

## Queer Colours

The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw profound changes in the way that homosexuality was viewed in society and in the arts. The very word homosexual was a modern coinage, invented to describe what was increasingly regarded as a phenomenon that ought to be studied and understood with the new tools of modern science, rather than simply condemned. Spear-headed by the emerging discipline of sexology, this medical interest in homosexuality overlapped with scholars' attempts to research how love between people of the same sex manifested itself in different times and places – in Sappho's Greece, for instance, in the Italian and English Renaissance, or in the countries of Asia and the Middle East that imperial expansion had brought closer to home. At the same time, modern artist and writers also looked for ways to represent queer identities in a positive light, sidestepping or indeed overturning prejudice and censure.

In this large effort to bring homosexuality to unprecedented visibility, the colour revolution also played an important role. As early as 1871, Charles Darwin had already established a link between colour and sexual selection: in the *Descent of Man*, he noted that certain male animals used the colour of their fur or plumage to make themselves attractive to potential sexual partners. It seemed logical, therefore, that later in the century sexologists should have wondered whether in humans, too, colour was attached to sexual behaviour. In his pioneering study *Sexual Inversion* that he compiled and revised from the 1890s to 1915, the English sexologist Havelock Ellis made a point of recording the favourite colour of many of the homosexual men and women that he interviewed for his case studies. For instance, of case XII, a 24 year-old man who said that he was made aware of the prevalence of homosexuality in England by the publicity that surrounded the Oscar Wilde case, Ellis noted:

He has a special predilection for green; it is the predominant colour in the decoration of his room, and everything green appeals to him. He finds that the love of green (and also of violet and purple) is very widespread among his inverted friends.<sup>1</sup>

Was green a particularly queer colour? The evidence gathered in *Sexual Inversion* was contradictory to say the least, pointing to a whole range of colour preferences among interviewees. Ellis nonetheless reported the opinion of one of his colleagues that 'inverts [the common way of referring to homosexuals before this word became widespread in English] exhibit a preference for green garments.'<sup>2</sup> He elaborated:

This decided preference for green is well marked in several of my cases of both sexes, and in some at least the preference certainly arose spontaneously. Green [...] is very rarely the favourite colour of adults of the Anglo-Saxon race, though some inquirers have found it to be more commonly a preferred colour among children, especially girls, and it is more often preferred by women than by men.<sup>3</sup>

The queer taste for green of case XII therefore confirms the basic premise of Ellis's theory of inversion: that homosexual men are individuals in whom female psyches are trapped inside male bodies (and the other way round for homosexual women). Here,

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis (1915), p.120.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis (1915), p.299.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis (1915), p.299.

the adult male invert displays an anomalous colour taste that is otherwise normally associated with women and little girls. By the same token, Ellis noted that 'of recent years there has been a fashion for a red tie to be adopted by inverts as their badge' – red being, according to his findings, more common as a favourite colour among 'normal women' than among men.<sup>4</sup> He quoted a report that the male street-walkers of Philadelphia and New York wore red neckties in order to make themselves immediately recognisable to potential clients. Indeed, that this use of red ties had become so well known among the general public that it attracted mockery in student circles and lewd comments in the streets.

To us, such observations are more interesting for their anecdotal than their scientific content. Ellis's sexological reading of the meaning of green appears to be in large part determined by cultural factors: it carries over the old connotations of green as a colour of danger and unreliability that can be traced back at least to the Old Masters, and that are here repurposed to signify the double life of nineteenth-century queer men and women, who were forced to keep their true inner feelings hidden from society. Oscar Wilde had played on the same associations when he subtitled his story 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' (1889), an essay about the English critic and murderer Thomas Wainewright, 'A Study in Green'. More revealing are Ellis's observations of how certain homosexual individuals might have used colour codes, through the medium of fashion accessories, to constitute communities and form a shared identity in the middle of an extremely hostile environment. His scientific enquiries also give us a glimpse onto the cultural construction of the turn-of-the-century homosexual as a chromophile – an individual marked by a heightened sensitivity to colour.

However clumsy Ellis's theories of sex might appear from a twenty-first century perspective, his views were decidedly progressive for his time. His aim was to show that homosexuality was a congenital condition and not a moral perversion or disease. In *Sexual Inversion* he endorsed his collaborator John Addington Symonds's idea that homosexuality could be compared to colour-blindness: both were, quite simply, naturally occurring deviations from the norm. Confusingly perhaps, he also compared homosexuality to synaesthesia: 'Just as the colour-hearer instinctively associates colours with sounds, like the young Japanese lady who remarked when listening to singing, "That boy's voice is red!" so the invert has his sexual sensations brought into relationship with objects that are normally without sexual appeal.'<sup>5</sup> The point of these comparisons was to stress that homosexual individuals were not to blame for their tastes and behaviours.

By the time (1897) that the first edition of *Sexual Inversion* finally went to press after many delays, Symonds had already been dead for some time. Nonetheless, he was a prominent presence in the book. He was, in fact, listed as co-author in the suppressed first English edition, which also contained his anonymised sexual autobiography and his pamphlets campaigning for social tolerance and legal reform. Symonds, who came out late in life when he was a married man with four daughters, was fascinated by his own sexual psychology and he repeatedly wrote about the lives and works of famous gay men from the past. As a historian of art and an aesthete, Symonds was also interested in colour. One of his last published works, 'In the Key of Blue', is a remarkable literary experiment in manipulating colour in order to speak about homosexual desire.

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<sup>4</sup> Ellis (1915), p.299.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis (1915), pp.317-18.

'In the Key of Blue' starts as an essay on the nomenclature of colour in literature but it soon shades into a series of impressionistic prose sketches, which have as their object a young Venetian porter named Augusto Zanon. Like other wealthy homosexual men from Northern Europe, Symonds regularly travelled to Italy, partly to study the artistic heritage, partly to look for sexual partners among the country's poorer social milieus. He befriended Zanon on one of these trips. In this highly experimental work Symonds behaved like a painter, using Zanon as his model: he staged the young man, dressed in the blue costume that was then characteristic of Venetian workers, against various backgrounds in the city and its surrounding countryside, translating into words the alluring effects produced by pairing Zanon's blues with other colours and observing them in different lights. The first of a number of inset poems addresses the vision of Zanon in the alluring intimacy of the Venetian night:

*A symphony of black and blue –  
 Venice asleep, vast night, and you.  
 [...]  
 Pitch-dark! You were the one thing blue;  
 Four tints of pure celestial hue:  
 The larkspur blouse by tones degraded  
 Through silken sash of sapphire faded,  
 The faintly floating violet tie,  
 The hose of lapis-lazuli.<sup>6</sup>*

Catherine Maxwell has rightly described 'In the Key of Blue' as 'an open love letter.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed Symonds celebrates the beauty of Zanon's male body and his own desire for it, simultaneously inviting readers to partake of his longing. The extreme artfulness of the literary composition serves to deflect the overload of homoeroticism by aestheticising and abstracting what are in fact very visceral emotions. Colour is crucial to the way that Symonds manages the very delicate task of bypassing Victorian moral censorship. Eschewing realistic representation, his impressionistic handling of colour gestures towards a different way of imagining masculinity and social relations. Seen through Symonds's eyes, the blues of the hard-wearing clothes of Venetian working men become distinctly queer colours, associated with forbidden tastes and sensations that could hardly be put in print. At the same time, blue also manifests a utopianism that Symonds shared with other homosexual activists of the time such as Edward Carpenter. He believed that the emancipation of homosexuality would stimulate cross-class partnerships, as opposed to the socially homogenous unions of heterosexual marriage. As Symonds wrote to the poet Richard Le Gallienne, who published a review of *In the Key of Blue*: 'Augusto, for me, is a good deal more than a lay figure. He is a downright good fellow and good friend.'<sup>8</sup>

Merging acoustic and visual sensations, Symonds's title, 'In the Key of Blue', plays with the synaesthetic imagination beloved by decadent writers. By speaking of 'symphonies and harmonies of blue', Symonds openly alludes to James McNeill Whistler and, through Whistler, to Théophile Gautier's classic colour poem 'Symphonie en blanc majeur' (1852), which Symonds transposes in a queer key.<sup>9</sup> The allusion to Whistler is

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<sup>6</sup> Symonds (1893), p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Maxwell (2010), p.238.

<sup>8</sup> Symonds (1967-69), 3:827.

<sup>9</sup> Symonds (1893), p.4.

also very strong on the book's cover, designed by the English artist Charles Ricketts. The strikingly aesthetic cover of *In the Key of Blue* features an elegant gilt floral motif consisting of bluebells and a laurel wreath, symbolising Symonds's blending of chromatic sensitivity and poetry. [cat.] The first edition included a number of copies bound in blue cloth, now extremely rare, which echo one of Whistler's most characteristic colour schemes, which he used, among others, in 'Nocturne: Blue and Gold, St Mark's, Venice' (1880) [cat.] and in his celebrated Peacock Room, also known as the 'Harmony in Blue and Gold', commissioned by the British shipping magnate and arts patron Frederick Richards Leyland and executed in 1876-77. Like the Peacock Room, *In the Key of Blue* is also a total work of art of sorts: its physical form and literary content partake of the same aesthetic values.

*In the Key of Blue* should be viewed as a collaboration between two queer artists. Ricketts, who also illustrated Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) and *The Sphinx* (1894), was in a life-long partnership with the artist Charles Shannon. The two men were a firm point of reference in London's queer artistic circles. They were particularly close to the lesbian poetic partnership Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), whose works also strove to integrate visual and poetic idioms in interesting ways, including by experimenting with coloured type in their collection of Sapphic lyrics, *Long Ago* (1889). Ironically, however, in the case of *In the Key of Blue* writer and illustrator disagreed about the blue cover. Symonds was very pleased with it, preferring it to the cream version in which the majority of the copies were bound. While Ricketts, so the story goes, objected to it, fearing that it could give rise to an unfortunate pun:<sup>10</sup> 'Reckitt's Blue' was the name of a popular commercial brand of laundry blue produced by the English firm Reckitt & Sons, which was used to improve old or yellowing white fabrics by adding a trace of blue produced with synthetic ultramarine (the process is similar to the blue-rinse used to colour white hair). The easy slip between Ricketts' blue and Reckitt's Blue would risk puncturing the exquisiteness of the book project.

There is something amusing in Ricketts's fear of being derided by colour association. But, in a period in which homosexuality attracted social stigma and could be the cause for criminal punishment, homosexual individuals had ample reasons to be anxious about their public reputations. Playing with colour was a way of revealing and concealing. We have seen that Havelock Ellis tells of students attracting homophobic slurs for wearing red neckties, reputed to be a code for homosexual leanings. The most talked-about among the coloured symbols of homosexuality was, however, the green carnation – an innocent chromatic divertissement that has become an icon of the 1890s craze to perform and transgress. It was Oscar Wilde who brought the artificially dyed flower to prominence when, at the premiere of his comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan* in February 1892, he appeared in the St James's Theatre wearing a green carnation in his lapel. [fig] The fashion soon spread among aesthetes belonging to Wilde's circle and was duly noted by the press, which started speculating on the meaning of this provocative fashion statement.

While it remains open to debate whether the green carnation was ever used as a badge of homosexuality, its green is decidedly also a queer colour inasmuch as it cannot easily be pinned down to a fixed meaning. It is a social provocation. It expresses a wish to subvert normative behaviours. And, of course, it flaunts a taste for the unnatural that could all too easily be associated with the allegedly unnatural passions of the 'invert' but that was also many other things besides. The green carnation also embodies the

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<sup>10</sup> Babington (1925), p.83.

decadent paradox that nature imitates art, on which Wilde expounded in his critical writings.

Only a few days after the much talked-about premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde's friend, the writer Violet Hunt, already seized on the growing myth in a brief sketch entitled 'Green Carnation' (1892), which featured an erotic triangle involving a woman and two men who exchange a green carnation as a token of their love for one another. And in 1894, Robert Hichens's novel *The Green Carnation* contained thinly veiled caricatures of Wilde and his lover Alfred Douglas. The novel opens with Reggie Turner – a Douglas epigone – admiring his reflection in the mirror as he is wearing the flower in his buttonhole. In the second chapter Lady Locke asks her cousin Lady Windsor if such carnations bloom on cottage walls: 'My dear Emily, green carnations never bloom on walls at all. Of course they are dyed. That is why they are original. Mr Amaranth says Nature will soon begin to imitate them, as she always imitates everything, being naturally uninventive'.<sup>11</sup> And when asked who started the fashion of the green carnation, Lady Windsor makes the following reply: 'That was Mr. Amaranth's idea. He calls it the arsenic flower of an exquisite life. He wore it, in the first instance, because it blended so well with the colour of absinthe. Lord Reggie and he are great friends. They are quite inseparable.'<sup>12</sup> Green carnations were not arsenic based: they were dyed green by immersing their stems in a harmless aniline malachite Green.<sup>13</sup> But in their fin-de-siècle mythology they often acquired poisonous connotations that looked back to the much-publicised mid-century anxieties about toxic greens, at the same time channelling homophobic feelings.<sup>14</sup>

This was the danger of flirting with visibility. As is well known, Oscar Wilde became the public face of the queer culture of the fin de siècle when he was sentenced for 'gross indecency' in May 1895. When Wilde was first arrested, he was seen holding a book with a yellow cover – a detail that was emphasised in several press reports. Yellow was the traditional colour of the wrappings of French novels, connoting lasciviousness in the Victorian public imagination (**cat.**). It was also the signature colour of England's most famous decadent magazine, the *Yellow Book*, which had been launched the previous year. Looking back to its power to symbolize the *zeitgeist* of the 1890s, the writer and bibliophile Holbrook Jackson remarked that yellow 'was associated with all that was *bizarre* and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern'.<sup>15</sup> This use of the adjective 'queer' in 1913, in close association with the idea of modernity, is deeply suggestive. The covers of the *Yellow Book*, designed by Aubrey Beardsley, often sported androgynous figures and emancipated women, displaying a progressive gender-bending ethos (Beardsley, who had illustrated Wilde's *Salomé*, was of course also notorious for his penchant for obscenities). **[cat.: Yellow Book cover, either vol. 3 or 4]** No matter that Wilde had never published in the *Yellow Book* and that there wasn't much love lost between him and its editors. Rumours got out that Wilde had been caught with a copy of the *Yellow Book*, causing the editors to panic and leading to Beardsley's dismissal. After its colour symbolism became too toxic and risky to sustain, the *Yellow Book* ceased publication before the end of the decade, officially bringing the yellow nineties to a close.

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<sup>11</sup> Hichens (1894), pp.22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Hichens (1894), p.21.

<sup>13</sup> The chemical process is described in *The Artist* (1892), pp.114–15. The author thanks to Catherine Maxwell for this reference.

<sup>14</sup> Beckson (2000); Matthews David (2022)

<sup>15</sup> Jackson (1922), p.46.

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