

LGBTQ+ Literature in the West: From Ancient Times to the Twenty-First Century, by Robert C. Evans

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Robert C. Evans's *LGBTQ+ Literature in the West* (2023) sets out, as he puts it, to “survey [...] the critical responses to literature of this kind (or these kinds) from the beginning down to the present day” (Evans 2023, 1). The subtitle of the book delineates this extended period as being *From Ancient Times to the Twenty-First Century*. This is an enormously ambitious and important undertaking, though it is also one which the author achieves with uneven success.

The book is structured into an introduction and nine temporally focused chapters, moving from what he calls the “ancient and classical period,” through the Middle Ages, the English Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then the early and late twentieth century. Each of these chapters focuses on selected writers from these periods. The chapter that focuses on the ancient and classical period offers the uncontroversial discussion of figures such as Sappho and Achilles, but then also expands the survey to include biblical figures such as Jonathan and David, classical Greek figures such as Sophocles, and classical Roman writers such as Virgil, Ovid, and Horace. One of the most important scholarly interventions in the book is the chapter that focuses on the Middle Ages. Very often historical accounts of same-sex sexualities skip the intervening centuries between the famed male-male intimacies in Roman society on the one hand, and the emergent sexual cultures of the Renaissance on the other. Evans’s discussion of this period is separated into the period 250–1200 AD and 1200–1500 AD and maps an extensive literary production and reception of what might anachronistically be called queer writers and texts. These include texts by religious and royal figures, as

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well as poetry, treatises and letters by unnamed writers that evidence queer themes, characters or religious moralist warnings.

The chapter on the English Renaissance focuses almost exclusively, but no less comprehensively, on sexuality-orientated readings and biographical sketches of playwrights Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. This chapter provides an invaluable summary of scholarship on gender and sexuality in these writers' works. In a curious structuring choice that is never quite explained, the subsequent chapter focuses on the seventeenth century and continues its engagement with Renaissance writers such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell. The chapters on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offer discussions of several authors who might in current parlance be readily considered gay or bisexual, including Lord Byron, Henry James, and Walt Whitman. Unsurprisingly, it is to Oscar Wilde that most of this chapter is devoted. The inevitably voluminous discussion of critical reception of twentieth century authors is very detailed, again covering both canonical queer authors (such as E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, Elizabeth Bishop, James Baldwin, Frank O'Hara, Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde) as well as authors who tend to get less scholarly attention (such as Vita Sackville-West and Angus Wilson).

While Evans's *LGBTQ+ Literature in the West* might be a valuable reference book and point of departure for researchers approaching an author's oeuvre for perhaps the first time, the book has several substantial flaws that undermine its impact.

Firstly, the encyclopaedic nature of the book is accompanied by almost no analysis. Besides a very short introduction and conclusion, the book does not make any specific claims about shifts in literary depictions of LGBTQ+ issues. This is a significant omission, as it becomes impossible for readers to glean any overarching view of dominant trends in how LGBTQ+ literature may have taken shape or changed in a particular period. Framing each chapter's annotated list of authors with a short overview would have enriched the otherwise encyclopaedic nature of the book immeasurably.

Secondly, the title of the book promises an incredibly broad temporal and geographic range. However, despite its explicit inclusion in the title, twenty-first century literature is almost entirely absent, and there is certainly no chapter devoted to it. This is not in itself surprising, given that a survey of LGBTQ+ literature over the past two decades would require multiple volumes. To this reader, however, this temporal framing appears as a disingenuous publishing decision to misrepresent the scope of the book. The reference to "the West" in the book's title is similarly unclear, given that this designation is never meaningfully defined. In reality, the geographic range of the book is largely limited to a narrowly Anglo-American literary tradition, making any broader claims to "the West" similarly disingenuous.

A third weakness of the book is how it blurs the analytical boundaries between a non-heteronormative *author* and a *text* that features non-heteronormative characters or

themes. In doing so, it sometimes over-relies on biographies of writers to *infer* that a particular text evidences queer themes. While this in itself is not an indefensible approach, it does require much bolder and more explicit theorisation by the author of the book.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book, however, is the style of its encyclopaedic entries. While the book would serve as an introduction for emerging researchers, the style of each entry appears to presuppose advanced familiarity with that specific writer's work. The following two examples demonstrate this point:

Thomas Gray (1716–71). George Haggerty, in Summers 1992 (199–214), argued that “Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ commemorates a problematic sexuality that traditional readings of the poem’s ‘melancholy’ usually ignore,” so that the poem “shows how the poet’s awareness of his own homosexuality shaped the familiar features of the most popular poem of the eighteenth century” (199). Haggerty later, in Summer 2002 (317–18), suggested that Gray long “suppressed his deeply emotional attachment to members of his own sex, and only later in life did he actually express the love he felt for another man,” whose name was “Charles-Victor de Bonstettin.” Poems on Richard West and on Eton College, along with the famous “Elegy,” are other works Haggerty mentions as relevant to Gray’s homoeroticism (318). Louis Crompton (2003: 456–9) called Gray “the most distinguished poet of his generation”—a “shy, affectionate man” whose “emotional life centred on intense male attachments” (456). (Evans 2023, 69)

Willa Cather (1873–1947). Blanche Galfant (1971 in Bloom 1997: 43–4) commented on “the remarkable gallery of characters for whom Cather consistently invalidates sex”. They “invest all energy elsewhere.” Galfant perceived, in this respect, “the strange involuted nature of [Cather’s] avoidance. She masks sexual ambivalence by certainty of manner, and displays sexual disturbance, even the macabre, with peculiar insouciance” (43). (Evans 2023, 117)

The absence of even a brief contextualising sentence on these two authors, which might locate them within a specific genre, country, or literary tradition, makes these encyclopaedic entries very difficult to follow. Evans’s use of very long sentences and his over-reliance on long quotes from the cited works further compound the stylistic inaccessibility of the book.

While the book has several weaknesses that will undermine its overall impact, its mapping of a longer history of queer-themed literature nonetheless makes it a worthwhile inclusion in university libraries.