North Central Conference of the Renaissance Society

The topic “Sexuality in the Renaissance” attracted some forty Renaissance scholars to the campus of the University of Guelph for the twentieth-anniversary meeting of the North-Central Conference of the Renaissance Society of America on November 14 and 15, 1980. In addition to these delegates, about twenty senior undergraduates and post-graduate students, from three Ontario universities, attended various sessions as guests of the Conference. In his keynote address Professor A. Kent Hieatt of the Department of English, University of Western Ontario used a number of illustrations from the paintings of the Renaissance — and particularly Hans Baldung Grien’s Eve — to indicate the connection that the Northern Renaissance made between the Fall of Man and the achievement of sexual experience. His comments on sexual awareness in the period were then complemented by two papers. Professor J.S. Thompson of the Department of Anatomy in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto delivered an illustrated lecture entitled “The Anatomy of Sex: Facts and Fallacies” in which he delineated the Renaissance understandings and misunderstanding of sexual anatomy and thereby indicated the anatomical grounds for several of the Renaissance attitudes to male and female. This paper was followed by a paper by Professor Victor Lotter of the Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph entitled “A Psychological Perspective Concerning Attitudes To Sexuality in the Renaissance.” Complementing comments made by Professors Hieatt and Thompson, Professor Lotter indicated some of the ways in which attitudes toward sexuality changed and developed as the Renaissance progressed. At the banquet Friday evening Professor George Hibbard of the Department of English at the University of Waterloo gave the examination of the conference theme a literary turn when he spoke eloquently on “The Language of Love in Shakespeare’s England.” The conference concluded on Saturday morning with two more papers. In her “May, December, and Cinderella: Sexuality and the Black Arts In The Renaissance” Professor D’Orsay Pearson of the Department of English, University of Akron returned to the topics of sin and lust touched on by Professor Hieatt and indicated the various ways in which black magic was used as a means of gratifying or stimulating sexual desire in the Renaissance. Still on the subject of sexual desire, Professor Roger Kuin of York University addressed the subject of Renaissance pornography in his address “Love’s Progress: Sexuality in Late Elizabethan Love-Poetry.” The conference then concluded with the Annual General Meeting. The consensus among delegates seemed to be that the conference was stimulating not only because of the topic itself but also because of the many ways in which the six papers delivered cast light upon each other and on the conference topic itself.