

How Same-Sex Desire Got its Gender Nonconformity Back

[*Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire in Antebellum American Literature*](#). David Greven. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014. 250 pp.

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<1>The history of homosexuality is slippery business. David Greven's *Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire in Antebellum American Literature* asks us to keep it slippery. With titillating terms like "lachrymose economy," used to suggest a connection between the "tear" of ejaculate and melancholic sociality in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Greven shows how antebellum expressions of same-sex desire belonged to a system of slick hermeneutics and ever-shifting signifiers. At the same time, Greven asserts that same-sex desire had a graspable presence in the period and was actively recognized as such. Divided into chapters on Poe, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville—the canonical misfits of the period we still sometimes call the American Renaissance—*Gender Protest and Same Sex Desires* suggests that scholars have too often taken for granted the aphorism that same-sex love could not speak its name. Greven insists—and here lies the great contribution of his book—that such love did find expression, and that it consistently did so through "gender protest": a collection of gender transgressions, conflicts, and refusals. To engage in same-sex love was to betray one's gender, and thus, as Greven explains in his introduction, to go to "battle with the world."

<2>With varying success, Greven establishes this link between gender protest and same-sex desire. In the chapter on *Pym*, for example, he proposes a class of men called "the gendered dispossessed" (134). Accounting for modes of intimacy within this class, he uses the concept to describe a "subaltern" community "cut off from prevailing codes, behaviors, privileges, and experiences" of manhood (134). The link to Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay does not hold historically or materially, perhaps. But Greven's intentions remain laudable. In our present, when variations on gay liberation rhetoric often insist on disentangling sexual orientation from gender identity, connections between the two appear less intuitive than they once were. Greven wallows eagerly in antebellum ambiguity. With Freud by his side, he does so, moreover, with affective dexterity, demonstrating, for instance, how Fuller's Mariana combines scoundrel

masculinity with lesbian narcissism, and how Poe's "Ligeia" (1838) rails against gender by way of lamentation. Passionately, Greven reaches back and endeavors to feel *with* these figures, attending to instances when gender and sexuality are disturbed, but never decoupled—broken, but never apart.

<3>For critics working on same-sex desire in the antebellum period, Greven spells out seven areas for reconsideration. These points offer useful coordinates, both in following the arguments of his book and for an all-purpose reassessment of the field. The first, to which I have alluded, echoes the Foucauldian idea that the apparent unspokenness around same-sex desire is really "a kind of naming" (35), a silence that can be located as a positive trace of its existence. The next four propositions call for reading race, class, "unruly affect" (35), and forms of theatricality as categories frequently used by writers in the period to contemplate, and to code, issues around same-sex intimacy. The sixth assertion holds that permutations and distortions of apparently heterosexual desire likewise reveal meditations on (and occasionally allegorize) same-sex sociality. As a seventh area for reconsideration, Greven reiterates the overarching argument of his book, precisely that same-sex desire in the antebellum period is tenaciously and multiply tethered to gender nonconformity.

<4>One adjective remains impervious to Greven's analysis. However much his examples protest gender norms, they remain invested in "same-sex" relationality. A now ubiquitous substitution for homosexual, in histories anterior to homosexuality's nominal invention by sexologists, same-sex comprises erotics between women, loves between men, and an array of additional intimacies, through the logic that it presents a pared down, transhistorical analytic. One wonders while reading Greven's book how gender protest, as an essential feature of the social landscape he delineates, might be used to frustrate not only presumed gender differences, but conceptions of sameness as well. On this front, it feels as though *Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire* opens up new possibilities for histories of homosexuality to be transformed from perspectives of gender variance and transgender historiography, yet steers clear of tackling such matters outright.

<5>In addition to the interventions outlined above, Greven reinvigorates questions over the origins and basis of queer theory. This is not to say that Greven articulates his hypothesis as fundamentally queer. Rather, the book enjoys a nonmonogamous relationship with that theoretical tradition, invoking queer occasionally, when it can be of use. But the book taps into a very queer dilemma: in short, whether sexuality is best understood in a Freudian or Foucauldian mode. While both theorists have enjoyed prominence in the field, some scholars have made Freud a whipping boy as of late. Lynne Huffer's *Mad for Foucault*([1](#)) stages this opposition for its central conceit, paving the way for Foucault to come out on top. Against this grain, Greven holds steadfastly to psychoanalysis. Part of this impulse lies in his fascination with

desire itself, which he describes as “a force that impels the desirer with a mysterious and insatiable urgency” (29). Yet it seems that this sense of “mystery” is genuinely where Greven finds Freud most relevant. “Same-sex desire in the antebellum period,” he explains, “is the doppelganger of a psychoanalytic theory of desire, an elusive mysterious, shadowy force that manifests itself in odd moments: the excessive yearning or extreme discomfort of a character; a languorously narcissistic self-encounter; the anguished evocation of one kind of suffering that seems to point to different kinds of suffering and also to indefinable fears; a look that lingers for far too long and seems to suggest a special need to look” (30). Such moments reach out for interpretive justice; Greven finds Freudian classifications up to the task.

<6>But this tug of war between Freud and Foucault is also where Greven sets himself apart from others too stringently—perhaps we should say where he protests too much. In decrying Foucauldian accounts of sexuality, Greven opposes the aims of *Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire* to a breathtaking piece by Christopher Looby titled “Strange Sensations: Sex and Aesthetics in ‘The Counterpane,’”⁽²⁾ in which Looby argues for reading Queequeg and Ishmael’s affectionate interactions in *Moby Dick* not as sexual, but as sensual. Sensuality in the mid-nineteenth century, Looby explains, could involve behaviors we now think of as sexual, but it could also involve “eating, drinking, smoking, gazing at landscapes, reading stimulating novels, going to the theater, and a host of other pursuits” (Qtd. in Greven 31). Greven quotes this line to suggest that Looby here dilutes the gritty specificities of sex. To be sure, Looby turns to sensuality to account for a world where erotics and aesthetics might be so interwoven they can’t be told apart. But Greven’s insistence that this line of thought is somehow pernicious falls flat. One is left questioning why sex should be, in studies of intimacy and sociality, so central an object of inquiry.

<7>Indeed, the payoff of Greven’s intervention seems to be that he decenters sex slightly to give gender protest its due. In essence, the book is about sexuality studies getting its gender nonconformity back. Driven by moments of close textual analysis, *Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire* comes through on its promise that Fuller, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville explored same-sex desire through an array of symptoms, substitutions, and codes. Linking them all, Greven asserts in his conclusion, was a “passionate and desperate joy,” at the heart of a “genuine queer resilience” (224). Perhaps no affect, unruly or otherwise, better describes the feel of Greven’s book. With such joy, the author crosses threadbare historical divides to inhabit a world of antebellum desire, which he shows was equally a world of disquietude and dissent.

Endnotes

(1)Huffer, Lynne. *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009.^(^)

(2)Looby, Christopher. "Strange Sensations: Sex and Aesthetics in 'The Counterpane.'" *Melville and Aesthetics*. Eds. Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. ([^](#))