

# The GAY & LESBIAN LITERARY HERITAGE

A READER'S COMPANION TO THE WRITERS AND THEIR WORKS,  
FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

REVISED EDITION

EDITED BY CLAUDE J. SUMMERS

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**Claude J. Summers**

*Editor*

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*For Ted, again.*  
*Still crazy after all these years.*

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*Claude J. Summers*

# Introduction



*The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* is a reader's companion to a remarkable range of literature and authors. It provides overviews of the gay and lesbian presence in a variety of literatures and historical periods, in-depth critical essays on major gay and lesbian writers in world literature, and briefer treatments of other topics and figures important in appreciating the rich and varied gay and lesbian literary traditions. The more than 380 essays gathered here attest to the pervasiveness of homoeroticism in literature from ancient times to the present, as well as to the recurrent preoccupation of gay and lesbian literature with certain themes and motifs, such as self-realization, erotic longing, alienation from society, and the celebration of beauty and forbidden pleasures. They are also witness to the historical and continuing attempts to suppress and silence homoerotic expression and to the (sometimes heroic) persistence of gay and lesbian writers in making their voices heard, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances. Given the nature of homosexuality—both historically and currently—as a controversial subject, this book cannot help partaking of a specific cultural (and political) agenda, the recovery and consolidation of a perpetually threatened legacy of same-sex love in literature and life.

The literary representation of homosexuality is a crucially important topic for gay men and lesbians. The vital role that literature plays in the lives of many homosexuals is due not only to the fact that an awareness of sexual difference may encourage the introspection that leads to enhanced literacy and to artistic creation, but also to the peculiar relationship of contemporary gay men and lesbians to their society. Homosexuals differ significantly from ethnic, national, and religious minorities, who may face discrimination and disdain, but who develop within their families important systems of support and nurturance. By contrast, most lesbians and gay men grow up in families in which their sexual orientation is concealed, ignored, or condemned. They often come to a realization of their gayness with little or no understanding of homosexuality beyond the negative stereotypes that pervade contemporary society, and

they usually feel isolated and frightened at the very time they most need reassurance and encouragement. Not surprisingly, a staple of the gay and lesbian “coming out” story is the trip to the local library, where the young homosexual, desperate for the most basic information, is usually utterly confused or bitterly disappointed by what he or she discovers, for even now our society does not make it easy for young people to find accurate information about homosexuality. Only later is the homosexual's radical loneliness assuaged by the discovery of a large and varied literary and cultural heritage, one that speaks directly to the experience of contemporary Western men and women but that also reflects other forms of same-sex love and desire in different times and places.

This volume is at once a documentation and reclamation of that heritage and also a contribution to it. It participates in a long endeavor by gay men and lesbians to recover their social and literary history. For centuries, educated and literate homosexuals living in eras that condemned homosexuality have looked to other ages and other societies in order to find cultural permission for homosexual behavior, to experience some relief from the incessant attacks on their self-esteem, and to penetrate the barriers of censorship that precluded open discussion of the love that dared not speak its name. Such attempts range from the ubiquitous lists of famous homosexuals in history to more elaborate and sophisticated historical research, such as that of Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century and of Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the recurrent attempts by gay and lesbian writers to discover traditions and languages through which to express themselves. Too often, however, attempts to document the gay and lesbian cultural legacy paid little attention to historical differences and tended to make few distinctions between different kinds of homosexualities, equating the emergent homosexual of the nineteenth century with the ancient Greek pederast, the medieval sodomite, and the North American *berdache*, for example, as though all four phenomena were merely minor variations on the same pattern.

*The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* is, of course, motivated by the identical impulse to understand the past and to recover the (often suppressed or disguised) artistic expressions of same-sex love that propelled earlier projects. But as the beneficiary of a more open climate and a recent explosion of knowledge about homosexuality in history, it is in a far better position than they were to discover a usable past. The new understanding of sexuality in history and culture that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s constitutes one of the major intellectual achievements of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The efflorescence of gay and lesbian studies within North American and European universities has, in fact, enabled this particular enterprise. Without the gay and lesbian studies movement, this volume would not have been possible. In entering the academic mainstream, gay and lesbian studies have enlarged our understanding of the meaning of being gay and lesbian, both in our own culture and in other times and places. They have challenged naive, uninformed, and prejudiced views, and, perhaps most important, have discovered and recovered significant texts and authors. Gay and lesbian studies have also claimed mainstream literature, revealing the pertinence and centrality of (frequently disguised) same-sex relationships in canonical texts.

But although gay and lesbian studies have enriched the academic study of history and literature, they still tend to be ghettoized in elite universities, often in women's studies programs that are themselves frequently isolated. Meanwhile, standard literary anthologies and histories continue all too often to omit or discount gay and lesbian texts and subtexts, fail to supply relevant biographical information about gay and lesbian writers, and foster the grievously mistaken impression that the world literary traditions are almost exclusively heterosexual. *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* aims to redress these deficiencies. It seeks to place portrayals of same-sex desire in historical context, to provide accurate biographical information about writers who have contributed to gay and lesbian literary traditions, and to explore important questions about the presence of homoeroticism in world literature. How has homosexual literature been shaped by the religious and cultural strictures against homosexuality? How does the homosexuality of an author affect his or her work even when that work has nothing specifically to do with homosexuality? How does one decipher the "coding" of literature in which the homosexual import is disguised? Is there such a thing as a gay sensibility? Are some literary genres and movements more amenable to homoeroticism than others? What are the connections between gay male literature and lesbian literature? Do gay and lesbian readers respond to ostensibly "straight" literature differently from heterosexual readers? What is the connection between lesbians and amazons? Why is St. Sebastian an icon of gay male artists? These are some of the questions asked and variously answered in this book.

*The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* testifies to the unique power of literature to express desire and signify sexual difference. More than any other kind of discourse, imaginative literature provides access to the subjectivity and complexity of sexuality by depicting the psychological nuances and ambivalences of desire and its frustration or fulfillment from the inside as well as the outside, and does so with the concreteness and specificity of lived experience. For example, at a crucial point in his coming to terms with his sexuality, the eponymous hero of E. M. Forster's novel *Maurice* thinks of himself as wandering "beyond the barrier . . . the wrong words on his lips and the wrong desires in his heart, and his arms full of air," while in Whitman's "When I Heard at the Close of the Day," the poet defines happiness not in terms of "plaudits in the capitol" but in the joy of communion with his lover, a fulfillment that nature itself seems to ratify:

*And when I thought how my dear friend  
my lover was on his way coming, O  
then I was happy,  
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all  
that day my food nourish'd me more,  
and the beautiful day pass'd well,  
And the next came with equal joy, and  
with the next at evening came my  
friend,  
And that night while all was still I heard  
the waters roll slowly continually up  
the shores,  
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and  
sands as directed to me whispering to  
congratulate me,  
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me  
under the same covers in the cool  
night,  
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams  
his face was inclined towards me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my  
breast—and that night I was happy.*

Forster's powerful images of isolation and emptiness capture the emotion of alienation with an intensity and immediacy of feeling that no psychological treatise could describe, just as no sociological study could explain the heightened contentment that Whitman conveys. Nor could a clinical description approach the lightning-bolt accuracy of Muriel Rukeyser's account of the pain of the closet in "The Poem as Mask":

*When I wrote of the women in their  
dances and wildness, it was a mask,  
on their mountain, god-hunting, singing  
in orgy,  
it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,  
fragmented, exiled from himself, his life,  
the love gone down with song,*

*it was myself, split open, unable to speak,  
in exile from myself.*

Imaginative literature, quite simply, captures human experience with a vividness that other kinds of discourse cannot.

Literature, however, is not merely a creation of particular perspectives by isolated artists; it is a reflection and an expression of social attitudes as well as individual sensibilities. As a complex interaction between artist and circumstance, and text and context, imaginative literature provides a rich record of historical lore. Hence, to study gay and lesbian literature is also to come to understand both the varying insights of particular authors and the changing historical conditions under which lesbians and gay men have lived and written. Insofar as literature documents—or challenges—its period's sexual beliefs and prohibitions, it is an extraordinarily valuable resource for charting the outlines of sexual ideology at any particular time.

Many readers may wonder whether a heritage that includes individuals as dissimilar as Sappho, Mehemmed Ghazali, William Shakespeare, Aphra Behn, Stefan George, Christina Rossetti, Gertrude Stein, Sophia Parnok, James Baldwin, Yukio Mishima, and Jack Kerouac is coherent enough to be useful. Indeed, the variety—or dissimilarity one from the other—of figures discussed in this volume is striking, both in terms of individual sensibilities and of different historical positions. This ought not to be surprising, however, since one of the central tenets of gay and lesbian studies is the wide diversity of gay men and lesbians, a principle that this book amply verifies. The resistance of gay men and lesbians to reductive stereotyping is a very important aspect of the literary heritage. Homosexuals are far too diverse to share a single sensibility, and the manifestations of homosexuality are too various to permit sweeping generalizations. Different individuals are affected differently by particular characteristics, and those characteristics are assigned different meanings in different societies. Even the identifiable homosexual styles—such as, for example, camp—that emerge from time to time are clearly the product of cultural and sub-cultural influences and are never universally shared by all homosexuals. As this volume demonstrates, there are in fact many gay and lesbian literary traditions, often co-existing with one another. It is not in their coherent unity—though many connections and continuities are apparent—but in their diversity and multiplicity that these traditions constitute a valuable heritage.

The literary study of homosexuality must inevitably confront a variety of vexed issues, including basic conceptual questions of definition and identity. Who, exactly, is a homosexual? What constitutes sexual identity? To what extent is sexuality the product of broadly defined social forces? To what degree do sexual-object choices manifest a biological or psychological essence within the desiring individual? These questions are not

only problematic for the historical study of homosexuality, but they also reflect current controversies about contemporary and historical sexual roles and categories, and they resist glib answers. Although contemporary North Americans and Western Europeans typically think in terms of a dichotomy between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and between the homosexual and the heterosexual, with vague compartments for bisexuality and bisexuals, such a conception is a historically contingent cultural construct, more revealing of our own age's sexual ideology than of actual erotic practices even today. The range of human sexual response is considerably less restricted than these artificial classifications suggest, and different ages and cultures have interpreted (and regulated) sexual behavior differently.

Because human sexual behavior and emotions are fluid and various rather than static or exclusive, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey and others have argued that the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* should more properly be used as adjectives rather than nouns, referring to acts and emotions but not to people. Moreover, the conception of homosexuality and heterosexuality as essential and exclusive categories has historically operated as a form of social control, defining the person who responds erotically to individuals of his or her own sex as the "Other," or, more particularly, as *queer* or *unnatural*. But though it may be tempting to conclude that there are no such entities as homosexuals or heterosexuals, this view, which so attractively stresses the commonality of human beings and minimizes the significance of sexual object choices, poses its own dangers. Human sexuality is simply not as plastic as some theorists assert, and to deny the existence of homosexuals, bisexuals, and heterosexuals—or the pertinence of such categories—is to deny the genuineness of the personal identities and forms of erotic life that exist today. It is, indeed, to engage in a process of denial and erasure, rendering invisible a group that has had to struggle for recognition and visibility. For most people in the West today, sexual orientation is not merely a matter of choice or preference but a classification that reflects a deep-seated internal, as well as social, reality. However arbitrary, subjective, inexact, and culture-bound the labels may be, they are impossible to escape and affect individuals—especially those in the minority categories—in profound and manifold ways.

The most painful and destructive injustice visited upon gay men and lesbians has been their separation from the normal and the natural, their stigmatization as *queer*. Yet the internalization of this stigma has also been their greatest strength and, indeed, the core of their identity in societies that regularly assign individuals to ostensibly exclusive categories of sexual desire. The consciousness of difference both spurred and made possible the recent creation of a homosexual minority—a gay and lesbian community—in the Western democracies, a process that involved transforming

the conception of homosexuality from a social problem and personal failing to an individual and collective identity. Quite apart from the fact that it facilitates identity politics, however, an acceptance of otherness is also often personally empowering. Fostering qualities of introspection and encouraging social analysis, it enables people who feel excluded from some of the core assumptions and rituals of their society to evaluate themselves and their society from an ambiguous and often revealing perspective. The reluctance to surrender the sense of difference, what E. M. Forster detected in the modern Greek poet C. P. Cavafy as the sensation of standing "at a slight angle to the universe," may account in part for the hostility of many gay men and lesbians to theoretical explanations of sexuality that translate the vividness of individual experience into ill-defined social phenomena and reduce sexual identity to a product of impersonal historical forces.

Homosexual desire and behavior have been documented in every conceivable kind of society. What varies are the meanings that they are accorded from era to era and place to place. In some societies, homosexuality is tolerated and even institutionalized, whereas in others it is vilified and persecuted. In every society, there are undoubtedly individuals who are predominantly attracted to members of their own sex, but the extent to which that sexual attraction functions as a defining characteristic of these individuals' personal and social identities varies considerably from culture to culture. For example, even today the so-called Mediterranean homosexuality (which predominates in Latin America, the Balkans, and the Islamic countries of the Mediterranean, as well as in the Latin countries of Europe) differs significantly from the Western European and North American pattern. Mediterranean homosexuality is characterized by a sharp dichotomy between active and passive partners, with only the passive partner in sexual relations ascribed a homosexual identity (and stigmatized), while the homosexuality predominant in North America and industrialized Europe emphasizes egalitarian relationships in which sexual roles are not rigidly polarized. And whereas the contemporary Western European and North American version of homosexuality is conceived in sharp opposition to heterosexuality, that is not so in many Asian societies, where homosexuality is accommodated within the paramount cultural obligations of heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Thus, any transhistorical and transcultural exploration of the gay and lesbian literary heritage must guard against the risk of anachronism, of inappropriately imposing contemporary culture-bound conceptions of homosexuality on earlier ages and different societies. Sexual categories are always historically and culturally specific rather than universal and invariant.

On the other hand, however, the recognition of cultural specificity in regard to sexual attitudes need not estrange the past or obscure connections and continuities between historical periods and between sexual

ideologies. For instance, modern North American and Western European male homosexuality, which is predominantly androphilic (that is, between adults) and socially disdained, is in many crucial respects quite different from ancient Greek male homosexuality, which was predominantly, though by no means exclusively, pederastic and incorporated a socially valorized educational function; nevertheless, awareness of those differences does not obviate the similarities that link the two distinct historical constructs. Neither does the acknowledgment of the distinctions between ancient Greek homosexuality and modern homosexuality entail the dismissal of the enormous influence that classical Greek attitudes toward same-sex love exerted on the formation of modern Western attitudes toward homosexuality. For many individuals in the early modern and modern eras, ancient Greek literature and philosophy helped counter the negative attitudes toward same-sex eroticism fostered by Christian culture. Ancient Greek literature has provided readers and writers of subsequent centuries a pantheon of heroes, a catalogue of images, and a set of references by which homosexual desire could be encoded into their own literatures and through which they could interpret their own experiences. Thus, though well aware of the differences between modern homosexuality and ancient Greek love, we may still claim Greek classics of homoeroticism as important elements in the gay and lesbian literary heritage.

Nor should our sensitivity to the cultural specificity of sexual attitudes cause us to rob individual authors of individual perspectives or to condescend toward the past. All writers exist in relation to their time and must necessarily write from within their worldviews, or, as philosopher Michel Foucault would say, the *epistemes* of their ages. But the fact that writers and other artists are embedded in their cultures does not mean that they lack agency and individuality. Artists tend to be more independent than their contemporaries, not less; and although they may express the tendencies and suppositions of their societies, they also frequently challenge them, even if those challenges are themselves facilitated and contained by societal beliefs. Hence, it is a mistake to assume that writers in earlier ages, before the general emergence of a modern homosexual identity, could not share important aspects of that consciousness, including a subjective awareness of difference and a sense of alienation from society. One of the rewards of studying the gay and lesbian literary heritage is, in fact, the discovery of homosexual subjectivity in the past and of the affinities as well as differences between earlier and later homosexualities.

For all its considerable heft, *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* has no pretensions to comprehensiveness. For this revised edition, we have added over 30 new essays and updated information in nearly all of the original essays from the first edition. Yet, there are some notable omissions of topics and authors, due variously to lack of space, an absence of available infor-

mation and research, or a difficulty in finding qualified contributors. Among essays that would be desirable, for example, are overviews of eastern European literatures, as well as entries on numerous authors for whom no room could be found. Moreover, the *Heritage* is undoubtedly biased in favor of English and American literary traditions, even as it also provides a great deal of information about other traditions and cultures. The

point that needs emphasis, however, is that this companion introduces readers to a wealth of literature, making accessible the fruits of the intense study that has recently been focused on gay and lesbian literature. It aspires to be a valuable companion to readers interested in the literary representation of homoeroticism from ancient times to the present.

# *How to Use* The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage



In a famous formulation, Sir Francis Bacon divided books into three types. "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but cursorily; and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention." This book aspires to all three categories. We certainly hope that it will be inviting and rewarding enough to entice readers into diligent and attentive study. At the same time, however, we hope that the book will also invite browsers, who will dip into it repeatedly over time for pleasure and enlightenment. In addition, we hope that it will also serve as a valuable reference tool for readers who need to find particular information quickly.

The essays in the *Heritage* are presented alphabetically, an arrangement that should encourage browsing. They are generally of three types: overviews of national or ethnic literatures; essays on topics or movements of particular significance for gay and lesbian literature; and essays on individual authors, not all of them gay or lesbian. The overviews of national literatures sometimes comprise several essays. For example, the entry on ENGLISH LITERATURE includes distinct essays on the following periods: Medieval, Renaissance, Restoration and Eighteenth Century, Romanticism, Nineteenth Century, and Twentieth Century. Similarly, the entries on AMERICAN LITERATURE, FRENCH LITERATURE, GERMAN LITERATURE, and GREEK LITERATURE include essays on particular periods, with twentieth-century American literature being further divided into essays on Gay Male Literature, 1900-1969; Lesbian Literature, 1900-1969; Gay Male Post-Stonewall Literature; and Lesbian Post-Stonewall Literature.

Entries on topics also sometimes include multiple essays, as, for example, the entry for POETRY, which is subdivided into separate essays on Gay Male Poetry and

Lesbian Poetry, or the entry for DRAMATIC LITERATURE, which consists of separate essays on Modern Drama and Contemporary Drama, or the entry for AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE, which includes separate essays on African-American Gay Male Literature and African-American Lesbian Literature.

The author entries range from brief accounts to in-depth critical analyses of major figures such as Sappho, Plato, William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Marcel Proust, or Virginia Woolf. The most important criterion in determining whether an author was assigned an entry is the author's contribution to gay and lesbian literary traditions, regardless of his or her own sexual orientation. The lack of an individual entry for an author does not, however, mean that the author is not significant to the gay and lesbian heritage or not discussed in the volume. For example, there are no entries for Wolfgang von Goethe, Jo Sinclair, Michael Nava, or Samuel Delany, but each receives detailed discussion: Goethe in GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN LITERATURE: BEFORE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, Sinclair in JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE, Nava in MYSTERY FICTION, GAY MALE, and Delany in the entry on SCIENCE FICTION. Discussions of authors who are not accorded individual author entries can most conveniently be found via the index.

The frequent cross-references should be helpful for readers interested in related topics or in finding further discussions of particular authors. The *Heritage* employs two types of cross-references. The first time an author who is the subject of an entry elsewhere in the volume is mentioned, his or her name is given in small caps, indicating that more information about that particular author can be found in his or her own entry. The same is true for topics or literary movements that are referred to in essays. In addition, readers are often urged to SEE ALSO other entries.



Each entry is followed by a brief bibliography. With some exceptions, the bibliographies emphasize secondary rather than primary material, pointing the reader to other studies of the topic or author. In the bibliographies, individual items are separated by bullets; the long dash indicates that a particular item is by the same author as that of the item immediately preceding it.

Finally, the index should be of help in maneuvering through this large volume. Some writers, such as Sappho, Oscar Wilde, and Radclyffe Hall, are discussed in several entries in addition to their own author entries, whereas others who have no individual author entries are discussed in the overviews or topic essays. Please consult the index to find such discussions.