

Whitman's Homotextuality, Homopolitics, and Homonationalism: A Case for Historicist Parallel Reading*

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Abstract

This essay puts forth *historicist parallel reading* as a solution to the particular quandary facing anyone engaged in Walt Whitman studies, namely that almost antipodal views, rather than proximate agreements, still arise on any topic concerning the poet and his *oeuvre*. This essay seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of this reading strategy by focusing on three of Whitman's interrelated core thematics. First, the *homotextuality* of *Leaves of Grass* is examined critically to show how it was generally misrecognized and, instead of being totally dismissed, should be relocated in the existence of a coded (and

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thereby hidden) level paralleling the open one—which hereby suggests the poet’s possible self-awareness of his (sexual) minority status, best described as *para*-homosexual. The essay then considers more closely the specific contents of Whitman’s *homopolitics* (the hidden level of his openly promoted democratic comradeship) by working through critical theorizations addressing squarely the “homosexual” dimensions of his political propositions. Finally, Whitman’s subscription to US national ideology and hence endorsement of white supremacy and glorification of imperialism, which may arguably have contributed to his canonization as well as the transmission of his homotextual messages and homopolitical ideals, are raised for a homonationalist critique. However, his more widespread reputation as a democratic internationalist and pro-immigration multiculturalist has provided more affirmative views on the matter and thus complicates it from a historical perspective.

Key Words: male friendship, open/secret, cruising strangers, ancient Greek model, American literary canon