

A REVIEW OF MARY RENAULT'S THE CHARIOTEER

Mary Renault is one of the better second-order novelists writing today, and her writing in The Charioteer shows a careful, reasonable command of classic style and themes. The core of The Charioteer is the contrast of Platonic and physical love in Plato's Phaedo--the setting is Gay and the treatment refreshingly reserved and non-sensationalistic, and for these reasons the novel can be enjoyable, even thought-provoking, reading--totally without bed-scenes, though; that two of the main characters were sleeping together I noticed only after it had been going on, so to speak, for weeks.

But the novel's ending has left me and others unsatisfied, missing the feeling of liberation which accompanies Renault's open, enlightened treatment in the rest of the story. Laurie Odell, the novel's main character, has two prospective lovers during his convalescence from war injuries after Dunkirk. One is Andrew, a sensitive, radical, strong Quaker C.O. who works at the hospital where he is recuperating, who is in love with Laurie, although without any concept of gayness--a Platonic lover in other words. Laurie's other prospect is Ralph, a school friend for whom Laurie has pined since adolescence, whom Laurie encounters at a gay party. Renault's sympathies seem to lie with Andrew--Ralph is something of a queer chauvinist pig, whose self-reliance and worldly wisdom borders on domineering--yet when Laurie finally opts for friendship with Ralph in order to avoid violating Andrew's innocence, his choice is represented as somehow heroic, admirable and manly.

I am not aware of any other attempts in fiction to create a Model Queer. Faced with this version of Gayness, I see rather the futile self-limitation and ultimately insulting patronization which such attempts entail. Above all, the conviction that love untainted by sexuality should be an untouchable ideal, that the refusal to admit that one (and the one onemay love) is a body--and not pure Platonic soul--should be considered not dopey or even sick but rather beautiful--that conviction represents a stumbling block to liberation not only of Gays but of everybody. Women, Blacks, Queers, workers--all have been characterized as mean but necessary body which pure and noble mind must dominate and hold in check. This prejudice lies at the root of Laurie's silly reluctance to admit his love to his friend and--well, he deserves what he gets.

One particularly interesting facet of Renault's Model Queer is his acceptance of the fallacy that "Gay is Gay and straight is straight and ne'er the twain shall meet." This sort of thinking is an invention of heterosexual sublimation and has no backing in modern sexual theory since Freud, which takes general bisexuality as its cornerstone. The promise to tolerate queers, as long as they keep to themselves, is a defense maneuver to keep the unnatural one-sided heterosexual identity--especially male identity--unquestioned and unchallenged, on which the structure of sexist discrimination rests.

In assenting to this you/us compromise (as is done for example in some CGA Outreach panels) we, like Laurie, deserve what we get--as much as we might have deserved what we surrender.

--Allan Brown