

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### Re-Articulating 'The Third Sex': Victorian and neo-Victorian Engagements with LGBTQIA+

A special issue of *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal* (2025)

Edited by Dr Helena Esser, Mollie Clarke, Dr Matt Crofts, and Dr Claire O'Callaghan

Deadline for abstracts: Friday 18th November 2022

Nineteenth-century literature and culture frequently offers a broader conception of what we have come to understand as LGBTQIA+ than is often recognised. Whereas fin-de-siècle decadent culture around prominent figures such as Oscar Wilde or Vernon Lee are relatively well-known as instances of queerness in Victorian culture, they are far from isolated examples. Indeed, the VPFA's 'Third Sex' Reading Group has explored - and continues to consider - gender fluidity and expressions of same-sex desire broadly, considering prominent figures, such as like Anne Lister and Aubrey Beardsley and the late Victorian New Woman, and works by Marie Corelli, Renée Vivien, and Radclyffe Hall alongside lesser known ones.

Today's neo-Victorian popular media have channelled this diversity visibly into literature, films and TV series representing, challenging, and re-imagining Victorian gender(s). As Caroline Koegler & Marlana Tronicke's Special Issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* shows (13.1/ 2020), queer neo-Victoriana have expanded beyond writers like Sarah Waters. Examples from Film and TV include *Wilde* (1997), *The Happy Prince* (2018), *Gentleman Jack* (2019), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), *Ammonite* (2020), or *Dance of the 41* (2020), and queer identities have featured in *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-present), *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), *Dickinson* (2019-2021), or *The Nevers* (2020-present). However, our understanding of these LGBTQIA+ stories is shaped and supported by a framework of understandings that have evolved over recent decades and are still evolving. In this respect, how do we approach, read, and signify articulations of what we now term 'queer' in a Victorian context? And how did Victorian media represent and navigate articulations of what was considered 'the third sex'?

Popularised by the writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld and Victorian taxonomies of desire, the term 'third sex' emerged as a means of describing and expressing alternate expressions of gender and desire. While the term has changed and evolved over time, it remains one means of questioning 'binary thinking' and introducing gender and sexual non-conformity. As Marjorie Garber puts it, 'the 'third is a mode of articulation, a way of describing possibility'. The term thus provides a flexible approach with which to challenge prevalent notions of the Victorian era as being restricted by hetero-normative binaries (male/ female, public/ private, lowbrow/ highbrow), in line with emerging scholarship into Victorian popular literature and culture.

To date, Victorian and neo-Victorian studies has developed rich understandings of historical contexts and dominant figures associated with both gender and queerness, but as Lisa Hager argued recently, a wider understanding of gender and alternate ways of being 'ought to be central to our field', such that Victorian studies 'fundamentally reconceptualize[s] our understanding of gender to account for the possibility of movement between, across, and among genders'. As Hager indicated, there are gaps in our understanding of the lives and experiences of those who might have identified with the conception of 'third sex'. Moreover, the shifting pace of gender studies beyond the Victorian has now opened up ways of reading genders and sexualities in the nineteenth century - and their neo-Victorian afterlives - in a new and exciting manner. In this endeavour, fiction offers

an especially varied and complex field in and through which to expand and enhance this discussion to better reflect the Victorian era and our relationship with it.

Following Hager's call to widen Victorian studies by embracing the critical possibilities offered by new insights into LGBTQIA+ experiences, this special issue of *VPFJ* invites articles that respond to the following questions:

- How does Victorian popular fiction and culture represent 'the third sex'? How might taxonomies of gender interact with taxonomies of fiction (across genres and forms, for example)?
- What can popular Victorian texts tell us about the lives and experiences of 'the third sex'?
- What are the conceptual challenges of reading and writing the histories of marginalised figures and populations (in biographies or through adaptations, for example)?
- How do contemporary theoretical frameworks and LGBTQIA+ concepts enable new readings of Victorian 'third sex' figures and narratives?
- How might we identify and theorise LGBTQIA+ identities that are less easily connected to binary understandings of gender, such as bi-, pan-, or asexuality?
- In what ways has Victorian popular fiction and culture inspired contemporary representations and understandings of queer culture, for example, in queer neo-Victoriana?
- How do neo-Victorian forms re-imagine and re-mediate potentially anachronistic LGBTQIA+ stories to a modern audience? How do they navigate the ideals of pride culture (i.e. by rejecting unhappy endings) or the absence of labels in and through a Victorian setting?
- How do texts encode, allude to, negotiate or mediate ambiguousness, or 'the unsayable' with respect to queer identities and desires, i.e. through symbolic registers or slang?
- Why and to what effect do queer writers write across gender(s), i.e. queer women writing queer men and vice versa? How do ideals of community, fantasy, and solidarity intersect among queer Victorians?
- How did national contexts, or aspects of race or class shape the formation of queer identity or queer spaces?
- Any other issue or text relevant to the exploration of diverse forms of sex and gender in neo/Victorian fiction.

Please send abstracts of 300 words to the guest editors of the 2025 special issue at [vpfreadinggroup@gmail.com](mailto:vpfreadinggroup@gmail.com) by **Friday 18th November 2022**. Full articles (of 7-8,000 words) are due by September 2023.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the guest editors at the above email address. We look forward to hearing from you.

VPFA  
**READING  
& GROUP**  
THE THIRD SEX