

REVIEW

Decoding the Aesthetes with Hungarophilia and Homophilia

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Bojti, Zsolt. *Queer Reading Practices and Sexology in Fin-de-Siècle Literature: Wilde, Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson*. New York: Routledge, 2026. 168 pages. ISBN: 9781003481812. Hb. \$190.00.

Within their works, aesthete writers of the *fin-de-siècle* allude to a clandestine queer culture that is at once the product of, and resistance to, the institutionalized project of pathologizing and criminalizing same-sex desire. Critics of British queer history have attempted to fill the epistemic void resultant of this homophobia by mining homoerotic subtext from such prominent aesthetes. Zsolt Bojti reinvigorates this investigation by isolating a curious yet understudied mode of encodement, that is, the queer literary and subcultural dialogue between *homophilia* (love of the same sex) and *hungarophilia* (a love of Hungary and its culture). The parallels between these philias—drawn by Oscar Wilde, Stanislaus Eric Stenbock, and Edward Prime-Stevenson, among other Anglophone authors—derives from their imaginings of Hungary as the place “where Western and Eastern cultures meet” (4). As Bojti explains, the cultural fluidity of Hungarians, perceived by the British as either a barbaric race or a flourishing modern nation, was a useful template through which to construct a coherent vision of the homosexual, who similarly floated through recognizable identity categories (gender, race, nationally, class) while negating or eluding others, like prescribed heterosexuality. Despite this parallel occurring with some frequency in *fin-de-siècle* literature, Bojti’s monograph is its first full-length exploration. (IMC)

Queer Reading Practices and Sexology in Fin-de-Siècle Literature: Wilde, Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson begins with an introduction that outlines both Bojti’s argument and its placement within the fields of Victorian sexology and queer history. Bojti usefully glosses foundational texts by critics Alan Sinfield (1994), David Halperin (2002), and Charles Upchurch (2009), as well as more recent work from Ralph M. Leck (2016) and Simon Joyce (2022). He particularly stresses the importance of textual transmission and dissemination to the sexological movement: “The greatest difficulty we face in the conceptualization of same-sex desire, especially in the study of

Anglophone literatures,” Bojti writes, “is that the English joined the discourse of sexual science rather late” (27). Monolingual authors and policymakers alike were disconnected from (predominantly German) conceptions of same-sex desire that positioned queerness as an identity rather than a set of deviant sexual behaviors, as perpetuated by high-profile criminal cases like Wilde’s infamous 1895 trials (28). Bojti also primes readers on homophilia and hungarophilia as discursive frameworks. Homophilia, as described by the author, captures “the numerous conceptualisations of same-sex desire in various legal, medical, and literary discourses” that attempted to render a coherent vision of homosexuality within the epistemic vacuum of homophobia (11). In turn, hungarophilia serves “as a common denominator and diagnostic tool to see how literary men contested the convoluted approaches to homophilia simultaneously in a more particular context,” namely, English literature (11). Hungarophilia can thereby demonstrate how turn-of-the-century gay authors used recognizable (and already queered) archetypes and symbols to explore alternative visions of male-male desire within their art (11).

Importantly, *Queer Reading Practices* is not a study of British hagiography on Hungary, but rather a study of “the Hungarian” and his textual manifestations in *fin-de-siècle* homophilic works. Bojti specifically examines musical ekphrasis in the *style hongrois* (Hungarian style) as it appears throughout several authors’ works in addition to other prominent hungarophilic motifs like perfume and language. His broader methodology is based on Nat Hurley’s (2009) conception of “reading anthologically,” in which texts yield additional valances when read together and within their respective cultural contexts (12). Bojti further analyzes the *style hongrois* through Stephen Benson’s (2006) framework of “literary music,” in which music is read alongside the paratexts of the player, their performance, and their audience (11). Music offers a mode of expression that eludes the explicitness of written or spoken language, thus making it uniquely suited for encoded communication. Bojti applies this mode, which Benson terms “open privacy,” to representations of Hungarian music in *fin-de-siècle* homophilic literature: “in a period when sexological knowledge was scarce and could not be publicly disseminated,” Bojti hypothesizes, “the very personal conceptualisation of a sexual self may be paralleled with the intimate description of Hungarian music” (12). Indeed, a character’s appreciation for the masculine, invigorating rhythms of a Hungarian *cárdas* may connote his appreciation for other forms of invigorating rhythms.

In chapter one, Bojti studies Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/91) and *Teleny; or, The Reverse of the Medal: A Physiological Romance of To-Day* (1893)—a privately printed pornographic novella purportedly co-authored by Wilde and other gay aesthetes—to demonstrate the revelatory effects of reading anthologically. As Bojti explains, seemingly inert textual details like the color green (50), perfumery (54), and Hungarian music (67) are in actuality homophilic motifs that signal queer content. For instance, Henry Wotton's "soul" perfume (per Walter Pater) overwhelms then excites Dorian, seemingly foreshadowing his impending descent into decadent depravity. Another example is the signature scent of Wotton's suppressed past, heliotrope, which in *Teleny* is a non-verbal cue for same-sex desire. Reading these usages of heliotrope together, Bojti argues, recontextualizes Henry and Dorian's encounter as a homosexual flirtation rather than simple moral corruption. This implication is compounded by the texts' publishing histories: Wilde changed the perfume from heliotrope to the more neutral *lilas blanc* when revising the 1890 version of *Dorian Gray* for general readership in 1891, seemingly in response to chatter about its homoeroticism. The sexual connection between the flower and queerness could only be made explicit in *Teleny*, the pornographic text, and not the public-facing *Dorian Gray*. One must read these texts together to decode a fuller picture of their homophilic implications.

Chapter two explores the Gothic as a generic means of queer identification. This section is influenced by William Hughes and Andrew Smith's (2009) analysis of the Gothic and queerness as jointly rooted in performance and style, which Bojti extends to Hungarian music as it appears in Stenbock's short story, "The True Story of a Vampire" (1894). Stenbock is a minor figure in *fin-de-siècle* studies, meaning his oeuvre is ripe for critical investigation. Bojti emphasizes Stenbock's cyclicity as evidenced by recurring themes, character names, plots, and his continuous allusions to preceding homophilic texts. A most interesting intervention is the parallels Bojti draws between "True Story" and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's vampiric poems "Der Erlkönig" [The Elf King] (1782) and "Die Braut von Korinth" [The Bride of Corinth] (1797), as each thematically poses that forbidden desire inevitably leads to tragedy. Stenbock struggled to accept his homosexuality, which was "considered unnatural and a crime against humankind" during his lifetime (100). Bojti adopts Davide Sparti's (2001) "internalisation model" to posit that Stenbock deploys familiar metaphors like the vampire to evoke and navigate his homophilic anxieties (100-01). Hungarophilia again appears to facilitate same-sex desire: Count

Vardalek, the titular vampire, is Hungarian and seduces his paramour/victim Gabriel by playing the piano in the *style hongrois*. Vardalek's playing not only enchants Gabriel but alerts him to their shared queerness. Without an accepted terminology through which to articulate their taboo desires, queer Anglophiles must resort to non-verbal forms of communication like music to identify themselves and each other.

The last chapter focuses on Edward Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: A Memorandum* (1906), one of the first English-language novels to feature queer protagonists with a happy ending (113). Like Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson's work is little-studied and even less is known about his life. As Bojti demonstrates, though, reading *Imre* anthologically with Prime-Stevenson's other texts and alongside contemporaneous sexological studies reveals that the author was deeply invested in depicting a version of homosexuality removed from its decadent, sexually charged image established in 1890s homophilic literature by Wilde and his cohort. This is not to say that Prime-Stevenson was unfamiliar with such texts. Rather, Bojti argues that *Imre* subverts reader expectations by recontextualizing familiar setups in *fin-de-siècle* homophilic and pornographic stories. Scenes that would normally conclude with the implication of sex, like cruising male escorts at the park, instead lead to intimate conversations about music and Hungary. The difference in representation is perhaps best captured by Prime-Stevenson's description of *Imre* as a "psychological romance," a decided departure from the subtitle "Physiological Romance" of *Teleny* (qtd. in 131). While both texts are homophilic and connote queerness through hungarophilia, *Imre* attempts to provide queer readers with a script for homosexual relationships. Rather than titillation, Prime-Stevenson foregrounds the legitimizing works of German sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) to establish a gay identity outside of homophobic *fin-de-siècle* propaganda.

Queer Reading Practices is an essential book for students of Victorian sexology, *fin-de-siècle* literature, queer history, and Eastern Europe's cultural footprint in the British imagination. It is a persuasive call for scholars to embrace anthological reading as a means to enrich our understanding of the emergent figure of "the homosexual" in his own words. As such, the monograph rejects the typical Foucauldian institutional approach to homosexual identity construction. Bojti engages with historical, literary, and cultural analysis, thus making it a useful text across the humanities. His arguments are well-evidenced, yet accessible to general readers or junior scholars. Bojti's strongest intervention is the understudied adoption of

Hungary and its cultural manifestations as a means for queer encodement. Indeed, his primary sources feel like they must be studied alongside hungarophilia in order to more fully understand their queer themes. Bojti's investigation leaves room for further discussion about said philia's relationship with various genres: *Dorian Gray* and "True Story" are analyzed as Gothic texts, but *Imre* is decidedly realist. The book also exemplifies the benefits of centering lesser-known authors like Stenbock and Prime-Stevenson. Certainly, Bojti's monograph opens the door for a new generation of scholars to revisit classic texts with a new lens (hungarophilia) and unearth new valances within homophobic literature.

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