5. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 22.
6. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2004), 49.

Queer

ELLEN CROWELL

IN 1891, *Punch* inaugurated "Queer Queries," a faux-advice column where imaginary readers aired grievances and sought solutions. In April 1891, "Urgent"—a starving vicar in a stingy parish—seeks counsel on whether to pawn his "lectern and ancient carved pulpit" for food, while "Perplexed"—whose property boundary has been breached by an invasive "aroma of questionable herrings and very pronounced haddocks" from the fish shop next door—asks whether to demand full meals as compensation.[1] Alongside these "Queer Queries" sits a poem entitled "Coming Dress," which dismisses as mere "queer robes" the sartorial future advocated by feminist reformers: "[S]hall we welcome with delight / queer robes that make a girl a fright? / Pooh-pooh! We're simply imperturbable. / The Reign of Fashion's undisturbable."[2] Vicars, aromas, and clothing here share queer pride of place; queer is that which disturbs or perturbs; even (or especially) if their rumblings can be easily contained by the boundaries of conventional humor and fashion. In other words, in 1891 "queer" was *punchy*.

It is, of course, punchy again—perhaps even punch drunk. A Gale Primary Sources term search suggests that "queer" hit a popular high-water mark in the mid-1890s—a height it did not reach again until the early 1990s. The pivot year was 1898, after which "queer" fell off precipitously and—after a small resurgence in the 1920s—kept falling. The fate of "Queer Queries" speaks to this pinch point: inaugurated in 1891, by 1898 *Punch* had discontinued the feature entirely. When "queer" did return to fin-de-siècle popularity levels in 1991, it did so only to blow right through and keep rising, up through our present moment. Registering both the pain and shame of a homophobic past and the world-making energies of political, critical and aesthetic activism, the

"queer" we know today is ever-more capaciously protean, such that it has inspired anxiety over the term's expansive applicability, and efforts to slow down if not reverse a dilution of its historically specific critical power.

There is a paradoxical grief here: that the loss, pain, and shame that fueled "queer" as a political and theoretical term in the 90s and early 2000s ("you can hear the hurt in it"[3]) is being diluted by ever-broadening conceptions of counter- or anti-normativity; that "queer" is running on other fuels. A 2015 special issue of *differences* entitled "Queer Theory Without Antinormativity"[4] invited scholars to trouble axiomatic conceptions of queer (in the words of Vicky Kirby, "how this relatively recent field of intervention and innovation runs to script"[5]) by rethinking static and monolithic conceptions of the norm. And a 2016 *New York Times* essay asked, "When Everyone Can Be Queer, is Anyone?" observing that if the goal of queer activism is to move us ever closer to "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality"[6] then this "widespread acceptance and even appropriation" of "queer" seems to be moving us "both closer to and further from" this goal.[7] As it was in the late 1890's, "queer" is again a flashpoint term. But whereas the problem today is capaciousness—"queer" loses meaning when it can describe anything that "ruptures and thwarts the oppressive circumscriptions of a norm by way of experimental possibility"[8]—in the late 1890s the problem was reversed: "queer" crashed at the start of the twentieth century because it lost its protean suggestiveness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the first use of "queer" as "homosexual" to an 1894 letter in which the Marquess of Queensberry—whose infamous libel of Oscar Wilde led to the artist's precipitous downfall—used the phrase "Snob Queer" to describe then Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery, whom he suspected was sordidly implicated in his eldest son's recent and suspicious death. But the way Queensberry attaches "Snob" to "Queer" complicates both words. Archibald Primrose, the Fifth Earl of Rosebery, may have been attracted to men, but to Queensberry, the Prime Minister's lesser status within the Scottish peerage, not to mention his Liberal politics and his Jewish wife, all combine to make him a "Snob Queer" (or "pretentious interloper"). Homophobia informs this slur, just as preference for traditional femininity animates *Punch*'s mockery of "queer robes." But "queer" here joins class snobbery and anti-Semitism to cathect multiple prejudices. Solidification into homosexual slur happened slowly, and the multivalent slipperiness that increased the term's popularity up to and including this late-Victorian cultural moment held on at least through the late 1920s. Before this definitional specificity took firm hold, the word was not yet stripped of its valences, catches, hidden springs—those aspects of "queer" we both embrace and are wary of today.

The publications of the Sette of Odd Volumes, a late-Victorian gentleman's club founded in 1878 by London bookseller Bernard Quaritch, help capture the fun-house mirror relationship between these two protean moments in the career of "queer." A supper club for bibliophiles, the Odd Volumes playfully cast themselves as displaced (odd) volumes who, when brought together for monthly dinners, reassembled as a "perfect sette." Originally limited to a membership of 21,[9] when the Sette began vetting "Supplemental Volumes" in the early 1890s, oddity had taken on greater significance. Admitted new Volumes were "odd" in eccentrically collectible ways. Bibliophiles all, their areas of expertise—including Chinese snuff boxes, Irish wines, and Scottish witchcraft; chronometry, chiromancy, and cocaine; rhinology, massotherapy, and forgery; tarot cards, the art of idleness, and the Loch Ness monster—additionally distinguished them as attractively queer.

The Sette's "Year-Boke" for 1893 pays homage to both the Volumes themselves and their queer habits of curation:

> Where O. V.'s banquet, what a splendid store
> Outvies the claims of gastronomical science:—
> Old books, mad rhymes, wild melodies, rare faïence,
> Weird songs, queer prints, quaint customs, and strange lore.[10]

Here, the "splendid store" describes both individual members and their odd collections; "queer" joins a range of adjectives that together stake out a realm of sociability in which oddity is celebrated for the way it playfully alters convention, an expansive alterity, as Peter Coviello might observe, "that is *additive*, a multiplication of differences in the absence of a single, stable standard of measure."[11] In 1898, the queer collecting practices of the Sette and their odd guests were again immortalized in verse:

> And next Judge Martineau expressed his pleasure
> In making now the acquaintance of a SETTE
> So perfect in their oddness. At his leisure
> He had compiled another odder yet;
> For the *First Number* he had made his treasure
> *Of every work published in parts*, and let
> Its fellows pine unbought—a queer collection
> If the first warranted the rest's rejection![12]

Martineau's collecting practices are deemed "odder" than those of the Odd Volumes, for to assemble a "sette" compiled solely of first numbers is to "queer" not only your own collection, but also those now rendered

forever incomplete. This "queer" is an act of "queering"—deliberate, performative, anti-normative—and yet having nothing to do with sexual identity or gender expression. Despite having often hosted the now-infamously queer Oscar Wilde, and despite having weathered their own queer scandal in 1893,[13] the Odd Volumes retained "queer" in their lexicon as late as 1898, when it still served as a marker for nebulous deviations.

By recapturing a moment before "queer" began to contract, we find something of our own. Sutured to no definite ideological or political position, "Queer" in the 1890s was nonetheless not *not* political, not *not* ideological. Then, sensations, collections, fashions were queer because they pushed against prevailing conceptions of the possible and acceptable. Although already harboring in its folds the denotative forces that would soon expel ambiguity, the term was still at play, marking entrances to layers of experience below, beyond, or to the side of convention. "Queer" gained popularity in a cultural moment that valued suggestiveness. When definitively tied to homosexuality, its popularity plummeted—not to rise again until reclaimed as a political and theoretical term now used to describe an ever-widening arena "including dust, dna, certain kinds of worms and maybe also time itself . . . "[14] This very capaciousness, however, threatens to drain "queer" of its specificity. Will it tighten up again? Or are other terms—wild,[15] neutral,[16] neuter[17]—shedding layers to be reborn?

Notes

1. "Queer Queries," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, April 25, 1891, 195. *19th Century UK Periodicals*, tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5ZWmp7.
2. "Coming Dress," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, April 25, 1891, 195, 19th Century UK Periodicals, tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5ZWmp7. This poem importantly names Constance Wilde, Oscar Wilde's wife, as an iconic proponent of queer fashion.
3. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
4. Robyn Weigman and Elizabeth Wilson, eds., *Queer Theory Without Normativity*, special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015).
5. Vicki Kirby, "Transgression: Normativity's Self Inversion," *Queer Theory Without Normativity,* special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 96–116, 97.
6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

7. Jenna Wortham, "When Anyone Can Be Queer, Is Anyone?," *New York Times Magazine*, July 12, 2016.
8. Kirby, "Transgression," 97.
9. In homage to the 1821 Variorum Shakespeare.
10. *The Year-Boke of the Odd Volumes: Annual Transactions of the Sette, 1893–1894*, ed. W. M. Thompson (London: Bedford Press, 1894 [privately printed]), 56–57.
11. Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 205.
12. *The Year-Boke of the Odd Volumes: An Annual Record of the Transactions of the Sette, 1897–1898*, ed. John Todhunter (London: Bedford Press, 1898 [privately printed]), 36.
13. See Ellen Crowell, "The Necromancer and the Seer: Bibliophilia at the Fin-de-Siècle," *Times Literary Supplement*, December 18, 2015, 15–17.
14. Jordana Rosenberg, "*Gender Trouble* on Mother's Day," *Avidly: A Channel of the Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 9, 2014.
15. For a discussion of emergent terms that seek to recapture or retain queer "vitality," see Jack Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," *Social Text* 32, no. 4 (2014): 137–148.
16. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
17. Claude Cahan, *Disavowals*, trans. Susan de Muth (1930; Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 151.

Reader

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"'TIS an incalculable animal the general Reader!" George Henry Lewes wrote to George Eliot's publishing house about sales of the early books of *Middlemarch* (1871–72), which he hoped would "in time haul in the general public."[1] As literary critics we have a tendency to define the term "reader" by separating potential readers into different