Book Reviews

Comptes rendus

Kenneth R. Bartlett, Konrad Eisenbichler, and Janice Liedl, eds. *Love and Death in the Renaissance*. Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1991. Pp. 219.

Grieving over the death of Charles IX and longing for his Hélène, Ronsard concludes that “l’Amour et la Mort n’est qu’une mesme chose.” If this selection of papers from the 1990 Renaissance Society of America conference in Toronto relates *Eros* to *Thanatos* less boldly, most of the essays treat love and death in similarly provocative ways. The editors make no effort to present an overview or even, alas, to edit, but their collection offers many insights into specific texts. Since I cannot deduce any larger themes, though, and at the risk of seeming as arbitrary as love and as relentless as death, I will describe the articles as the editors present them: alphabetically by author.

According to Ellen Anderson, Cervantes’s *El rufián dichoso* revises the *Symposium*’s notion that we all seek our lost other halves. In *Rufián*, love gives the self to another, sharing a larger self and taking on the other’s sin. Distinguishing this love from that praised in *The Courtier*, a text she reads without irony, Anderson seems to link Bembo’s ladder of love to Plato’s Aristophane’s fancy of once undivided globular humanoids, not to his Diotima’s language of ascent. Yet if oversimplifying neoplatonism, she is eloquent on love that does not demand beauty or virtue. Next, Linda Austern’s “Love, Death and Ideas of Music in the English Renaissance” correlates attitudes to music with more moralistic Renaissance views and shows how sexual doubts sustained an ambivalence toward music’s power.

André Dulaurens’s *Des maladies mélancholiques*, says Donald Beecher, “was arguably the most clearly reasoned and cogent statement” on erotic melancholy. He shows Dulaurens forsaking scholastic thought, applying Galenic humoral theory, and assuming a “somatopsychic” etiology. Sufferers, we hear, should try exercise, social distraction, purges to eliminate bile, moisturizers, and narcotics. William Bowen’s Ficino might find the implied materialism depressing: the Florentine’s belief that God’s creative love works through harmony “explains the beauty of music” and gives

“a basis for aesthetic criticism” by accounting for love’s tendency to seek beauty. Bowen’s essay clarifies the mathematical and philosophical concepts that relate numbers, ratios, and musical intervals to affect.

Spenser’s Garden of Adonis (*Faerie Queene* III.vi) has its own mathematics and certainly swells with affect. Ronald Horton reads it as allegorizing married generative sex and lawful pleasure. My difficulty here is that the scene has no reference to marriage until Spenser mentions Cupid and Psyche near the canto’s end; nor is Adonis married to Venus (Spenser calls him her “lover”). This garden breeds all creatures, not just people, and some are “paramours” and “lemans.” Horton must be right, though, that Spenser insists on the legitimacy of sexual pleasure, while the physiology he ingeniously perceives solves some knotty problems.

In a bravura performance, Alan Levitan reports on a metrical animal he has found in *Antony and Cleopatra*. He names it — such are the rights of a discoverer — the Crocodactyl: a “syllabivorous beast that gorges on pentapods (five-footed lines) and is particularly attracted to those that feature inherently trochaic words and phrases; its mode of attack is to stun the head of its victim with a powerful trochee, to straddle the victim’s feet with its own trochee-words, and to transform the heartbeat of its prey into a dactylic or trochaic inner rhythm that forces the pentapod to sing as it dies.” It lives near the Nile, shunning “Romans, even as prey.” Many say Shakespeare contrasts Rome’s *mentalité* to Egypt’s; Levitan hears this in the play’s very music.

For Daniel Martin, Montaigne’s essays in their early editions make triptychs; and, since they also evoke various Olympian divinities, they constitute a mnemonic theater showing something about Montaigne’s politics and “phallocentrisme paranoïaque.” How readers react will depend on their comfort with the method; I needed more evidence. Margaret Mikesell offers plenty of evidence in a fine piece of textual excavation demonstrating that even as Vives’ *Instruction of a Christian Woman* recommends marriage, another message lies coiled in its imagery and logic: marriage is spiritually repugnant, so don’t do it. Vives, she shows, goes beyond orthodoxy, if not beyond some church fathers, and in this differs from Erasmus (whose influence, though, she may underestimate).

Olga Pugliese’s subtle essay on how Love and Death frame *The Courtier* will impress anyone interested in literary frames and margins. She calls the text untraditional in having a letdown at the end, yet the *Symposium* itself closes as Socrates leaves his friends sleeping and trudges out into the workaday sunlight. Might not Castiglione follow Plato’s own framing technique? The Petrarch of the *Canzoniere* seeks *furor*, but not the sort Diotima and Bembo extol. Nancy Ruff demonstrates how echoes of Dido’s passion filtered through Vergilian commentary merge with scriptural and patristic allusions to create multiple ironies. Just as Dido’s words imply more than she knows, so Petrarch’s lover “speaks a truth that he himself apparently does not hear.”

Love is among the *dramatis personae* of *Antony and Cleopatra*, for Shakespeare follows Plutarch in giving Antony a servant named Eros. Bart Westerweel shows him giving Eros shape and then turning him to *eros*, “informing agent” of a “metaphoric field” with neoplatonic intimations of sleep and dissolution in death’s kiss. (I wonder what Westerweel might make of Antony asking Eros for his armour while Cleopatra urges him to sleep: the scene recalls the image, intriguing to neoplatonists, of Venus watching Mars sleep while cupids sport with the god’s arms). Gerhild Williams traces in *Melusine* and the 1587 *Faust* the mortal wounds loves makes as it withdraws. Even those restive with phrases like “the Renaissance mentality” and sceptical toward Denis de Rougemont will respect William’s diagnosis of Melusine’s rage and Faust’s self-imposed isolation.

Colette Winn writes *La Navire* by Marguerite de Navarre, a queen with ample reason in a bruised life to couple loving with dying. Mourning her dead brother, Marguerite asserts “l’absence et la Présence,” loss and love, and “réussit à concilier son expérience sentimentale et la conception religieuse de la mort.” She does so while aware that “l’écriture est à la fois une tentative et une tentation,” that the experience she tries to convey/transcend requires, finally, silence. At last “l’écriture” ceases to be “protestation pour devenir prière” and points, “comme le dit si joiliment Blanchot,” to “ce seul moment de grâce . . . où il ne faudra plus écrire.” By alphabetical accident *Love and Death* ends with an essay gesturing beyond death to love. The decision to print thirteen essays must have brought good luck.

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