

Queer Reading Pleasures

Review of Zsolt Bojti, *Queer Reading Practices and Sexology in Fin-de-Siècle Literature: Wilde, Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson* (Routledge, 2025)

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As scholars of English literature, especially Victorian Studies (a key period in the British empire), we are under necessary pressure to diversify the canon and to discuss exclusionary literatures and reading practices. One of the ways in which we can do this necessary and recuperative work is by thinking outside of national and Anglocentric approaches to texts and literary networks; we must instead engage in the same international and/or polymath/interdisciplinary reading practices as embraced by our queer Victorian subjects, for example. *Queer Reading Practices and Sexology in Fin-de-Siècle Literature: Wilde, Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson*, by Zsolt Bojti, provides readers with precisely this kind of interdisciplinary discussion of queer history (combining literature, letters, sexology, legal history, etc.), and better yet, his analysis is not bound by nation—or language, even. What makes this work unique and important is that there is not yet a book which frames this history in the context of a wider, transatlantic–European exchange of literary ideas; indeed, this combined focus on both a global and literary exchanges of queer culture is what sets apart, what Bojti calls, “homophilia” and “hungarophilia” in *fin-de-siècle* literature. Most academic texts in this category tend to come from history and cultural studies, not literary studies. At the same time, many of the competing studies tend to limit themselves to a single nation—British or American, and rarely a wider European context.

The Introduction makes a compelling case for both the ensuing discussion of homophilic literature and for its author, Bojti, as the one to conduct said study. It does so by introducing readers to the key term, “hungarophilia.” Put simply, the term refers to an obsession with the figure of the Hungarian as a kind of symbol or shared “code.” *Queer Reading Practices* explains how this figure came to occupy an important place in late-nineteenth-century conversations, in both literature and emergent sexology, on male-male desire. These conversations would spread across Europe and into Britain by way of literature and *belles-lettres*. However, because of Britain’s repressive legal approach to homosexuality (even limiting the distribution and, thus, knowledge of sexological texts), many English writers would resort to certain codes—like hungarophilia—in order to build a covert community or “anthology” of queer readers. A Hungarian himself, Bojti is thus ideally positioned to trace the evolution of this queer-coded conversation spanning multiple languages as well as continents.

Chapter 1 offers a deep historical dive into late-Victorian sexology and, specifically, those writers (John Addington Symonds) and sexual scientists (Havelock Ellis) working to destigmatise homosexuality at the turn of the century. In this chapter, Bojti also explains his selection of the term “homophilia” to in order to emphasise the way that many of these writers allowed for amorous (or romantic) love between men; this term is then contrasted, throughout the study, with those conversations—in both science and literature—preoccupied with the physical aspect of male-male desire. Bojti’s introduction is required reading for anyone interested in late-Victorian homosexuality because of its thorough attention to the historical specifics concerning these conversations among those working in the emergent sciences and, later, literary figures like Oscar Wilde; the introduction traces which scientist coined which sexual term (like Karl Heinrich Ulrich’s positive use of the term “Urning” for male same-sex desire), and how and such a term was then taken up and circulated among writers across the continent and into Victorian England. Bojti thus makes a compelling argument for Victorians’ late and limited access to sexology’s recuperative (or anti-criminal) approach to homosexuality; the introduction then uses this historical context to set the stage for subsequent analysis of literature by writers in English—from Oscar Wilde to Count Eric Stenbock and Edward Prime-Stevenson—and how in these works we can trace the evolution of the conversation, including the eventual integration of continental sexology’s positive representation of homophilic love.

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The second chapter of *Queer Reading Practices* is focused on Oscar Wilde, who probably still is the first person who comes to mind when thinking of Victorian homosexuality. For this reason, it is wise that Bojti begins with Wilde—both because any queer history must contend with this iconic figure, and also because Wilde did, in fact, play a critical role in disseminating a specific and, as Bojti convincingly argues, negative version of homophilic love at the end of the century. The negative, in this case, refers not only the Victorian public's homophobic response to any discussion of male-male desire following the Wilde trials, but also, as Bojti explains, to Wilde's own aesthetic conception of gay desire. This chapter offers new and compelling historical analysis of Wilde's relationship to emergent queer texts and sexological writings of the time, including Wilde's loose or second-hand knowledge of sexology—mostly Ulrich's writings on the Urning, and only cited explicitly after his imprisonment. Instead, Wilde's notion of male-male love, Bojti explains, belongs within an aesthetic tradition immersed in, or resisting, contemporary degeneration theory and fears of bodily contamination. This chapter thus looks to hungarophilia—including images of olfactory stimulation and Hungary Water in perfume and auditory sensation per the *style hongrois*—as a way to trace this queer-coded conversation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, along the collaboratively-produced (or queer anthology), *Teleny* (1893). But with their emphasis on aesthetic physicality, these texts ultimately “rehearsed the rather unfortunate idea of neuropathology that men attracted to their own sex were weak, effeminate, and unwholesome” (78).

Chapter 3 is devoted to the queer literature of “half-Estonian British resident” Count Stanislaus Eric Stenbock (“a remote member of Wilde's circle” [89]). Titled “Gothic Performance,” this chapter does not disappoint, as it weaves in sustained discussion of the vampire as another queer-code that comes to Stenbock by way of European folklore through Goethe (and Polidori's *The Vampyre*). This Gothic “anthology” thus influences Stenbock's notion of male-male love as inevitably doomed, something only to be enjoyed in the afterlife (with vampires). Bojti's writing style results in compelling close readings of both Stenbock's short fiction, as well as Goethe's “Die Braut von Korinth” (The Bride of Corinth, 1797; which “introduced the figure of the vampire into world literature”) and Goethe's “Der Erlkönig” (1782; “which is a reworking of one of the most famous Scandinavian ballads, *Elveskud*”). I most enjoyed the chapter's analysis of the latter work, in particular, and its discussion of the homophilic Elf fairyking—who seems to reappear as vampire

in Stenbock's "True Story of a Vampire."¹ In addition to the homophobic vampire, Goethe's queer influence is also visible via Carmela, the story's narrator. As Bojti explains, this story gives us a narrator who is too young (thirteen years old) and the wrong gender; as a result, she (the narrator) is simply unable to comprehend the queer coded seduction of her brother, Gabriel, taking place before her eyes. This chapter delivers close and historicist analysis of Hungarian music (hungarophilia) as key to this coded male-male desire driving the plot. Yet, it is Carmela's inability to access those codes (and the community of readers into which her brother enters) which then effectively replicates the "classificatory problem of same-sex desire in the first half of the 1890s" (109).

The final chapter of *Queer Reading Practices* is focused on Edward Prime-Stevenson, author of *Imre* (1906) and *The Intersexes* (1909). It bears noting that Bojti is an expert on Prime-Stevenson, with a new edition of *Imre* forthcoming from Oxford University Press. This expertise is on display in chapter 3, "False Snares and Sexology in Edward Prime-Stevenson's 'Homosexual Romance.'" The chapter offers a richly-researched history of the author's life and his involvement in sexological writings at the end of the century. Bojti establishes Prime-Stevenson's expertise in both Hungarian music and, also, continental sexology as convincing context for reading *Imre* as a kind of corrective response to the negative homophobic literature coming out of Britain (per Wilde and *fin-de-siècle* Decadence). This chapter is also a testament to Bojti's uniquely positioned expertise, as readers are given a thorough history of Prime-Stevenson's hungarophilia. The figure of the Hungarian proves key to understanding the unfolding male-male sexual plot in *Imre* and to appreciating the author's positive (or non-Degenerate take) on this homophobic love (more than physical sex). The chapter ends with a fascinating history of Prime-Stevenson's subsequent work on *The Intersexes* and the author's blend of fiction and science. This chapter teaches us that Prime-Stevenson's fiction borrowed from sexology, just as his sexology borrowed from fiction, allowing for an anthology of readers working from new code. As Bojti beautifully concludes, "Oswald and Xavier Mayne could promote a wholesome conceptualisation of same-sex desire at the beginning of the twentieth century" (137).

1 As Bojti notes, sexologists also picked up on this queer aspect of Goethe's tale "'Erlkönig' is included, without explanation, in 'Bibliographie der Homosexualität' (Bibliography of Homosexuality) published in the first issue of *Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook of Sexual Intermediaries)" (93).

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This book provides scholars and students with a much-needed critical resource on queer literature and sexology at the end of the nineteenth century. It changes the way we think about queer literature's contribution to *fin-de-siècle* sexual science, and vice versa; better yet, its bold interdisciplinary analysis pushes us to rethink the confines of period or national literatures—encouraging us to read canonical and non-canonical texts alongside each other in order to gain a richer sense of the modern invention of homosexuality and the polymath reading practices as embraced by our queer Victorian subjects. *Queer Reading Practices and Sexology in Fin-de-Siècle Literature* poses a significant contribution to literary studies and queer cultural histories alike.

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