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Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Lyric Verse

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Abstract

Many critics have tried to find explanations for why Shakespeare's sonnets and Richard Barnfield's *The Affectionate Shepheard* seem to have been unpopular on their original publication, whereas other equally explicit works exploring homoeroticism, such as Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* or Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, were well received by readers and audiences. This essay argues that these critics have overlooked the significance of the lyric form in their investigations. Lyric is more fluid, open-ended, and overtly performative than either narrative verse or drama, and this made it a more dangerous literary form for expressing controversial sexual sentiments.

Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Lyric Verse

REBECCA YEARLING

If it be sinne to love a lovely Lad;

Oh then I sinne I, for whom my soul is sad.

—Richard Barnfield, *The Affectionate
Shepherd, Containing the Complaint of
"Daphnis" for the Love of "Ganymede"*¹

When Richard Barnfield published *The Affectionate Shepherd, Containing the Complaint of "Daphnis" for the Love of "Ganymede"* in 1594, it did not meet with universal approval. The poem, a pastoral work describing the love of the shepherd Daphnis for the boy Ganymede, was apparently regarded as being too overt in its homoeroticism, as can be seen from the preface to Barnfield's next volume of poetry, *Cynthia, With Certaine Sonnets, and the Legend of Cassandra* (1595), in which he writes: "Some there were, that did interpret *The affectionate Shepherd*, otherwise then (in truth) I meant, touching the subject thereof, to wit, the love of a Shepherd to a boy; a fault, the which I will not excuse, because I never made."² This preface is rather obliquely phrased, but it seems clear that Barnfield's aim is to excuse and defend his previous work against detractors who felt that his subject—a homoerotic relationship—was inappropriate. His defense is that these readers have misunderstood: the subject was not a "fault" because his poem was intended as "nothing else but an imitation of *Virgill*, in the second Eglogue of *Alexis*."³ In other words, Barnfield attempts to protect himself and his poem by claiming

¹ Rebecca Yearling is a teaching fellow at the University of Bristol. She is working on a monograph on Ben Jonson, John Marston, and early modern dramatic satire.



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