

## Martin on Foerster (2018)

Foerster, Maxime. *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Literature*. U of New Hampshire P, 2018, pp. 243, ISBN 978-1-5126-0170-1

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*The Politics of Love* offers a fascinating explanation of how nineteenth-century French authors from the Romantic and Decadent periods worked to *queer* notions of heterosexuality long before today's vocabulary existed to discuss it. While scholars such as Michael Riffaterre have discussed similar tropological features of these two literary movements, Foerster goes further by illustrating the ways in which their common tropes troubled heteronormative narrative expectations about things such as marriage, women choosing to work in the domestic sphere, and male dominance in romantic relationships. Relying primarily on novels, *The Politics of Love* seeks to illustrate how gender subversion, queer sexualities, and non-normative temporalities challenged and resisted contemporary notions of heterosexual behavior.

Foerster's helpful introduction clearly defines and lays out his project. Working chronologically rather than thematically, he structures the book in two parts. The first, entitled "The Reinvention of Love," consists of three chapters in which the author examines Romantic writers and their representations of amorous heterosexual relationships. Through careful close readings, the author demonstrates that both male and female writers created protagonists in romantic relationships who refused to follow accepted bourgeois conventions. Foerster's first chapter relies on a quartet of novels to elucidate how he is using "queer heterosexuality." Relying on two of Germaine de Staël's novels, *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807) as well as two novels by George Sand, *Lélia* (1833) and *Isidora* (1845), the author foregrounds the inversion of gender roles, power dynamics, and claims for social spaces as elements of the troubling of heterosexuality in these writers' works. Anticipating claims that these novels' social commentaries, which contested male privilege and established gender roles, were primarily a preoccupation of female writers, Foerster examines male-authored texts such as Benjamin Contant's *Adolphe* (1816), Alfred de Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836), and—in the following chapter—Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). He underscores the point that queer heterosexuality was not just a product of the Romantic female imagination, but resulted from a larger cultural critique of heteronormative expectations that adversely affected men and women alike. These male-authored works investigated gender fluidity, critiqued male privilege, and pointed to a "battle *within* the sexes" (107). In the third chapter, Foerster synthesizes his observations from the first two chapters to articulate certain salient features of queer heterosexuality and advocates that the most productive way to read these novels is not from an oppositional two-sex model but rather from the perspective of a "common thread in the project of the reinvention of love" (16).

Transitioning from the Romantic period, the second half of the book is entitled "Decadence and the Refinement of Perversions," which deals more with the promotion of gender deviance and sexual transgression than with analysis of romantic heterosexual relationships. The fourth, and shortest, chapter of the book argues that Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly—perhaps inadvertently—proposed the possibility of female dandyism. However, Foerster argues that the subversive power of this critical move is paradoxically undercut because the female dandy "reinscribes the dialectics of masculinity and femininity not just within the subject but also within the heterosexual couple" (166). Such a bold argument might have benefitted from more examples from Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly or, better yet, from a third or fourth lesser-known author. In the final chapter, the author intends to "identify and theorize the specific link between Decadent literature and sexology," which he does through an examination of doctor/patient relationships in Baudelaire's "Mademoiselle Bistouri" in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), Jean Lorrain's *La Dame aux lèvres rouges* (1888), and Rachilde's *La Jongleuse* (1900). This well-argued chapter is fascinating in Foerster's attention to the ways in which female protagonists resist domination through patriarchal taxonomies as they subvert gender roles and power dynamics. Textual examples of the interactions between female protagonists in search of "disturbing sensations" and males from the medical world is often a caricature that points to the ultimate failure of medical discourse—despite its pretensions of neutrality—to define, confine, and label women as hysterics, neurotics, and nymphomaniacs (186).

The book ends with a short discussion of the nineteenth century's creation of the conditions preparing the way for the representations of same-sex sexualities and an even further troubling of heterosexuality as ideas of sexual fluidity evolved in works such as Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. *The Politics of Love* is a thoughtful and persuasive book that takes two temporally different French literary movements and successfully juxtaposes them to demonstrate how men and women suffered from nineteenth-century patriarchal paradigms and how writers, both male and female, sought to reimagine love and the erotic.

**Volume:** 48.1–2

**Year:**

- 2019