

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

The essays in this book have been written over a number of years in the wake of the revolution in French critical theory and its transatlantic exportation. They mark the trajectory of my intellectual development from an interest in literary formalism and the “literariness” of the text to post-structuralist concerns, particularly the powerful convergence of psychoanalysis, gender theory, and a cultural semiotics conditioned by various intertextual traditions. I have chosen to discuss the question of the rhetoric of sexuality in its many formulations in the works of sixteenth-century French writers, ranging from Rabelais and Montaigne to Marot, Marguerite de Navarre, Pernette du Guillet, Scève, and Ronsard. By focusing on the issue of rhetoric, I have been led to examine the enigmas that haunt literary texts and the ways in which the *topoi* of sexuality reveal a work’s underlying self-conscious preoccupations. Implicit in my readings of these early modern texts is the conviction I share with Perry Meisel – who warns against the dangers inherent in Freud’s literary speculations as psychosexual reductions – that the mechanisms of a psychoanalytic reading of literary work are already inscribed in the mechanisms of its language.¹

Recent criticism has amply demonstrated how the laws of unconscious desire are played out in a text’s representational modes.² In departing from the theoretical presuppositions of classical applied psychoanalytic criticism, relating a somewhat positivistic rapport between author and text, I too have been concerned with mapping the strategies deployed to figure the libido of the writing subject. To be sure, subjectivity, as I con-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ceive of it in this study, is a rhetorical effect; it is a phenomenon that is enacted through psychic tropes, staged fictions of the self, structured like a language and mediated by the conflict between narcissistic fantasy and the imaginary desire of the other. Within this context the notion of what is sexual cannot be regarded simply in terms of biological drives alone, but is meant to include fantasy production manifested as shifts of desire in language beyond what the text actively articulates. What I wish to suggest here is that the hermeneutic operation involved in analytic discourse is not that of uncovering the “truth” of sexuality *per se*, but rather of describing its rhetorical effects and the problems it constitutes for the writing subject. Ultimately for me the challenge of the critic is to avoid becoming the all-knowing subject, a quasi-imperialist possessor of authorial logos, capable of transcending the constraints of what is sometimes inexpressible.

Reading psychoanalytically has enabled me to register the shifting energies of unconscious desire as they are elaborated in a literary field where the many discourses of love transcribe, through intertextual references, the enigma of love itself. In a way, each of the chapters in this book constitutes an effort to explore how, in a particular text, the play of forces creates a syntax of meaning that can only be produced by the dialogic relationship established between reading and writing. In my own readings I have therefore attempted to delineate the complexity of the writing project as a phenomenon implicitly derived from the creation of a textual memory that cannot be dissociated from the question of intertextuality itself. What this actually implies is that the “history” of the subject represented in the texts analyzed here is inextricably bound to a rewriting process through which the writer re-members, and is simultaneously spoken by fragments of a pre-existent cultural *corpus*; the “I” of the text is invented through a series of images, figures of desire, that inscribe the subject in a discursive space from which emerges the symptomatic obsession that engenders literary production. Following the theoretical assumption that the text, like the subject, is a *locus* where knowledge and meaning reside, the act of rhetorical analysis exercised by me in this book must indeed be

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

regarded as a critical gesture that constructs meaning through “listening,” and in that process, shows that fantasy is “in relation to the real,” but does not reveal precisely what that relation is.

The Rhetoric of Sexuality is not a mere application of psychoanalytic theory to texts of the French Renaissance. Quite clearly it takes as its point of departure the presupposition that psychoanalysis is an interpretative discipline operating within a continual dialectic of cross-fertilization with literature. Perhaps better than anyone else Shoshana Felman has formulated this problematic in her attempt to demystify the essentialized differences between literature and psychoanalysis. By calling into question the temptation to reduce this polarity to positions of mastery, Felman forestalls the threat of creating unnatural distinctions between literature and psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis tells us that fantasy is a fiction, and that consciousness is itself, in a sense, a fantasy-effect. In the same way, literature tells us that authority is a language effect, the product or the creation of its own rhetorical power: that authority is the *power of fiction*; that authority, therefore, is likewise a fiction.³

In essence, the theoretical perspectives put forward in the individual case studies that constitute this book arise equally from the rhetorical play figured in the individual texts studied as from the psychoanalytic models that form the “fictional backdrop” through which the literary critic processes the writer’s narrative. I have therefore tried to identify and observe the rhetorical strategies of each of the texts studied by submitting my analyses to a process that critically engages the dialectics of desire in a meaningful dialogue with the hermeneutics of an eclectically conceived psychoanalysis.

While this book has many agendas, its most conspicuous preoccupation has been the attempt to contextualize a strategy of reading that focuses on the issue of object relations in texts. This conceptual framework designates theories or aspects of theories – both literary and psychoanalytic – concerned with exploring the relationship between the image of the narrative subject as it is figured in the text and the representation of the other as genera-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

tor of psychic functioning. So far as my own reading practice is concerned, particularly in the chapters treating love as a form of discourse, I have tried to consider the desiring subject's amorous ties as a form of narcissistic reflexivity. Accordingly, the notion of desire, a concept to which I return frequently throughout this study, must be understood as a play of subjectivities realized through a figural field of perceptions and cognitions. The questions toward which this book ultimately moves, as it "essays" the issues of gender, the body, and the dynamics of repression, examine the rhetorical structures through which desire binds to an object and plays itself out as the other's desire. The end point of such a project is to elucidate how the text represents intersubjective relations that denote the cause and effects of these fictions of desire, manifested as either a drive for recognition or a need to satisfy an inadequate or damaged relation with a binding ideal. If, as Jacques Lacan claims, it is from the other that the desiring subject transmits the signifiers of his or her desire, then the figural representation of these relations can only be realized in the intrapersonal fantasy underlying the text.⁴

The relationship between the sexes and the attempt to delineate the status of women and men was a major *topos* in French Renaissance texts. At the core of this controversy is the question of gender identity and the rapport between sexuality and the narrative representation of the desiring subject. Part I of this book, "Rhetorics of Gender," explores gender as both a rhetoric and thematic preoccupation in some major sixteenth-century texts. It deals with both female and male gender identity in terms of the established codes of the Renaissance, and analyzes how the historical myths of gender roles, bound up with the cultural institutions that frame texts discursively, are interrogated. In using the term "gender" I not only refer to the differences between and within the sexes themselves, but also to the question of power relations and the ways in which they problematize patriarchal myths.

The essays in this section are concerned with the symbolic representation of gender identity in text production, and the rhetorical strategies through which sexual difference subverts

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

and challenges the fantasy of a unitary subject rooted in the myth of biological partition. Like Naomi Schor, I have adopted as ideological presupposition for this study the idea that only the dissymmetry of difference can undermine repetition, but going even further, I argue that the politics of representation can only become powerful when producing fictions of identity whose fundamental trope is one of gender revision.⁵ The five essays grouped together in part I therefore function as cultural discourses revealing the contingency of gender roles by engaging texts in agonistic encounters with patrilineal and matrilineal sources.

In “Pernette du Guillet and a voice of one’s own,” I examine the question of female autonomy and its articulation through a revisionist rhetoric that transcends the dominance–submission paradigm of petrarchism and instead theorizes in figurative language a utopian discourse of equals derived from the neo-platonic tradition. In the next chapter, the concept of manliness is explored in a case study analysis of the Rondibilis episode in Rabelais’ *Tiers Livre* where the construction of a male gender identity emerges as the result of a misogynistic discourse representing the very negative qualities attributed to female narcissism. Reading with attention to the anxiety associated with the marriage question and its contextualization through references to the controversy between two opposing schools of spermatology (the teaching of Claudius Galen and the Platonico-Hippocratic school), I have tried to focus here on the question of male sexuality and its representation in the character Panurge. The essay on Marguerite de Navarre, centered on the tenth *nouvelle* of *L’Heptaméron*, examines woman’s place in a world where, beyond being an invisible support for male desire, she would transcend the tension of indifference and affirm her autonomy in the paradoxical language of female silence.

The last chapters in part I examine two of the most typically anthologized pieces from Montaigne’s *Essais* as masculine modes of creativity: “De l’institution des enfans” (I, 26) and “De l’affection des peres aux enfans” (II, 8). In “Pedagogical graffiti and the rhetoric of conceit,” I delineate the figural represen-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

tation of the genesis of the male ego and its relationship to the marks of gender that are inscribed in the text. Most particularly, what is analyzed rhetorically is the enigma of male sexuality as allegorized through a panoply of intertextual references, ranging from Horace and Ovid to Ariosto. The chapter “Montaigne’s Family Romance,” on the other hand, unravels the myth concerning the origins of the creative act and the tensions derived from the conflict between the aesthetic and the biological. Out of the field of perception figured in “De l’affection des peres aux enfans,” emerges the representation of an exemplary bond of nurturance which functions as a reparative gesture in terms of the dynamics of the “family romance.”

Part II, “Figures of the Body,” addresses the question of how the body is represented in the *blasons*, love poetry, and prose of the period. In portraying the female body, Petrarch’s description of Laura not only informs the Renaissance model of womanly beauty, but also becomes a descriptive system through which male writers fetishize the female body and dismember it through their scriptural practices. This rhetoric of fragmentation in French Renaissance texts unveils the phallogocentric biases and conflicts of the male writer whose particularized descriptions represent the female as either a beloved maternal object or one of sheer abjection.

The first two chapters of part II deal with the disfiguration of the female body. In “Architecture of the Utopian Body,” the *blasons* of both Marot and Ronsard are studied in an attempt to elucidate the signifying practices through which the desiring subject’s representation of the ideal body is revealed as resistant to the ravaging force of temporality. The chapter on Ronsard’s 1552 sonnet cycle reveals how fictions of the body, ranging from the pseudo-Anacreon of *The Greek Anthology* and Horace to Petrarch and Ariosto, are rewritten, and in that process create a lover’s discourse in which the sexuality of the desiring male is both affirmed and interrogated.

In the essay on the rhetoric of Montaigne’s self-portraiture, the metaphoric relationship between text and body as mimetic mode is studied in “Sur des vers de Virgile” (III, 5). What

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

emerges from my analysis is not only a demonstration of how rhetoric and sexuality are interchangeable *topoi* in the montaignian essay, but far more importantly how textual representation is but a mere simulacrum of a lost ideal.

Part III of this book, “Allegories of Repression,” examines how figural language suggests libidinal, political or social tensions at work in texts that are rhetorical analogues of compulsive and obsessional behavior. In “Scève: the rhetoric of dream and the language of love,” I explore how the dream poem’s multiple descriptive systems converge in an allegorical narrative that transcribes the amorous subject’s struggle between eros and the intellect. Drawing partially on the image of woman inherited from both petrarchan and biblical traditions, Scève’s dream of love is inextricably linked to a scenario whose principle motivator is the figure of the phallic mother.

The final chapter on “Sexuality and the Political Unconscious in Rabelais’ *Quart Livre*,” studies in detail three key sections of that book: the prologue, the *Chiquanous*, and the *Papimanes* episodes. The concept of allegory as used here refers to a process whereby the rabelaisian narrative transcribes “social material” in the form of theatrically motivated fictions that stage repressed desires and fears. At stake are the figural representations of power relationships and the ways in which they overdetermine the writer’s scriptural practice and subjugate textual production to the political rule of Law, a phenomenon culminating in the representation of the 1551–2 Gallican crisis in the *Papimane* episode.

Through this book my concern is with the function of sexuality as rhetorical trope. The heterogeneity of the texts and issues discussed are meant to contribute to the volume’s overall interest by providing reading models for investigating the taboo subject of the sexuality underlying the rhetorical practices of the French Renaissance literary canon.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French
Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French
Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I
RHETORICS OF GENDER

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35624-4 - The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French
Renaissance

Lawrence D. Kritzman

Excerpt

[More information](#)
