

## BOOK REVIEW

*Setting Plato Straight: Translating Ancient Sexuality in the Renaissance.* By TODD W. REESER. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 390. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-226-30700-8.

Todd W. Reeser's book explores some of the reasons why what we mean by a platonic relationship today is vastly different from what Plato himself understood by *eros*. Reeser suggests (viii) that the modern commonplace notion of platonic love differs from Plato on two counts: the gender of the individuals involved (nowadays a platonic relationship or friendship is often, but not exclusively, said to exist between a man and a woman) and the possibility of sexual activity. In contemporary usage, the term "platonic" seems to describe a relationship where outsiders may assume that a sexual relationship is a possibility, so the use of the term has a lot to do with the sociocultural expectations of particular on-lookers. Plato's ideal, according to Reeser, was the ancient Greek pederastic relationship between an older and a younger male, which did not necessarily preclude a sexual component. The influence of Christianity and the paranoia about "sodomy" inspired by Biblical texts meant that this ideal did not go down well in the early Renaissance, when Plato's works first became accessible to a wider audience. Scholars were concerned that Plato's undisguised exaltation of male-male same-sex *eros* would encourage homosexual acts and relationships among their readers. Reeser investigates a series of translations and adaptations of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* in the Renaissance, in which writers, for various reasons and in many different ways, with varying degrees of success, try to edit same-sex *eros* out of Plato. To use the modern idiom cleverly adapted by Reeser to the title of his book, they all try to "set Plato straight".

*Setting Plato Straight* is a work at the crossroads between traditional Classics, Classical Reception studies in the Renaissance, Translation studies, and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) studies, and will be of interest to all those with an interest in one or more of these areas. The author reveals that the work is intended as "a contribution to a twenty-first century sexual counterdiscourse" (ix): by re-reading and re-interpreting Plato, Renaissance translators, consciously or subconsciously, he argues, not only imposed a "heteronormative" worldview on the ancient text, but in the process invented modern heterosexual

culture (viii-ix). Reeser focuses his study on two speeches in Plato's *Symposium* that have caused the most anxiety and resulted in alteration or even outright censorship among Renaissance translators – Aristophanes' speech on the origins of love (189a-193e), and Alcibiades' disarmingly frank account of his fruitless attempts to seduce Socrates (215a-222b).

Marsilio Ficino, a Florentine churchman patronized by the Medici, published his *Opera Omnia* in 1484, the first complete translation of Plato's entire corpus into Latin. However, suggesting that repression of male-male sexuality in translations of Plato predates even this publication, in his second chapter, Reeser considers the approach of the early Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni, who published partial Latin translations of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, in 1424 and 1435 respectively (63). Bruni developed a theory of translation that emphasized faithful transmission of the sense of the Greek original and avoided judgment concerning an ancient text (62), but nevertheless in practice, as Reeser observes, "Bruni repeatedly transforms both the words and the sense of the same-sex sexuality of the Platonic corpus" (63). Reeser joins previous scholars in criticizing Bruni for diluting the sense of Plato; for example, by using the gender-neutral Latin participle *amans* (which can refer to both males and females) instead of the unambiguously masculine noun *amator* to translate the Greek *erastes* ("lover") into Latin, Bruni is seen to disguise, perhaps deliberately, the male-male nature of the sexual relationship.

In his third and fourth chapters, Reeser looks at Marsilio Ficino's translation of and commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. Although Ficino does not follow a coherent strategy or methodology in treating sexuality (88), his Neoplatonic approach with its emphasis of God/spirit at the expense of matter/body, means that sexuality and the physical body are ultimately effaced and negated – they are "purged" from the text. Reeser argues that Ficino's translations and explanations in his commentary obfuscate what is really going on in Plato's text: Ficino plays down the "unstable" physical and corporeal in favor of the stable and the divine, even viewing the "chaste" Socrates, who resisted the temptations placed in his way by Alcibiades, as almost presaging Christ (149).

The next few chapters examine, in chronological order, adaptations of Plato in the vernacular, beginning in chapter five with Symphorien Champier's pro-woman stance in *La Nef des dames verteuses*, published in 1503. Champier was physician and not a translator of Plato and his mission was to advance the cause of women in this proto-feminist work, described by Reeser as "a pivotal discursive moment in the movement of Neoplatonism from Florence to France" (152). Chapter 4 of Champier's book shows the influence of Ficino, and while he cites

Plato's *Symposium* by name (151), from the outset, Champier transforms male-male love into mere friendship, emphasizing the importance of beautiful intelligence rather than a beautiful body (153). He groups all sexual acts into a "single, vague category that must be avoided" (160). As a physician, Champier appeals to the concept of Hippocratic balance in the humors, and in addition argues that men and women balance each other out (177), providing a French remedy to what he sees as a Florentine-Ficinian problem.

Chapter six focuses on the reception of Socrates as a Silenus-figure in Erasmus and Rabelais. Reeser argues that Rabelais is subtly subversive when he describes Socrates as "unlucky with women" (*infortuné en femmes*) given the fact that, as we know from Plato and Xenophon, "Socrates makes no effort at all to be "fortunate" in women" (201). Reeser suggests that Rabelais is joking: "To say that [Socrates] is unfortunate with women really means that he was too busy admiring adolescent boys" (202).

In chapter seven, Reeser investigates the Saxon Janus Cornarius' 1546 translation of the *Symposium* into Latin, in which he goes to great lengths to explain male-male sexuality as a cultural phenomenon specific to ancient Greece, and to distance his contemporary fellow Germans from this practice. In spite of these reservations (or perhaps because of them), Cornarius produces an astonishingly faithful translation of Plato.

In chapter eight, Reeser looks at the adaptation of Platonic ideas about love to a proto-feminist context in mid-sixteenth-century France. Reeser's thesis is that heterosexuality is under construction in the French texts of this period, and that various attempts are made to write male-male *eros* out of contemporary writings, and where possible, to replace male-male sexuality with platonic (in the modern sense) friendship or with male-female relationships.

Chapter nine deals with the fascinating subject of a genre of poetry that suddenly erupts in the second half of sixteenth century France, in which male writers compose poetry from the perspective of women in love with other women. Reeser observes a great many Neoplatonic elements in these poems (273). While there is no condemnation of same-sex *eros* between women in these texts (275), there is also not a lot of overt sexuality or even consummation of sexual relationships; in most cases, the speaker, separated from her loved one, laments this fact at length. Reeser interprets this literary phenomenon as a disguised, sublimated desire for

frustrated male-male sexuality (281–282). In chapter ten, Reeser reflects on Montaigne’s sophisticated, self-conscious reading of Plato in the Renaissance tradition and emphasizes his Skeptical approach.

Classicists will find it frustrating that Reeser transliterates all Greek words, even in phrase or sentence format, tends to cite page numbers of translations of Plato’s works rather than the original works with the Stephanus numbers, and has no comprehensive bibliography. The system of endnotes means that one pages desperately, only to be disappointed. However, the book makes a stimulating contribution to the literature on the reception of Plato and to gender studies. Reeser concludes that the process of “setting Plato straight” is not, perhaps appropriately, a straight line from Ficino to the invention of heterosexual love in the sixteenth century (307). Each translator or interpreter has tried to alter or censor Plato in their own way and for their own reasons, but ultimately all have failed. Plato is queer and can never be straight.

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