

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Cornelius, Michael G. Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love: The Gay King in Fiction, 1590–1640

Christopher Michael Roman

Volume 40, Number 4, Fall 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086078ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i4.29280>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Roman, C. (2017). Review of [Cornelius, Michael G. Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love: The Gay King in Fiction, 1590–1640]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40(4), 193–195.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i4.29280>

Cornelius, Michael G.

Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love: The Gay King in Fiction, 1590–1640.

Lanham: Lexington Books 2016. Pp. 289. ISBN 978-1-4985-3458-1 (hardcover) US\$100.

Michael G. Cornelius's *Edward II and a Literature of Same-Sex Love: The Gay King in Fiction, 1590–1640* is a thorough and convincing book, establishing the role of Edward II as a central figure in the evolution of gay characterization in English literature. Cornelius covers a chunk of time linked to what Stephen Greenblatt has called Renaissance self-fashioning, charting the extensive changes to the record of the historical king. The representations of Edward II are complex, and Cornelius considers the thick web linking the sexuality of the king and Renaissance attitudes toward culture, desire, nature, and disease.

Cornelius's "Introduction" interrogates the notion of sexuality in the Middle Ages as it is linked to that of the Renaissance. Arguing that manifestations of sexuality are both biological and cultural, Cornelius examines how same-sex love was represented during the medieval period, as well as how same-sex love could intersect with the dynamics of same-sex friendship. The literature on Edward II proves a fruitful and concentrated body of work to examine same-sex desire and its competing discourses. As Cornelius establishes, identifying oneself as queer is fraught in a time period that does not have those clear identifying markers. Yet, Edward II resolves some of these issues because of the very public enactment of his relationship with Piers Galveston. Thus, Edward II is a catalyst for examining the prevailing moods around same-sex desire.

Cornelius provides a foundation for his argument in chapter 1, focusing on the Middle Ages. Beginning with the historical records and quickly moving to Adam Davy's *Five Dreams of Edward II* and John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, Cornelius explores how Davy worries over Edward II's sexuality at the same time that he offers support for the new king. Lydgate revises the history of Edward II's reign by divorcing him from his sexuality while emphasizing his victimhood at the hands of Roger Mortimer. Chapter 2 is the crux of the book as it deals with Christopher Marlowe's influential play, *Edward II*. Cornelius argues that Marlowe's *Edward II* is essential in studying male-male desire prior to the twentieth century. Marlowe represents an identity crisis; specifically, Marlowe shows us Edward-the-queer vs. Edward-the-king. The collision of

public vs. private roles creates a dramatic tension. As Cornelius correctly points out, Edward II chooses love—and chooses love *actively*—despite Edward's previous depictions as victim or passive. Edward *chooses*. This choice, however, is at the root of all the problems of the play. Edward's attempts to navigate these roles prove to be the very key to his identity and the failure of his kingship. According to Cornelius, Marlowe creates an iconic gay character with which future literature dealing with Edward must contend.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of how Edward's love and actions become an echo of one's own desires and need to touch history. Michael Drayton, the author at the heart of this chapter, is obsessed with Edward II, and writes, according to Cornelius, a reaction to Marlowe's own work. Drayton's *Piers Gaveston* focuses on the negative effects of private love on the affairs of state. In Drayton's text, the relationship between Edward II and Gaveston is eroticized, with constant reference made to their sexual relations. In this text, however, Edward II becomes the victim of a sexual predator; Drayton sanitizes the history in order to recast Edward as an empathetic icon.

If thus far we have seen triumphant or empathetic representations of Edward II, Cornelius next turns in chapter 4 to Sir Francis Hubert's *The Historie of Edward the Second* to explore a homophobic representation that also contains scenes of high romance. Hubert creates an Edward full of self-loathing, as well as a love situated in Renaissance romance tropes and *carpe diem* poetry. Hubert appeals to nature as a way to explore the inescapability of desire. Hubert admits that all kinds of sexualities exist in nature, though same-sex love is baser than heterosexual love; natural despite its unnaturalness. Thus, for Hubert, Edward is simply battling against his very nature.

Cornelius continues to explore the intersection of nature and desire in chapter 5, focusing on this work's only female writer, Elizabeth Cary, and *The History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II*. In this text, Cary represents Edward's sexuality as a disease, though (as in Hubert) one that is rooted in the natural. Cornelius points to the ways in which Cary identifies with Isabel, a point that feminist scholars have made, but also how Cary identifies with Edward himself as his own fall from grace mirrors events in Cary's life. Cary never blames Edward for his sexuality, instead suggesting that it is something that cannot be helped. As Cornelius insightfully argues, Cary tries not to excuse away Edward's sexuality, but she does identify with him as suffering from a disease and thus makes sense of his plight as one she herself connects with.

Finally, Cornelius ends his study with a brief examination of Richard Niccols's revision of the *Mirror for Magistrates* and his addition of a history of Edward II. In many ways, we come full circle; Niccols's Edward II is closest to Marlowe's and represents a king who prioritizes his relationship with Gaveston. However, Niccols also represents a king who is angry and bitter about his treatment at the hands of disloyal barons. Cornelius ends this overview by suggesting that Niccols's own work is proof of Marlowe's own positive representation of Edward and how that legacy has taken firm hold in the English imaginary.

Cornelius ends his thorough study of the characterization of Edward II in Renaissance literature with an invitation to think about how his representation has invited creation. Edward's legacy, his very memory, is retained because of his same-sex love. As Cornelius points out, we remember Edward because he *is* gay; we identify with Edward because he could not stay silent. That public declaration echoes through history. Edward II proves to be a site of queer resistance that makes him—and Cornelius's study—significant as we continue to reclaim and rediscover our queer history and its deep roots.

CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL ROMAN
Kent State University

Desan, Philippe, ed.

The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne.

Oxford Handbooks. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xx, 813. ISBN 978-0-19-021533-0 (hardcover) US\$150.

Following close after the English translation of his Montaigne biography, Philippe Desan has assembled a team of American, French, and British scholars to produce a voluminous handbook analyzing Montaigne and his work. Desan tells us in the introduction that this is the first Oxford Handbook to be devoted to a French author, and the choice in this case is obvious. Probably more than any writer other than Shakespeare, Montaigne is a publishing business unto himself. There have been more than three hundred editions of his work, and more than one thousand books have examined and explained his life and his works, some of them bestsellers. The number of scholarly and journalistic