Victorian Popular Fiction, Culture and The Third Sex

Claire O'Callaghan and Helena Esser

Abstract

This introductory article for this special issue of *Victorian Popular Fictions* explores Victorian popular fiction and culture as key sites for negotiating gender and sexual non-conformity, with a focus on the concept of the 'third sex.' Taking the 1871 trial of Fanny and Stella as a point of departure, it re-examines nineteenth-century anxieties around gender and sexuality within legal, medical, and cultural discourse, particularly the emergence of sexology and the categorisation of sexual and gender diversity. It traces how popular literature, media, and culture both reflected and shaped public debates about non-conforming gendered and sexual lives. Engaging with Victorian texts and contexts, as well as their neo-Victorian legacies, the introduction foregrounds the instability of gender binaries by examining how non-conforming subjects were represented, regulated, and imagined. Combining historical and literary analysis, it demonstrates how such representation in nineteenth-century popular literature and culture continues to inform modern understandings of LGBTQIA+ identities, power, and resistance, and highlights the enduring significance of the long nineteenth century in shaping debates around gender, sexuality, and normativity.

Keywords

gender; non-conformity sexuality; LGBTQIA+; third sex; sexology; queer; history; Victorian; neo-Victorian

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Correction notice (23 December 2025): note 1 (p. 15) has been added.

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Claire O'Callaghan and Helena Esser

In April 1870, Mrs Fanny Graham and Miss Stella Boulton, better known today as Fanny and Stella, were arrested at London's Strand Theatre. Charged with "the abominable crime of buggery," unlawfully conspiring to "induce and incite other persons feloniously with them to commit said crime," and disguising "themselves as women" (McKenna 2013: 35), they quickly learned that the police authorities had been watching them for over a year. Miss Boulton and Mrs Graham were the self-assigned public names of, respectively, Thomas Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park, who together toured the stages and drawing rooms of southern England. Living and performing in women's attire, they moved fluidly between elite, private circles, theatrical spaces and fashionable society. Their arrest, however, marked a moment of rupture between these worlds. As Morris B. Kaplan observes, "Fanny and Stella wandered off of the stage and outside the confines of a sexual underworld" (2004: 47). The ensuing legal case, The Queen v. Boulton and Others, appeared before "the Lord Chief Justice and a special jury at the Queen's Bench, Westminster Hall, in May 1871" (Kaplan 2005: 230). The case became a sensational news story that captured the attention of both the press and the public, and seeped into popular culture, finding expression in literature, theatre and music of the period.

Yet little did Fanny or Stella anticipate that the ensuing scandal and attention would participate in a reconfiguration of prevailing frameworks governing the perception and regulation of binary, heterosexual gender and all deviations from it. Their case coincides with the date often cited for the inauguration of sexology, a newly emergent medical discipline rooted in the assumption that sexuality could be quantified, categorised, analysed, and controlled through observation and diagnosis. As Foucault claims, "the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was categorised – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'contrary sexual sensations' can stand as its [sexology's] date of birth" ([1976] 1998: 43). The invocation of sexology may "invoke an obsolete science and a vanished world" (Felski 1998: 1), when the "interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul" (Foucault [1976] 1998: 43) could be pinned down, classified, and governed in the same way as geodes, butterflies, and human races. It also, as we shall see, repopularised the term 'the third sex.'

During Fanny and Stella's six-day trial in 1871, their movement between the theatre, a private, socio-sexual underworld and their fluid ways of being came under intense scrutiny. The prosecution presented the pair as having "paraded openly on the streets of London" (Kaplan 2004: 47; Clark 2021: n.p), using their public visibility to challenge perceived norms of gender, sexuality and propriety, and the boundaries of acceptable conduct. Victorian science and medicine were also called upon to raise anxieties about moral order and perceived physical transgression. Seeking to ascertain both "their sex" *and* corporeal evidence of sodomy, Dr Thomas James Paul, the Divisional Surgeon to 'E' Division of the Metropolitan Police, had conducted intrusive physical examinations on Fanny and Stella. Paul believed that because they wore women's clothes and had "acted [and] passed" as women, they had "by the mysterious alchemy of sodomy, effectively become" women (McKenna 2013: 47). Paul testified against them, and his findings were reported widely. Fanny and Stella thus became figures through whom the era's fascinations and anxieties about gender and sexuality could be publicly explored and spectacularly displayed. Their legal case marked the first recorded instance of the word "drag" in its modern sense, and Fanny's testimony also recorded her use of the term "campish" in a queer context as far back as 1868, earlier than the *Oxford English Dictionary* recognises (Kaplan 2005: 35, 54).

Literary media and the Victorian press exploited the scandal to its fullest extent. Newspapers and pamphlets circulated lurid accounts of Fanny and Stella's lives, amplifying their notoriety and ensuring that the case captured the public imagination. When Fanny and Stella were acquitted, *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* reported the verdict in all its glory:

> The Foreman: "Not guilty" (loud cheers, drive of "Bravo!") – His Lordship: "Upon all the counts of the indictment?" – The Foreman: "Yes, my lord. Not guilty on all the counts" (renewed cheering, which was, however, soon suppressed).
>
> ("Trial of Boulton and Park" 1871: 8)

The same report also noted that "Boulton fainted upon the verdict being returned" before the pair left the court together with their friends (1871: 8). Such sensational coverage not only heightened the drama surrounding the case but also resonated with Victorian culture. Just as serialised novels of the time delighted readers with plots of transgression, disguise and social scandal, coverage of The Queen v. Boulton and Others offered a real-life drama that both mirrored and yet magnified familiar literary tropes, satisfying the same appetite for spectacle, intrigue and social transgression that characterised the era's popular fiction. At the same time, the case and the vocal reactions to the verdict also reveal that public opinion was not unified, and hint at the existence of a lively queer subculture that had not yet been shamed into silence. As such, Fanny and Stella's case contrasts markedly against the Wilde trials almost twenty-five years later.

The Victorians' grappling with non-conforming gender expressions is also illustrated by how quickly the pair passed into contemporaneous popular literature and culture. Charles Hindley's compilation, *Curiosities of Street Literature* (1871), for example, printed the salacious street ballad "The Funny He-She Ladies!" describing the lurid details of Fanny and Stella's arrest. They were fictionalised in John Saul's *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, or Confessions of a Mary-ann* (1881), a text that presented itself as the memoirs of a real-life sex worker named Jack Saul. Later, Oscar Wilde paid homage to Stella in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), when Lady Bracknell refers to the "dear Duchess of Bolton" (McKenna 2012, 107).

In recent scholarship, Fanny and Stella have been analysed in a variety of ways. As Robert Steele summarises, Sean Brady and Kaplan have read Fanny and Stella as "gay men

who cross dressed and likely engaged in anal sex;" Charles Upchurch has emphasised "Boulton and Park's social identities as part of the middle-class;" and more recently, Simon Joyce has "attempted to reclaim Boulton and Park's identities as transgender women" (Steele 2020: 41). The fact that "modern scholars do not agree on how Boulton and Park [self-] identified" reflects how "contemporaneous press coverage of the case was equally confused about how to articulate and describe Boulton and Park's non-normative identities", referring to Fanny and Stella as "men, as women, and as somewhere in-between" (41). Such ambiguity is also captured in the formal court papers held at the National Archives at Kew, where the trial transcript and depositions show the court clerks were unsure of how to refer to the pair. The documents, in fact, are littered "with crossings-out and corrections, turning 'he's' into 'she's' – and vice versa" (McKenna 2013: 35). Fanny and Stella's story, therefore, is important for reminding us how, in the nineteenth century, many individuals clearly "experienced gender and sexuality in non-heteronormative ways" (Clarke 2021). They provide a glimpse of "a 'pre-homosexual' subculture which was obviously extensive, varied and flourishing, involving, in differing roles and degrees, men of all walks of life" (Boyd 2002, 67), but which was also about to vanish.

Figure 1: Fanny and Stella. Photograph by Frederick Spalding.
Restored. Essex Record Office D/F 269/1/3712, Public domain. c. 1869.

Indeed, not only does Fanny and Stella's case sit on the cusp of when gender and sexuality became categorised in ways still recognisable today, its significance extended well beyond its immediate circumstances, contributing to durable epistemological and institutional shifts that continue to shape contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. Historically,

this shift has played a visible role in major moments in queer history, including the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, and continuing into the present. In recent years, especially after the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the United States and virulent anti-trans lobbying in UK politics, queer rights and women's reproductive rights have become increasingly connected, as both face threats from far-right legislators who rely on outdated rhetoric. As a result, gender has become a newly prominent socio-political battleground. Intersectional feminism, especially in the post-#MeToo era, reminds us that gender and power are interlinked across race, class, and other axes of the social fabric. Queer studies suggest we are no longer served by considering gender as a monolithic or binary, mutually exclusive construct. To understand and ultimately challenge the dynamics between gender and power in a hetero-patriarchal society, we must also examine how binary gender is enforced through collective attitudes towards divergence, complexity, uncertainty, and play. These attitudes – as Fanny and Stella's history signifies – are significantly shaped by nineteenth-century culture. This special issue explores how Victorian popular fiction (in its broadest sense) and neo-Victorian writing shape and respond to gender nonconformity as a crucial site of negotiation.

This introduction provides an overview of the complexity of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century, as well as the endeavours to construct and maintain heteronormative binaries in the period. Our interest lies in that which is outlawed and conceived of as atypical or non-conforming, which today is collected under the LGBTQIA+ acronym and/or captured under the umbrella term 'queer.' While we largely focus on Britain, the landscape of Victorian gender is embedded in transnational culture reaching across Europe, the Empire, and the world. It is also, importantly, shaped and negotiated across social, medical, and legal discourse, lived experience, and indeed, literature. Fanny and Stella's case is a useful point of departure to draw out increasing uncertainties around heteronormative gender presentation and their reflection in literature and popular culture. In what follows, we summarise some of the ways that gender and sexuality were discursively, legally, and medically shaped and regulated in Victorian Britain in the aftermath of their trial. We provide a brief history of sexology and the field of Victorian queer studies with a focus on the idea of the 'third sex.' Lastly, just before an introduction to the articles comprising this special issue, we recapitulate some of the texts and topics covered by the monthly Third Sex Reading Group which inspired this special issue. Through this introduction and the special issue more widely, we hope to draw out how nineteenth-century gender and nonconformity underpin and ground but also challenge and enrich our understanding of LGBTQIA+ identities today. In tracing the different and sometimes problematically entangled ways of being queer in the (neo-)Victorian context, we reflect on the potential and the challenges of researching divergence in the past. In the landscape we outline, as we demonstrate repeatedly, popular fiction provides an invaluable staging ground for gendered explorations and reveals how culture and theory are shaped in tandem and in response to one another. It is in that complex landscape that our contributions are embedded and to which they add important new impulses.

LGBTQIA+ Histories and Sexological Contexts

Fanny and Stella's case is a pivotal turning point in the second half of the nineteenth century because it effectively put gender and sexual diversity on trial. With the concurrent advent of sexology, anxieties about gender-nonconformity triggered a paradigmatic shift across legal, social, medical, and moral lines, transforming it from choices or behaviour one *does* to something one *is*. As Michel Foucault asserts,

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology […] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.
>
> (Foucault [1976] 1998: 43)

In Germany, in 1864, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs coined the term 'Uranian' for male homosexual love, and in 1868, Karl Maria Kertbeny pioneered the term 'homosexual.' Both were self-identified homosexual men who campaigned for the de-stigmatisation of male-male desire. Indeed, Ulrichs' defence of homosexuality at the Deutscher Juristentag in Munich in 1867 is considered the first public 'coming-out' in history (Pretsell 2024: 1). However, it was not until Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 influential work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which took on Kertbeny's concept and became a widely published text, that sexology established its full register of sexual pathology, including such terms as sadism and masochism. The psychological "Clinical-Forensic Study," which cloaked potentially offensive terms in academic Latin, lastingly entangled sexual nonconformity with contemporary theories of mental illness and social degeneration, and popularised the concept of sexual inversion, which envisioned gay men as female souls in male bodies and vice versa. As such, it inscribed non-normative sexuality as an aberration and transposed queerness from a lived experience into a medical condition. At the same time, its detailed case studies also made queer identities visible to one another and served as inspiration for a range of texts, from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) to writings by Renée Vivien and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).

Reflecting Victorian culture at large, *Psychopathia Sexualis* focused on homosexual desire between men, deeming female sexual inversion rare and comparatively tame: "woman," writes Krafft-Ebing, "(whether sexually inverted or not) is by nature not as sensual and certainly not as aggressive in the pursuit of sexual needs as man, for which reason the inverted sexual intercourse among women is less noticeable, and by outsiders is considered mere friendship" ([1886] 1899: 390). In this way, the study repeated established contemporaneous dismissals of female sexuality at large, rendering queer female desire virtually invisible. However, that invalidation also provided a degree of safety, as queer women escaped the damaging scrutiny of another seminal event in British sexual history, namely the 1885 Labouchère Amendment, which was in no small part a consequence of Fanny and Stella's case.

The court's inability to convict Fanny and Stella hinged on a lack of a current legal definition of sodomy (understood yet not formally defined as anal sex resulting in ejaculation) and how it might be physically proven. As Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller summarise in their popular history of *Bad Gays*: "To put it simply, the authorities knew what Boulton and Park were up to was wrong, even if they did not know exactly what that consisted of" (2022: 97-8). They redressed this uncertainty following W. T. Stead's sensational exposé, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," when the government was keen to pass a Criminal Law Amendment Bill to address prostitution and child trafficking by raising the age of consent. Henry Labouchère's amendment was added, but its criminalisation of "any act of gross indecency" between men penalised *any* manifestation of male-male desire, including flirting, kissing, and propositioning, and drew repercussions across the British Empire. This became known as the Blackmail Charter, sustaining private and organised blackmail schemes across London (Cook 2003: 27), in which Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas were also embroiled.

Indeed, the Wilde trials of 1895, still possibly the most widely known event in queer history, have come to encapsulate Victorian repressive, if not vindictive, attitudes towards homosexuality. Publicly accused by Douglas' father, the Marquess of Queensberry, of "posing

as somdomite" [*sic*], Wilde's libel suit famously incurred his widely publicised prosecution for gross indecency. The trials, in which fictional texts, including Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Robert Hichens' parody *The Green Carnation* (1894), were used as evidence, have been well documented, for example by H. Montgomery Hyde's 1948 *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, with the fullest assembly of relating sources compiled in Joseph Bristow's 2022 *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. Six years before the trials, prominent members of the aristocracy, possibly including Prince Albert Victor, the Prince of Wales, were implicated in frequenting a male brothel staffed by telegraph boys in the Cleveland Street Scandal (1889). In this case, authorities shielded the wealthy culprits, allowing paragons such as Lord Arthur Somerset to leave the country, or dismissing the testimony of telegraph boys and the notorious aforementioned Jack Saul – author of *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* 1881 – as 'tainted.' This cover-up drew wide criticism from both the press and government and subsequently led to the especially severe prosecution of Wilde. It was in and through this very public and merciless downfall of a literary celebrity that the full apparatus of Victorian policing of (male) homosexuality converged, including sexology, the law, and socio-cultural attitude in its scrutiny of public, private, and fictional utterances. Sentenced to two years of hard labour, which left Wilde bankrupt, broken, and exiled, and no doubt contributed to his early death in 1900, the events established Wilde as a queer martyr for generations to come: "Oscar Wilde," recounts gay actor and film-maker Rupert Everett, "is the patron saint of anyone who ever made a mess of their life. More than that, […] he is also the Christ figure of the gay movement. Crucified so that our sins may be forgiven" (Everett 2020: 8). Indeed, Wilde's tomb in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, which also contains the ashes of his lover Robert Ross, had to be outfitted with a glass barrier in 2011, as the many lipstick kisses left by fans were corroding the stone. "He belongs to our world more than to Victoria's," wrote Richard Ellman at the end of his seminal biography (1988: 589), invoking a popular legacy still very much in evidence in the year 2025, when Stephen Fry stars as Lady Bracknell in an openly queer West End production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* – the play that debuted in London just before Wilde's trial (1895) and from which his name was subsequently removed. Thus, while Wilde has become a fixture of queer genealogy, his fall from grace also left a lasting imprint on contemporary queer activism.

Post-Wilde, in 1896, Havelock Ellis could not publish his study, *Sexual Inversion*, because publishers feared prosecution. He had collaborated on the study with John Addington Symonds (also featured as case 18), whose writings on 'Greek love' contributed to a larger tradition by gay Victorians to ally and ostensibly legitimise homoeroticism through links to the ancient world. Their collaboration is important, for as Heike Bauer's 2009 title *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860-1930* reminds us, sexology was not solely the work of scientists and medics but was also dominated by poets and literary critics. *Sexual Inversion*, while deliberately foregoing characterisations of homosexuality as immoral or a crime, nonetheless echoed established concepts as an "inborn perversion" or "organically abnormal" (Ellis 1908: 29).

In the post-Wilde climate, Ellis therefore published in Germany. Nonetheless, a London bookseller who stocked copies was prosecuted in 1897. It is no wonder, then, that queer activism, for example by Ellis' wife Edith Lees Ellis, or Edward Carpenter, both members of the Fellowship of the New Life, consciously distanced themselves – as Carpenter put it – "from the mere gutter" (1894: 10), that is the salacious, decadent, hedonistic reputation of Wildean homosexuality, associated with rent boys and hotel rooms. Instead, the New Life championed socialism and marriage reform, and advocated pacifism, vegetarianism, and simple living, "in order that a lover's desires and a citizen's ideals may be merged in a new attitude towards freedom and restraint" (Lees Ellis 1921: 10). Lees Ellis' own marriage was meant to

set an example of equal partnership, shared labour, and companionship, despite her attraction to women. Like Lees Ellis, Carpenter, who cohabited with his working-class partner George Merrill, considered "Eros" to be a potentially levelling political force, which easily passes the bounds of class and caste" (1908: 114-15). Notably, Carpenter and Merrill served as inspiration to and as early readers of E. M. Forster's gay novel *Maurice* (1971), written in 1913–14 but never published during his lifetime. Although Forster showed the work to literary queers such as Siegfried Sassoon, Lytton Strachey, and Christopher Isherwood, he feared censorship and prosecution, especially because he was adamant to give the novel a happy ending. Apparently, a note on the manuscript read, "Publishable, but worth it?" (Toynebee 1971: 32). As such, Forster's case exemplifies the self-silencing and anxiety experienced by British queer people in the wake of the Wilde trials. Kristin Mahoney's 2022 *Queer Kinship After Wilde* explores in detail transnational expressions of queer identity and desire after 1895, for example, through the queer expat community on the Italian island of Capri, which we will discuss later.

The Third Sex

While queer activism in Britain re-routed to safer causes and climates, sexology and activism once again converged in and through the significant work of German physician Magnus Hirschfeld, who pioneered the study of transvestitism and gender-affirming surgery. Despite the infamous "Paragraph 175" in the German criminal code, which criminalised homosexuality and created a similarly repressive climate as in Britain, Hirschfeld emerged as an authority on sexuality with such works as *Sappho and Socrates* (1896), *Berlin's Third Sex* (1904), or the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (*Yearbook for Intermediate Sexual Types*, 1899–1923). He featured prominently as an expert witness in the Harden-Eulenburg affair (1906–9), a highly publicised sex scandal involving Kaiser Wilhelm II's best friend. In his book *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910), Hirschfeld distinguished between sexual orientation and gender identity, an important contribution to transgender history. His Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute of Sexual Research), founded in 1919, amassed an immense archive, included a public museum, and provided gender-affirming care, including surgeries for Dora Richter and Lili Elbe, among others. Hirschfeld, known in Berlin as 'Tante Magnesia,' was also involved in the first film about homosexuality, Richard Oswald's *Anders als die Andern* (*Other than the Others*,1919), a sympathetic portrayal of the damage of blackmail under Paragraph 175. As a dedicated and life-long campaigner for sexual reform, the Jewish Hirschfeld was targeted by the far-right Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP, National Socialist German Workers' Party), whose harassment sent him into exile in 1930. In 1933, the Nazi regime raided, destroyed, and burned the Institute and its research. Hirschfeld, whose life motto, "per scientiam ad justitiam" (through science to justice') reveals how intrinsically sexology and activism were entwined for many, also popularised the term 'third sex' for nonconforming individuals, which we adopt in the Reading Group and in this special issue.

Figure 2. Costume party at Berlin's Institute for Sexual Research, showing Magnus Hirschfeld (right) holding hands with his partner, Karl Giese. Date and photographer unknown. Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft e.V., Berlin.

Today, the 'third sex' is an infrequently used term in Victorian literary and cultural studies, where there is a far greater tendency to frame diverse gender and sexual histories and texts within the contexts of LGBTQIA+, queer, or trans Victorian studies. For sexologists, 'the third sex' was an expansive umbrella term for capturing the lives, desires and ways of being of those who did not fit a dimorphic sex/gender model. This special issue of the *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal* explores assorted engagements between Victorian literature and culture and what was, even before sexology, known as 'the third sex.'

Although its meaning has evolved, the 'third sex' continues to function as a conceptual framework for exploring diverse genders and sexualities, as it both evokes and challenges binary conceptions of gender. As a catch-all 'third' category, it embodies the relegation of deviant gender expressions to the margins, but also claims equal status and provides an unmapped, open, even slippery space for a multitude of identities. As Marjorie Garber puts it, the "third" in 'the third sex' "is a mode of articulation" and "a way of describing possibility' (1992: 11). Such expansiveness seems important given the complexity of efforts to map contemporary terminology with and to Victorian lives and works, something reflected upon by Simon Joyce in the opening of his monograph *LGBT Victorians* (2022). Accordingly, when applied to Victorian literature and culture (and therein neo-Victorianism), the 'third sex' is a capacious and flexible means through which to signify diverse lives and ways of being that challenge to dominant Victorian paradigms of gender and sexualities.

This special issue foregrounds the term 'the third sex' for several reasons. Firstly, as the history of Fanny and Stella and the subsequent scholarly appraisal of their lives suggest, the critical vocabulary through which such histories and assorted texts are understood continues to evolve apace across LGBTQIA+ Victorian studies and beyond. As Laura Doan suggests, however, there is a need to continue efforts to historicise "queerness-as-being" as much as "queerness as method" (2013, viii-ix). Showcasing diverse ways of being in the long nineteenth century using historical language alongside how it was recorded, re-presented and expressed in popular literary forms is one way of contributing to this endeavour.

Secondly, and relating to this, while the term 'the third sex' may have fallen out of use in most contemporary scholarship, as part of a broader lexicon through which diverse genders and sexualities were articulated in a pre-sexology moment, it speaks to the way in which time and again in Victorian fiction, poetry, and life-writing, characters and figures grappled with ways of expressing genders and sexualities beyond the binary, often in non-specific or fluid ways. In literature, the term 'third sex' has long been used as a means by which authors articulated diverse ways of being. For example, in chapter fifteen (volume 2) of Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), a biofiction based on the life of Madeline de Maupin (illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley in 1898), the protagonist declares, "I belong to neither sex" and later asserts, "I am of a third distinct sex which has no name as yet: above or below the others, more imperfect or superior" (online). In George Moore's novella, *Albert Nobbs* (1895), Albert's gender crossing provokes the question, "What was she?," to which Albert reflects, "neither man nor woman" ([1895] 2011: 39). And Aimée Duc integrated the term into the title of her novel *Sind es Frauen? Roman über das dritte Geschlecht* (1901), which translates into English as *Are They Women? A Novel about The Third Sex*.

Thirdly, the term relates to the underpinning work that we, along with Dr Mollie Clarke, Dr Matt Crofts, Milly Kate Harrison, and Rebecca Hamilton, have been doing through the Victorian Popular Fiction Association's (VPFA) 'The Third Sex Reading Group'. Over the last five years, this monthly reading group has discussed over forty different texts and topics relating to queer Victorian and neo-Victorian popular culture, ranging from staples of queer history, such as Oscar Wilde and Anne Lister and their afterlives on screen, to the subject of queer vampires, queer ecologies, asexual Victorians, and the 2025 Met Gala on Black Dandyism. While a full overview of these discussions, which depend on and live by the generous and insightful contributions of participants and guest hosts, lies outside the bounds of this introduction, what follows is a broad reflection on the varied landscape of gender and deviance discourse in (neo-)Victorian media.

The Third Sex Reading Group and Queer (Dis)Continuity

Today's LGBTQIA+ communities are characterised by their need for, and celebration of, queer-positive meta-narratives, the paradigm of queer pride, and an abundance of available labels and markers. As such, the queer landscape is marked by stark differences from the Victorian period, but also by (perceived) connections with queer ancestors and enduring genealogies, even if those are often characterised by failure and trauma. This necessitates a constant dialogue between past and present, across popular and academic expressions and evaluations, because the nineteenth century may both supplement and undermine queer genealogies through their complexity and slipperiness. Victorian fiction often provides unexpected resonances and hidden histories that have – sometimes purposefully – escaped those readers and scholars lacking the frameworks, in-group slang, or labels to identify them. While such instances support welcome meta-narratives of queer persistence, the diverse negotiations and strategies of being and eluding a homophobic society adopted by nineteenth-century individuals do not always affirm modern audiences' desire for queer-positivity, nor provide unifying lived experiences with which to identify. During each discussion, we are reminded that even scholarship cannot – nor should it – always fix, uncover, label, or out, histories of gender-nonconformity. Not only must we contend with the inevitable uncertainties, gaps, and blind spots of historical research into a taboo-laden area, but, in intending to be both respectful to our subject and responsible to our audiences, we must be both purposeful and 'queer' in our approach, for example in our use of pronouns and labels, as we see in the case of Boulton and Park, who, as we have seen, also chose to be known as Fanny and Stella (hence why we

intentionally list their different names here). In this way, gender and gender-nonconformity cannot be understood as isolated phenomena but instead, as our texts and topics regularly bear out, as constructed and constantly under negotiation through and across public discourse and private expression, legal, medical, and moral parameters, but most often and most potently through (popular) fiction, then and now.

It seems intuitive to dedicate group discussions to those figures who have become well-known touchstones or archetypes of LGBTQIA+ history, been eulogised or become paradigmatic depictions of closeted queerness, such as the (Wildean) aesthete bachelor, or the cross-dressing lesbian. However, both figures also provide opportunities for re-examination, for example in the context of what is and is not visible, or what can and cannot be said in a Victorian context. Hichens' *Green Carnation*, for example, known largely as a parody on Wilde and Bosie, picks up on and is embroiled in certain undercurrents of gay subculture. It spotlights not just the notorious Wilde, but the artificially dyed floral buttonhole that ostensibly served as a homosexual identifier to those in the know and was either pioneered or popularised by Wilde at the opening of *Lady Windemere's Fan* (1894). As a pun on the French *en vert* (in green), the green carnation conjured the "invert" of sexology (Mahaffey 1998: 59) but also reclaimed the term in a defiant gesture of in-group code. Defiance also resonates in Hichens' description of the flower as symbolising "the philosophy to be afraid of nothing, to dare to live as one wishes to live, not as the middle-classes wish one to live; to have the courage of one's desires, instead of only the cowardice of other people's" (Hichens [1894] 1901: 95). The passage directly echoes Wilde's own words in "The Critic as Artist":

> To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability.
>
> (Wilde 2008: 1057-8)

Both utterances reject, in true decadent fashion, what is constructed as 'normal' and 'natural,' and what, to Hichens, signifies "all that is middle-class, all that is of the essence of jingoism, all that is colourless, and without form, and void" (Hichens [1894] 1901: 108). Hichens might simply be parodying Wildean sentiments for the contemporary market, but the fact that this market existed also suggests how visible gay subculture was within popular culture and that it was rife for veiled but knowing allusions. That the novel was also implicated in the trials shows how precariously positioned both Wilde and the novel as literary endeavour were. At the same time, there is also a way of reading *The Green Carnation* as simmering with the same frustrations of being closeted as emerge in Wilde's writings, and of allying its queer undertones with a larger, counter-cultural rebellion. Beneath its literary dimension, *The Green Carnation* is also noteworthy for being the product of the author meeting Wilde and Bosie in Luxor in 1893 (Beckson 2000: 391). Like Algeria, where the pair would encounter André Gide two years later, Egypt likely provided opportunities for sex tourism, hinting at the way gay subculture was entangled with and across colonial dynamics.

The Green Carnation draws attention to the precarious and evolving balance between the in/visible and the un/said, not least due to its uncertain literary status as a 'bad novel' or mere parody. As such, it invites comparison to the anonymously penned pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893), often ascribed to Wilde. Here, too, the texts' subversive potential has seldom been acknowledged (see Cohen 1987) due to its genre, calling up Jack Saul's testimony in the Cleveland Street scandal: Saul's descriptions of male sex work in London, including with prominent politicians, were so distasteful to the court that the jury dismissed him as "a 'revolting creature' whose testimony was not to be believed" (Lemmey and Miller 2022: 104-5). As such, these texts and testimonies reveal complex dynamics between lived reality,

legal prosecution, social status, genre, and censorship beneath the highly publicised aspects of homosexual subculture.

Female homosexual relationships, while exempt from the same scrutiny, also suffered from a lack of representation and articulation, having recourse, as Sally Ledger notes, only to "the vocabulary made available to them by late Victorian sexologists and a handful of naturalist and decadent writers" (Ledger 1997: 142). Thus, historical lesbians, such as the Ladies of Llangollen or Anne Lister, while locally infamous, may be better known today as subjects of neo-Victorian biofiction such as *Gentleman Jack* (2019–22), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), or *Ammonite* (2020). These popular narratives seem to underscore a set of emergent tropes around the invisibility of lesbian desire potent enough to be parodied by *Saturday Night Live* as "award-winning glance choreography" and "saddest flirting" (2021). Indeed, such tropes are in no small part the legacy of Radclyffe Hall's seminal lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The novel, in which the sexological studies of Ulrichs, Krafft-Ebing, and Ellis (a friend of Hall's) play a crucial role in Stephen's self-understanding, puts into play Krafft-Ebing's claim that the "masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom, finds pleasure in the pursuit of manly sports" and displays "a strong desire to imitate the male fashion in dressing the hair and in general attire, under favourable circumstances even to don the male attire and impose in it" ([1886] 1899: 392). Indeed, Stephen's preference for male attire mirrors Hall's own sense of style. It takes up Ellis' notion of inversion as physically manifest in "brusque, energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech, the inflexions of the voice, the masculine straightforwardness and sense of honour, and especially the attitude toward men" (1908: 143) and portrays Stephen's invert experience as misunderstood, othered, and miserable, finding spaces of queer possibility only in Paris' Sapphic salons and being an ambulance driver during the First World War. However, the novel also laments the "conspiracy of silence that had sent the girl forth unprotected" ([1928] 1982: 153), and, while the book did not escape scandal, censure, and being banned for obscenity, it ironically also functioned as an important identifier for lesbian readers throughout the twentieth century. "Many people learned for the first time that sexual relations between women were possible," notes Alison Hennegan: "the publicity, sensational and fiercely hostile though it often was, nevertheless gave many homosexual women their first awareness of each other's existence" (1982: viii). However, with its fatalist ending – which does not reflect Hall's own lived experience with Una Troubridge – the novel's fraught legacy also illustrates the evolution of queer histories and the demands of representation. Its close echoing of "the sexologists' pathologisation and morbidification of lesbian sexuality" (Ledger 1997: 144) increasingly set it at odds with the gay liberation movement's paradigmatic pride discourse and "contemporary understandings of the meaning and shape of gay identity" (Love 2007: 100-1), yet it remains for many readers one of "the only obtainable representations of real lesbians" and "constitute[s…] some semblance of history" (Liming 2007: 86). The novel illustrates not only the importance and complexity of queer visibility across time, but also that LGBTQIA+ stories exist within other, constantly evolving contexts, dynamics, and hierarchies. Whereas female homosexuality was much less prominent than its male counterpart in the past, in recent decades bi-, pan- and trans- identities have struggled to claim equal visibility and validation, and asexuality is only recently being recognised in popular culture and academia at all, for example. The Reading Group provides opportunities to expand beyond the known canon and give equal weight to lesser served stories and identities.

However, Hall's novel also illustrates that queer identities and the articulation thereof can vary across transnational contexts. Whereas *The Well of Loneliness* is considered the first English lesbian novel, more than twenty years before its publication, there existed a thriving Sapphic community in Left Bank Paris, of which both Hall and Stephen were part.

Indeed, the novel's wealthy American hostess Valérie, a "*libre penseuse* when it came to the heart" whose "love affairs would fill quite three volumes" (Hall [1928] 1982: 222), was modelled on Natalie Clifford Barney. Among Barney's affairs number the decadent poetess Renée Vivien, courtesan Liane de Pougy (whose lovers included Mathilde 'Missy' de Morny and fellow courtesan Émilienne d'Alençon), painter Romaine Brooks, and the writers Élisabeth de Gramont, Olive Custance (who later married Lord Alfred Douglas) and the famous (Sidonie-Gabrielle) Colette. De Pougy's auto-fictional *Idylle Sapphique* (1901) recounts her and Barney's romance, including such events as Barney, who figured herself "a dashing rescuer of damsels (and gentlemen!) in distress who never hesitated to wield a sword in the face of big and little dragons" (Rodruigez 2002: 90-1), wooing de Pougy dressed "deliciously, as a Florentine pageboy, grey silk tights exquisitely moulding themselves to her shapely legs, her body admirably set off by a short dalmatic of pale green brocade decorated with foliage worked in precious stones" (de Pougy 1901: 21). Together, their alter egos also enjoy 'the divine' Sarah Bernhardt in her role as Hamlet, hinting at explorations of a distinctly lesbian iconography less modelled on contemporary masculinity. The novel ends in the demise of de Pougy's alter ego because, as she put it, unhappy endings were "necessary… in those days, in order to find a publisher who would consent to bring out a book on the subject" (Rodruigez 2002: 94), thus anticipating the negative arc of Hall's novel, yet de Pougy is also surprisingly explicit, not shying away from describing the collision of female bodies, "firm and pink and swelling" (de Pougy 1901: 33). Perhaps a certain erotic frankness was expected in a courtesan's fiction, but as Colette's immensely popular *Claudine* novels (1900–3) also exemplify, a degree of female homoeroticism was acceptable, even fashionable.

Written on the suggestion, and to no small degree orchestrated by Colette's husband, the avant-garde libertine Willy (Henry Gauthier-Villars, who also claimed to be the author), the four *Claudine* novels chronicled the coming of age of a wise and opinionated young woman, who became the first teenage voice in literature and a new model of modern womanhood. "Claudine," writes Patricia Tilburg, "was the quintessential *belle époque* gamine – frank and mischievous, fearless and ironic, sexually knowledgeable but chaste." (Tilburg 2009: 75) The *Claudine* novels recount teenage romantic friendships, affairs between female schoolteachers, and the fictionalised *ménage à trois* with Georgie Raoul-Duval, in which Willy was also involved. The novels, whose popularity sparked a range of Claudine merchandise, including soaps, fans, cigarettes, perfume, and lingerie, "made claims for sexual, financial, and social autonomy that harmonized with the demands of the New Woman" (Tilburg 2009: 12). There was also, no doubt, a voyeuristic element not least embodied by Willy's involvement. The *Claudine* novels illustrate the unique and complex status of female homosexuality in turn-of-the-century culture, being capitalised on for the pleasures of a male readership on one hand, but patronisingly dismissed as "a sign of weakness, a probable indication of mental disturbance, but an essentially harmless condition" (Benstock 1987: 54) on the other. As Shari Benstock explains:

> The "inverted" behavior of lesbians was determined to be the result of frustration and fear, an attempt to escape men rather than to give evidence of a preference for women. Women who remained unmarried and perhaps lived with other women were generally assumed to have suffered a fate not at all their fault – to have been overlooked by men seeking wives. The dominant heterosexual culture in general would not have acknowledged woman's choice for a homosexual rather than a heterosexual life because this culture did not recognize woman's desire in any form.
>
> (Benstock 1987: 54)

Nonetheless, Colette embarked on a long *liaison* with the gender-nonconforming Missy (also Max) de Morny, finding in the Left Bank's Sapphic circles "a refuge from the dominant

heterosexual culture in which women served men's needs, in which women were under both the protection and the dominance of the patriarchy" (Benstock 1987: 56-7). That the double-edged safety of lesbian invisibility did not withstand scandal, however, is exemplified by Colette's fall from grace after she and de Morny shared an onstage kiss in their sensually charged performance of *The Dream of Egypt*, which took place in the Moulin Rouge in January 1907. The performance induced a riot and, drawing parallels to male homosexual scandals, resulted in the loss of the aristocracy's and upper bourgeoisie's allegiance.

Despite such limits to the unofficial tolerance, lesbian women created their own subculture in and through an era that championed new, modern ideals of womanhood. Their celebrations of women's power and wit were linked to feminist activism. Barney and her circles notably rejected the pathologised sexological terminology around inversion, illness, and paranoia in favour of ancient models centred on Sappho. In 1904, Barney and Vivien embarked on a pilgrimage to the island of Lesbos, and a famous photograph shows the women in Barney's salon in Hellenic dress, dancing around a neoclassical temple in Barney's garden. Transposed in Hall's novel, Barney thus provided "a kind of lighthouse in a storm-swept ocean" ([1928] 1982: 1928: 319). These women saw their sexuality as an advantage: "Lesbianism released them from predetermined schema of femininity and engaged them in a creative process that Barney described as "perpetual becoming"' (Latimer 2005: 8).

The cases of Colette, Barney, de Pougy, and Hall may exemplify that real life can be stranger and freer than fiction, yet popular fiction also provides a landscape of claimed and unclaimed possibilities, with knowing allusions and in-jokes with specific audiences, or of oblique individualism beyond classification. Some texts and identities become visible and readable to us only as our own vocabulary expands, such as trans and non-binary identities (which, for example, may apply to Missy/Max de Morny). Other cases remain stubbornly fixed in their socio-historical context or continue to evade and defy our categorisation, serving as important reminders that both socially constructed gender and scholarship are always evolving. The Reading Group has grappled with a variety of histories in which sexuality remains fluid and evasive, such as Mary Diana Dods, who adopted male identities both in his/her/their literary career as David Lyndsay and private life as Walter Sholto Douglas. A confidante of Mary Shelley, Dods/Lyndsay/Douglas lived for a time as the husband of Isabella Robinson and "began a series of transgender careers so successful that they remained undiscovered for over 150 years" (Friedman 2001: 5). Was Dods/Lyndsay/Douglas a cross-dressing lesbian, or a trans man? Was their pseudonym a strategy to succeed on the literary market or a textual expression of genuine gender identity? Vernon Lee, whose given name was Violet Paget, similarly engaged in both textual and real-life gender nonconformity. She entertained several same-sex relationships and usually dressed in masculine clothing, yet she adopted no epithet for her identity. In Victoria Cross' *Theodora, A Fragment* (1895), gender cross-play remains textual and is embodied through the androgynous, moustachioed Theodora, who confuses and escapes gender binaries through her disguises and physical queerness, but cannot, ultimately, escape her own demise. Her queerness in turn queers her lover Cecil, and as such the text has usually been situated in the context of female decadence but also calls up popular tropes and anxieties surrounding the 'mannish' New Woman. As such, female gender-nonconformity is bound up in interesting ways with feminist aspirations. Marie Corelli's popular short story "My Wonderful Wife" (1889) likewise explores confused or ambiguous heteronormative relationships through its satirical portrayal of Honoria, who, to her husband's horror, takes up smoking, masculine dress, and a lecturing career. The story seems to lampoon the husband who hysterically exclaims: "'Honoria is not a woman! […] She is half a man! She is a mistake; she is a freak of nature […]. She should be exhibited as an eccentricity in some museum!'" (Corelli 1886: 45). It is particularly suggestive given Corelli's own life-long same-sex relationship with

Bertha Vyver. However, elsewhere, Corelli denounced the New Woman as "sexless" and "lost" (1905: 182-3), calling her championing of female gender-nonconformity into question. This poses conundrums for us: How do we discuss a text that seems to defy our desire for both feminist and queer positivity? Can or should we expect queer writers to champion transgressive sexualities in their work? What does this say about the literary market, and Corelli's relationship with it? Corelli's text serves as an important reminder that private-public dynamics can be complex and contradictory, and that, as Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill argue, "exploring the ways in which women writers (and their characters) intentionally or otherwise submit to convention, contradict themselves, send mixed messages and express confusion about their culturally prescribed position as women, is just as important as highlighting moments of resistance, liberation and empowerment" (2021: 8). This also applies to LGBTQIA+ writers.

Expressions of male homoerotic desire and non-normative identity are, as Theodora's lover Cecil shows, not always clear-cut either, as male writers and artists explored queer expressions and archetypes outside the effete dandy – albeit still often in the context of decadence. Wilde's play *Salomé* (1893), for example, refrains from describing the infamous *femme fatale* protagonist, whose "perverted twisting of her loins" and "trembling breasts" had been rhapsodised about in Joris-Karl Huysman's À *Rebours* where the princess becomes "the symbolic deity of indestructible lust," a death-dealing "monstrous beast" ([1884] 1922: 94-5). Wilde refrains from characterising Salomé or her famous Dance of the Seven Veils at all, instead giving voice to her vampiric desire for Iokanaan. The sexually expressive and even predatory *femme fatale* becomes a projection ground for homosexual desire. Adorned in jewels, gazing and desiring unashamed, and, like the homosexual Othered, demonised, and doomed, she is yet in a position to voice her longing, to say: "I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire" (Wilde 2008: 576). As such, Salomé may be understood as a *homme fatal*, a queer resonance picked up by the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2017 production of the play, in which the title role was played by a male actor. No wonder, then, that the play was so well complemented by the irreverent, shape-shifting figures of Aubrey Beardsley. "Are they," asks Brigid Brophy, "female fops, these personages of Beardsley's: female dandies: female effeminates, even? Or are they male hoydens, male tomboys, boy butches?" (1968: 38). Beardsley's transgressive characters are, as Susan Sontag notes, undeniably camp, a concept that links the exaggerated, androgynous, stylised, and artificial to sexual self-expression: "the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine" (1966: 279). In circulation as homosexual slang as early as the 1860s and mentioned in Hirschfeld's research (Edwards 2020), the elusive but innately queer concept of camp has provided a consistency throughout queer history and into the present, as its choice as the 2019 Met Gala theme and adjacent exhibition attest.

By contrast, other queer concepts that remain rooted in their historical moment are difficult to recuperate, such as romantic friendships, especially between women. Passionate commitments to other women and expressions thereof – involving kisses, physical contact, and declarations of faithfulness – seem to have been, as the *Claudine* novels also hint, normalised rites of passage for young women in the nineteenth century, "all of them without any hint that the women involved had the slightest sense of wrongdoing, or any suggestion that such affection could be considered abnormal" (Faderman 1985: 15). Lilian Faderman characterises these as love relationships but hesitates to assign them a 'lesbian' label due to a lack of sexual intimacy or proof thereof, which again ties into contemporary dismissals of female sexuality. As Carolyn W. de la Oulton importantly notes, however, "our post-Freudian collective consciousness means that interpretations of romantic friendship will inevitably be filtered

through, or at least seen in relation to, current definitions of homosexuality" (2007: 3). Whether romantic friendship remained non-sexual out of ignorance or a deliberate rejection of the erotic dimension is impossible to fathom (Marcus 2007: 43-4). However, much like the question of whether these relationships deserve equal status with heteronormative partnerships, the insistent rumination by scholars on whether these relationships were sexual throws back at us our own preoccupation with sexual activity as a marker of sexuality itself.

It is therefore worth considering the potential of asexuality, both as a formerly niche concept of Victorian sexology whose reclamation by today's LGBTQIA+ community has become newly resonant and as an important prism that excavates social and sexual dynamics. Asexuality, meaning the lack of sexual attraction to any gender, necessitates "new possibilities in intimacy, desire, and kinship structures" (Cerankowski and Milks 2014: 3): "The mere process of explaining what asexuality is radically alters the vocabulary necessary for talking about eroticism, sexuality, or sexual orientations" (Chu 2014: 89). This is evident in the Victorian context through romantic friendships, but also beyond. Despite surrounding the topic with moral taboo and linguistic obfuscation, Victorian society largely subscribed to the idea that "sex – within limits that varied widely in strictness – was not only natural but often necessary to physical and mental health" (Green 2023: 38). Indeed, John Ruskin's unconsummated marriage to Effie Gray constituted a scandal, and was considered a kind of failure, even if the exact reasons remained unarticulated. Krafft-Ebing outlined the concept of 'Sexual Anaesthesia' in the language of dysfunction, even though his case subject did not consider himself unusual, or else applied a fraught moral framing, as if the absence of a sexual drive translated into an absence of all other emotions. Ellis similarly understood a lack of sexual interest in the context of sexual phenomena like fetishes, but also uncomfortably entangled it with race theory and the over-sexualisation of non-white people, especially women.[1] Like H. G. Wells, in his essays "The Rate of Change in Species" (1894) and "Human Evolution, an Artificial Process" (1896), Ellis also linked sexual "frigidity" to the "fate of racial life" (1913: 2, see Owen 2014: 121-2). As Claudia Sterbini shows in her close reading of *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), "non-sexuality is, for Wells, a central site of anxiety – one that must be explored in both fiction and non-fiction to prevent humanity from becoming non-sexual like the Martians or Morlocks" (2025: 3). Indeed, Wells' fiction reflects Ellis' sexology and the latter's study repeatedly ponders passages of Wells' fiction. Their reciprocal relationship "underscores how sexology was constructed at the intersection of literature and pseudo-science, in which the former becomes an active site through which sexological discourse is shaped, disseminated, and transformed" (Sterbini 2025: 4).

Notably here, too, even the absence of sexuality is political and entangled, often problematically, across multiple social dynamics. Today, an asexual person is understood to be "the individual who, regardless of physical or emotional condition, actual sexual history, and marital status or ideological orientation, seems to *prefer* not to engage in sexual activity"

[1] The Reading Group has proved a valuable forum for exploring underanalysed subject matters, for example through our first session on asexual aestheticism in the work of Ouida, which provided generous feedback to Esser's work (see below). In that context, we would like to thank Claudia Sterbini for her role as co-host in a following session which generated many useful insights. We would also like to highlight the important research currently being undertaken on the role of asexuality in the Victorian context in which our discussions are embedded, including Claire O'Callaghan's ongoing research on aromanticism and asexuality in Emily Bronte's life and work, Han O'Flanagan's work on M.R. James and asexual materialities, Alex Tankard's work on queer, neurodivergent asexuality in literature and television, T.N. Hutchinson's research into fin de siècle and Edwardian decadent asexualities, and the recently founded Aromanticism & Asexuality Research Network.

(Johnson 1977: 97, original emphasis). While it is of course complicated to re-project such concepts into the past, reading Victorian popular fiction through an asexual lens can, as Esser argues elsewhere, help re-frame the dynamics between gendered performance, power, and agency. Reading Ouida's *Princess Napraxine* (1884) in this way, for example, "makes visible Ouida's effort to radically disentangle her character from the sexual marketplace by disidentifying with sexuality itself" (Esser 2024a: 128). The protagonist Nadine's self-fashioning into an unresponsive aesthetic object not only illustrates how "queer aestheticism defined the aesthetic itself as the realm where one's autonomy could be realized in an oppressive social world" (Friedman 2019: 6-7), but also implements a Ouidean "strategy of withholding oneself from hetero-patriarchal power structures, highlighting how Nadine is constantly pursued by unwanted male sexual energy" (Esser 2024a: 128).

Here, the tensions inherent in re-viewing the Victorian past from today's perspective provide new insights. Similarly, neo-Victorian fiction is notably "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewelyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). With its paradigmatic re-centring on formerly marginalised identities, neo-Victorian fiction can respond to modern queer audiences' desire to see themselves mirrored in popular fiction – ideally in positive and empowering ways. Having flourished, as Sarah Gamble notes, "alongside developments in gender, particularly the inception of debates concerned with queerness and performativity" (Gamble 2009: 128), such as the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the 1990s, queer neo-Victorian fiction marked a turning point in popular representation. Such fictions are spearheaded, of course, by Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), whose works Claire O'Callaghan has analysed extensively in her 2017 monograph, as has Helen Davies (in 2012). In her 2015 discussion of *Fingersmith*, O'Callaghan has also shown how Waters mixes Victorian genres, such as the sensation novel and pornography, to depict female same-sex desire. Caroline Koegler and Marlena Tronicke note that Waters' lesbian fiction highlighted "the extent to which LGBTQIA+ readers previously had been denied historical visibility and life-affirming, affective-sensual self-recognition in a 1990s culture still heavily invested in understandings of queerness as failure, pathology, and disease" (Koegler and Tronicke 2020: 1-2). This desire for queer-positive stories has only grown, and fan audiences tend to react with outrage and boycott to popular fictions that follow the so-called 'Bury Your Gays' trope, meaning narratives in which queer story-arcs end in tragedy as (bizarrely Victorian) punishments for transgression, ostensibly normalising meta-narratives of queer failure. Therefore, as the likes of *The Well of Loneliness* fall out of favour, neo-Victorian fictions navigate historical ambiguity or a lack of queer categories and genealogies through speculative elements. Nat Reeves's *Nettleblack* (2022) envisions a cosy Victorian village-scape that abounds with any and all types of LGBTQIA+ characters, regardless of whether those identities can be framed by historical taxonomies. As the non-binary author explained for our reading pack:

> Neo-Victorian historical fiction is a way for me to affirm the importance of self-identity whilst also delving into the personal, meaningful, slightly ramshackle ways you might have to go about that. It's a way of flipping the script and shifting the emphasis from debates around historical "evidence," anachronism, and what you *do* versus what you *are* (none of which are ideal when you're frankly sick of people appropriating you as a topic for debate). Instead, the process of writing these books is its own research act: a way to imaginatively inhabit the mindset of someone working out who they are without the help of modern vocabulary, a position which is in itself not dissimilar to the twenty-odd years of my life I spent not having the words to explain myself.

Alongside Reeves's novel, neo-Victorianism has allowed for a fuller exploration of trans lives in the past and present. As Ann Heilmann's 2018 monograph on James Miranda Barry shows,

across media and forms, the re-imagining of gender non-conforming lives from the past provides a useful analogue for diverse gender expressions in the present. In fact, as Heilmann argues, neo-Victorianism might usefully be understood as a transgenre.

Apple's *Dickinson* (2019–21) about Emily Dickinson deploys anachronism as a feature that uses style to re-frame and translate the universal feeling of coming of age for modern audiences. Everyday activities such as dancing and 'binge' reading Dickens, but also conversations, are translated through gestures and montages and positioned as contemporary equivalents to experiences shared by modern audiences, while also showing and respecting the historically specific conditions that underpin those experiences, such as family hierarchies. As such, these fictions, rather than reinforcing the distance between "Them" and "Us" that characterises much of neo-Victorianism (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 1), seek to collapse divergences and hierarchies in favour of through-lines and affinities.

In their recruitment of speculative elements, such neo-Victorian fictions approach the territory of steampunk, whose queer potential Esser examines at length elsewhere. Steampunk, as a "self-aware, meta-historical, transmedia aesthetic that flaunts playful, retro-speculative anachronisms as its defining feature, and so collapses linear timelines into an imaginative and often semi-ironical triple exposure of past, present, and future" and "unsettles dichotomies between fact and fiction, past and present, history and speculation, irony and nostalgia, the familiar and the strange," holds innate queer potential to re-imagine the past (Esser 2024b: 3-4). It mirrors queer-affirming fictions of queer Victorians like Vernon Lee, Simeon Solomon, and Oscar Wilde that Bristow identifies as decadent historicism, that is a myth-making through fiction which prioritises emotional truth, even if that "entails faking and appropriating history in the face of contravening empirical facts": "This historicist impulse to recover the queer past, even though it may well involve acts of preposterous distortion, defines one of most potent aspects of literary decadence" (Bristow 2020: 10). Desiring to see themselves mirrored in history, these artists conjured counterparts in Renaissance heroes and Shakespearean actors, even if those identities could not be supported by "truth" (Esser 2025: 300). Steampunk, in a similar way, may construct queer-positive, if counter-factual narratives in which happy endings are possible. It realises Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, a mode of reading that prioritises texts' "empowering, productive as well as renewing potential to promote semantic innovation, personal healing and social change" (Röder 2014: 58-9) on a meta-fictional level. By destabilising the hierarchies and connections between past and present, steampunk also invites audiences to re-imagine and re-shape their present.

In its desire for affirmative genealogies, neo-Victorian fiction also reminds us, not only of the pain, repression, and self-denial experienced by many queer Victorians, but also that gender always interacts with other power structures across social, geographical, and temporal axes. While these empowering narratives are important in today's precarious climate, we must not blindly idealise historical queer people or naively uphold simplistic meta-narratives. As Ben Miller and Huw Lemmey's podcast and book *Bad Gays* repeatedly show, queer persons were not exempt from entanglement in unequal hierarchies and power dynamics, for example, along the lines of age and consent, or Orientalism and colonial geography. As Mahoney notes, because our subjects are:

> playing with a set of concepts, structures, and institutions that are as much enmeshed in histories of violence and exploitation as in traditions of care and nurturing, the results are not always ethical or just. And, because they are situated within national histories with ties to colonialism and racial trauma, their expansive curiosity is often inflected by imperialist, Orientalist, and exploitative appetites
>
> (Mahoney 2022: 13)

Indeed, in line with Kadji Amin's concept of deidealisation, we must also take seriously "the 'complex personhood' of queer, racialized, and subaltern persons too often assigned the psychically flat role of righting the ills of an unjust social order and denied the right to be damaged, psychically complex, or merely otherwise occupied" (Amin 2017: 11): "Queer Studies stands positioned to offer more textured accounts of the distinct cultural and historical modalities of deviance, its precise relation to multiple forms of power, and the (un)ethical and (a)political visions it fosters" (Amin 2017: 9).

Wilde's relationships with young rent boys have, in recent years, drawn critique, and indeed, the Hellenic tradition with which Victorian gays like Wilde, Walter Pater, or Symonds sought to legitimise their desires also brings up changing and potentially uncomfortable ideas and definitions around what counts as adulthood. There was no age of consent for boys in Britain at the time, whereas the age of criminal responsibility at which boys could be prosecuted for 'gross indecency' was fourteen. Therefore, these debates remain complicated, even if they seem less so in the cases of Victorian gays such as Gide and Bosie, or Wilhelm von Gloeden and Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, who engaged in what we today call sex tourism with adolescent boys. Richard Burton's theory of a 'Sotadic Zone,' published in 1885, in which male homoerotic behaviours and relationships were linked to the hot, ostensibly permissive climate of the near-equatorial zone, may potently illustrate how the Victorian Orientalist imagination linked sexual licence to colonial geographies. Indeed, Ardel Haefele-Thomas explores the linkage between Queerness and both Gothic and colonial others (2012), and Robert Aldrich notes: "The perception, and (to a limited extent) the reality, of the empire as a homosexual playground must not be underestimate" (2003: 5). No wonder, then, that André Gide happened upon Wilde and Bosie Douglas in Algiers in 1895. Gide, himself interested in teenage boys, describes in his memoir how Douglas (then aged twenty-five), after Wilde left, prepared to 'elope' with a fourteen-year-old coffee server, whom he dressed up in silks and a golden turban. The way that age and Orientalist fantasy intersect is obvious.

A similar imagined geography also applied to Italy – notably, Burton's 'Sotadic Zone' also encompassed Italy and Greece, which were constructed in the Victorian perception as archaic, pastoral, and backwards, through a kind of inner or European Orientalism (Kukavica 2013: 126). Especially Sicily and, later, Capri "represented a bit of ancient Greece on Italian soil" as a "cultural home," but also, "with its Arabic history and paganising Catholicism, was also perceived as exotic and 'Oriental'" (Arcara 2012: 136). As Stefania Arcara notes, this intellectual homeland "takes on an added significance when it is evoked in order to redeem homosexual desire from the taint of sin and elevate male love to the status of natural innocence" (Arcara 2012: 139). As such, male homosexual relationships with adolescent youths could be idealised as following the Hellenic model of pederasty. Accordingly, in 1870s Taormina, the German photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden could bring to life his own Hellenic fantasies through his photographs of young, naked boys and teenagers, contextualising his work within an aesthetic model while also indulging in homoerotic ideals. His models were local, working-class men whose poverty and work as fishermen were romanticised as pastoral and whose rustic masculinity was sexualised by tourists, who considered them to be sexually available. Von Gloeden's photographs, rife with aesthetic abundance and sensuous splendour, exemplify this. As von Gloeden provided money, work, and fame, the local area soon became financially dependent on him, and while he seems to have entertained meaningful relationships with some of his models, with whom he shared his proceeds, the unequal power dynamics across multiple axes are striking. In a similar vein, d'Adelswärd-Fersen, who had to flee Paris after a scandal, settled on Capri in 1904, where he built the decadent Villa Lysis, which housed an opium den and was "dedicated to the youth of love," as an inscription reads. Here, he lived with his fifteen-year-old lover, the Roman labourer Nino Cesarini, to whom he dedicated several artworks. The

villa was host to numerous decadent celebrations and tableaux, for example, involving a naked youth "on a white bearskin, his body covered with golden gauze, his forehead covered with roses and his arms resting on a skull of polished ivory" (quoted in James 2020: 156). When Cesarini turned twenty, he 'aged out,' but remained d'Adelswärd-Fersen's steward and heir, to the displeasure of local families who hoped to position their own offspring in d'Adelswärd-Fersen's gainful employ.

Capri thus became an Arcadia for expat homosexuals, visited by John Ellingham Brooks, E. F. Benson, and Somerset Maugham, Victorian painters Frederic Leighton and John Singer Sargent, or the German steel magnate and heir Friedrich Alfred Krupp. It was home to lesbians such as Kate and Saidee Wolcott-Perry, the pianist Renata Borgatti, said to be enamoured with Compton Mackenzie's wife Faith, Mrs Francesca Lloyd and Mimì Franchetti, the Principessa Helène Soldatenkov, or Romaine Brooks. It was perceived as a refuge from Britain's post-Wildean climate of moral policing, a *terra incognita* of wild possibility, and a counterpoint to a 'civilization' that was synonymous with "heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, child-rearing and family life as essential values of civilised society" (Aldrich 2003: 6). However, if it was an actionable utopia, it was thus certainly only for the wealthy and privileged tourists. Power dynamics of all kinds pervade Victorian gender and gender-nonconformity and leave echoes and legacies that stretch into the present, which makes a study of (neo-)Victorian queerness such a fruitful endeavour. Such scholarship, as we now discuss, is rich and abundant, but we are still unearthing the depth and contours of the LGBTQIA+ past.

The (Neo-)Victorian Field of LGBTQIA+ Studies

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to delineate the full breadth of LGBTQIA+ scholarship at the intersection of Victorian and neo-Victorian studies in recent years. Nonetheless, a growing body of work, both within and beyond the academy, has significantly expanded the parameters of gender and sexual historiography as they pertain to Victorian popular literature and culture. For example, situated at the earlier end of the *VPFJ*'s temporal scope is Anthony Delaney's *Queer Georgians: A Hidden History of Lovers, Lawbreakers and Homemakers* (2025). Drawing on extensive archival research alongside representations in popular media, Delaney delineates how "The Georgians were asking many of the same questions about gender, sex and sexuality that we are today: What makes a man? What is a woman? What exactly was the 'Third Sex'?" (2025: 2). Through a series of case studies extending into the early Victorian period that intersect with popular culture, including the Ladies of Llangollen and Anne Lister, among others, Delaney traces the intricate histories of diverse individuals. At times, he also illuminates how certain contemporary historical narratives have queered the past in problematic or anachronistic ways. In a similar yet more overtly literary vein, Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (2008) undertakes the crucial task of more fully updating the diverse and intricate history of women's relationships. Responding in part to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal study of male homosocial desire in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Marcus explores the social and sexual bonds between women in British literature and culture from 1830 to 1880. She demonstrates convincingly that "one does not have to go outside the canon" to uncover representations of same-sex intimacy (81).

Marcus's efforts to re-centre discussions of female same-sex desires and modes of embodiment have been complemented by a range of single-author studies (so to speak) with similar intentions to re-orientate how the work of several authors' writings by way of

LGBTQIA+ theories and plotlines. One ground-breaking text in this space is Holly Furneaux's *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (2009). Furneaux's text has proved particularly generative and influential for LGBTQIA+ Victorian studies. Reinterpreting Dickens and his major works in relation to queerness, Furneaux demonstrates that LGBT ideas, themes, and figures are to be found everywhere in Dickens's oeuvre, challenging any view of him as traditional or conservative. Demonstrating instead that Dickens had a deep fascination with gender and sexuality articulated most prominently in his portrayal of men and masculinity, Furneaux brings to light neglected areas of Dickens's studies while placing him in dialogue with writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and Walt Whitman. To Furneaux, Dickens not only challenged conventional ideas of Victorian manhood but also offered a more hopeful, life-affirming possibility for LGBTQIA+ lives. At the latter end of the journal's chronology boundary is J. C. Bernthal's study *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (2016). Christie was the most commercially successful novelist of the twentieth century, whose work, as Indu Ohri has shown (2021), was indebted to and influenced by Wilkie Collins. Bernthal's monograph demonstrates that although Christie's work remains incredibly popular today, especially in adapted form onscreen, she was situated in a commercially challenging market (inherited from the Victorians and Edwardians). Tracing the queer figures and plotlines found in Christie's work, including her Poirot and Marple narratives, Bernthal not only elucidates Christie's queer narratives but asks "might [her] books be queerer?" (sleeve).

While the term 'queer' features prominently in many of the titles mentioned so far, Simon Joyce's *LGBT Victorians* (2022) mobilises a much fuller lexicon to study the lives and works of several figures, placing them in relation to sexology. Joyce's book is important for giving equal consideration to those who defined themselves primarily in terms of their gender or sexual identity, which might resonate with readers today. But rather than impose modern categories on historical lives and works and run the risk of charges of anachronism, Joyce is especially interested in how the Victorians conceived of themselves using terms like 'Uranian' or 'Urnings', among others. Alongside Fanny and Stella and Anne Lister, Joyce also explores the life and work of sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, considering how, across twelve pamphlets printed between 1864 and 1880, Ulrichs conceptualised gender and sexuality and 'the third sex.' Joyce's book includes a discussion of Victorian pornography, including the aforementioned *Teleny*.

Elements of Joyce's work on John Addington Symonds, for example, rely on newly available transcriptions of archival sources. To that end, recent years have also seen the transcription and publication of a range of queer archives. With respect to Symonds, for instance, Amber K. Regis's *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds: A Critical Edition* (2016) reproduces in its entirety for the first time the full text of Symonds's *Memoirs* from 1889 onwards. As well as contextualising Symonds's life and work, the edition traces the manuscript's fascinating history (from Symonds's death to its publication), including the extensive emendations visible in his *Memoirs*. Similarly, studies of Anne Lister have, one might suggest, been regenerated by the wider availability of her diaries. Building on Helena Whitbread's work (1988 and 1992) and mobilised by the popularity of Sally Wainwright's popular neo-Victorian television biodrama, *Gentleman Jack* (2019–22), 'Lister studies' has grown apace in recent years. No longer confined to the margins of lesbian history, Wainwright's project galvanised the West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS) to amplify its efforts to transcribe every page of Lister's twenty-seven diaries, an initiative which involved volunteers from around the world in the decoding of the material, therefore making it a popular, non-academic endeavour too. This, in turn, helped to inaugurate the establishment of The Anne Lister Society in 2022, an organisation that now boasts its own annual conference, and the

archival revival also led to the establishment of *Packed With Potential*, a nonprofit organisation "dedicated to promoting greater understanding of Anne Lister and her contemporaries through open, collaborative, and accessible research" (online).[2] A similar upsurge has been visible in studies of 'Michael Field,' evidenced in collections such as the edited volumes *Michael Field, Decadent Moderns* (2019), *Michael Field*, *For That Moment Only and Other Prose Works* (2022), and *Michael Field in Context* (2025).

Expansions in how we read – or perhaps re-read – Victorian literature and culture through more capacious conceptions of gender and sexuality have also been a defining development in recent LGBTQIA+ Victorian studies. This growth is particularly evident in several, though not all, areas of enquiry in the LGBTQIA+ Victorian remit. Notably, trans Victorian studies have grown rapidly, offering invaluable perspectives on re-examining gender in numerous nineteenth-century texts and contexts. Among the most influential contributions is Lisa Hager's article, "A Case for a Trans Studies Turn in Victorian Studies: 'Female Husbands' of the Nineteenth Century" (2018). Beginning with a critique of Victorian studies' resistance to "fundamentally" reconceptualise understandings of the field "to account for the possibility of movement between, across, and among genders," Hager examines representations of 'female husbands' in Victorian periodicals and pamphlets (2018: 37). Through this analysis, they demonstrate how a trans framework allows for a fuller and more nuanced understanding of nineteenth-century lives that exceeded or resisted fixed gender binaries. Hager's article sits alongside a broader and vibrant body of scholarship dedicated to trans histories and representations. This includes Ardel Haefele-Thomas' special issue of *Victorians Review* on the subject (which features Hager's article), Jolene Zigarovich's essay "Transing Wilkie Collins" (2018) and her monograph *TransGothic in Literature and Culture* (2018), as well as Kit Heyem's *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (2022) and Frankie Dytor's recent studies on trans embodiment (2024, 2025). Adjacent to these works, titles like Jen Mannion's award-winning *Female Husbands* (2020) offer a comprehensive history and analysis of gender fluidity and cross-gender identification across a variety of sources, recounting the lives of many individuals who were assigned female and interacted with society as men, including some who married women. Mannion's book is particularly relevant to this special issue for its exploration of the intersections between lived histories and popular fiction, notably its examination of how the 1746 trial of Mary Hamilton informed Henry Fielding's popular novel, *The Female Husband* (1746).

That said, placed side-by-side, works like Hager and Mannion's demonstrate that critical disagreement on the usefulness of historic terms to explore LGBTQIA+ lives and texts remains an area of lively debate. To Mannion, for instance, the term 'female husbands' is a capacious and generative one that takes in the lives of those who "in contemporary terms might be described as transgender, nonbinary, butch, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual" (2020: 1-2), whereas for Hager, it is a "punitive gender-policing measure" that called "attention to the person's transgressive claim to the identity of 'husband' by qualifying it with 'female' since there is no need to qualify cisgender men's claim to 'husband' with 'male'" (2018: 37).

This Special Issue

Influenced by Hager's call to widen Victorian studies by embracing the critical possibilities offered by new insights into LGBTQIA+ experiences, this special issue of *VPFJ* invited articles that responded to a broad range of conceptual research questions. These included: How does

[2] For more on this see, https://www.packedwithpotential.org/.

Victorian popular fiction and culture represent 'the third sex'? How might taxonomies of gender interact with taxonomies of fiction across genres and forms? 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? How do texts encode, allude to, negotiate or mediate ambiguity, or 'the unsayable' with respect to queer identities and desires, i.e. through symbolic registers or slang? How did national contexts, or aspects of race or class, shape the formation of queer identity or queer spaces? And 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?

These questions were informed by three broad principles. Firstly, we agreed that the Reading Group very clearly demonstrated that nineteenth-century popular literature and culture frequently offered a broader conception of what we have come to understand as LGBTQIA+ than is often recognised. In a time before the sexological categorisations of Victorian taxonomies for diverse genders and sexualities, a more fluid conception of genders and sexualities beyond binaries existed in a way that both disrupts the segregation of the separate spheres ideology, which denaturalises the strong footing held by hetero-normative genders and sexualities. Secondly, while prominent figures such as Oscar Wilde or Vernon Lee are relatively well-known instances of queerness in Victorian culture, they are far from isolated examples. As indicated above, our Reading Group explored stories of gender fluidity and expressions of same-sex desire in real-life narratives and popular fictions, demonstrating that they are wide and varied. Beyond Anne Lister, Aubrey Beardsley and the late-Victorian New Woman, traces of those diverse histories can be found in the lives and work of Marie Corelli, Mary Diana Dodds, and Renée Vivien. But alongside those are the lives and works of many who have slipped through the margins or somehow become lost in the passing of time, and we hope to have captured some of them among our pages. Thirdly, we agreed that neo-Victorianism has proactively channelled the diversity of the 'third sex' into literature, film and television, even if it does not typically use such terminology. As neo-Victorianism is now a firmly established sub-genre of Victorian studies reflected in its integration in scholarly conferences, we wanted to situate Victorian and neo-Victorian responses side-by-side. Caroline Koegler & Marlena Tronicke's special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2020 showed that queer neo-Victoriana has expanded far beyond writers like Sarah Waters and screen productions has enabled the widespread dissemination of diverse histories, such as *Wilde* (1997), *The Happy Prince* (2018), *Colette* (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* (2012–16), *Penny Dreadful* (2014–16), *Dickinson* (2019–21), or *The Nevers* (2020–present), *Bodies* (2023) and the *House of Guiness* (2025).

The essays that are presented here, then, are a snapshot of the wide range of works, figures and topics in the field, attesting to the vibrancy of work in and around LGBT+ studies, Victorian popular fiction, and the long nineteenth century and its legacies. Opening the special issue is Anouska Lester's article, "'My own Dearest of all': Recovering Marie Corelli and Bertha Vyver's Queer History through Material Culture." Lester presents a new account of the material legacy of the popular Victorian novelist Marie Corelli and her partner, Bertha Vyver, drawing on previously unexamined letters, objects, and buildings to argue for their rightful place in queer history. The article publishes, for the first time, a letter from Corelli to Vyver –

discovered in 2013 and now held in a private collection – and uses the document as a point of departure for a broader reconsideration of how their relationship was materially expressed and remembered. Through an examination of a series of newly contextualised objects and architectural case studies, Lester argues that Corelli and Vyver's partnership exemplifies a strategic manipulation of visibility and invisibility**,** blurring distinctions between private and public, heritage and domestic space. Corelli and Vyver, Lester demonstrates, appropriated and reimagined the Tudor and Shakespearean past to assert their agency, their partnership, and their place within cultural memory. From a close reading of photographs, pseudonyms, dress, and domestic artefacts, Lester shows how Corelli's self-fashioning operated through a careful choreography of concealment and revelation, offering new insight into the intersections of authorship, gender performance, and intimacy and expanding current understandings of queer material culture, authorship, and legacy in late Victorian Britain.

The presence of androgynous and intersexual figures across the writings of Algernon Charles Swinburne speaks directly to the expansiveness of the 'third sex,' and how this area of enquiry has long been acknowledged by critics. Yet these motifs continue to offer fertile ground for reinterpretation. Connor Moore's article, '"He ought to have been a pretty and rather boyish girl': Queer and Trans Readings of Swinburne's Poetry and *Lesbia Brandon*" does precisely this. Revisiting the critical discourse on Swinburne's negotiations of gender and sexuality, Moore presents a new and original reading of Swinburne's novel in relation to transfemininity. Paying particular attention to the shaping of extant readings of Swinburne in the 1990s, Moore draws attention to the limitations and blind spots of such work in relation to transgender. Opening the interpretative possibilities of Swinburne's writing further, Moore's trans reading of *Lesbia Brandon* not only reframes Swinburne's treatment of embodiment and identity, but also – responding to Hager's call for a trans methods cited earlier – highlights how trans theory can productively reshape Victorian studies, reorienting the field toward pressing contemporary concerns with recognition, liveability, and liberation. By advancing a trans reading of *Lesbia Brandon*, Moore expands the interpretative horizon of Swinburne studies and demonstrates that Swinburne's engagement with gender fluidity and selfhood is far richer and more complex than previously understood. In doing so, Moore's article makes a substantive and timely contribution to both Swinburne scholarship and the broader dialogue between trans studies and nineteenth-century literature.

The capacious nature of Swinburne's writing generates another contribution to this special issue, too. In "'Male and female at once': Bisexual Phenomenology in Swinburne," VJ René re-examines Swinburne's work in relation to bisexuality. René argues that through his work, Swinburne conceptualised bisexuality not merely as an erotic preference or a literary trope, but as a phenomenological orientation shaping poetic vision. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation and Clare Hemmings' bisexual epistemology, the article reconsiders Swinburne's depictions of hermaphroditic and androgynous figures as articulations of a dynamic, dual-directional subjectivity. As such, René further critiques how influential queer readings, particularly Richard Dellamora's, 'straighten' Swinburne's texts by collapsing bisexual plurality into monosexual interpretations. By reorienting our attention toward bisexual possibilities, the essay reveals new ways of understanding Swinburne's erotic, aesthetic, and conceptual investments.

Claire O'Callaghan's article, '"These queer hearts of ours': Emily Faithfull and the Sensational Strategies in *Change upon Change: A Love Story* (1868)," offers the first sustained reading of Emily Faithfull's sole novel, showing how it transforms one of Faithfull's real-life relationships through fabulation. *Change upon Change: A Love Story* (1868), a now lost popular fiction, which was republished in the United States in 1873, is here considered in-

depth, and read as Faithfull's literary response to the highly publicised Codrington divorce scandal of 1863–64. Drawing on unpublished archival sources and previously overlooked contemporaneous reviews, O'Callaghan uncovers the novel's layered queer strategies, demonstrating the transtextual means by which Faithfull employed the genre of sensation fiction to narrate her doomed relationship with Helen Codrington. By situating *Change upon Change* within the context of Faithfull's mid-Victorian exposure and social scrutiny, O'Callaghan explores how the novel functions as a queer sensation narrative. Illuminating how Faithfull crafted a coded story of desire, betrayal, and self-representation, O'Callaghan reads the novel as an assertion of Faithfull's voice amid cultural censure. In doing so, she shows how, in Victorian culture, sensation fiction was used as a mode of lesbian literary expression long before the advent of formal sexological terminology. The article thus furthers new avenues for understanding the negotiation of queer identity in mid-Victorian literature.

Milly Kate Harrison's article, "In Wilde's Wake: Robert Hichens and the Burden of Influence," provides – as the title implies – a new and original reading of the literary entanglement between Robert Hichens and Oscar Wilde, examining how the Wildean connection and influence both facilitated and constrained Hichens's early career. Focusing on Hichens's 1900 novel *Sea Change*, Harrison explores how Hichens contended with the pressures of Wildean influence amid the fin de siècle's charged cultural and sexual milieu, especially in the aftermath of Hichens's Wildean satire *The Green Carnation*. Published just before Wilde's death, Harrison approaches *Sea Change* as a sophisticated exploration of queer desire, artistic mentorship and moral ambiguity during a time when the formal codification of sexual categories was particularly prominent. Emphasising Hichens's subtle negotiation of influence and authorship, Harrison engages productively with Wilde's shadow. By exploring the productive tension inherent in Hichens's career forged by his connection with Wilde, Harrison's contribution reveals how *Sea Change* illuminates questions of queer legacy, discretion and the personal costs of cultural visibility in late-Victorian literary and social contexts.

At the mid-point of the Special Issue is an article that bridges Victorian and twentieth-century writing: Helena Esser's "Dandies, Desire, and Decadent Legacies: Homoeroticism and Homosociality in the works of Ouida, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Yukio Mishima." Queerness is often understood as either subversive and/or in opposition to hegemonic socio-cultural structures, a reading reinforced by the 1895 Wilde trials, in which Oscar Wilde's decadent dandy persona became a site of cultural condemnation. But as Esser's article shows, a focus on the representation of homoeroticism, masculinity, and elite homosocial spaces in writers excluded from spheres of white patriarchy opens new ways of thinking about the dandy that came to influence Wilde and the legacy that followed. Focusing, therefore, on the lineage and trajectory of the decadent dandy in the works of British author Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée), the Harlem Renaissance writer Richard Bruce Nugent, and Japanese decadent Yukio Mishima, Esser illuminates the global legacies of Victorian popular fiction and its capacity to engage with both historical and emerging discourses on sexuality, desire, and masculine identity. Arguing that all three authors mobilise dandyism and homoeroticism to negotiate culturally specific conceptions of masculinity, agency, and social belonging, Esser reveals how aesthetic self-fashioning interacted with contemporaneous understandings of male same-sex desire. As the article demonstrates, the Victorian dandy has a transhistorical and transnational lens through which non-hegemonic subjectivities may be (re)imagined.

Remaining with the legacies of LGBTQIA+ Victorians, the next articles explore neo-Victorian approaches to gender and desire more fully. Diana Maltz's contribution, '"Here presented nonsequentially, and in a new relation to one another': Primary Source Work and the Quest for Empathy in Tom Crewe's *The New Life*," takes as its focus Tom Crewe's 2023 novel depicting a creative reimagining of the collaboration between sexologist Havelock Ellis and

cultural critic John Addington Symonds during the production of their 1897 study *Sexual Inversion*. The text situates itself within the historical moment in which *Sexual Inversion* was banned in 1898 following an obscenity trial, a legal judgment deeply shaped by the homophobic aftermath of the 1895 Wilde Trials. As Maltz shows, drawing on his background as a historian, Crewe engages in what might be called emotional or affective historiography, incorporating letters, memoirs, and treatises into his narrative in ways that catalyse the protagonists' self-reflection and crises of conscience. In doing so, Maltz suggests, readers are invited to experience history through the lens of personal and affective engagement. Through a close reading of the novel and its wider history, Maltz demonstrates how Crewe overtly challenges any modern expectations for queer characters to express overt pride, illustrating instead how disclosure in the 1890s could significantly endanger lovers, friends and professional networks. As Maltz argues, Crewe instead emphasises mutual responsibility within the context of late-Victorian approaches to feeling and social conduct in conjunction with a commitment to compassion, self-improvement, and ethical living**.** By foregrounding empathy alongside historical authenticity, Maltz shows how Crewe's novel is both a literary exploration of queer affect and a historically informed reflection on sexology, moral responsibility, and interpersonal bonds. Her article thus presents a distinctive reflection on contemporary understandings of fin-de-siècle sexuality and relational ethics.

Next is Rachel M. Friars's article, '"My heart is a hand reaching': Lesbian Yearning in Neo-Victorian Fictions." Taking two neo-Victorian texts as her focus – Hannah Kent's *Devotion* (2021) and Nell Stevens' *Briefly, a Delicious Life* (2022) – Friars looks at how, in these novels, lesbian yearning functions as both an emotion and a deliberate practice, tying characters through the intensity of desire. As with all historical fictions that explore the past as a means of interrogating the present, Friars argues that lesbian yearning is a textual strategy for both (re)constructing queer histories and envisioning queer futures. By foregrounding yearning, these novels, Friars contends, acknowledge the persistent marginalisation of lesbian relationships in cultural narratives of queerness. In the context of lesbian neo-Victorian fiction, yearning, the article demonstrates, becomes an active mode of resistance, enabling characters to articulate desire in defiance of heteropatriarchal systems of marriage, kinship, and religion. Their yearning is not merely a longing for the objects of their desire, but, Friars shows, a necessity for imagining an alternative social and temporal future in which queer existence can be lived openly, safely, and as a fully embodied form of life-affirming possibility.

Building on a focus on hopefulness, in the final article in this Special Issue, titled "The Search for a Liveable Life: George Sand, Scandal and Queer Possibility in *Briefly, A Delicious Life*," Charlotte Boyce offers a fresh and original reading of Nell Stevens's neo-Victorian reimagining of George Sand's 1838–9 stay in Mallorca with Frédéric Chopin. Boyce situates the novel in relation to Judith Butler's theories of queer liveability. Showing how Stevens's novel historicises *and* reimagines the queer elements of Sand's life, Stevens, Boyce argues, reveals the complexities of genderqueer identity and relationality in a nineteenth-century context. By examining how the Mallorcan setting functions as a utopian yet precarious space for gender non-conforming identities to coexist within ostensibly heterosexual family structures, Boyce exposes Stevens's representation of the tensions between queer possibility and social constraint. Boyce argues that, even while showing the limits of acceptance and belonging, Stevens's novel is committed to reimagining queer liveability beyond rigid binaries. By expanding contemporary understandings of historical queerness, Boyce's article continues to underline the way in which the neo-Victorian project of envisioning LGBTQIA+ histories remains a critical project.

This special issue contributes to the ever-growing critical jigsaw comprising LGBTQIA+ Victorian studies. Popular fictions constitute a particularly rich and nuanced

medium through which such inquiries can be pursued, offering opportunities to deepen our understanding of the Victorian era and its complex legacies. While we hope it expands the field, we are equally conscious that significant gaps persist, and further research is required – most notably regarding asexual, bisexual and intersex histories and narratives. Neo-Victorian criticism has contributed substantially to broadening the interpretive possibilities of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century, yet these specific identities continue to be comparatively underexamined there, too. Research will, of course, continue to evolve, and we look forward to the future unearthing of more of what Anna Clark terms "twilight moments": the histories and texts which involve "sexual desires, relationships, and practices that did not produce identities, that were half-understood, expressed only by oblique gestures, veiled in silence" (2005: 140).

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