



# Erkkila, Betsy. Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus" [review]

Peter J. L. Riley

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2013 Peter J. L. Riley

---

## Recommended Citation

Riley, Peter J. "Erkkila, Betsy. Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus" [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 30 (2013), 101-102.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.2059>

## REVIEWS

BETSY ERKKILA, ed. *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus."* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011. xiii + 147 pp.

In this provocative, timely, and useful book, Betsy Erkkila provides readers with the opportunity to trace the development of what eventually became the "Calamus" poems through their various stages of drafting, revision, and rearrangement. *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love* presents a facsimile and transcription of the little-known 1859 manuscript "Live Oak, with Moss" alongside facsimiles of the "Calamus" clusters of 1860 and 1881. Erkkila's "Afterword" seeks to revise the biographically orientated critical stance put forward by Alan Helms and Hershel Parker, who, in Erkkila's view, read Whitman's revisions of "Calamus" as the product of a "guilt-ridden homosexual poet [who] was engaged in a persistent and lifelong process of self-censorship, cover-up, and disguise after he had a single isolated love affair or 'homosexual crisis' in the late 1850s." Erkkila complicates any easy correlation between the biographical Whitman and Whitman's persona(s) on the page, arguing that "Live Oak, with Moss" "may be multiple, poetic, and not a simple or single narrative at all." She contends that "while the force of the poet's passion 'for his love whom I love' and 'my life-long lover' is clear," it is "unclear whether the poet refers to a man, men, a past or current lover or lovers, or some future fantasy lover." Erkkila's argument is most convincing when she says that "'Live Oak, with Moss' might be read as a daring poetic sequence of scenes, or tableaux, in which Whitman gives voice to a full range of fluid and ever-shifting states of body, mind and feeling." It is with these sensible caveats in mind that she provides a number of spirited close-readings and observations about the possibilities, but also, crucially I think, irresolutions of the texts presented. She also asks us emphatically to find out for ourselves—this book empowers readers to make their own minds up about Whitman's presentation of erotic, physical, social, and spiritual love between men.

One of the most thrilling aspects of this book is also potentially one of its principle weaknesses. Erkkila writes with conviction that Whitman's songs "reveal a poet newly articulate about his public role as the evangel-poet of those sexual offenders and social outsiders who were—and still are—among the least visible and most oppressed within the putatively liberating but in fact heteronormatizing structures of the liberal state." It is certainly exciting that the "Calamus" poems should be reissued at this time of renewed hope—in the wake of the *Perry v Schwarzenegger* federal decision, and just as Obama comes out in favor of gay marriage; indeed Erkkila's presentation of these works, along with her "Afterword," have an urgency and vitality reminiscent of the pamphlet or manifesto form. And yet at times, the poems feel as though they are being cajoled into an evangelism and political radicalism that Whitman so frequently resists. For Erkkila, these poems are "revolutionary"; they constitute "a radical departure in Whitman's work and

in literary, sexual, and social history”; they are also “his most public and politically engaged.” But these estimations are not always convincing: when the line “I am what I am” from “Live Oak” VIII is explicitly compared to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 121—“I am that I am”—does this not point to the fact that Whitman engages with a tradition of homosocial poetry that stretches back at least to the sixteenth century? Surely this complicates the idea that these poems of Whitman represent a “radical departure” in literary history. Certainly, his poems are surprising and provocative, but in this format—extracted from their sequential arrangement and dispersal in the *Leaves of Grass* of 1860 and 1881—they are sometimes in danger of being loaded with an exaggerated potency.

As Erkkilä espouses the revolutionary force of Whitman’s songs, she also makes a contrapuntal move to downplay the poetic sublimations or dilutions associated with his later work: “Whitman tells ‘the secret’ of his ‘nights and days’ not for sensation or sublimation but as an emancipatory act of sexual, political, artistic, and spiritual liberation. . . . ‘The Base of All Metaphysics’ does not sublimate, dilute, or silence Whitman’s celebration of erotic love between men as many have argued.” I was left wondering, though, whether it is actually this combination of dilution, radicalism, sublimation, and secrecy that makes “Calamus” so titillating and compelling in the first place. Provocative though the photograph of a calamus plant on the back of this book is, I wonder if Whitman would have wanted us to have such easy access to this wonderfully naughty plant. Who, barring perhaps an Emily Dickinson or Henry David Thoreau, would not admit having to reach for a dictionary when first confronted with this word? The thrill of finding out about this organic appendage is in the chase. Though Whitman shows us his leaves on the front of the 1855 *Leaves*, he makes a point of not providing an illustration of this particular plant in 1860 or 1881. If Whitman’s “Calamus” cluster were as “liberated” as Erkkilä claims, his poems would not be so effective or erotically charged. Many of these poems are not particularly radical; rather, the sexual pleasure of this poetry is often to be found in the continual combinations of partial and possible implicature, apparent confession, and libidinal sleight of hand. After all, the elements of disguise that distinguish the cruise, though symptomatic of a lamentable social intolerance, are always in danger of being great fun.

In spite of these reservations, this book stands as an excellent and valuable contribution to Whitman studies. The opportunity to switch so easily between these versions is a real pleasure, and Erkkilä’s sensitivity to the currencies of Whitman’s language continually impels the reader to look and think again. Of particular note is the reading of Whitman’s retort to John Addington Symonds that he had sired six children. Erkkilä suggests that, though “disingenuous,” the claim is “not wholly at odds with the amative, reproductive, and familial languages and contexts in which he expressed loving relationships among and between men.” “Whitman,” she continues, was perhaps “thinking of some of the ‘illegitimate sons’ he adopted, fathered, and mothered over the course of his life.” It is while highlighting the sexually “fluid” and “permeable” possibilities of Whitman’s life and work—and the role the reader has to play in this legacy—that *Walt Whitman’s Songs of Male Intimacy and Love* becomes most persuasive.

*The University of Oxford*

PETER J. L. RILEY