



PROJECT MUSE®

Where's Queer?

Talia M. Vestri

Keats-Shelley Journal, Volume 68, 2019, pp. 185-187 (Article)

Published by Keats-Shelley Association of America, Inc.

The cover of the Keats-Shelley Journal, Volume LXVIII, 2019. The title 'KEATS-SHELLEY JOURNAL' is centered at the top. Below it, the volume and year 'Volume LXVIII 2019' are printed. At the bottom, the publisher information 'Published by THE KEATS-SHELLEY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC. New York, New York' is visible.

KEATS-SHELLEY
JOURNAL

Volume LXVIII
2019

Published by
THE KEATS-SHELLEY ASSOCIATION
OF AMERICA, INC.
New York, New York

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/771179>

Where's Queer?

TALIA M. VESTRI

IN 2014, I opened a blog entry for the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism's (NASSR) Graduate Student Caucus with a query that still resonates today: "Where art thou, queer theory?"¹ That provocation echoed an observation made ten years prior, when David Collings and Michael O'Rourke highlighted the dearth of Romantic queer undertakings in their introduction to a special issue of *Romanticism on the Net*: "We have had *Queering the Middle Ages*, *Queering the Renaissance*, *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, and *Queering the Moderns*, but no *Queering the Romantics* or *Queer Romanticism*."² Since then, it seems, the scene has little changed.

My own question pertained less to the hunt for same-sex desires and non-normative sexual identities—what Collings and O'Rourke gesture to as the "protoqueer"—but, rather, to the methodologies emerging subsequently in the wake of queer theory's initial wave. Where, for example, can we find queer history and queer historiography, queer ecology, queer temporality, queer affect, or queer kinship invigorating Romantic scholarship? As O'Rourke thoughtfully commented on my post: "we do need a queer romanticisms which would (not solely be about sexuality) but rather attend to issues like climate change, the future of the humanities and futures of reading."³

Scholars of other periods have been less reticent to forge such explorations. For instance, in collections such as Duc Dau and Shale Preston's *Queer Victorian Families: Curious Relations in Literature* and Monica Flegel's *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture: Animality, Queer Relations, and the Victorian Family*, both published in 2015, Victorianists have considered domestic arrangements that counter models of the reproductive, genealogical nuclear family. Early modernists including Madhavi Menon, Jonathan Gold-

1. Talia M. Vestri, "Romantics Today: Where Art Thou, Queer Theory?" *NASSR Graduate Student Caucus* (blog), October 23, 2014, <https://nassrgrads.hcommons.org/2014/10/23/romantics-today-where-art-thou-queer-theory/>.

2. David Collings and Michael O'Rourke, "Introduction: Queer Romanticisms: Past, Present, and Future," *Romanticism on the Net* 36-37 (November 2004), <https://doi.org/10.7202/011132ar>.

3. Michael O'Rourke, Comment on "Romantics Today: Where Art Thou, Queer Theory?" *NASSR Graduate Student Caucus* (blog), November 11, 2014, <https://nassrgrads.hcommons.org/2014/10/23/romantics-today-where-art-thou-queer-theory/>.

berg, and Valerie Traub have troubled time itself, proposing queer history, or “unhistoricism,” as a method of disrupting normative notions of chronological progression, periodization, and continuity between past and present.⁴ The American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies recently published online a list of “Recent Works in Queer Eighteenth-Century Studies,” featuring titles such as Paul Kelleher’s *Making Love: Sentiment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Bucknell, 2015) and Jason Farr’s *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Bucknell, 2019).⁵ Despite their emergence elsewhere, “queer X” projects have yet to proliferate among Romanticists.

This is not for lack of interest, of course. In 2019, the annual meeting of NASSR hosted an unprecedented *two* panels on queerness, “Queer Elements” and “Queer Romanticisms.” (By contrast, the 2018 conference featured only one; in 2017 and 2016, none. Meanwhile, the 2019 meeting of the Modernist Studies Association dedicated three panels to queer approaches, with half a dozen papers scattered among other sessions.) Despite recent efforts by feminist critics and #Bigger6 advocates to demasculinize and decolonize the period, Romantic studies still needs to deconstruct its dominant heuristics, a solution that queer epistemologies may offer.

When *Frankenstein*’s creature fades into snow and ice, what kind of “no future” or queer ecology does Mary Shelley invoke in a novel that brims with male homosocial bonds?⁶ When John Keats extends himself discursively across the Atlantic to commune with his brother, what sort of queer kinship and queer temporality might such an act perform? Once we shift from unearthing gay and lesbian figures such as Anne Lister or the “masturbating girl” of Jane Austen’s oeuvre, what else might we uncover?⁷

4. Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricisim in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128.1 (2013), 21–39. See also Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120.5 (2005), 1608–17.

5. “Recent Works in Queer Eighteenth-Century Studies,” *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.asecs.org/single-post/2020/06/29/Recent-Works-in-Queer-Eighteenth-Century-Studies-in-Celebration-of-Pride-and-the-Landmark-Supreme-Court-Ruling-in-Bostock-Title-VII>.

6. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

This work would require, of course, that we pivot from identity politics to methodological innovations, prompting us to do the “work of disruption, questioning, and reassessment promised by queer theory” in the first place.⁸ The kind of work, in other words, that might continue the important job of dismantling the Romantic ideology.

Talia M. Vestri earned her Ph.D. in English with a Graduate Certificate in Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies from Boston University in 2018, and has since held visiting faculty positions at the College of the Holy Cross and Vassar College.

On Being a Romanticist in the Library

LEILA WALKER

LATELY I DREAM of libraries.

I dreamed I was in my office, propagating ivy clippings for students to cultivate. Each student would use a webcam to record the plants’ growth, and together we would develop a database of time-lapse videos showing the “same” plant in different environments. In my dream, I wondered: *is this* a digital project?

(Surely my dream reimaged Natalie Jeremijenko’s 1998–1999 “One Tree” project, in which she planted 1,000 clones of a single tree, as a non-textual representation of Charles Darwin’s description of watching the tendrils of a climbing plant feel out boreholes in a wooden post: “The same tendril would frequently withdraw from one hole and insert its point into a second hole. I have also seen a tendril keep its point, in one case for 20 hrs. and in another for 36 hrs., in a minute hole, and then withdraw it.”¹ As Gillian Beer notes, this passage does in language the work now done by time-lapse photography.²)

I dreamed I was showing a stack of rare materials in archival sleeves.

8. Chris Roulston, “New Approaches to the Queer 18th Century,” *Literature Compass* 10.10 (2013), 763.

1. Charles Darwin, *On The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants* (London: John Murray, 1875), 95–96.

2. Gillian Beer, “Plants, Analogy, and Perfection: Loose and Strict Analogies,” in *Marking Time: Romanticism and Evolution*, ed. Joel Faflak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 29–44.