

Book review : The Last of the Wine by Mary Renault

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The Last of the Wine

by
Mary Renault

(Longmans, London)

At some point nearly everyone who reads *The Charioteer* finds himself suspecting that Mary Renault is the pseudonym of a male writer, for it is astonishing that a woman should be able to write with such intensity and with such a wealth of intimate detail about the lives and loves of homosexual men. After reading *The Last of the Wine* one is almost convinced that Mary Renault is not only a man, but a gentleman of ancient Greece. She thinks like a Greek. Her ethics are thoroughly Grecian. Even her style — terse, condensed, never inflating trifles nor making little of issues which are large, capable of expressing the most varied emotions with brief, often searing clarity, — even her style is Greek.

The Last of the Wine is the story of Athens during the last years of the Peloponnesian War as seen through the eyes of Alexias, a youth of good family who grows to manhood during that troubled period. Alexias is an admirer of Socrates, a school-mate of Plato and Xenophon and a friend of other members of the Socratic circle, including the unhappy Phaedo. In his teens he is a celebrated — but not *too* celebrated — beauty with many suitors. He is a superior athlete. He becomes the beloved and comrade at arms of the noble Lysis and before he is out of his teens he fights beside Lysis in defense of Athens. His father is lost in the disaster at Syracuse and Alexias assumes the responsibilities of head of the family just as he reaches man's estate. He and Lysis serve several years together as sea-warriors under the generalship of Alkibiades. They starve with the rest of Athens during its long siege by the Spartans. Alexias is an enemy of Kritias, the most ruthless of the Oligarchs who rule Athens for a time after her capitulation to Sparta, and he and Lysis become leaders of the democratic revolt which overthrows the tyrants. This young man, then, is no mere bystander. He is thoroughly engaged in the manifold life of Athens and in her struggles. Alexias is the hero of this novel, enamoured of another hero, Lysis, but the story does, nevertheless, possess a heroine: she is Athens.

It is good to read a book which, permeated through and through with homosexual emotion, yet far transcends a narrow preoccupation with sexual love to the exclusion of all other human values, issues and concerns. In *The Last of the Wine* there is no question of a schizoid «homosexual way of life» existing in isolation from the culture in which it is imbedded. Instead we are given a convincing picture of homosexual love integrated with and contributing to a highly developed civilization.

Everywhere in the works of the Greek writers we receive glimpses of friendship-love as it existed in classic times. Scholars such as Edward Carpenter, J. A. Symonds, Lowes Dickenson and Hans Licht — to

mention a few I am familiar with — have attempted to round up the ubiquitous and scattered evidence and to provide us with a more comprehensive picture of the institutionalized homosexuality of ancient Greece. But because the Greeks treat the subject so sketchily and the scholars treat it with detachment, the modern man cannot quite believe, as much as he might like to do so, that homosexual love was a valuable and valued element of Greek social life. It all sounds too good to be true; we suspect that the Greek homosexual writers exaggerated their social felicity and that the modern scholars have accepted their somewhat wishful exaggerations at face value. At least, such has been my own feeling, — a sort of wry, regretful scepticism. Now, along comes Mary Renault who gives us a full, clear picture of Greek friendship-love as it was lived in its day to day details, as it ripened over the years. She displays its nuances. She shows us how it all worked out in actual practice.

We envy the candor and liberty of the Greek lovers. We envy the spontaneity which was permitted them. Lovers did much of their courting in public and it was taken for granted that they should. Lovers walked the streets arm in arm if they felt like doing so and nobody objected. Lovers embraced in public places when they met and it was considered quite proper. When a youth announced to his family with sweet solemnity that he had accepted a lover the news was received with gravity and respect, his father's only concern being for the status and character of his son's friend. Nevertheless, partners in a young friendship seriously debated how much sexual liberty they ought to permit themselves, much as engaged heterosexual youngsters debate the same question today.

It has taken this novel to make me realize that what I have hitherto considered to be contradictory tendencies in the Greek attitude towards homosexual love are little more than the ambiguities of ordinary life. Although the Greeks frequently praised sexual passion they also counseled chastity. While every youth, the scholars tell us, considered it a disgrace not to have a lover, yet the boys were strictly chaperoned by their tutors. Well, sexual life in Greece may be viewed as a spectrum including all shades and all gradations of shades of opinion and feeling and conduct. It seems to me, after reading *The Last of the Wine*, that the only way the modern mind can understand the ancients' thinking about homosexuality is to construct a Hegelian triad with sexual love as one's thesis, chastity as the antithesis, and with a highly individualized and sensitively variable synthesis of the two as outcome or end result. Be that as it may, Mary Renault is the first writer of our era, so far as I know, to take us into the lives and minds and hearts of Greek lovers, to show them to us in their natural habitat, and to make their experience fully and concretely understandable and plausible to us.

The Last of the Wine is enriched by a poetic sort of Freudianism. One might say that insofar as Freud was a Greek, then Mary Renault, in this novel, is a Freudian.

By focusing entirely on the homosexual side of Greek emotional life I have created an imbalance which is not true either to the Greeks or to the novel I am reviewing. One of the most appealing features of *The Last of the Wine* is the picture it gives us of a society based upon the fact

of human bisexuality, showing forth the possibility of a sensitive, harmonious balance between the heterosexual and homosexual components of human nature, and the artificiality, the crudity of the view which insists that a man must be either the one thing or the other, either a lover of men or of women, when the truth about him is that the completest man is he who freely and with sincerity loves both. At the same time, Mary Renault shows us a world in which both exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality were tolerated and respected. It was not supposed that the sexual needs and tastes of all men were, or ought to be, the same. In the second place, the quality of a man and the quality of his beloved mattered more than the sex of the individuals.

The most dubious thing about the homosexual cause is that it is forced to defend sex for sex's sake with no qualitative distinctions between honorable and dishonorable modes of loving, with no distinction between the self-respecting and the gutless, with no distinction between devotion and mere sensuality. Those wrapped up in the homosexual cause tend to lose sight of such distinctions, I believe. It is at least ridiculous to find oneself a «crusader» for kinds of love which are irresponsible and sordid as well as for love which is characterful and good. *The Last of the Wine* confronts us with such qualitative, ethical distinctions in such a way that few of us, perhaps, will be able to put the book down without a rather shamed realization of how far we have strayed from the standards of our youth while, at the same time, it restores our confidence in those standards and inspires us to rededicate ourselves to them.

I suppose I ought to mention the novel's few slight faults. They are relative faults which would not be apparent at all if the book were not so extraordinarily good. Well, Alexias seems to have too orderly a grasp, too clear a perspective of Athenian political and military affairs for a boy of fifteen. The relationship between Alexias and Lysis sometimes seems a little too noble to be true. When Lysis marries, Alexias conquers his quite understandable jealousy much too easily . . . It is said that love needs something to forgive. *The Last of the Wine* is a novel which it would be impossible not to love. It is easy to forgive faults which are only those of a fond parent who slightly over-idealizes her children.

The Last of the Wine has been scheduled for publication in the United States by Pantheon Books, on October 15th. Price 4.50 dollars.

Luther Allen.

What is sinful is not always criminal

In the most outspoken declaration on sex ever made in Britain by religious leaders, the Church of England today urges that—

1. *Homosexuals should be accepted into the homes of normal people.*
2. *Consenting homosexuality between adults in private should not be punished.*
3. *Street prostitutes should not be convicted without corroborative evidence*