

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Queering the Late Victorian Book

*Queer Books of Late Victorian Print Culture*. Frederick D. King. Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. 258 pp.

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<1>In *Queer Books of Late Victorian Print Culture*, Frederick D. King calls for renewed attention to the “material experience of reading” (2). Weaving together textual studies, queer theory, and trans theory, King argues for consideration of how the materiality of the late nineteenth-century book interacts with its literary content to produce hidden queer discourses and a physical space for queer intimacies. Calling such texts “queer books,” King focuses on the collaborative efforts behind these works as he traces how these books emerged from and transformed existing heteronormative structures and ideals in print culture.

<2>In Chapter One, “Concerning Golden Books and *Silverpoints*,” King highlights the role of the queer book in aesthetic culture. He begins with a discussion of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) to demonstrate how “the queer book serves as a means of mediating discourses of same-sex desire between male aesthetes” (41). In his discussion of *Dorian Gray*, King contends that the unnamed book restarts the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian after Sibyl’s death, providing space for their queer desires. Similarly, King argues that Marius and Flavian’s “shared aesthetic experience of reading” (49) positions the book as a “site of physical intimacy” (50). In the second half of the chapter, King turns to John Gray’s *Silverpoints*, examining how the text’s materiality merges with Gray’s spirituality and eroticism, positioning the work as a queer book. Specifically focusing on Charles Ricketts’s typographical choices, King illustrates how *Silverpoints*’s font and excessive white margins create space for the consideration and cultivation of queer desires.

<3>Where Chapter One establishes the role of the queer book in aesthetic texts, Chapter Two, “Pomegranate Stains on the Ideal Book; or Queering the Hetero-Beautiful,” explores how the queer book developed from the heteronormative structures and ideals embedded in the Revival of Printing through its analysis of Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). As a collection of fairy tales, *House of Pomegranates* embodies the heteronormative ideals of “family, reproductive sexuality, [and] conventional gender roles” (74-75). And yet, as King’s analysis in this chapter persuasively shows, Wilde’s text and Charles Shannon’s and Rickett’s illustrations and designs work together to also provide space for queer discourse in the collection. King begins by discussing William Morris’s vision for Kelmscott Press, arguing that Morris’s control over the design and publication process, his promotion of unity, and his singular notion of what is considered beautiful made Morris’s books “hetero-beautiful” — a beautiful work that is based on gender binaries and heterosexuality (80). King then turns to *A House of Pomegranates* to illustrate how Ricketts and Shannon merged new printing techniques and Morris’s “handmade book tradition” to produce a queer space that provides alternative views of sexuality, gender, and beauty (25).

<4>King’s Chapter Three, “Trans-Textuality in Michael Field’s *Long Ago* and *Whym Chow*,” complicates his previous discussions of the queer book as it considers the role and textual effect of Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) on and in the two texts. For King, Michael Field undermines gender and sexuality binaries, “transform[ing] these two volumes into works of queer introspection” (133). In his use of trans theory to analyze Michael Field and their work, King highlights a gap in Michael Field scholarship. King, importantly, does not situate Cooper and Bradley as trans individuals, but instead uses trans theory to demonstrate how Michael Fields’s position as both the public persona of two women and the textual persona as male author “offe[r] an incoherence regarding gender differences that enriches the poetic exploration of sexual and gender conflicts in their work” (142). The second half of this chapter examines *Long Ago* (1889) and *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914), illustrating how the subjects of each work, Sappho and their dog, respectively, provide the opportunity for queer relationality. In both *Long Ago* and *Whym Chow*, binaries between past and present, subject and object, male and female, and paganism and Catholicism are undermined and reimagined through the work’s material design.

<5>In Chapter Four, “Collaboration and Conflict: Queer Space in *Salome*,” the book’s strongest chapter, King explores how Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations in the English version of Wilde’s *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (1894) are an interpretation of Wilde’s text that then infuse Wilde’s text with meaning. The

interplay between “Wilde’s use of innuendo” and “Beardsley’s overtly sexual” (179) illustrations creates a queer space that promotes female agency and non-normative desire. Salomé’s desire, and thus female desire, is transformed from something silenced and “part of a distant uncivilized past” (179) to something visible and available in contemporary Western discourses. In this way, according to King, Salomé becomes a symbol for desires that challenge heteronormativity, and thus the work becomes a queer space for any “reader who seeks expressions of sexual difference” (178). As with the proceeding chapters, King also examines the publication history of *Salome*, arguing that the, at times, turbulent relationship among the work’s collaborators “decenters” Wilde from the text and challenges contemporary norms for publishing erotic texts. Unlike the circulation of traditional nineteenth-century erotic books, such as *Priapeia sive diversorium poetarum in Priapus Iusus, or Sportive Epigrams on Priapus by divers poets in English verse and prose* (1890), *Salome* was publicly available at the Bodley Head and priced more affordably. In focusing on Wilde’s collaborators and their effect on “his mythos,” King highlights an underdeveloped area in scholarship on Wilde (182). In addition to broadening the scholarly focus on *Salome* from Wilde to the work’s other collaborators, King also uses his analysis of *Salome* to assert that “queer theory is itself born from the study of book history, but that connection is typically unspoken” (208).

<6>King began *Queer Books* by calling for a return to the materiality of the book and an emphasis on the reader’s experience. King concludes his work by calling for the digitization of nineteenth-century queer books, suggesting that online access to these texts would produce new meanings just as the physicality of late Victorian works affected their content. While the nineteenth-century queer book provided a physical site for queer discourse and relations, in our current age, King notes, these opportunities are now online.

<7>*Queer Books* demonstrates King’s wide-reaching knowledge of the late Victorian book and print culture, and each of his chapters could be expanded into larger works. While, at times, the focus on multiple texts positions King’s work as better suited for scholars of aestheticism and nineteenth-century textual studies, as opposed to nineteenth-century queer studies, this does not take away from the work’s impact. King’s *Queer Books* is an important work for any nineteenth-century scholar interested in textual studies, aestheticism, and queer theory as well queer narrative studies and digital humanities. In arguing for a focus on the materiality of the book in creating queer discourse and relationships, and, significantly, the collaborators of these works, King provides new avenues in nineteenth-century scholarship.