

Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940 by Dennis Denisoff. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. xi, 187 pp. + 7 b/w illus. ISBN 0-521-80039-0. \$54.95.

Was English aestheticism confined to dandy-aesthetes during the last quarter of the 1800s? In *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* Dennis Denisoff demonstrates that aestheticism involved not only an aesthete elite but the middle class, and spanned at least one hundred years. "People accepted different aspects of aestheticism ... at different times, as it suited their interests," Denisoff explains in his Introduction. "The mainstream itself played" an "important role" in constructing and sustaining the culture of the dandy-aesthete with his "particular sexual-aesthetic philosophy." Various conjunctions between "members of a society ... antagonistic towards non-sanctioned sexual practices" and those attracted by "the more ... sympathetic discourses ... offered by aestheticism" were facilitated by aestheticist parodies. Denisoff focuses on the force of "comic insinuations of dissidence" which give the questionings of gender norms and the *outré* representations of same-sex desire in aesthetic parody "a high resiliency."

In Chapter 1, "Alfred Tennyson and the Critical Sexualization of Aestheticism," Denisoff locates the initial connection of aestheticism with gender trouble in mid-Victorian literary criticism. During the 1840s, debates about the moral and national purposes of poetry took place within a "heteronormative terminology." Critics associated topics they didn't like with effeminate "affectation," putting poets in "a touchy relationship with their audiences." Some readers welcomed "the strategic malleability of ... gender performance," such as that in Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), but many were disturbed at any "amatory tenderness" between men. By the 1860s, support for and rejection of "sensual, aestheticist writing" had become "mutually reinforcing." Algernon Charles Swinburne employed a perversely eroticized aestheticism to defy the critics in *Poems and Ballads* (1866). With "cultural authority" at stake, Robert Buchanan launched "The Fleshly School of Poetry" (1871), an attack on "the many sub-Tennysonian schools," especially the Pre-Raphaelites, which poisoned readers with "emasculated" and "morbid" representations.

Sexual "parody always carries the risk of educating its audience about the very subject that the author aims to denigrate." Buchanan's mimicry of Swinburne's style put a discourse of non-heteronormative desires into wide circulation. In Chapter 2, "The Leering Creatures of W.H. Mallock and Vernon Lee," Denisoff pursues the "nuanced sexual distinctions and moral judgments" made in aesthetic parody during the 1870s and 1880s. Mallock's dramatic set-piece, "The New Republic" (1877), takes aim at "the allusive, homoerotic discourse that Pater did so much to popularize." However, as Denisoff shows, Mallock's apparent homophobia coexisted with a "long-term interest in"