

2022

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Recommended Citation

Shanafelt, Carrie D. (2022) "Review of The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman, ed Christopher Looby," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.12: Iss.1, Article 11.

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.12.1.1299>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol12/iss1/11>

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Review of The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman, ed Christopher Looby

Abstract

Christopher Looby's anthology of queer nineteenth-century American short stories is a fascinating collection of both obscure and familiar texts that together constitute a powerful argument for the queerness of the short story and for the centrality of queerness to American literary aesthetics.

Keywords

queer, short stories, American, nineteenth century, gender

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Christopher Looby, ed. *The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman and Other Queer Nineteenth-Century Short Stories*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 311 pp. ISBN: 9780812223668.

Reviewed by Carrie Shanafelt, Fairleigh Dickinson University

Christopher Looby's bracing anthology of queer American nineteenth-century short stories offers significant evidence for the centrality of queer desire to the American literary imagination. Looby begins with a bold (and perhaps surprising) claim:

If the short story is an original American literary form, as Alfred Bendixen has claimed, and if the short story is in some way queer, as Axel Nissen has argued, then it would seem to follow that there is something fundamentally queer about the most distinctively American literary genre. (vii)

The rest of this book serves as compelling evidence for recentralizing queerness in American literary studies. Over the course of reading these twenty remarkable stories, one begins to register queer affect within circumstances of historical alterity that have too often rendered it obscure or marginal.

Divided (somewhat arbitrarily, as Looby admits) into Queer Places, Queer Genders, Queer Attachments, and Queer Things, these stories range from the familiar (Willa Cather's "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament," 1905) to the obscure (the anonymously-authored "The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman," 1857), and have been gathered together to be viewed through what he calls these four "overlapping rubrics." Looby offers a rhizomatic map of the contents in the introduction, inviting the reader not to take the four sections (five stories in each) as definitive or limiting frameworks; he instead proposes these headings as nonexclusive ways of seeing queerness: "Instead of locating queerness only as a quality of persons, that is, it proposes that queerness can be found elsewhere too" (x). While the twenty-first-century reader may be accustomed to looking for queerness as a politicized identity (in authors or characters), Looby's four loci of queerness shift our attention to the phenomenology of landscape, time, affect, and perception; we see that, in these stories, very little may be overtly sexual, but absolutely everything is erotically charged with desire and (often) abjection.

Aside from Bendixen and Nissen, citations to scholarship in the field have mostly been relegated to endnotes in this introduction, where they are identified in the text as "Any number of scholars and critics" (viii) or "One critic... other critics" (xi). Normally, it would suggest a little contempt for one's peers not to name and

quote them in a critical introduction like this. However, in this case, the endnotes supply much fuller context for each source, offering a wealth of resources for those who would pursue the subject, while not discouraging the casual reader from making use of the introduction as a reading guide, in which capacity this introduction is unusually helpful.

As a historian of British eighteenth century sexuality, I needed a few pages for my eyes to adjust to the dim light in these stories, in which the narration often leads one away from the intriguing person or object at the center of the story or hides it behind the heavy curtains of insinuating dialogue or denial. In the introduction, Looby guides the reader to notice and anticipate resonant details—a second kiss that seals the first, a pronoun shift within a single line, a friendship rendered illegible to us by heteronormative erasure—so that we can read these narratives generously and empathetically. Looby concludes that “these stories offer us a weird and intransigent mixture of bated hope and wary admonition” (xxiv). Many of the twenty stories that follow offer an uncanny growth of hope in the midst of certainty that it must soon be stamped out.

The breathtaking anonymous title story “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” describes, in opaque, lightly comic third-person prose, the tender courtship of Japhet Colbones and his kind wife Tiddy, who tolerates his ineffable oddness, his particularity about their home, which they share with his sisters, and the inexplicable disappearance of items of the ladies’ clothing. The narration maintains the suspense of dramatic irony until it culminates in the tragic and theatrical revelation of Japhet’s transgender identification. As in many of the stories in this collection, rendering queerness explicit exposes it to the toxic open air in which it cannot survive.

And so, in many of these stories, queerness is sustained by mystery, projection, encryption, and overt orientalism. Several of these stories dramatize the transference of white queer desire onto foreign or non-white bodies and genders and articulate their terror of queerness as a fear of losing status in a rigidly homophobic middle or upper class. Charles Warren Stoddard’s “A South-Sea Idyl” (1869) allows its narrator an ecstatically blissful intimate relationship with an island companion, Kana-ana, who, after sating the narrator’s every desire for scents, flavors, music, and beauty, “would mesmerize me into a most refreshing sleep with a prolonged and pleasing manipulation” (21). But the narrator suddenly wrenches himself away from his lover to atone perpetually for sins he cannot bring himself to regret. In “Felipa” (1876), Constance Fenimore Woolson tells of a passionate tomboyish Florida daughter of laborers who becomes obsessed with a silvery-white vacationing lady and her fiancé, whose limited toleration of Felipa

drives her to self-harm. And in Ambrose Bierce's "The Haunted Valley" (1871), the grave of a variously-gendered Chinese person, Ah Wee, has been wept over and cursed at by their viciously racist murderer-lover-master "who must have been at least as much demented as bereaved" (29). In each of these tales, the bourgeois narrator is lured as much by disgust as by titillation toward the queerness they believe they are witnessing, and each eventually yanks themselves free so as not to be ruined or tainted by it.

While some of these narratives focus on travel encounters, others tell of peculiarly American male domestic idiosyncrasies—self-imposed rules and rituals for the home fabricated to make order out of incipient anarchy. Bret Harte's hauntingly weird "In the Tules" (1895) never reveals why Martin Morse, a California settler from Missouri, is so resolute in his desire to remain utterly alone in the landscape, voyeuristically watching a steamboat chug past every night "sweeping by him with the rush of an unknown planet" (187). A chance encounter with a mysterious stranger struggling in the wake of the boat populates his world with obsession, paranoia, and longing. Meanwhile, the narrator of Herman Melville's outrageous "I and My Chimney" (1856) is so monomaniacally devoted to his home's mysterious architecture that it gradually alienates everyone around him. Convinced of the inherent superiority of a home with a single central chimney, and obsessed with defending it from his wife's attacks, his devotion to the chimney renders all other earthly relations impossible. Samuel L. Knapp's "The Bachelors" (1836) narrates the fate of a drunken, delirious vow made by three male friends never to marry, broken by one friend after many years of globetrotting adventures, only to be welcomed with tenderness and joy by the other two men, now living together to their great mutual pleasure.

Several stories tell of women in ambiguous tension with heterosexuality, femininity, or both, drawn instead to intimacies with other women, as in Mary Wilkins Freeman's "Two Friends" (1887). In Mark Twain's "How Nancy Jackson Married Kate Wilson" (c. 1900-1903), a woman is forced by blackmail to live in disguise as a female husband. Painful, unassuageable longing tortures many of the women in these stories, as in Sarah Orne Jewett's "Martha's Lady" (1897), Octave Thanet's "My Lorelei: A Heidelberg Romance" (1880), and Kate Chopin's "Lilacs" (1896). The possibility of intimacy between women offers these characters respite from violent, unforgiving patriarchal expectations, but ultimately, women's love for one another is threatened by limitations imposed by class, religion, and heteronormativity.

The three strangest tales in this volume appear in the final section, *Queer Things*. The inclusion of Louisa May Alcott's "The Candy Country" (1885), Charles W.

Chestnutt's "Dave's Neckliss" (1889), and Sadakichi Hartmann's "Schopenhauer in the Air" (1894) challenges us to read queerly into material substances that, rather than being objects of fascination or projection, forcibly draw characters in (to pleasure or doom) with their own inhuman power. The two hams of "Dave's Neckliss"—the present ham tempting and delicious, and the past ham a tool of dehumanizing psychological torture—are superimposed. While the white narrator can no longer eat ham afterward, Julius the storyteller has accepted that Dave's hideous death will always be with him in the ham of today. The presence of these stories in this anthology makes a forceful argument for an expansive methodology of queer reading and draws our attention to the material object as a locus of queer potential.

Most importantly, Looby's anthology brings together several stunning narrative experiments that challenge any normative description of nineteenth-century literary aesthetics. It is a treasure to have at one's fingertips so many piercing exceptions to the patriarchal metanarratives of American literary production. In addition to being delightful to read, it would be a queerly magnetic object of fascination for students at any level in American literature and will ably serve as the centerpiece of a syllabus. It challenges the reader to confront historical desire in all its alterity, nonconformity, and violent intensity. Queer readers may come to these stories looking for our predecessors, but we instead find something as hard and uncanny as human bone.

