

Yearning for open frontiers and open-necked shirts: Greek reception in Victorian Britain and the perception of queer identity

Long have the matters of Hellenism and homosexuality been intertwined; as queer identity evolves this fact remains incredibly apparent. The Victorian era particularly represents a period of great change for the perception of queer identity. Both the early process of definition, and the acquisition of language for English speakers, shaped attitudes in medical, sociological, and poetic spaces. Reflections on the nature of queer love in the Victorian era not only impacted public perceptions at the time, but also have continued to impact its perception in contemporary queer theory and societal perceptions into the 21st century.

At the beginning of the Victorian era, there existed very little language for homosexual men to utilise in their own description, especially language which lacked negative connotation. The early queer theorists and advocates driving linguistic development in academic circles at this time wrote largely in German rather than English; indeed, the term 'Homosexual' itself did not exist until 1869, when Karl Kertbeny, a Hungarian-German author, published a pamphlet arguing against the Prussian antisodomy statute, therein creating the terms 'Homosexual' and 'Heterosexual'¹ (from the Greek prefixes meaning 'Same' and 'Different'). Along with these terms, Kertbeny created a form of "hetero/homosexual binarism" (Beachy, 2010) that formed the basis of a system that separates sexuality into distinct and opposing categories².

This lack of vocabulary available for English-speaking homosexual men in the Victorian era caused many academics and writers to look to Antiquity. Emily Rutherford speaks, in her essay 'Impossible Love and Victorian Values', of the introduction of the Greek Phrase, ἔρως τῶν ἀδυνάτων (which Rutherford translates to the love of impossible things) into the writing of the English classicist and poet John Addington (J.A.) Symonds on his discovery that the Ancient Greeks "acknowledged a kind of desire which he lacked the words to articulate in English". J.A. Symonds wrote often about what he called 'Uranian love', from the Ancient Greek word 'οὐρανιος' (ouranios), meaning celestial or heavenly. The term 'Uranian' was then adopted as a self-identifier by many homosexual writers and poets in the Victorian era and when used to mean simply a man who loved men, the term was used

¹ These words were originally German and were adopted by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his 1886 book 'Psychopathia Sexualis', thereafter, being adopted into the English lexicon. (Drescher, n.d.)

² Without this system, an eclectic mix of perceptions on the nature of love and sexuality were allowed to develop in both the German and English-speaking worlds.

interchangeably with “Urning” (Wilper, 2016), coined by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in 1864 (Drescher, n.d.).

Undoubtedly, the early development of vocabulary to describe love between men, and the creation of self-descriptive categories, impacted the perception of the queer identity greatly. However, when considering the conclusions of Victorian writers in Ancient Greek reception, the structure of homosexual relationships and reflections on the nature of queer love itself could be seen as having a more significant, long-lasting impact on the perception of the queer identity—the choice of writers such as J.A. Symonds and Edward Carpenter to continually look to the structure of Ancient Greek relationships between men, solidified the association between homosexuality and pederasty in the minds of both pioneers in the field of queer theory and the minds of the general public; an inextricable link that has been perpetuated to the modern day.³ To many, the term ‘pederast’ was interchangeable with ‘man who loved men’. Robert Beachy’s (2010) paper ‘The German Invention of Homosexuality’ even claims that this association predates the work of Symonds and Carpenter, that “large groups of male “pederasts” [in Enlightenment Paris] who sought the sexual companionship of other men [developed] the identity of a sexual minority [men who loved other men]”.

In 1873, J.A. Symonds wrote ‘A Problem in Greek Ethics’ wherein he outlines the Ancient Greek perception of relationships between men and suggests how this could be used as a basis for modern attitudes. Symonds, throughout the book, presents Pederasty as interchangeable with love between men, an attitude which extends to the most ‘Uranian’ discourse of the time. Symonds, to make an argument for the separation of what could be analogous to romantic and sexual attraction in contemporary queer theory, references both Pausanias’ speech in Plato’s symposium and Maximus Tyrius, arguing for the distinction between these forms of love in evaluating the propriety of relationships between men. Symonds first quotes Maximus Tyrius distinguishing between two forms of love:

“The one love is mad for pleasure; the other loves beauty. The one is an involuntary sickness; the other is a sought enthusiasm... The one is Greek; the other is barbarous...”

Symonds then takes extracts from Symposium describing “the two kinds of Aphrodite, heavenly and vulgar...” (Ouranios and Pandemos), first turning to “vulgar” love.

³ Ideas of homosexual men as sexual predators have been at the centre of many forms of prejudice throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

"The Love who is the offspring of the common Aphrodite is essentially common, and has no discrimination, being such as the meaner sort of men feel, and is apt to be of women as well as of youths, and is of the body rather than the soul..."

Symonds then turns to what he calls "Uranian Love" taking a further extract from Pausanias' panegyric:

"The offspring of the heavenly Aphrodite is derived from a mother in whose birth the female has no part. She is from the male only..."

Symonds claims that this extract "proves that the love of boys was held to be ethically superior to that of women". He argues for the distinction between "heavenly" and "vulgar" forms of love, yet also for a "mixed form of pederastia upon which..." he claims "...the Greeks prided themselves...". He even goes on to claim that "[this form of pederasty] had for its heroic ideal...Achilles and Patroclus" and that it exhibited "a sensuality unknown to Homer". He uses this undefined "sensuality" to make a case for what he terms "Greek Love" defined as:

"passionate and enthusiastic attachment subsisting between man and youth, recognised by society and protected by opinion, which, though it was not free from sensuality, did not degenerate into mere licentiousness."

Not only does Symonds use his understanding of Ancient Greek History and Literature to make an argument for a form of socially acceptable love between men, but he also brings the separation of sexual and romantic love to the forefront of the academic discussion around what had hitherto been framed as simply impure "Homoerotic desire". Yet, Symonds still claimed a lack of morality in some forms of love between men; immoral sexual relations were distinct from pure romantic love and while "sensuality" within the context of a romantic relationship was considered acceptable, "mere licentiousness", sexual relationships alone, held a moral judgment. The distinction between "sensuality" and "licentiousness", however, is not clear. As James Wilper states, "At best, this conception of Greek love had to remain an unattainable ideal toward which its followers could strive; but at its worst, it was merely a sham, a way of clothing sex with male prostitutes in the garb of intellectual mentorship."

Symonds also portrays the relationship between men as an opportunity for societal development. He claims in 'A problem in Greek Ethics' that the Ancient Greeks not only tolerated "homosexual passions, but...attempt[ed] to utilise them for the benefit of society" and that "the blending of Social Strata in masculine love seems to me one of its most pronounced and socially hopeful features" (Wilper, 2016). Yet his idea of homosexuality as enabling social progress is not unique to Symonds' writing. Edward Carpenter posits a similar idea to Symonds when reflecting on homosexual love and

society: "true Democracy rests, more firmly than anywhere else, on a sentiment which easily passes the bounds of class and caste, and unites in the closest affection the most estranged ranks of society." (Wilper, 2016). However, the sentiment that Carpenter refers to in this extract is Eros, rather than the 'Greek Love' that forms the basis of Symonds' argument; where Symonds associates sexual desire with moral decline, Carpenter associates sexual desire with the opportunity to unite across societal boundaries. James Wilper, commenting on the work of Robert Martin, states that "Carpenter seemed to offer a vision for building a new social order", but still emphasises that this "new homosexual tradition was established firmly with reference to the legacies from the ancient world."

However, over time 'Greek love' became opposed to an increasingly popular "Uranian manliness", love between comrades, inspired by the homoerotic 'Calamus' poems of the American Poet Walt Whitman (Wilper, 2010). While Whitman himself never confirmed the homoerotic nature of the poems, J.A. Symonds and the 'Uranian' poets obsessed over "the Calamus-lover...who [Symonds believed] could trace his lineage to Achilles and Socrates". Of Walt Whitman, Gregory Woods writes in his book 'A History of Gay Literature': "He transformed...nostalgia for pastoral Greece into yearning for a utopian New World of open frontiers and open-necked shirts" but as James Wilper highlights "it would be wrong to characterize this shift as an abandonment of Hellenism..." as "... Ancient Greek comrades-in-arms—Achilles and Patroclus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, and the Sacred Band of Thebes—remained powerful images and models in the imaginations of the Uranians."; the masculine ideals of relationships between Ancient Greek warriors remained important in the minds of Uranian poets as their perception of love between men shifted partially towards a hypermasculine love between comrades. Symonds, discussing the appeal of Walt Whitman's writing in his 1891 book 'A Problem in Modern Ethics', highlights the comradely love to be found in antiquity "It recalls to our mind the early Greek enthusiasm—that fellowship in arms which flourished among Dorian tribes, and made a chivalry for prehistoric Hellas"

Robert Martin poses in 'Edward Carpenter and the Double Structure of 'Maurice' that E.M. Forster's 1913-1914 novel 'Maurice' "opposes two kinds of homosexuality", one formed from the writings of Plato and J.A. Symonds' interpretation of 'Greek love', the other from the "Edward Carpenter and his translation of the ideas of Walt Whitman". Yet, as James Wilper identifies, the choice to separate these contributors to the changing perception of queer love does not recognise "the role [Symonds] played in developing comrade love". Wilper also criticises Rupert Guldin's omission of "the link between Oxbridge Hellenism and Uranian love" as well as what he calls the "construct [of] an artificial opposition between Symonds and Carpenter". While Symonds indeed played a role in the shift in

focus towards an idealised 'comrade love', the opposition between the perception of queer love in the writings of Symonds and Carpenter is not entirely fabricated. As highlighted earlier, although Symonds and Carpenter both reflect on the social development possible through homosexual relationships, Symonds still speaks of sexual desire as something that lacks morality and should be limited, whereas openly celebrates the uniting power of Eros. Wilpen even highlights the following quote by Guldin in his book: "In his novel 'Maurice', written in 1913-1914, Forster confronts both approaches: Symonds' idealised, sex-repulsed aestheticism is repudiated by Carpenter's socially critical and sex-positive position"⁴; while a claim that could be perceived as hyperbolic, Guldin does raise an important distinction between each writer's perceptions of queer love.

The association of each mode of homosexuality with one of the two love interests in the novel highlights another important distinction; the class divide in the perception of queer love. This time between the Greek love elucidated in J.A. Symonds' early work and the 'Uranian' love between comrades. The Greek love elucidated in J.A. Symonds' early work is associated with Clive, a fellow student at the University of Cambridge, and the 'Uranian', comradely love with Alec, a working-class man. The Hellenistic context of 'Greek love' was inherently inaccessible to working class Victorians who did not study classics and, as such, comradely love was more accessible to a broader spectrum of Victorian homosexuals. However, Edward Carpenter's claim that homoeroticism "easily passes the bounds of class" also cannot be seen as wholly true when there still existed an unequal power dynamic between the upper-class and working-class participants in these cross-class relationships.

Perhaps the largest point of contention in the perception of homosexuality in the Victorian era was the performed masculinity or femininity of homosexual men. Alan Sinfield writes, in 'The Wilde Century', that at the turn of the twentieth century "the most determined and prominent work on the idea of homosexuality was being conducted in opposition to the effeminacy model, on the programme that same-sex passion is quintessentially manly". This backlash to an effeminate stereotype of gay men can also be seen in Karl Heinrich Ulrich's creation of the "Urning". "The urning, in his first configuration, was a mildly effeminate man" and "Among [Ulrich's] letters, he received some from indignant masculine men who were repelled by any suggestion that they were effeminate..."

⁴ This is my own translation of Guldin's quote featured in James P. Wilper's book 'Reconsidering the Emergence of the Gay Novel in English and German'. The original German quote is as follows: "In seinem 1913–1914 geschriebenen Roman 'Maurice' [sic] konfrontiert er [Forster] die beiden Ansätze: Symonds' idealisierender, körperförderlicher Ästhetizismus wird zugunsten von Carpenters sozialkritischem und körperbejahendem Standpunkt abgelehnt".

(Pretsell, 2024). Oscar Wilde is by no means a typical representation of his homosexual contemporaries; his effeminate persona was looked down upon by those who followed the masculine ideals of 'Uranian' or comradely love. Yet, Wilde remains to be, arguably, the most famous of them all, in both Victorian and contemporary minds. Wilde's 1895 prosecution for the crime of 'Gross Indecency'⁵ remains to be the most high-profile prosecution of a homosexual man in the UK's history (Wilde and Frankel, 2012). The cause célèbre was followed by many, and under cross-examination Wilde spoke the words that would become famous for the centuries to come:

"The love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy... It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it, and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it."

While Wilde's words were nothing short of actively harmful for his defence (all but admitting the charges of which he was accused), they did speak incredibly publicly to an attitude that was likely hitherto unseen by the general public following Wilde's prosecution, that of an unashamed attitude to love between men.

Both Emily Rutherford and Gideon Nisbet, in 'Impossible Love and Victorian Values' and 'Greek Epigram in Reception' respectively suggest that the testimony of Wilde in his trial mirrors J.A. Symmonds' writings on Greek love. James Wilper goes further, saying that his testimony shows "the core beliefs about love between men inherent in nineteenth-century Hellenism", ideals that come from Plato's writings, specifically from Symposium. He argues that the "intellectual" "pedagogic" nature of love explained in Wilde's testimony, "...is the "gratification" in exchange for being made "wise and good" described by Pausanias..." and that "it is beautiful" in the way of heavenly Aphrodite.

While Symmonds attempts to justify the relationship between two men with claims of benefits to society and seemingly contradictory moral judgments on the nature of sexual desire, Oscar Wilde publicly and unashamedly claims that love between men is natural. Although seeming to subscribe to the pederastic ideals of Greek love, Wilde's perception of homosexual love rests on an idea of love for the individual that a large part of the discourse of the time ignores, love does not offer some great restructuring for a utopian society, but rather companionship and joy. His assertion that "There is nothing unnatural

⁵ The criminalisation of all sexual acts between men excluding 'Buggery' (which was criminalised three centuries prior in The Buggery Act of 1533) was introduced under this name in the UK in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. (Brewster, n.d.)

about it” reflects the attitudes of revolutionary queer theorists in the years to come, an attitude that would persist to the modern day.

Classical reception had the power to shape the perception of an entire community of people throughout the English-speaking world. The nature of homosexuality allowed academics to see themselves in the past, and to slowly bring about change, but for people who have historically been excluded from academic spaces, the movement towards visibility is much further behind. Much of the literature surrounding Greek reception and the queer identity focuses on the love between two men. Victorian academics romanticised Dorian societies and the case for love between men in the Victorian era was often made by belittling women. The histories and perspectives of women were ignored. In fact, there still exists a significant disparity between the study of love between men, and the study of love between women in classical reception, history, sociology, and beyond. Academia has the power to shape the perceptions of underrepresented groups, to ingrain stereotypes in the popular consciousness, but also to remove them. A history of assumed conformity to modern ideals, and, perhaps more notably, assumed objectivity in observation, caused the fascinating world of gender and sexuality in Ancient Greece to go unresearched for a long time. An increased awareness of subjectivity and improved access to academia opens the doors for a whole host of new perspectives, concepts, and theories. The possibility of undiscovered histories; what could be more exciting than that?

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