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Amigoni, D. and Regis, A.K. (2013) *Introduction: (Re)Reading John Addington Symonds (1840-93)*. *English Studies*, 94 (2). pp. 131-136. ISSN 0013-838X

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2013.767567>

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Introduction: (Re)Reading John Addington Symonds (1840-1893)

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The articles in this special issue of *English Studies* began life as papers delivered or offered by delegates at the “(Re)Reading John Addington Symonds” conference held at Keele University, UK, in September 2010. This event provided a forum within which new work and approaches to Symonds’s diverse corpus of writings could be assimilated and evaluated. It was the first such conference since John Pemble and Annie Burnside organised their international symposium on Symonds—“The Public and Private Face of Victorian Culture”—at Bristol University, UK, in April 1998. The publication of *John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon Desire* in 2000, a collection of articles emerging from the symposium and edited by Pemble, was the first modern study of Symonds’s work as a nineteenth-century cultural critic and homosexual apologist. The Bristol symposium and Pemble collection were the result of increased interest in Symonds after the publication in 1984 of an abridged edition of his *Memoirs*, edited by Phyllis Grosskurth. The *Memoirs* made public and explicit, for the first time, Symonds’s experiences as a homosexual man living in Victorian Britain. Grosskurth had brought Symonds’s out of the closet in her 1964 biography—an open secret during his lifetime among family, friends and sympathetic literary circles—but she was unable to quote directly from the manuscript of his *Memoirs*, locked away in the archives at The London Library where they had been placed by Symonds’s literary executor, Horatio F. Brown, subject to a fifty-year embargo. With the embargo expired and the *Memoirs* in print, contributors to the Pemble collection were able to begin the important work of repositioning Symonds as a central part of Britain’s nineteenth-century queer heritage.

The Pemble collection also continued the important work of “Surpassing the Modernist Reception of Symonds”, as contributor Howard J. Booth puts it: countering pathologised, often phobic dismissals of Symonds’s work on account of his perceived transgression and excess, both sexual and textual.¹ The collection broke new ground in its reassessment of Symonds; his writings across a range of disciplines were viewed through the critical lens of sexuality, of queer self-fashioning and his attempts to write revisionist, queer historiography that encompassed Antiquity, the Renaissance and contemporary manifestations of male same-sex desire. This introduction will survey developments since the publication of the Pemble collection and will consider the original contribution made by this special issue to scholarship on Symonds.

The Memoirs have continued to raise and dominate interest in Symonds’s life and work. Sean Brady, for example, made use of Symonds’s life-writings to elucidate the development of nineteenth-century masculinity as a social status able to accommodate—albeit in a fraught and contradictory manner—acts of homosexual self-making.² And sustained interest in the Memoirs as text is in large part due to the revelations contained in Sarah J. Heidt’s groundbreaking article on the Symonds’s manuscript and the ethics of editorship: “‘Let JAS Words Stand’: Publishing John Addington Symonds’s Desires”. Heidt revealed that one third of Symonds’s text had been removed by Grosskurth—not one fifth as she claimed in her Foreword to the edition—and that missing materials were more varied and significant than Grosskurth’s account of “execrable poetry and [...] self-conscious nature descriptions” acknowledged.³ Symonds’s public acts of life-writing have also been the subject of scholarly interest. Travel writing and autobiographical

¹ Booth, “A Certain Disarray of Faculties”, esp.154-8. For a detailed account of the scholarly developments that have helped to “[Surpass] the Modernist Reception of Symonds”—surveyed here in brief—see Howard J. Booth’s entry on Symonds for Oxford Bibliographies, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199799558/obo-9780199799558-0096.xml> (accessed January 13, 2013).

² Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality*, esp. 157-94.

³ Grosskurth, “Foreword”, 11.

essays form the basis of David Amigoni and Amber K. Regis's study of hybridity in Symonds's construction of self and place, while the act of translation as a form of "embodied self writing and self transposition" is the focus of Amigoni's exploration of Symonds's edition of Benvenuto Cellini's memoirs.⁴ Symonds's life—and his attempts to order and understand that life—continues to fascinate.

If the availability of the *Memoirs* prompted a resurgence of interest in Symonds's life and work, then the future looks bright indeed as more and more of his writings come back into print. Many of his key works are already available as facsimile copies and digitised ebooks (free to download or read online at sites such as www.archive.org); but now, new translations and critical editions are starting to appear. In 2007 Andrew Dakyns translated and self-published Symonds's "Soldier Love"; this essay first appeared in the 1896 German edition of *Sexual Inversion*—co-authored with Havelock Ellis—but was excised during preparations for an English edition. This 1897 text of *Sexual Inversion*—so rare due to an attempt by Symonds's family and executors to buy up and destroy the entire print run—has also been reissued in an edition published by Palgrave Macmillan and edited by Ivan Crozier. Crozier provides a substantial introduction and extensive annotations, tracing the genesis, significance and legacy of this work in the years following Symonds's death. The new essays assembled here contribute further to the process of recovering and re-interpreting these writings. Jana Funke's essay in this special issue is one of the first to make use of "Soldier Love" and provides a timely reassessment of the 1897 edition of *Sexual Inversion*, and of its relationship to the editions that followed.

Palgrave Macmillan has continued to make more of Symonds's writings available, and in 2012 they published John Addington Symonds and *Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources*

⁴ Amigoni, "Translating the Self", 163.

edited by Sean Brady. This collection contains Symonds's essays on same-sex phenomena in ancient Greece and contemporary nineteenth-century society—*A Problem in Greek Ethics* (written in 1873, privately printed in 1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (privately printed in 1891)—and Symonds's extant correspondence with Havelock Ellis as they planned and collaborated on the *Sexual Inversion* project, published together and in sequence for the first time. Again, Funke's essay casts new light on this important collaborative relationship. Future critical editions are currently at various stages of preparation, with contributors to this special issue planning new editions of Symonds's *Memoirs (Regis)* and his correspondence with Vernon Lee and A. Mary F. Robinson (Newman).

Increasing interest in the full range of Symonds's writings has facilitated attempts to recover and extend our understanding of his contribution to a wide range of nineteenth-century cultural debates. Dominant trends in recent scholarship have focused on Symonds's contribution to histories of the Renaissance and Antiquity, both idealised cultural sites that provided him with positive (though not uncontested) sources of sexual self-identification. The increasing interest in his contributions to historiography is reflected here. Jana Funke argues for a more nuanced view of his critical reception of ancient Greece: if there is a tendency to implicate Symonds in the persistent nineteenth-century idealisation of early Greek culture, Funke's essay shows the way in which Symonds was alert to issues of age inequality in the historic record of Hellenic same-sex desire; she also explores the (often negative) ethical implications of this historical detail for ways of presenting and advancing male same-sex practices in the political and legal environment of nineteenth-century Britain.

The problematic reception of Greek culture underlines the increasing realisation of Symonds's importance to Renaissance historiography, and his use of the Renaissance as a site

for articulating the place of sexuality in culture, and as an opportunity for building his expertise and reputation as an historian and critic of art. Hilary Fraser's article, for instance, focuses on the third volume of his monumental *The Renaissance in Italy*, which comprehensively surveyed *The Fine Arts* (1877). Fraser's analysis identifies the "embodied" nature of Symonds's scholarly appreciation, and the way its eroticism could be sanctioned by the disinterested gaze of the academic art historian. If there was once a tendency to see the recovered *Memoirs* as the place where Symonds could be "himself", however conflicted, Fraser's work extends our understanding of the place of embodiment and desire in Symonds's carefully researched scholarly work. Indeed, as Fraser argues, Symonds's historical research into the overlapping traditions of Christianity and Hellenism was a space that licensed a way of exploring ambiguous desires, suspended between the devotional and the erotic. As Fraser argues, Symonds's approach to embodied aesthetics was vested in the materiality of art objects and an interest in the physiological response of the viewer, both in history and in his own time. To this extent, he can be aligned with other significant aesthetic theorists and critics from the late Victorian period, such as Vernon Lee, an important figure in Sally Newman's article and increasingly widely discussed in Victorian scholarship;⁵ but also popularisers from the Darwinian and Spencerian traditions, such as Grant Allen.⁶

Funke's essay also contributes to growing interest in Symonds's immersion in late nineteenth-century scientific discourses. Funke's article explores Symonds's place in sexology by returning to Joseph Bristow's account, which opposed Symonds's literary historicism to Havelock Ellis's scientific determinism in explaining same-sex desire. Funke complicates this opposition, showing how, in different contexts of argument Symonds could lean towards

⁵ See, for instance, Maxwell and Pulham, eds., *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*.

⁶ Author of *Physiological Aesthetics*, also published 1877.

congenital explanations of same-sex desire, as well as explanations that foregrounded history and cultural acquisition. Funke's work also provides us with a new perspective on the literary intellectual in science, re-thinking many of the negatives that colour the understanding of that relationship by positively reassessing the role of Ellis. In Funke's essay, there is less intellectual contestation between the legacy of the dead Symonds and the surviving Ellis, more a sense of evolving intellectual and (liberationist) political aims. If we are inclined to remember Horatio F. Brown's place in the suppression of Symonds's involvement in *Sexual Inversion*, Funke's essay reminds us that Symonds was an active collaborator who positively shaped the distinctive ethical focus that the work achieved through intellectual collaboration.

The new essays here thus reassess the location of Symonds in networks of collaboration and association. Previous work on Symonds's relationships has tended to privilege pedagogic and erotic relationships played out within homosocial networks.⁷ Sally Newman's article here explores his relationship with women interlocutors Vernon Lee and A. Mary F. Robinson. Newman's essay shows how Symonds entered into a complex, triangulated and intellectual relationship with these women which, for Symonds, was clearly driven by an attraction to Robinson. While Grosskurth's biography noted this relationship, Newman's detailed essay observes its unfolding through unpublished correspondence. This prompts Newman to reflect critically on the nature of the archive and the way it traces annals of desire, actively constructing "complex hierarchies of knowledge and power" in which object choice matters less than a complex meld of attraction comprising the intellectual, sensuous and erotic.

⁷ See, for instance, Booth, "Same-sex desire, ethics and double-mindedness"; Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain*; and Robertson, *Worshipping Walt*.

The way in which place helped to shape this complex meld is one of the new directions in Symonds scholarship extended by these new essays. Howard J. Booth explores the central position held by Venice in Symonds's imagination. Other major critics have noted the importance of Venice to Symonds and other late Victorian writers' impressionistic ways of seeing; Catherine Maxwell's recent essay is an important example.⁸ For Booth, Symonds's way of seeing comprised a gaze which beheld Venetian culture as vested in its history, architecture, colour, and its working men and their clothing. The gaze, in being reciprocated, ultimately constructed sociality itself, and Booth argues that it was "part of [Symonds's ambitious] project to make society and culture whole once more." Thus, in reconceptualising the queer gaze in Venice, Booth implicitly brings Symonds's work into alignment with what Raymond Williams has called the "culture and society tradition", giving that tradition a distinctively queer and spatially exotic accent. Booth's essay is also distinctive in the way that it extends the consideration of the range of genres in which Symonds expressed himself. And significantly, Booth achieves a serious and culturally contextualised treatment of Symonds's poetry which has, hitherto, been either ignored or undervalued.

These new essays build a renewed understanding of Symonds's work as a notable cultural critic rather than simply a memoirist. This focus stresses the significance of his later writings: Funke's article explores his "late" science writings, while articles by Booth and Amber K. Regis on Symonds's "late" expressiveness constitute a new recognition of the particular significance of *In the Key of Blue*. Regis's essay provides a case study of *In the Key of Blue* in the context of what Edward Said, following Theodor Adorno, has described as "late style". This is the first article to consider in detail the textual history and reception of this particular and

⁸ Maxwell, "Whistlerian Impressionism", 234-242

increasingly important work. If Funke's article sets Symonds's sexological writing in the context of cross-generational anxieties, and Fraser comments on Symonds's sense of cultural "belatedness", Regis's article provides a critically grounded interrogation of what it means to write in a "late style". For Regis, "lateness" comprises a sense, in Said's terms, of "untimeliness" and it is fitting that the final article in this special issue should examine Symonds in urgent critical dialogue with his own culture and his past written selves while clearly "speaking out" in public about same-sex desire. Symonds "speaking out" in print may, oddly, not have quite the same allure as a private embargoed in an archive for fifty years; yet, while the Memoirs will remain important to Symonds's body of works (especially when edited and restored in full), Symonds emerges in the essays here as a vibrantly engaged public intellectual.

Acknowledgements

The guest editors would like to thank Odin Dekkers for providing the opportunity to put together this special issue and Astrid van Hoek for her unfailing patience and editorial support. We are also grateful to the British Association for Victorian Studies, The London Library, and the Research Institute for the Humanities at Keele University, UK, for their generous financial support of the "(Re)Reading John Addington Symonds" conference in September 2010.

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