

MOLLY MOLLY OXENFREE: UNCOVERING QUEER POETS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

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The Decadence and Aestheticism movements facilitated and enabled queer expression through cultural resistance.

- Evangelista: “Defined by their attacks on the nineteenth-century cult of progress and materialism, their interest in pleasure, desire, and subversive individualism, and their cosmopolitan outlook, these movements seem rather to herald the dissolution of the Victorian worldview.”
- *The Yellow Book* launched in the 1890’s and is the period’s most well-known decadent periodical.
 - Featured voices affiliated with Wilde and his Rhymer’s Club, and the feminist New Women writers.
- The decadent movement, then, was largely comprised of voices working to undermine Victorian conservatism and reticence, especially in the domains of gender and sexuality. Thus, fin de siècle queer identities became more visible than early era figures.

Anonymous publishing decreased over the century, suggesting unity between public, artistic, and private identities.

- Decline of anonymous publishing correlates with the decadence and aestheticism movements beginning c. 1880-90.
- The same major periodicals from the dataset publishing in 1860-1879 continued to publish well into the 1890’s. This suggests the difference is due to introductions of liberal periodicals like *The Yellow Book* and *Woman’s World* to the cultural sphere rather than the absence of conservative ones.
- Two possible (and potentially coterminate) conclusions:
 - Poets previously obscuring their identities were no longer compelled to during the decadence movement. As Victorian values began transitioning, the need to obscure one’s identity faded with them.
 - Some poets continued to use pseudonyms for business reasons. See Michael Field, two female lovers sharing a male pseudonym.
 - Voices like queer poets and New Women detached themselves from pseudonyms to have a greater cultural impact. By combining literary and personal identities, decadent poetry became a form of social resistance.

Victorian periodicals allowed for the establishment of a public-facing outlet in which poets of non-normative sexualities and gender identities could integrate with an oppressive culture to form a discoverable queer space and community in mainstream media by the end of the nineteenth century.



From *The Dark Blue* 1:2, 217–220, April 1871. Illustrator: Simeon Solomon. (DVPP)

Methods

- A survey of known queer poets in the *Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry Project (DVPP)* has been conducted to examine publishing patterns including journals published in and amount of pseudonymous publications in order to make observations on the discoverability of queer poets.
- Relationships between poets have been examined to identify how a community is formed both on and off of the page.

Limitations

- The project does not aim to, and in fact avoids, ‘outing’ poets — i.e. hypothesizing sexual identities. It relies on a small cohort of poets identified as queer by recent scholarship and historical sources, and is therefore not comprehensive. It serves to direct future research.
- Limitations of time and labour restrict the project to only a single digital corpus which, with nearly 20,000 poems, still cannot be fully surveyed.
- Countless poets, queer or otherwise, published under pseudonyms or no signature at all. While the *DVPP* has done extensive research to attribute these poets to their true identities, many are lost to time. The canonical representation of queer poets does not nearly encompass the likely reality.

Works Cited

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Case Studies: How are Queer Poets historically discovered?

1. Professional Affiliations

The image on the left accompanies Swinburne’s poem, “The End Of A Month.” Swinburne himself was openly homosexual, as was the illustrator, Simeon Solomon. The pairing of illustration and poem from two openly homosexual men suggests the possibility of a sexually progressive editorial team and a periodical that may host a higher concentration of queer works than most. Public-facing collaborations between queer artists could be an indicator of queer culture forming in a particular journal.

2. Historical Sources

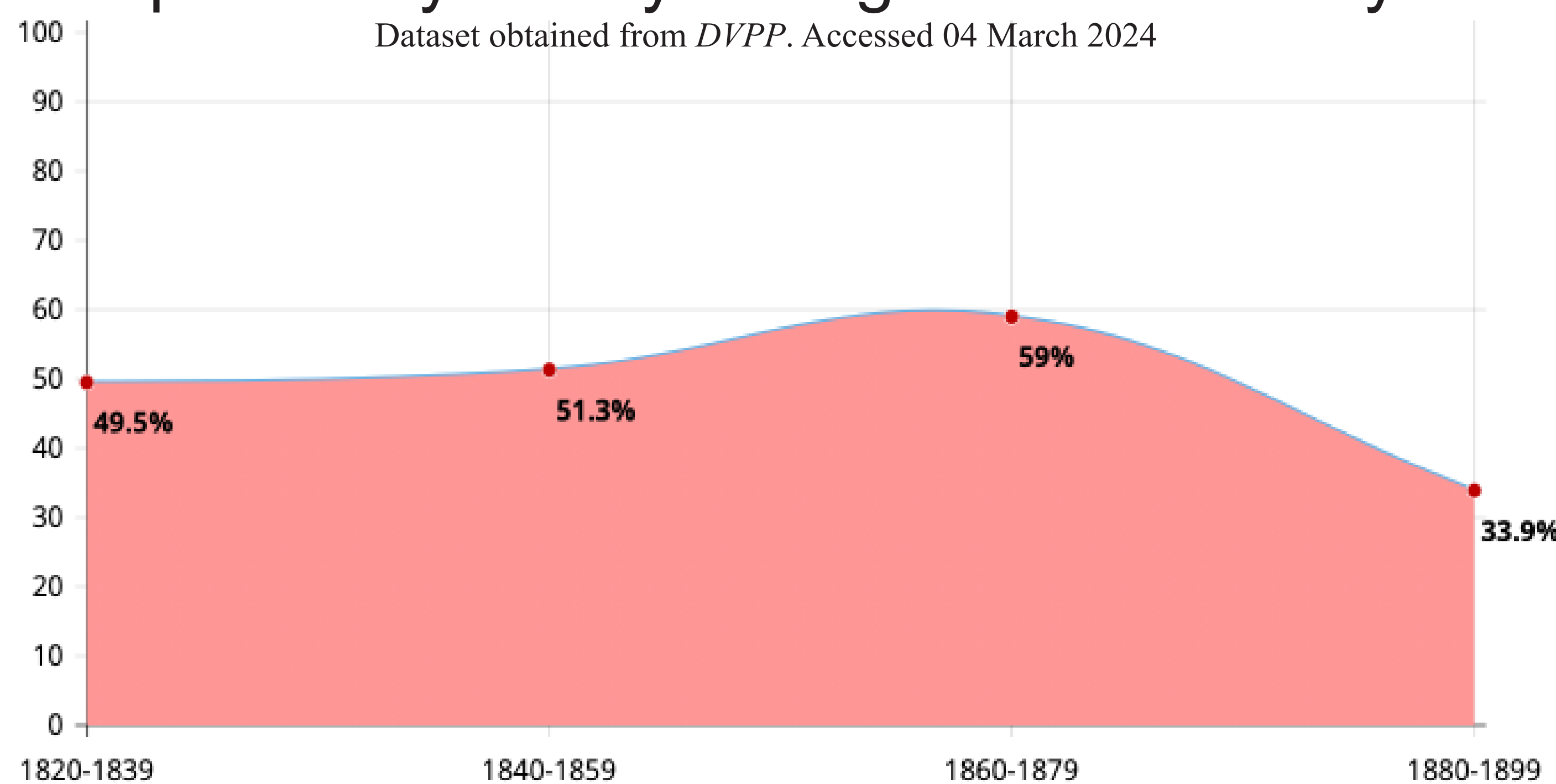
- Historians have access to a much broader view of a poet’s life than might be possible in contemporary studies. Edmund Gosse confessed his repressed homosexuality to John Addington Symonds in a private letter (Edsall 106). Meanwhile, Arthur Christopher Benson tangled with his own sexuality in his diaries, which we now have (*ODNB*).
- These sources need not be attached to the person in question — Olive Custance’s brief affair with Renée Vivien was written about in the latter’s diaries (*ODNB*). That means that *anybody’s* diaries and letters are a potential source of determining sexuality in the tangled Victorian social web, not just those belonging to the figure in question.

3. Social Circles

Personal affiliations of a poet are not conclusive proof, but can serve as a headwater on the metaphorical research river. For example: Many poets studied in this project alive in the 1880’s or 90’s were somehow affiliated with Oscar Wilde. In fact some, like Richard Le Gallienne, had relationships with him (McKenna). People with an in-group tend to stick together, especially in a marginalized denomination (Sumner 13), which means anyone affiliated with a queer person is a person of interest when trying to uncover more queer identities in historical research.

Percentage of poems published unsigned or pseudonymously throughout the century

Dataset obtained from *DVPP*. Accessed 04 March 2024

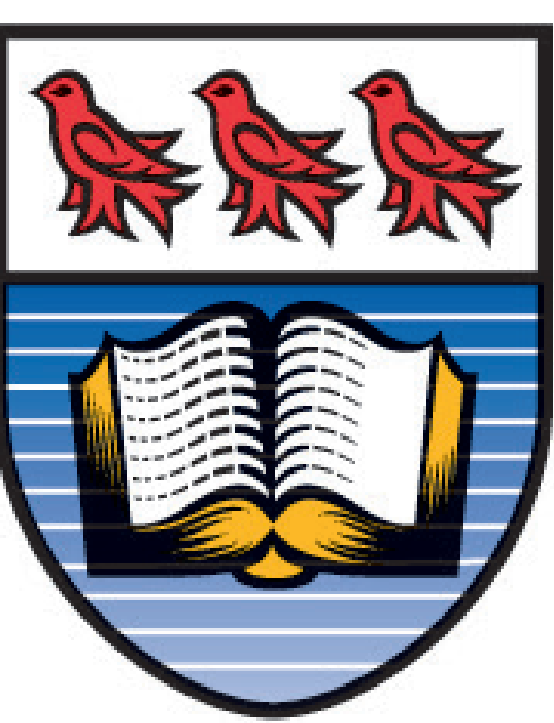


HOW I READ PETRARCH.

I NEVER could read Petrarch. But one day
I caught him reading it, and stole quite nigh;
He saw me, took my hand so lovingly,
And laid it on a line. I dare not say
What the line was: ’twas Petrarch’s—and straightway
He kissed me on a lip, a cheek, an eye,
But would not pair the kisses. What could I
But read a page of Petrarch every day?
From the same book, of course! I used to try
To understand his pencillings, and sigh:
‘He is so clever!’ Wearying with this,
I’d kiss the marks for rest, and kiss, and cry:
‘He thought of me just there!’ once, twice—and aye!
His Petrarch was no poet to my kiss!

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By Theo Marzials, from *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* Series 4 7:324, 176, 12 March 1870. (DVPP)



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