

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Friedman, Dustin. *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self*. John Hopkins UP, 2019. 234 pgs.

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<1>British Aestheticism has long been studied for expressions of sexual dissidence and same-sex desire. Foundational studies of the aesthetes by scholars such as Linda Dowling and Richard Dollimore placed importance on the historical study of same-sex desire in relationship to aesthetic theories of beauty and the limits of language. Dustin Friedman's book is a fresh contribution and a turn in the discourse from sexual dissidence to queer theory. *Before Queer Theory* examines not only the relevance of queer theory to the study of British aestheticism, but the relevance of British aestheticism to the study of queer theory.

<2>Periodization limits the conversations between literary movements, and rightly so, because there is always the danger of ahistorical equivalencies being presented to the reader, misrepresenting both the past and the present. Friedman avoids this pitfall and instead tracks a history of queer thought that emerges in the writings of British aesthetes in order to reveal common interests between aestheticism and contemporary discourses in the study of queer theory. Friedman draws on a variety of theorists including Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, and Lee Edelman, but most influential is José Estevan Muñoz's theory of queer relationality from *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Rather than focus on opposition to heteronormativity, an act both challenging and anachronistic at the Victorian *fin de siècle*, queer relationality allows Friedman to study the work of aesthetes as queer theorists. Friedman's thesis is that

aesthetes such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), and Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) showed art to be a realm where queers can resist a hostile social world by developing an autonomous sense of self, one that is inspired by their sexual difference and grounded in the ability to resist dominant power relations. (2)

Their writing—essays, stories, poems, and plays—presents relationships between queer figures, not in opposition to heteronormative existence, but in relation to other queer people in parallel to heteronormative existence. Rather than just responding to the marginalizations imposed on their queer lives, Friedman argues that the aesthetes argued more than a century before Muñoz “that the discourses causing feelings of alienation are not absolute and unquestionable, but historically contingent, and therefore can be imagined differently” (2). Aestheticism is not a repudiation of

heteronormativity, but rather a rejection of heteronormativity as the only option. The result is an engaging and clearly written analysis of aestheticism as an important example of queer relationality between writers of the past and writers of the present. *Beyond Queer Theory* is an exploration of historical texts by the aesthetes, and a historically based engagement with British aestheticism in the contemporary study of queer theory. Friedman's monograph is significant because his historical queer analysis allows the reader to imagine a future for queer theory influenced by non-linear engagements with the literature and art of the past as potential sources of queer companionship.

<3> Friedman's first two chapters address the work of Walter Pater and offer a detailed argument for approaching Pater as an important influence for the other aesthetes he examines as well as for contemporary queer theory. These chapters chart the historical development of Pater's theories of individualism and desire as a response to and reinterpretation of Hegelian concepts of subjectivity and contradiction. Examining "Diaphenietè," "Winckelmann," *Plato and Platonism*, and *Marius the Epicurean*, Friedman demonstrates that Pater's contribution to queer theory is the idea that the aesthete can refuse the interpretation of their social and sexual differences as failure, and see it rather as "their refusal to adhere strictly to the laws governing everyday life and logic" (35). Diaphenietè serves Friedman as an example of "heroic passivity" in order to argue that rejecting the expectation of physical domination by men is not a feminine opposition, but a choice "to live . . . beyond all socially recognized identity categories (40). Such a rejection is only possible for Pater by those who can "embrace desire that society has declared verboten," because such a perspective allows an individual to then "question all the truths society presents as absolute and unquestionable" (50).

<4>Chapter two looks at Pater's euphuistic prose in his novel *Marius the Epicurean*. Rejecting the realist prose that mimics the everyday, Pater privileges an "ornate, complex and self-consciously artificial style" adopted by Aesthetic poets and authors who were rejected because of their failure to embody Victorian conceptions of masculinity (73). Pater's artificial style allows *Marius* to question the convention of violence enacted by men on men as a perversion of masculinity, rather than the embrace of sexual desire between them. Friedman argues that Pater endorses a queer reordering of society around art and its appreciation of desire, individualism, and the peaceful accumulation of sensations.

<5> Chapter three, "Oscar Wilde's Lyric Performativity," explores Wilde's study of sexual identity in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." in relation to the limits of language. The language of Shakespeare's sonnets is found to be insufficient to express Cyril's homoerotic desires. Wilde's point, according to Friedman, is to abandon essentialist notions of identity and consider instead the complex multivocality of individuality (89-90). The implication is that existing discourses of beauty and desire that are available to the individual have limits for cultivating a sense of "self-knowledge," because "the individual contains many selves that resist sedimentation into a univocal, self-consistent subjectivity" (90). Friedman's ideas about language and identity have important implications for the study of queer identities and intersectionality today. It also questions the temporal mutability of queer identity when placed into a historical perspective.

<6> In chapter four, Friedman explores Vernon Lee's *Hauntings* and reveals a relationship between her work and his theory: to nurture subjective and creative relationships with the past as a queer companion. Elizabeth Freeman's concept of temporal perversity and Edelman's concept of reproductive futurity influence his reading of Lee's story "Oke of Okehurst." Friedman reads the story as a self-conscious search for a spectral lesbian history not documented by empirical research. It is through a study of the past, that Friedman says Lee's ghost stories look "forward toward the queer future, providing a theory of historical consciousness for the heretofore unimagined versions of desire that will come" (146). While this chapter is the one that connects the aesthetes' work to Friedman's study of the aesthetes, it is the weakest chapter in that the example of lesbian history he presents is better described as a feminist rejection of male domination over the female reproductive system. He certainly does not imply that this rejection is a lesbian discourse, but the role of lesbianism in his theory becomes unclear in what is otherwise a solid reading of Lee's fascinating story.

<7> Examining Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper's study of Walter Pater in their ekphrastic poetry, most notably *Sight and Song*, Friedman finds a metaphorical relationship between Michael Field's study of the painting's surface and its message to the viewer. Friedman claims that Michael Field's poetry queers indifference in order to allow the reader's "consciousness to transcend the limits of the merely personal biological impulse, thereby enabling readers to regain a sense of autonomous subjectivity" (149). Like the Renaissance painter, the reader can free themselves from the limits of heteronormativity, portrayed here as a two-dimensional experience of beauty and desire. Friedman aligns art's ability to transcend the limits of the canvas's "concrete reality" with a representative queer approach to the development of subjective selfhood (153). As with his previous chapters, Friedman finds queer theory in the writing of Michael Field, rather than in their biography.

<8> The book concludes with a brief coda that connects the aesthetes' study of art and its role in helping them develop a sense of queer selfhood with the importance of humanities education in the development of individual students exploring their own queer identities today. I recommend this book to scholars and students of queer theory and British aestheticism because Friedman's accomplished integration of two should appeal to readers of either specialization. Like his four aesthetic subjects, Friedman demonstrates the value of historical analysis in queer theory. He also demonstrates the potential influence that the past could have on imagining queer futures within contemporary queer cultures.