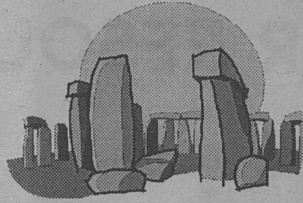


STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

by charlie emond

A la recherché du temps perdu



France began to develop a gay reputation back in the ninth century with Alcuin and his group of scholars at the court of Charlemagne. They even had pet nicknames for each other, such as "Dodo" and "Daphnis." John Boswell analyzes their poems and letters as "part of a tradition of erotic address between men."

A couple of centuries later, in the era of troubadours and songs of courtly love, France became the Motown of Europe, and Provençal became the language of love. Other countries envied the legendary level of romance in Provence, and this included same-sex love. Chartres was the major academic center of Europe in the 11th century, where gay clerics, including Marbod, Bishop of Rennes, wrote and taught gay poetry. In fact, there were even male brothels in Chartres, Orleans, and Paris that employed only men with large genitals.

When the French monk, Bernard of Morlaix looked around him in the late Middle Ages, he commented that gay people "are as numerous as grains of barley, as many as the shells of the sea or the sands of the shore."

Honi soit qui mal y pense

In previous columns, we have met gay Frenchmen such as Bishop Ralph of Tours and his boyfriend John, the bishop of Orleans (nicknamed "Flora" after a famous French prostitute!). We also met King Henry III, who "...combin(ed) the qualities of both sexes," and his infamous yet lovely "mignons." A later French king, Louis XIII, with his lovers provided by Richelieu, even created a kind of gay heritage by fathering Phillip of Orleans. Phillip was deliberately brought up as a girl so as not to be a threat to his brother, the future "Sun King," Louis XIV. He became the most stately homo at his brother's court in 17th century Versailles.

Cherchez la femme

Look at your lists of gay folk and notice that the lesbians on it seem to be writers and poets, and that many of them are also French. In the flow of poetry and prose from Sappho to Audre Lorde, the

lesbian writer has been the torchbearer for the lesbian cause. France seems to have produced more than its share of Sapphic muses.

Collette (1873-1954) comes out on every lesbian list... and every French list too for that matter! Her first marriage was to a guy who made her write the Claudine novels and then published them under his name! She left him (no wonder), and though she married twice more, she found time for romance with several women.

Her study of lesbian mores, *The Pure and the Impure*, has been called brilliant. The androgynous drawings of Aubrey Beardsly were her inspiration. That blend of masculine and feminine qualities became the stuff of her characters, and something she admired in the lesbians she knew.

Although in time she became a national treasure, the church, no surprise, refused to let her be buried in a Christian graveyard due to her "immoral" life and her "celebration of human sensuality." Here in the US, her best known work is *Gigi*, which was both a play and a hit movie starring Audrey Hepburn. To be honest, I don't remember sensuality of any kind, unless you count the homophobic Maurice Chevalier drooling over little girls.

Chacun a son gout

Another movie on a French theme is *Total Eclipse*. This is the biography of that prince of poets, Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), who claimed that all his troubles came from being feminine! (Not that his incredible devotion to religion and alcohol had anything to do with it!) He actually got married, and you can only feel very sorry for his wife and child. (In one fit of madness, he deliberately set his wife's hair on fire!) Their lives together were a torment for everyone.

His torrid love affair with Artur Rimbaud (1854-1891) was also a mess. This "marvelous boy"—brilliant, original and an outrageous Bohemian in every way—stabs Verlaine through the hand during one argument. (Watching them in action, you really end up intensely disliking both of them.)

Rimbaud wrote all his stuff

before he was 19 and then went on to become a merchant and die at 37. Though they inspired each other to write their best stuff, they were both too prickly to get along together well and things ended up with a scandalous duel.

In this movie, Rimbaud is played by a sometimes naked Leonardo DiCaprio, and it is worth the rental fee to see him play gay with such abandon.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose

Along with the French kiss, French letters, French ticklers, and French fries, the French may also have also given us our current use of the word "gay." In the language of Provençal, "gai" meant courtly love, "gai saber" meant lover, and "gaiol" meant an openly homosexual person. "Gay Paree" always conjures up in my mind same-sex couples strolling down the Champs Elysees. How about a remake of *Gigi* with Leonardo in the title role?

For more info: I have written this column using information from two books in particular: John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, which I have already recommended, and Thomas Cowan's *Gay Men and Women Who Enriched the World*.

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queens College and master's degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction. ▼

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