AESTHETICISM AND SEXUAL PARODY 1840–1940

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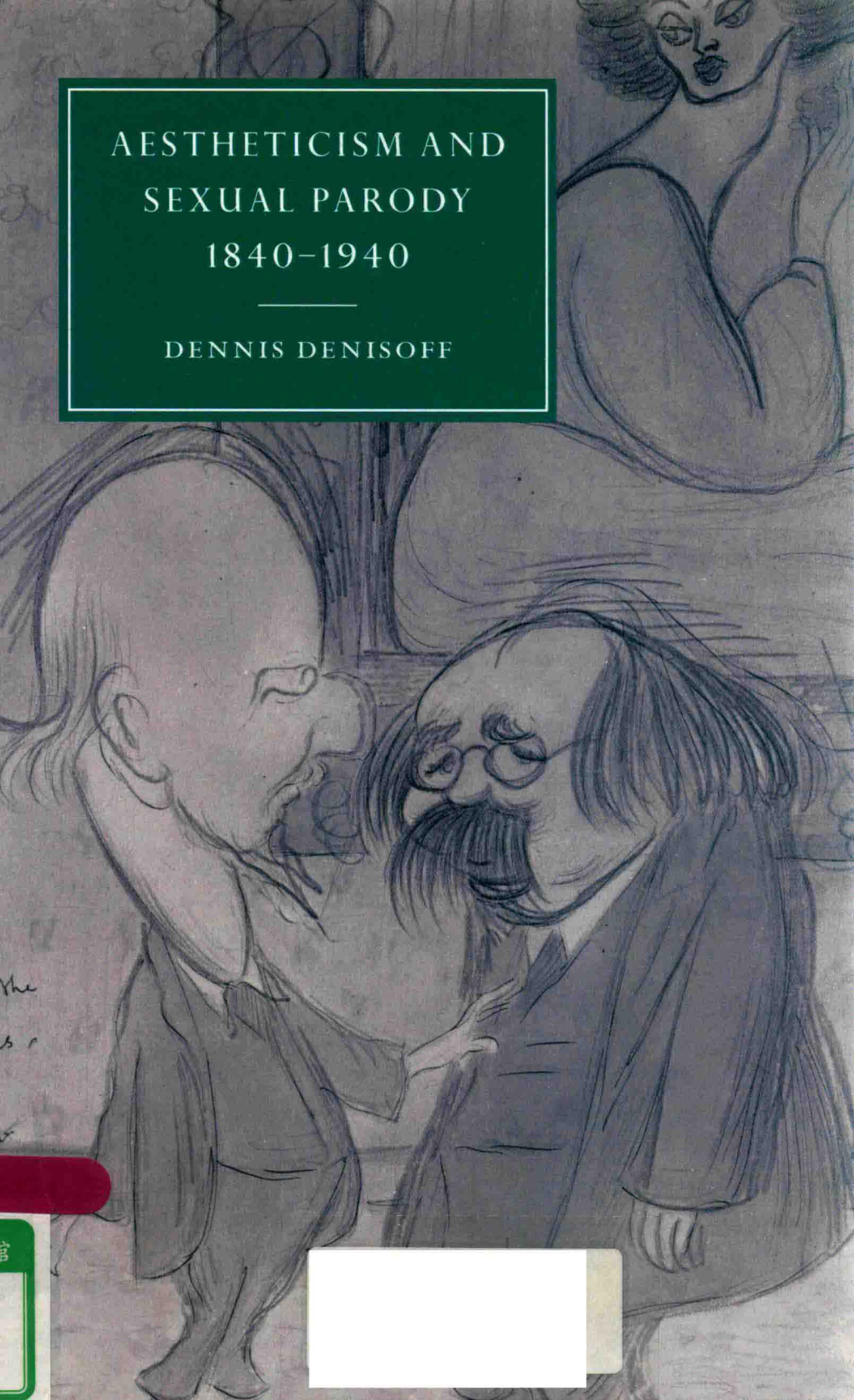

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This original and provocative study discusses the work of authors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and argues that members of mainstream society grew to accept and even enjoy the non-normative sexuality of the Aesthetic Movement chiefly through works of parody and self-parody. Highlighting Victorian popular culture, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* adds a new and important dimension to the theorizations of parody as a combative strategy by which sexually marginalized groups undermine the *status quo*. From W. S. Gilbert's drama and Vernon Lee's and Christopher Isherwood's prose to George Du Maurier's cartoons and Max Beerbohm's caricatures, Dennis Denisoff explores the parodies' interactions with the personae and texts of canonical authors such as Alfred Tennyson, Walter Pater, Algernon Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde. In doing so, he considers the impact that these interactions had on modern ideas of gender, sexuality, taste, and politics.

DENNIS DENISOFF is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Ryerson University, Ontario. He is the author of *Erin Mouré: Her Life and Works*, the editor of *Queeries: An Anthology of Gay Male Prose*, and the co-editor of *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*.

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LITERATURE AND CULTURE 31

AESTHETICISM AND SEXUAL PARODY
1840–1940

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE 31

Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly syntheses and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as "background," feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field.

This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.

For Michael

Acknowledgments

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chapter first appeared in altered form in *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts and Contexts*, edited by Shannon Hengen (© 1998 by Overseas Publishers Association, published by Gordon and Breach Publishers).

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Introduction

Although busy seducing Dorian Gray, Lord Henry proves quick with a *bon mot* when Sir Thomas chooses to defend the brute reason of "practical men":

> "I can stand brute force, but brute reason is quite unbearable. There is something unfair about its use. It is hitting below the intellect."
>
> "I do not understand you," said Sir Thomas, growing rather red.
>
> "I do, Lord Henry," murmured Mr. Erskine, with a smile.[1]

Deftly splicing together the devaluation of a person's intellect and the image of being hit in that vital area below the belt, Lord Henry translates his flirtation with Dorian into an epigram that gives an eroticized tweak to Sir Thomas's desexualized and anaesthetized understanding of social intercourse. A faith in the practicality of reason, Lord Henry implies, hinders not only intellectual but also erotic pleasures. Dabbed with just a *soupçon* of erotic suggestion, this challenge to brute reason stimulates two quite different reactions. Sir Thomas's nervous blush communicates an impatience with, if not anxiety over, the epigram's tacit assertion, while Mr. Erskine's smile signals a sympathetic understanding. The mixed response during this brief exchange at Lady Agatha's dinner table makes it apparent that the constellation of cultural codes that demarcated the dandy-aesthete had, like Lord Henry himself, become familiar in the homes of a broad spectrum of Victorians. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, it seems that every other issue of *Punch* magazine carried a titillating parody of the persona or a cartoon of a couple of lower-class Londoners playing dress-up as dandies. Such comic representations demonstrate just how popular the image had become. Moreover, they suggest the important role that the mainstream itself played in the construction of the dandy-aesthete as a marker of a particular sexual-aesthetic philosophy and certain sexual identities.

Looking at British culture from roughly 1840 to 1940, this study addresses the ways in which aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete developed into sites for the engagement and embodiment of sexual parody itself.[2] To date, studies of aestheticism and sexuality have focused predominantly on canonical authors and artists, while the parodies of these figures have been referenced as little more than buttresses to their fame. Similarly, although there has been an increase of attention in cultural, gender, and queer studies to the decentered body as a potentially parodic text, this has not fostered a concomitant consideration of *literary* parodies' roles in the formation of marginalized bodies and identities. I hope to address both these lacunae by reconceptualizing the role of literary and cartoon parody in the formation of aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete, as well as its function as a temporally dynamic, multi-sided form of cultural interaction that contributed to the dissemination of dissident views.

Encouraged by the fact that authors such as Wilde offered up some of the wittiest morsels of parodic repartee in the English language, recent scholarly attention to sexual parodies has focused almost exclusively on contributions from the margins. The use of parody, however, is not one-directional. Supporters of dominant or established social institutions also use parody to challenge what they see as a burgeoning cultural threat in order to undermine its claims to legitimacy. Critics and parodists of aestheticism, for example, frequently took advantage of its seductive appeal in order to enhance the popularity of their own, contrary views. These reciprocal acts of appropriation go some distance in explaining why many members of a society predominantly antagonistic towards nonsanctioned sexual practices nevertheless encouraged a phenomenon like aestheticism that not only fleshed out new erotic codes, but also abetted the construction and definition of the homosexual and other identities. Even though parody underscores a text's and a narrator's moral or ideological distance from its subject, it still depends – because of what has come to be described as its parasitic nature – upon an audience knowing a sufficient amount about the generic and ideological context of that subject.[3] As the following chapters demonstrate, parodies that encouraged the formation of public, proscriptive homophobia would have also been responsible for popularizing its target of humor. Even if they fully believed in essential configurations of human desire and attraction, parodists who turned to a sexualized discourse to undermine aestheticism and the dandy-aesthetes were also catalysts for the denaturalization of gendered and sexual norms.

My analysis of sexual identity formation hopefully demonstrates that literary and cartoon parodies of the marginal do not only offer the subjects of derision a potentially positive space within contemporary culture, but also are themselves dependent on those subjects for their own position, meaning, and value. The following chapters do deal extensively with canonical authors such as Alfred Tennyson, Walter Pater, Algernon Swinburne, and of course Wilde, but they do so primarily with regard to the writers in relation to their critics and parodists, or as the products of their labour. This shift in focus reveals that parodists of aestheticism and the dandy-aesthetes did not, as is often assumed, try in some clumsy, hostile fashion to eradicate their subject. Rather, in many instances, they attempted to modify or revamp the subject while acknowledging its beneficial contributions to contemporary culture. If, as I argue, such an encouraging complicity is integral to parody as social critique, then the usual division between critics and advocates could be fruitfully reconfigured to place as much emphasis on their concordant motivations as on their different positions within the relationship. Toward this purpose, this study looks at parody as a continuum ranging from the scathing criticism of early-Victorian reviewers to the queer parody of camp.

QUEER PARODY AND THE DANDY-AESTHETE

Although parody is often recognized as a means of political maneuvering, conventional definitions of the term tend to downplay such social engagement. In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon articulates the standard view of parody as intramural, addressing "another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse."[4] This differentiates it from satire, which is seen as "extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind."[5] Satire, moreover, has been characterized by an orientation toward "a negative evaluation and a corrective intent" which is seen to be strongly lacking in the twentieth-century parody that Hutcheon takes as her main subject.[6] Hutcheon, however, is quick to point out the limitations of these distinctions. Early in her analysis, she refers to parody as imitating "art more than life," thus acknowledging that it does imitate both.[7] And she more than once demonstrates that parody, like satire, can have ameliorative, sociopolitical aims.

One particular aim for which parody has proven to be especially well suited is the undermining of normative idealizations by oppressed

groups and individuals trying to negotiate their own positions within society. Parody itself sanctions such maneuvering not simply through its structural dependence on the celebration of multiple interpretations, but also by leading its audience to consider the potential existence of still other ontological possibilities that may have remained unarticulated. Through its reliance on double meanings, parody effectively questions the possibility of any such thing as an "original," with the term coming across for many gender and queer scholars as a misnomer for the privileged codes of the dominant ideology.

According to Judith Butler, the parody of gender conventions from a marginalized position can lead to a revision of heterosexual ideology. Unlike our unacknowledged and often unrecognized performativity, these acts entail conscious repetitions of traditional performances in which "part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary."[8] The sexual parodist's aim is not to modify previous representations in order to bring them closer in line with some fundamental reality, but to evoke pleasure from challenging the idea of originality itself. This denaturalization of sex and gender, Butler argues, will introduce new areas of agency that had been closed down by essentialist regulatory systems: "the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed."[9] In Butler's theorization, gender and sexual identity are constructs communicated as texts written on and by the body through dress and performance. Parody is more appropriate here than satire as the analytical model precisely because its traditional association with the intramural realm of coded discourse, rather than social and moral concerns, emphasizes the queer constructionist challenge to the assumption that gender, sexuality, and identity exist exclusively within the extramural domain.

As Jonathan Dollimore and others have noted, however, Butler's formulation can lead to a slippage between conscious performances such as drag and unconventional sexualities in general. Dollimore also points out that, if Butler's model is applied transhistorically, it risks erasing the pre-sexological, pre-psychoanalytic conception of sexuality as a private act. The shift to this privacy took place in Europe during the nineteenth century and in the earlier historical period performance would have been more readily envisioned as a statement about society, rather than

one's self-identification.[10] Dollimore suggests that as early as the 1890s a form of parody akin to that articulated by Butler and other queer scholars had become an important component of British culture. In a discussion of Wilde, Joe Orton, and others, he describes homosexual culture as being highly dependent on artifice, image, and parody for its self-validating strategies and argues that a homosexual sensibility can be seen to exist, if at all, only as "a parodic critique of the essence of sensibility as conventionally understood."[11] Camp in particular, according to Dollimore, functions as a strategy of empowerment for marginalized people by undermining the depth model of identity "from inside, being a kind of parody and mimicry which hollows out from within."[12] He argues that Wilde's incorporation of diverse sexualities into the notion of subjectivity, for example, threatened to destabilize established *fin-de-siècle* ideas of what constitutes human nature and the individual. It is specifically because Wilde did not try to position himself and his sexuality outside of the dominant system that his claims were so threatening.

The following study pays close attention to the applicability of such a queer notion of parody to pre-1890s aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete persona which, not coincidentally, had their greatest impact during the same period in which the conceptualization of sexuality as part of a person's identity arose. During the mid-nineteenth century, sexologists were defining homosexuality as an inversion of, or deviation from, what they presented as natural standards. At the same time, the traditional family model was helping to essentialize the newly coined term "heterosexuality" through what Ed Cohen has called "the silent privilege of remaining unmarked."[13] This process of marginalization deterred men and women from developing sustained sexual identities situated within nonheteronormative communities, even as it demarcated such communities as a necessity for scientific and other official discourses.

In *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses the way in which identities are constructed through macro-systems that influence processes of perception and communication within private or domestic spaces. But Foucault himself points out that this is only one perspective on the issue. It would be succumbing to monolithic notions of power not to recognize that, even within established institutions, dissident and disinterested elements continue to exist. Such an oversight would allow no discursive room for acknowledging sympathetic or affirming articulations of those acts and identities that have been debased. Marginalized communities, should