The Book Beautiful: Aestheticism, Materiality, and Queer Books

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Abstract
The Book Beautiful: Aestheticism, Materiality, and Queer Books studies the multimedia art of decorated books of the British Aesthetic Movement (1880-1900). Incorporating textual scholarship and queer theory, the project considers how the language of sexual intercourse, as it was expressed through Aestheticism's conception of Eros, influenced a textual intercourse between literary content and bibliographical design. Paying particular attention to the influence of book design, typography, and illustration, the decorated book is reread as a total work of art that is realized when diverse concepts of beauty and eroticism are bound together in a single edition of a book. The result of these diverse artists collaborating on the creation of beautiful books for publishers The Bodley Head and Leonard Smithers Ltd., was a queer revision of literature as a material art form and of the book as a multimedia medium of creative expression capable of circulating a discourse of beauty and sexuality realized through the integration of literary and material creative expression. Chapter 1 places the emergence of the queer book in the history of the nineteenth century's Revival of Printing, paying particular attention to the influence of William Morris's work with the Kelmscott Press and what he called his "Ideal Book," in order to demonstrate how the collaboration of Oscar Wilde, Charles Shannon, and Charles Ricketts on A House of Pomegranates expresses Aesthetic ideas of beauty within the material exigencies of industrial bookmaking practices. Chapter 2 looks at John Gray's volume of poetry, Silverpoints as the product of a textual intercourse between the author and the book's designer, Charles Ricketts, in order to explore how the performativity of Gray's Aesthetic persona – an Aesthetic ideal momentarily realised in Gray's recitation of his work – finds a life of its own in the material book. Chapter 3 revises Linda Dowling's philological concept of the "fatal book" in order to read Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley's bibliographical collaboration on Salome for The Bodley Head, as a Decadent ars erotica, a text that represents sexual dissidence as a sacred cultural discourse. Chapter 4 examines Leonard Smithers's publication of The Savoy as a queer periodical by revising the act of reading as a masturbatory textual intercourse between contributors practicing self-reflexive critical analysis. The project concludes with a look at the sexual politics that leads to the demise of the queer book within British Aestheticism.

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