitter celebrates this ambiguity, praising Marvell and Campion for "creating through language an opportunity for readers of all sexual orientations to enjoy a mirror of their emotions in poems of high-quality lyricism" (91).

"The Homoerotic Marvell," Chapter 3, offers a focused look at homoeroticism in chosen Marvell lyric poems, particularly the enigmatic "The Unfortunate Lover." Here Klawitter turns to Erasmus's letters and the dramatic tradition of Damon and Pythias to argue that affections between men "(locker room camaraderie)" were not only accepted but encouraged and even envied throughout the centuries (26). Klawitter especially appreciates "Unfortunate Lover" because of its indecipherability and lack of specific historical occasion, since it justifies a "reader's response" more than most, "making it in some ways a more satisfying read because we are not distracted by facts, i.e., not cemented to one historical moment with exact characters hogging the imagination's stage" (99). However, he does acknowledge the reader must follow clues within the poem that

confirm some interpretations more than others, and the strongest evidence for Klawitter points to a homoerotic relationship between speaker and "my poor lover" (line 11) with possible autobiographical indications—"How satisfying it would be to determine the actual identity of the lover and discover how he fits, if he does fit, into the sketchy web we have of Marvell's personal love experiences" (104). Most earlier scholars, he admits, have avoided the homoerotic subtext as a result of social mores, but now such a reading should not only be possible but probable. And, as Klawitter comments on those who disagree, "To them I say, the burden of proof is on them. . . . it seems to me that erring on the side of the 'authorial fallacy' can work in both directions—if I am wrong, you can be just as wrong" (11).

In Chapter 4, "Andrew Marvell and Autoeroticism," Klawitter vehemently asserts his right of reader interpretation in offering a provocative, even unsettling reveling in the "delicious sexual ambiguity" pervading some of Marvell's most famous poems. In considering the autoerotic undercurrents in several poems, Klawitter offers a perspective on the history and neglect of the clitoris in society and literature. His thorough discussion of "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn," a poem deemed "provocatively sexual and curiously clitoral," is based on his article "Andrew Marvell and the Nymph's Little Foot" in Gilles Sambras's 2008 *New Perspectives on Andrew Marvell*.[5] Klawitter sets up the opening of the poem as the aftermath of "a kind of poetic gang rape" by the wanton troopers who have left without developing a real relationship with the Nymph (142). Sylvio's gift of a fawn ("Sylvio's penis") with silver chain and bell (possible chastity belt and warning bell to assure fidelity), leads to the fawn hunting his "dear" ("the nymph's genitalia") (143). Thus, the Nymph's playing her "solitary time away" (line 38) in Sylvio's absence is taken as a reference to masturbation, autoerotic pleasure that she grows to prefer to "The love of false and cruel men" (line 54).

Here again Klawitter lets his imagination soar, linking Marvell's possible celibacy to a celebration of autoeroticism in the "Nymph," then voyeurism in "The Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers," for which Klawitter insists we must equate the speaker to the poet: "It is time we sound a death knell for the 'authorial fallacy'

[5]Reims, France: Presses universitaires de Reims, 2008.

and let the flavor of a poem be attributed to the poet" (149). He judges the poem both ekphrastic and political but acknowledges, "Underneath both readings, however, lurks that naughty voyeur who is watching the little girl at play" (154). The concluding discussion of "The Garden" perhaps offers a less graphic subtext of autoeroticism and serves for Klawitter as a "Janus-like" transition from lyric to satire that can best be interpreted as a parody of the Leveller and Digger philosophies (154) and predicated upon the myth of Narcissus.

Turning to the question of Marvell's own sexual experiences, Chapter 5 considers "The Celibate Marvell." Klawitter encourages consideration of "an alternative sexuality for Andrew Marvell," not "asexuality" nor "nonsexuality," which connote negativity, but the more intentional life of celibacy, which he argues is evidenced in his life and his poetry. A survey of changing views of Platonic love, not necessarily nonsexual love, in Spenser, Barnfield, Cowley, and Donne offers context. To clarify Marvell's own proclivities, Klawitter contrasts him with fellow bachelor and contemporary Robert Herrick, whom he describes as "another candidate for celibacy but one who certainly throws enough fuel on the heteronormative fire to let readers conclude he was probably more interested in the opposite sex than Marvell ever was" (26). However, Klawitter finds Herrick's erotic lyrics sometimes "silly." They do not reveal the same depth of homoerotic attraction (though not fulfillment) as Marvell's "The Loyal Scot" and "The Unfortunate Lover." Also unlike Herrick and others, Marvell, he contends, portrays "a kind of clinical coldness" in his love lyrics, indicating celibacy.

In the rather lengthy final Chapter 6, "The Devotional Marvell," Klawitter turns to Marvell's semireligious poems not only to place him among other religious poets but within "the tradition of sexual sublimation" (26). Not that readers usually consider Marvell a particularly religious poet: "If people want English Renaissance religious verse, they turn to other poets: George Herbert, for example, where they can be caressed; Thomas Traherne, where they can be mystified; or John Donne, where they can be knocked around" (216). However, Marvell may reveal more tenderness toward God than for a physical lover. "The Coronet" is judged the "most obviously devotional" poem (209), but "Bermudas" is credited as actually giving us a liturgy, "having its own minister, and its own ritual, including hymn,

sermon, and Eucharist" (216). A thorough comparison with Waller's "Battle of the Summer Islands" indicates that Marvell's poem goes beyond pure narrative to prompt divergent readings that add richness to interpretation, richness that Waller's account lacks.

The discussion segues to Renaissance books of "moral imperative" (227), natural outgrowths of medieval conduct books that serve as a background for Renaissance moralizing poems, particularly Herbert's "The Church-porch" and Barnfield's homoerotic "Shepheard" verses which contain a sermon warning Ganymede to control his pride. Marvell's own contribution to moral imperative poems is presented as his "On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*," which presents the advice to read Milton's epic and be edified by it. Klawitter sees the poem as indicating Marvell's sexual selfhood in that he directs his attentions to this fellow poet, then later, all his energies to the betterment of the Restoration government in a type of marriage to the State, the ultimate sublimation of human sexual satisfaction (242).

Through all the acknowledgments of the indecipherability of Marvell and his poetry, Klawitter refuses to admit defeat: "Surely we can . . . keep chipping away at Marvell, letting a little light fall here and there on what need not be forever an enigmatic corpus" (226). *Andrew Marvell, Sexual Orientation, and Seventeenth-Century Poetry* makes a major effort toward that goal. The success of that effort, again, is up to reader interpretation. Provocative, irreverent, engaging, and definitely not boring, the book suggests that the chameleon Andrew Marvell could produce a corpus equally ambiguous, equally variegated, "wav[ing] in its plumes the various light" and colors of interpretations—colors that span the spectrum of the rainbow.

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