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**Report on the dissertation by Kateřina Kolářová: "Know Yourself: Write Yourself!
Queer Subjects and the Construction of Gender and Sexual Identity at the Turn of
the 19th Century"**

According to Michel Foucault, the end of the nineteenth century marked a decisive moment in the European history of sexuality. It witnessed, in particular, the birth of a new 'species': the homosexual, constituted by the procedures of the *scientia sexualis*. In this context, 'homosexuality' or 'sexual inversion' was both an ascription by doctors, psychiatrists and sociologists as well as an individual's self-ascription.

In her excellent dissertation, Ms Kolářová starts out from this general diagnosis, but rather than merely reproducing the Foucauldian account of a history of sexuality for late-Victorian England, she presents a compelling analysis of three case studies – John Addington Symonds's *Memoirs*, the autobiography of an eminent man of letters with homoerotic/homosexual inclinations; the journal of Michael Field (the pen name of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) on the two women's friendship, cohabitation and literary collaboration; and sexologist Havelock Ellis's autobiography *My Life*, which combines Ellis's self-speculation with a biographical account of his lesbian wife Edith. The autobiographical question "Who am I?", she argues, not only became increasingly urgent with the crumbling of Victorian certainties towards the *fin de siècle*, but was inextricably interwoven with the new conceptualisation of gender and sexuality. The compulsion to know and write oneself was an effect of the discursive power the individual was subjected to, but rather than repressing the individual's freedom, this imperative was the condition for the individual to become a subject, thus marking the point of intersection of power and pleasure. The analysis of autobiographical texts thus provides "insights into the structures of modern subjectivity, its gendered nature, and, most significantly, into the technologies of its production." (p. 178)

Ms Kolářová presents a thorough reading of the autobiographical texts which corroborate her suggestion that around 1900 the autobiographical project on the one hand and the discourses of gender and sexuality on the other were inextricably intertwined. The three texts under discussion have been carefully selected in so far as they represent a variety of solutions or strategies in responding to this imperative to know and write oneself. In her analyses Ms Kolářová convincingly shows that the triad of gender, sex and sexuality

constitutes "the fulcrum of the power mechanisms that form the modern subject" (p. 8). In addition, in her sophisticated and sensitive readings, she underscores the diversity of individual writing strategies and resists the temptation to categorise and pigeonhole. In particular, she questions the idea that the texts of either J. A. Symonds or Michael Field can be easily appropriated for gay or lesbian identity politics. In contrast, she argues, traditional approaches which assume that both homosexuality and heterosexuality are stable subject positions, only reproduce their own assumptions and interpretative frameworks without being able to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of the autobiographical projects. For this reason, Ms Kolářová does not rely on the published editions of either Symonds' *Memoirs* or Bradley and Cooper's journal, but has spent considerable time in London sifting through the complete manuscripts and comparing the unpublished original with the edited versions, thus revealing considerable omissions and distortions. The dissertation therefore does not merely complement previous studies on Symonds, Michael Field, and Ellis, but is able to present fascinating new material as well as to boldly challenge and revise traditional scholarly opinions.

Even though all three case studies evince the discursive constraints the individual is subjected to, they at the same time reveal a surprising, and often contradictory, variety of gendered subject positions: Symonds's *Memoirs* is not only, or not even primarily, a late-Victorian coming-out narrative. It is rather "a textual performance of masculinity" which becomes the means of coming to terms with what he considers his 'abnormal sexuality' while simultaneously creating new tensions and disrupting the "concept of the masculine self as unitary, self-possessed and [...] coherent." (p. 58) Symonds's performances of shame, in particular, are shown to be enabling or empowering rather than being mere subjections to a heteronormative discourse.

Interestingly, the writing strategies of Bradley and Cooper are completely different although at the latest with the Wilde trials, the two women had become well aware of the constraints of normative sexuality. In clear contrast to traditional autobiographical texts in general and the projects of Symonds and Ellis in particular, the journal's vanishing point is not the fiction of an autonomous and self-identical subject. Instead, it constantly shifts between the first person singular, the third person singular and the first person plural, exploring the relationships between the individual woman and the position of 'Michael Field'; between Braddon, Cooper and 'Schwester', a nurse in a Dresden hospital; as well as between Braddon, Cooper and Bernard Berenson, a mutual friend with whom Cooper had some kind of romantic relationship. Carefully developing her reading from the initial question as to how one can "read two women writing as a man writing as Sappho" (p. 106), Ms Kolářová shows that the text constantly defers meaning, thus multiplying gender identities and spinning an intricate web of sexual desire. Nevertheless, despite the differences between this journal and the texts by Symonds and Ellis, she happily avoids any simplistic suggestion that the individual case of Michael Field might represent a 'female' version of writing the self.

Havelock Ellis's project, eventually, turns out to be a further example of the relational quality of subject constitution. His wife Edith, whom he transforms into a sexual type, 'the lesbian', represents the ghost which haunts his autobiography but which at the same time is the precondition for his self-fashioning as masculine and heterosexual. In all three cases, Ms Kolářová convincingly shows, the individual is neither autonomous nor



completely subjected by dominant discursive regimes. Different subject positions, which cannot be completely reconciled with each other, vie with each other for primacy.

The analysis of the autobiographical material is informed and supported by Ms Kolářová's exceptional expertise in the theoretical debates within contemporary gender and queer studies, which she discusses in her second chapter and – throughout the thesis – in the extensive footnotes which frequently constitute something like a secondary text running parallel and adding to the main line of argument. The works by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick constitute the theoretical basis of the study, which is supplemented by wide-ranging discussions of relevant theoretical and critical work. Sometimes I had the impression, though, that the analysis was slightly overloaded with these references to related studies. Also at times the theoretical discussion seemed to become an end in itself and I would have appreciated a closer link between the theoretical chapter 2 and the case studies in chapters 4 to 6 than the one offered in chapter 3. This is not a severe objection but rather meant as a suggestion which Ms Kolářová might wish to consider before publication. This should be complemented by a thorough stylistic and linguistic revision as Ms Kolářová's English is undoubtedly competent yet slightly marred by some minor mistakes (e.g. with regard to the use of the definite/indefinite article) and a certain inclination towards theoretical jargon which sometimes makes the reading not as enjoyable as it could be.

I should like to repeat that my few critical remarks should not detract from Ms Kolářová's achievement and are not meant to qualify my overall enthusiasm for her exceptional thesis which one reads with great profit. It is the product of intellectual ambition, meticulous research, and academic proficiency. I am convinced that upon publication it will be regarded as a valuable contribution to our understanding of the *fin de siècle* in England, which ideally combines the questions of gender and queer theory, the insights of historical gender studies, with the analysis of literary genre, textual structures and rhetorical devices. It is an ambitious piece of genuine research through which Ms Kolářová will certainly establish herself as a significant scholar in the field of literary and cultural gender studies.

Unfortunately, I am not familiar with the regulations and grading system at Charles University, but if Ms Kolářová had submitted her dissertation at the Free University, I wouldn't have hesitated to grade it with "summa cum laude" (excellent). In any case, I strongly recommend the acceptance of Ms Kolářová's dissertation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Sabine Schülting'.

Prof. Dr. Sabine Schülting