

## Rita Mae Brown's *Venus Envy*

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Rita Mae Brown's *Venus Envy* is a significant departure from many conventional works associated with what was once known as "gay literature." It is obvious, for example, that the author has a socio-political axe to grind, something noticeably absent from, say, *The Gilgamesh Epic*. There's a good deal of irreverent humor, too. Previous concepts that are enlarged and expanded upon center around two of Brown's finer points: one, that love is love, regardless of gender, and two, that human sexuality is inclusive and all-encompassing.

Although *Venus Envy* has its virtues, subtlety isn't one of them. This is particularly true of a tendency toward what has been labelled (correctly) as "speechifying." There are several junctures in the story where the reader has the distinct impression he is being lectured to, and while the relative truth of a given rant might not be in question, the way in which that truth is related makes for bad literary form. One example (Billy to Frazier):

"Think about being gay. Half the women you meet will be nervous. The other half will also be nervous but secretly furious that you haven't made a pass at them. You will be accused of doing things, all sexual, of course, that you never did. If you date a younger woman you will be accused of being an older, manipulating, seductive lesbian who preys on the young and innocent. If you date an older woman they'll say you're looking for a mother. If you date someone your own age they'll say it's like being sisters and won't last. You can't win. The Born Agains will assault you at every possible convenience and guess what, other lesbians will accuse you of not being gay enough. No respect. No support. No nothing. I don't want that kind of life."

Another example (Frazier to Libby):

"Might I remind you, mother, that every gay person comes from a straight home. If you have a problem with my values, then you'd better examine your own... I'm not blaming you. I am what I am. To me it's the difference between being right-handed and left-handed. I'm left-handed in a right-handed world. But you could use your left hand and I can certainly use my right. Nothing is ever as clear as we think it is... You either love me as I am or you don't love me at all. And maybe that's my lesson too. I'm not going to change anyone unless it's myself. "

Brown swings a blunt club, piling cliché upon banal cliché and in the process greatly undercutting the effectiveness of her "message." What's ironic about this approach, from a literary point of view, is that it isn't particularly necessary. Works like *The Symposium* and *The Gilgamesh Epic* translate as well as they do because they allow the reader to connect the philosophical dots instead of providing a clumsy diagram. Good art creates a kind of conversation, a place where artist and audience can meet. Political diatribes -- of whatever kind -- merely bore.

One of the things Our Miss Brown does with reasonable success in her book is inject an element of humor into it, a cheeky irreverence sorely lacking in most "serious" gay and lesbian literature, past or present. Illustrations of this can be found throughout *Venus Envy* (itself a pun), perhaps nowhere more so than in those chapters devoted to Frazier's libidinous encounters with the gods. This section of the book is by turns silly, impudent, funny, and delightfully erotic -- an intoxicating combination. At one point Jupiter attempts to put the moves on Frazier, only to be mocked by daughter Venus. "Oh, you've spoiled it. She'll never go to bed with me now," he laments. Undaunted, Jupiter hopes to impress the visiting mortal with a display of, ahem, celestial pyrotechnics:

"He roared, 'I'll show you overwhelming.' And laughing, he enlarged himself to such a height she couldn't see his face. His penis, quickly hardening, cast a shadow on the garden. Jupiter reached down and pulled out his member, as big as the Empire State Building. He rubbed himself a few times and sperm squirted across the sky, except it wasn't white; the ejaculate filled the azure blue with a rainbow of glittering colors. He instantly reduced himself, drawing alongside Frazier as the colors, iridescent, melted into one another. 'Better than fireworks,' he said."

Passages like this provide a healthy dose of naughty, harmless amusement that, for me at least, went a long way toward breaking down a perception of contemporary homosexual literature and The Gay Movement as largely humorless, angry, and obsessed with the minutiae of (forgive me, I'm tired of the phrase too) "political correctness." A light touch, it seems, can move mountains.

The sentiments expressed in *Venus Envy* I found most significant didn't challenge but rather confirmed and validated my previous feelings regarding the nature of love and sexuality. One of these truths is so simple and self-evident that denying its wisdom appears both ignorant and illogical. "There's no shame in tears," Venus tells Frazier. "The shame is in not feeling. Just as there's no shame in (a woman) loving a woman. *The only shame is in not loving at all.*" Does it really matter if a man loves a man or a woman loves a woman? Not to me. Never did. As long as you love *someone*. Truly, madly, deeply -- that's all that matters in the end. "Plumbing" has nothing to do with it.

The second notion of consequence contained within the book is trickier, more threatening I think, even to "tolerant" heterosexuals (and, I'll wager, a good many homosexuals and lesbians as well). Still, I believe it's true nonetheless. Venus: "Certainly I make love to women. I believe one should be able to make love to one's partner as a woman to a woman, as a man to a woman, as a man to a man. Why limit yourself?" Why indeed? I think that if we could be all things in a loving relationship with another -- regardless of our predominant sexual preference -- our lives would be immeasurably deeper, our identities more richly nuanced. Clearly, there are differences between the sexes, but if we could learn to give and receive, to surrender and to initiate, to be both man and woman and to explore the dimensions of individuality (in the truest sense of that word), then what wonder, what revelation might await us? As for me, I'm not homosexual, nor am I heterosexual, as that term is usually (i.e. narrowly) defined. I prefer women but basically I consider myself androgynous, both masculine and feminine. I believe that minus societal injunctions and learned behavior, that's what we all are. That doesn't mean bisexual; that means androgynous.

So, despite previous accusations of "trash" and "froth," I actually found that some of the ideas contained within Rita Mae Brown's *Venus Envy* mirror my own. Her book is an obvious product of our times. It's difficult to imagine many of the literary elements mentioned here -- the Out And Proud sermons disguised as dialogue, the salacious, degenerate humor, the expansion of sexual identity beyond comforting polarities -- showing up in early homosexual literature. This is a

conspicuous sign of definite change, even progress, for literature and society as a whole. Where do we go from here? I'm not certain, though I suspect some day maybe not that far into the future all of the classifications and taboos we overlay sexuality with will be seen for what they are; just so much primitive superstition. I sincerely hope I live that long. In the meantime, I'll do what I always do -- negotiate the present.