YVONNE IVORY

THE HOMOSEXUAL REVIVAL OF RENAISSANCE STYLE, 1850-1930
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Reviewed by Laurence Davies

In 1950, a group of gay men in Los Angeles founded the Mattachine Society. They took their name from a medieval community of bachelors who met in the forests of France to hold masked revels and to defend the weak from the tyranny of the powerful. This was hardly the first and certainly not the last time that a persecuted and, of necessity, clandestine group drew on the inspiration of its metaphorical ancestors. It is not hard to argue that for homosexuals in nineteenth century Europe, the corresponding source of inspiration was ancient Greece. Time, place, and polity might vary—Sappho’s Lesbos, Thebes of the Sacred Band, Athens of the Symposium, or the joyful and sexually egalitarian Arcady imagined by Edward Carpenter—but in each case, nineteenth century writers contrasted a crabby censorious present with a broader-minded past. “Fleshly” readings of Greek society provoked indignant resistance (well documented in Linda Dowling’s Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford [1994]), but besides tweaking the veils of prudery, fleshly readers could claim, at least among themselves, the prestige of an ancient civilization thought to have been largely good as well as great.

At least for male homosexuals, what made it virtually ideal was its unrestricted tolerance. Whereas the Mattachines had of necessity to work and play in secret, the Greeks in all their variety lived in the open, and while the modern “Uranian” could not live as openly, he might still be heartened by the example of
kindred souls in a more congenial society. While the Mattachine had to challenge law and custom, a Greek of whatever preferences and affections could live according to the Nomos. But now comes Yvonne Ivory to argue the significance of a different queer chronotope: Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She makes her case with a gratifyingly wide range of sources in English and in German.

It would hardly be a revelation to be told that certain late nineteenth century authors praised the accomplishments of Renaissance poets and painters rather as Winckelmann a century before had praised Greek statuary. Individually and collectively, Pater’s essays on Renaissance painters epitomized the Aesthetic movement, and his admirers supposedly knew entire passages by heart. When questioned about the nature of the “love that dare not speak its name” at his trial for sodomy, Wilde cited not only the Platonic dialogues and the Biblical love of David and Jonathan but also the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. “For [Wilde] at least,” writes Professor Ivory, “the Renaissance came to mind as readily as ancient Greece when a positive model of desire between men was called for” (14). Yet Ivory is not primarily arguing that her chosen set of writers sought to legitimize homosexuality by citing the words of great men. Quite the contrary. The writers of her study, she argues, were fascinated with Renaissance criminality. When one considers the Italy of cardinals, bankers, dukes, and condottieri, “civic virtue” is not the first phrase that comes to mind, and Strozzi or Sforza or Borgia family values hardly resemble those endorsed by our twenty-first century Savonarolas. Vital to Ivory’s argument are the writings of John Addington Symonds, an Englishman who stands at the meeting point of several homoerotic cultures: Greek, contemporary American (as embodied in Whitman), and Italian. His seven-volume study of *The Renaissance in Italy* (1875-86) assesses its cultural and moral contradictions. The
Italian Renaissance, he observes, “was so dazzling by its brilliancy, so confusing by its rapid changes, that moral distinctions were obliterated in a blaze of splendour, an outburst of new life, a carnival of liberated energies. The corruption of Italy was equalled only by its culture” (qtd. 28). (For a witty variant of this argument, watch Orson Welles-as-Harry Lime’s little speech on the Borgias and the cuckoo clock [http://cuckooclocksforsale.org/the-third-man-orson-welles-great-cuckoo-clock-speech-against-democracy-peace-brotherly-love] in The Third Man.)

Sharing Symonds’ love of erudition and his deftly nuanced way with an argument, Ivory poses a question which, she says, “has simply never been asked”: why were “so many Renaissance enthusiasts” of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries “what we would now characterize as homosexual” (15)? Ancient Greece was clearly not enough for them. While they admired its sexual freedom, Ivory argues that “Hellenist discourse alone was a scaffold strained to its limits by the task of supporting the imaginary of criminalized and pathologized late-nineteenth-century homosexuals” (16). Moreover, to think of the Renaissance chiefly as a rediscovery of Classical civilization is inadequate. Of the five topoi or motifs that Ivory finds common to nineteenth-century historiography, some have Greek roots, but none could be described as entirely Greek, and all of them nurtured queer thinking. They include “the aestheticization of all aspects of life; the celebration of the body; the tolerance of crime, especially in its incarnations of vice and excess; the proliferation of illicit sexual practices; and the rise of individualism and its attendant cults of personality” (17).

This study is so closely (yet alluringly) textured that I’m reminded of Borges’s parable “On Exactitude in Science,” which tells of an empire surveyed with such
precision that the map of one province occupies an entire city. It might be helpful, therefore, to sketch in a few demarcations. Ivory has the ability, not always a given in cultural studies, to think in period. She does not bother herself about the accuracy of nineteenth century scholars; her project, rather, is to study their “categories of investigation” (5) because those are what framed the controversies of the day about the nature and history of the Renaissance. As she points out, the word itself does not appear in English until 1836 (29, 166 nn. 89-91), and then it expresses Pugin’s contempt for the artistic paganism of the sixteenth century. Of necessity, the chronological definitions of the term fluctuate. While it sometimes includes just the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it may also extend to the fourteenth—pointing the way for many of our own contemporaries, who would of course go still further back. Furthermore, in the second half of the nineteenth century, artists, critics, and historians often distinguished a good Renaissance (usually *quattrocento*) from a bad one (as exemplified by Raphael or Michelangelo). In light of such distinctions, Ivory admirably contrasts Pater’s generally tolerant view of artistic developments with Ruskin’s furious attacks on sixteenth-century decadence. Essentially, they were quarrelling about the relation between artistry and bad behaviour. Despite his love of Dante, that supreme analyst of an earlier corrupt society, Ruskin insisted that aesthetically virtuous art can be produced only by a morally virtuous society, and at that a Christian one. For critics such as Pater, aesthetic virtue could flourish even in the soil of vice.

The reference quoted above to “criminalized and pathologized late-nineteenth-century homosexuals” gives us another vital context for Ivory’s argument. Lest her “discussion of non-normative sexual practices . . . be lost in the white noise
of ubiquitous Renaissance criminality, ” she writes: “Within the category of illicit sexual activity I would include extra-marital sex, incest, prostitution, rape, and sodomy simply because these are the aspects of the sin of lust that are mentioned most often by nineteenth-century Renaissance historians” (33-34). Every item in this catalogue was subject to vigorous legal and Parliamentary debate in the Victorian era (witness the furors over the medical inspection of prostitutes or the marriage of widowers with their sisters-in-law), but by the end of the century, homosexual activity had become to an unrivalled extent the object of medical, legal, and political scrutiny. With good reason, discussions of this issue in English tend to concentrate on what is known as the Labouchère Amendment, which became law in England and Wales in 1885. Actually reducing the penalty for certain acts, it stipulated that a conviction for sodomy (for instance) could earn a maximum of two—indisputably horrible—years rather than a life sentence. Nevertheless, because the wording of the law specified private as well as public male activity, and included “attempts to procure” as well as the performance of vaguely defined “acts of gross indecency,” the reach of the amended law stretched much farther, and the legislation became known as the “Blackmailer’s Charter.”

Round about the same time as the amendment came a wave of medical discussions stigmatizing sexual deviation. As disciples of Foucault have argued, these discussions turned a variety of attitudes and behaviors into a pathological condition subject to medical as well as legal surveillance. In this as in other regards, Ivory’s experience as a Germanist is invaluable, putting what is not infrequently a parochial conversation into a far more resonant international setting. She cites recent German scholarship on the revisions to the Prussian Criminal Code that became law in 1871, Year One of the new German Empire (53, 174 n. 26). Even more valuably,
she gives an extensive account of German sexological thought in the nineteenth century, some of it adamantly hostile to same-sex love and sexuality, some of it notably sympathetic.

One particularly cogent reason for comparing the stigmas imposed upon “British and German inverts” – Ivory’s choice of words here reflects her fluency in the language of the times – is that the stigmas sometimes provoked the same defenses. “In both countries,” Ivory writes, “some inverts turn to theories that implied that the full development of the individual could legitimately encompass non-conventional behavior in the sexual realm” (173 n. 22). The story of her second chapter, “Individualist Inverts,” is one of stigmatisation and resistance. In private, and to some extent in public, the example of Renaissance self-fashioning made at least some homosexual men or women realize that they could lead an unapologetic existence free of the torments of duality and self-doubt. According to Stephen Greenblatt, author of the most influential study of this mode of life (1980), the recognition of self-fashioning as a significant factor in the Renaissance began with its first major historians, Michelet and Burckhardt. The resuscitation of self-fashioning (or, as Ivory also calls it, with a slightly different timbre, self-cultivation) reinforced and was reinforced by a number of influential nineteenth century writers. As Ivory shows, the most persuasive of these included Symonds, Whitman, Max Stirner, Julius Langbehn, John Henry Mackay, and Edward Carpenter. Stirner, an antinomian philosopher of the 1840s, “was convinced that criminality was a defining feature of the true egoist” (58); his work anticipated Nietzsche’s and was well known to anarchists in the 1890s. Mackay wrote Stirner’s biography (1898), and, like Carpenter and Symonds, appealed to “alternative traditions in order to expound the virtues of love between
men” (51). Langbehn, “whose primary emotional attachments were directed toward men,” claimed in his best-selling study of Rembrandt (1890) that “Individualism is the root of all art” (69). Whitman enriched this mixture of ideas by showing in magnificent and accessible poetry that individualism could also be tender, generous, liberating, comradely, and gay. But in what might be called a Jamesian contrast of New World innocence and European sophistication, the contributions of ideas and examples from the Renaissance were rather more worldly. They included the accomplishments of the Courtier, who personified the elements of stylishness and bearing, and who, in the words of Castiglione’s Il Cortegiano (1528), was devoted “not to the service of the prince, but to his own perfection” (qtd. 41). In order to survive in a social microcosm subject to absolute rule, the Courtier must make a bella figura, resorting, if need be, to “a kind of guile that makes duplicity a matter of pride” (47).

While Whitman’s homosocial cosmos was famously democratic, the world of the Renaissance state was quite evidently not. It seems improbable that many laundresses or millers practised self-cultivation. From what perspective, then, might we take Ivory’s argument? The Italian aristocrats, courtiers, and artists who figure in narratives of boldness, subterfuge, and style were either above the rules because they could make them up to suit themselves or outside the rules, which they saw as nothing but contemptible hobbles on their freedom. In “the imaginary of […] late-nineteenth-century homosexuals,” it would seem, Renaissance rule-scoffers served to provide analogies, perhaps with a tinge of fantasy, and to prove the arbitrariness of legal and medical categories rather than to solicit literal imitation. It is difficult, for example, to conceive of Pater or Symonds putting down his pen to indulge in a spot of
late-night plundering or, like Cellini, stabbing somebody in a fit of passion or revenge. If Wilhelmine or Victorian doctors and judges classed what homosexuals did alongside robbery with violence or embezzlement, the more fools they, albeit cruel fools.

The second half of this study is devoted to the Renaissance as it appears in the works of Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, and Vita Sackville-West. Here Ivory considers the literary acting-out of the ideas about self-cultivation and criminality analysed in the first two chapters. In Wilde’s case, this calls for close readings not only of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* but of some of his less known works, such as two plays with Renaissance settings: *The Duchess of Padua* (a blank verse drama of revenge that was first publicly performed in London in 2010) and the incomplete “The Cardinal of Avignon.” Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” a somewhat more familiar story featuring a debate about Willie Hughes, the boy actor who may have been the dedicatee of Shakespeare’s sonnets, elicits from Ivory some incisive remarks on forgery and Mannerist painting. She also reminds us that Wilde warmly praised Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a journalist and portrait painter who excused his poisoning of a sister-in-law by saying she had thick ankles. Altogether, Ivory concludes, Wilde created “a new notion of Personality that is at once (for the criminalized homosexual) an incitement to act (to deceive, to commit crimes, to sin) and an invitation to deploy Renaissance justifications (individualism, style, beauty) to defend those acts” (108).

With Thomas Mann, we turn from the flamboyant to the closeted. If Wilde himself was a public work of art, Mann was a private and familial one. The relevant
literary texts are *Fiorenza* and “‘Gladius Dei,’” one a play about the original Savonarola, the other a story about his modern avatar laying verbal waste to Munich’s bohemian quarter. The text that interests Ivory the most, however, is Mann’s own life in the early 1900s as he contrived to manage his rapidly accumulating fame and prepared himself to settle into a comfortable bourgeois marriage – “without privately having to sacrifice the familiar, sensual, and even homoerotic trappings of the Renaissance aesthetic” (136).

Thanks to her pride of ancestry (numbering Lucrezia Borgia among her ancestors) and her childhood at Knole, a fifteenth century archepiscopal palace transformed by Italian craftsmen in the early seventeenth century into one of the grandest mansions in England, Vita Sackville-West felt an unmediated intimacy with the Renaissance. By Ivory’s count, “between 1910 and 1917 she would write two plays, two poems, a novel, and a dramatic fragment set in Renaissance Italy, as well as a lengthy essay on Leonardo da Vinci, and a monumental, unfinished treatment of ‘The City States of Italy, from 1300 to 1500’ ” (142). Sackville-West herself epitomized the spirit of those times as “a civilisation of the intellect, shadowed over by physical terror” (qtd. 145). The horrors fascinated her; in an essay on Shelley’s *The Cenci*, that drama of patriarchal terror, she compiled an extraordinary catalogue of gruesome and abundant homicides (209 n. 44). Yet, again in Ivory’s words, “the Renaissance fantasies most often explored by Sackville-West are not of violence […] but of something more close to her heart: uninhibited masculinity” (148). These fantasies also shaped her escapades in drag, and her intense correspondences with lovers, above all with Violet Keppel.
In this final chapter, Ivory handles the intertwinnings of art and life with particular dexterity. She reveals a fascination with style, artifice, and freedom from convention shared by male and female homosexuals while recognizing that while the women were not subject to the same legal penalties as the men (under English law at least), they were at least as subject to medical dogmatizing, and of course the codes of patriarchy. When summarizing in her Introduction what her chosen writers made of the Renaissance, Ivory claims that in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century discourse, “the unfettered Renaissance individualist can only be figured as masculine” (9). All the same, I can’t help wishing that she had considered the uncanny fiction of “Vernon Lee” (Violet Paget), who appears in this volume only as a brilliant cultural historian. One particularly relevant story is “Amour Dure” (1890), the narrative of a Prussianized Polish scholar rendered abject and eventually killed by the ghost of Medea da Carpi, a sixteenth century Duchess. Yet this may be the exception that proves the rule.

In Ivory’s study, even the footnotes are unskippable – despite Palgrave Macmillan’s omission of running heads to help us navigate. The treatment, for instance, of negotiations between individualism and socialism is masterly (170 n. 12, 172 n. 21) and, without saying so, makes the paradoxes of Wilde’s “The Soul of Man under Socialism” more understandable. Of course Ivory cannot cover every reference to the Italian Renaissance made by writers of her specified period. Yet one wonders why authors such as George Eliot and Robert Browning were also intrigued by the violence and duplicity of the times. One also wonders how much the fascination with criminality and aristocratic freedom owes to Byronism, or the fascination with self-styling to the cult of the Dandy, especially as represented in Barbey d’Aurevilly and
Baudelaire. But a monograph should be intensive rather than encyclopaedic, original rather than predictable, provocative rather than analgesic. And here is a monograph par excellence.

Laurence Davies is Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow.