



Setting Plato Straight: Translating Ancient Sexuality in the Renaissance

By Todd W. Reeser

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When we talk of platonic love or relationships today, we mean something very different from what Plato meant. For this, we have fifteenth and sixteenth-century European humanists to thank. As these scholars—most of them Catholic—read, digested, and translated Plato, they found themselves faced with a fundamental problem: how to be faithful to the text yet not propagate pederasty or homosexuality.

In *Setting Plato Straight*, Todd W. Reeser undertakes the first sustained and comprehensive study of Renaissance textual responses to Platonic same-sex sexuality. Reeser mines an expansive collection of translations, commentaries, and literary sources to study how Renaissance translators transformed ancient eros into non-erotic, non-homosexual relations. He analyzes the interpretive lenses translators employed and the ways in which they read and reread Plato's texts. In spite of this cleansing, Reeser finds surviving traces of Platonic same-sex sexuality that imply a complicated, recurring process of course-correction—of setting Plato straight.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Reeser presents a systematic, scholarly account of the manner in which fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance translators of Plato’s erotic dialogues dealt with Plato’s obvious positive acceptance of male/male and especially man/boy (pederasty) sexual love (eros). . . . Reeser’s book is richly complex and goes beyond mere hermeneutics of translation. Among the many books available dealing with this topic, this should be definitive. Extensive notes but no separate bibliography. Essential.”

(*Choice*)

“In *Setting Plato Straight*, Reeser offers us a superbly nuanced, game-changing study of the history of sexuality through the lens of Renaissance translations of Plato. Reeser’s close readings of a wide range of continental texts are lucid and sophisticated, and his philological work is exemplary throughout. The book does an exceptional job of attending with care and rigor to both sexuality and hermeneutics (as well as to their intersection). The book has broad and significant implications for Renaissance studies. Scholars interested in humanism and humanist reading practices, Renaissance translation and philology, and the use of queer theory as a heuristic for Renaissance texts will all find the book engaging, challenging, useful, and even entertaining. For its combination of technical mastery and boundary breaking conceptual work, the committee enthusiastically awards the Gordan Prize to *Setting Plato Straight*.”

(*Phyllis Goodhart Gordan Book Prize Committee*)

“The implications of *Setting Plato Straight* are substantial. Reeser takes the developments of sexuality studies, queer theory, and translation studies into account to offer a substantially new and deeply sophisticated understanding of how problematic classical texts and ideas were transmitted and adapted in the Renaissance. While a number of scholars have considered homoerotics and same-sex sexuality in the Renaissance, none have engaged with Plato so systematically. Reeser demonstrates that Plato is crucial for understanding the production of cultural logic around sexuality. Although the ongoing politics of sexuality figure heavily in public culture, this book is not simply timely, but profoundly important.”

(*Katherine Crawford, author of The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance*)

“Reeser’s *Setting Plato Straight* is a masterpiece that combines scholarly erudition with a deep understanding of critical theory. It is a model piece of literary scholarship that will have a long shelf life.”

(*Lawrence D. Kritzman, Dartmouth College*)

“Highly original and extremely important. Reeser undertakes to describe and analyze the issues of translation and sexuality raised by the reception of the works of Plato in the early modern period within a wider context than any other study undertaken. While focusing primarily on translations and literary reworkings of the erotic material in the platonic dialogues, *Setting Plato Straight* brings in medical, philosophical, and political writings to enhance understanding of the context in which these translations and literary works were created. It will contribute greatly to the scholarly debates concerning early modern sexuality.”

(*Kathleen Long, director, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Cornell University*)

“This book is a landmark study that will reward a careful study. . . . Despite its academic nature, *Setting Plato Straight* should be read by social policy makers of today, and of course any student of the Renaissance. But most of all it should read by anyone who thinks they know what love is. Hint: Plato knew.”

(*Sun News Miami*)

About the Author

Todd W. Reeser is professor of French and director of the gender, sexuality, and women's studies program at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of *Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture* and *Masculinities in Theory*.

Users Review

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