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Hyman, Wendy Beth. Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry

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Hyman, Wendy Beth.

Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 201. ISBN 978-0-19-883751-0 (hardcover) \$78.

Renaissance erotic poetry is inextricably linked to discourses of death, as if the poetics of sybaritic excess and affective hyperbole required mortal counterpoint to preserve the age's morality that controlled the body and emotion. In this well-researched and engagingly written book, Wendy Beth Hyman takes a feminist approach to Renaissance *carpe diem* poetry, a genre in which courtship and seduction—led by both women and men—are couched in the language of mortality and decay. Hyman offers a lucid, critical account of the intellectual history behind the clever, cognitive play of the most prevalent kind of Renaissance love poetry. The *carpe diem* poem is written against the idea of “corrosive” (3) time, time that erases beauty faster than a lover can fathom or preserve love. It is one of the most prevalent kinds of erotic and amorous writing in the Renaissance, which makes it all the more surprising that modern criticism waited so long for a book-length study to elucidate the aesthetic world of this type of poem and lyrical mode. But it has been worth waiting for the impressive body of detail and astute critical perspective Hyman's book offers.

After opening with a brief, illustrative analysis of the thematic and rhetorical classical precursors of *carpe diem* poetry, Hyman moves to a discussion of the “mobility” (4) of the imagery of the seductive trope that makes this poetry “confrontational” and “sacrilegious” (5). The overblown metaphors that capture inflated emotion function more as stylistic ornaments than allegories of love and desire. But this rhetorical lore provides the speakers in these poems with the tools to challenge the value of physical chastity, the nature and effect of time, the limits of human knowledge, and the perplexities of signification. Hyman's discussion of the structural making of the poetry of desire, however, unfolds within a still broader context: the goal to construct and deconstruct “national worlds” revealed in “the rhetoric of discovery, conquest, and revelation” (13), and in the elegy. The external world of *carpe diem* poetry, the world that shows that the often congested and suffocating drama of personal longing, hope, fear, and frustration is played out against a bigger global drama of the time and materialist discourses, represents an immensely stimulating node of the book's argument.

What I find equally inspiring—especially for further criticism, which the book inevitably invites—is the occasional emphasis on imitation and the insistence on the fact that the “intellectual experiment [...] performed on the body of [...] the beloved” (14) within a *carpe diem* poem is both a rhetorical and gendered experiment. To get to the heart of the meaning within these tense lyrical poems, which Hyman compares to emblem books and “*vanitas* paintings” (14), she explores how the rhetoric of absence became a conduit for expressing desire, and how remodelling and transforming models in the poetics of imitation provided new verses of mortal love.

Much like the public theatre, Hyman argues, Renaissance love poets create spaces for the elaboration of ideas and fantasies about gender and sex in these poems that invite love. This comparative understanding of *carpe diem* poetry represents another fresh take on this unavoidable and hitherto under-theorized genre of love writing. Thus, to read these poems against their thematic precursors and models in classical Greek and Latin poetry, and in the French traditions, is to expand the critical space for original theoretical elucidation of the *carpe diem* poems and the backgrounds against which they flourished. These explorations are some of the strongest sections in this absorbing book. The corpus of poetic texts analyzed is wide-ranging, and includes both canonical and less well-known poems and plays. The poets and works range from Marlowe’s erotic epyllion, *Hero and Leander*, to Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*, to John Milton’s *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*. Additionally, the book engages with the poetry by Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, Ben Jonson, John Davies, Thomas Wyatt, and Margaret Cavendish, as well as briefly with other plays and poems.

The language and “erotics of doubt” (53) is the subject of an exceptionally absorbing second chapter about Lucretius’s theory of atomism elaborated in *De rerum natura* understood through erotic poetry, especially Robert Herrick’s *carpe diem* lyricism and its relationship with time, and the “triumphant conquest” over “social mores” (62) in Thomas Carew’s poetry of unabashed eroticism. Hyman is an attentive close-reader, and the connections she makes with other poetry (that of Marvell, for instance) and plays (*Measure for Measure*) create unexpected moments in, and add thought-provoking analyses and attentive close readings to, her criticism.

“The erotic invitation in the Renaissance is a problem” (79), according to the opening line of Hyman’s brilliant third chapter—a problem inflected in

Renaissance painting as well as in literature. The discussion in this chapter is framed by the motif of the death of “a bridal couple,” and begins with an analysis of a painting that stylizes this motif, on display in the Cleveland Museum of Art. The art-literature comparative method continues through much of this chapter, and the notion is to focus on both the material objects—the pictorial representation of time as the mortal reaper—and the philosophy and language of gender and desire that provide the verbal background for cognitive consonances and disharmonies within *carpe diem* poetry. In the second half of the book, in fact, the comparative analysis of the visual and the textual enhances the discussion of ideas of sex, the female body, death, and desire in ways that no other, earlier discussion of the invitation poem ever ventured.

Intellectual daring and critical freshness make each of the five chapters and the compact “Afterword” (beginning with brief remarks on Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and moving on to sum up the argument) an original critical piece. The book expands significantly how we should think about the genre of the invitation to love (and seduction) poem, and our sense of how deep and diverse are the imaginative making and signifying powers of a form that gave energy to Renaissance love writing—and that has become, for many readers, the essence of Renaissance love poetry.

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Jurdjevic, Mark, Natasha Piano, and John P. McCormick, eds.

Florentine Political Writings from Petrarch to Machiavelli.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. x, 322. ISBN 978-0-8122-2432-0 (paperback) US\$34.95.

The editors, Mark Jurdjevic, Natasha Piano, and John P. McCormick, have produced an excellent collection that brings together Florentine political writings from the Renaissance of importance to Florence and beyond. The epigraph from Leonardi Bruni sets out the Florentine love of freedom and hatred of tyranny: “I think something has been true and is true in this city more than in any other; the men of Florence especially enjoy perfect freedom