

2015

Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen



Bachelorthesis

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Date: 15-08-'15

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**JOHN ADDINGTON**

**SYMONDS**

A comprehensive analysis of how JA Symonds used his work to try and make the lives of homosexuals in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century better.

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**My object is known to myself. But it is not one which I care to disclose in set phrases. Someone, peradventure, will discover it; and if he is a friend, will shed perhaps a tear at the thought of what these lines have cost me – if he is a scientific student of humanity, will appreciate my effort to be sincere in the dictation of a document – if he be but a fellow-creature, will feel some thrill of pity, and will respect the record of a soul which has still to settle it's account with god.**

*From the memoirs of John Addington Symonds*

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## Introduction: The reappearance of J.A. Symonds

In English queer history, no time has been more known for its repression and cruel treatment of homosexuals than the nineteenth century. In none of the centuries before or after were so many men tried and convicted for the ‘unnatural crime’. Punishments ranged from the pillory to exile and at worst a death sentence. The severity of the punishment the men received varied greatly depending on which social class they belonged to in society. The structure of the criminal justice system in regards to homosexuality, which was formed for a large part during this era, would stay in place until the Sexual Offences Act would come into force in 1967.<sup>1</sup> It was only a little over a century earlier that they abolished the death sentence in regards to sodomy, making it a statutory rather than a capital offence. John Addington Symonds, a poet, historian, but most of all a homosexual, lived during these troubled times.<sup>2</sup> Using his skills as a writer, he tried on more than one occasion to bring about a better understanding of men who suffered under these laws, and to create wider acceptance of ‘the love that dare not speak its name’.<sup>3</sup> In this paper a comprehensive analysis will be given of some of his most interesting pieces or work about the subject, and why they are so important.

Ever since the arrival of gender studies in the early 1970’s there has been a large revival in research regarding homosexuality and its complex history within societies across the globe. Founded in England, historians and researchers from other related fields got to work on examining the lives of homosexual men and women, trying to give the LGBT community its place in history. Throughout the past forty-five years the field has developed itself, focussing not just on the lives of homosexuals, but gender and all of its complexities. John Addington Symonds became one of those researched individuals with the arrival of Canadian biographer Phyllis Grosskurth’s book ‘John Addington Symonds; A biography’. She was the first researcher on Symonds that publically outed him as a homosexual almost seventy years after his death.

John Addington Symonds, while quite well read in his own time, had slipped into oblivion with the arrival of a more modern genre of writing in the early twentieth century. His most fascinating essays, and his memoirs and letters, were hidden away in the London

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<sup>1</sup> N.C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Symonds was born on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1840 and he died on April 19<sup>th</sup> in 1893

<sup>3</sup> ‘The love that dare not speak its name’ is a quote from Lord Alfred Douglas, one of Oscar Wilde’s lovers, who said it in 1891.

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Library, hardly touched upon. Symonds' memoirs are a fascinating read about his personal struggles with his sexuality and how it was to live in a society that did not accept that part of him. Horatio Brown, the man in charge of publishing the volume, was ordered by Symonds himself to remove anything that might give the readers the idea he had been a practicing homosexual. Brown published the edited memoirs in 1895, as requested, after Symonds' death. In 1923 he also published several of Symonds' letters, which were once again selected and edited carefully. Along with editing the work, Brown placed a restriction upon the original memoirs. They were placed in the care of the London Library at his death in 1926, and were not to be released for publication for another 50 years. Grosskurth's biography on Symonds was based for a large part upon this original document, along with the collection of letters written by Symonds, which Herbert Schueller and Robert Peters were compiling at the same time as she was writing her book.

Grosskurth's book put a virtually forgotten man back on the map of queer history, and in 1999 an international symposium was held in Bristol, focussed solely on research regarding Symonds and his legacy. John Pemble, one of the organisers of the symposium and a research fellow at Bristol University, transformed the entire collection of presented papers into a book which was published in 2000 called 'John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon Desire'. Ten years after the book was published, a second symposium was held at the University of Keele, which was about (Re)reading John Addington Symonds. Howard J. Booth, who is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Manchester, presented a paper about Symonds at both symposiums and made it clear that the new research was a continuation on the work that had been started with the Pemble collection. The contributors to the Pemble collection had begun the difficult task of repositioning Symonds as a central part of Britain's queer heritage from the Victorian era. As Booth states in one of his papers, the Pemble collection worked on countering pathologised, often phobic dismissals of Symonds' work on account of his perceived transgression and excess, both sexual and textual.<sup>4</sup>

During the second symposium, several academics presented their interpretation of various parts of Symonds' body of work, hence the name *(re)reading John Addington Symonds*. Almost every paper about the nineteenth century writer portrays him as a transitional figure. Symonds' undertaking was part of a much bigger change taking place in

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<sup>4</sup> Howard J. Booth, 'A Certain Disarray of Faculties': Surpassing the Modernist Reception of Symonds' in: John Pemble ed., *John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon desire* (Basingstokes 1999) 154 - 169. (P. 155)

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Britain's strict society, even if the man himself would never be alive long enough to see the results. For instance, Jana Funke, a researcher who is affiliated with the Center of Medical History at the University of Exeter, sees Symonds and his collaboration with Havelock Ellis on sexual inversion as the start of a new strand of research into homosexuality. Not as a choice, but as affliction that no harsh punishment could prevent.<sup>5</sup>

One of the more interesting articles of note, is that of Sally Newman, who studied the letter exchange between Symonds and the two women Mary F. Robinson and Vernon Lee. She theorizes that Symonds might not have been only attracted to men. According to her analyses of the letters, she believes that there was an erotic love triangle at play. While she does state there is a certain intellectual desire, rather than an immediate physical one, she proposes to look beyond the scope of binary categories identity of that time period. One can place question marks next to Newman's interpretation of the letters that were exchanged between these three people, but there is validity to the theory of looking beyond the standard binary categories presented to us. As will become clear further on in this paper, Symonds did not necessarily believe that one could only love the male or the female form.

A thing of note with all the papers published in these previous collections, is that they all focus on particular pieces, and do not show the full scope of how Symonds used his writing as a way to influence the way English society treated the minority that he belonged to. Both collections have worked to pull Symonds from the oblivion he had landed in, and they did an amazing job with that. This paper is an attempt to analyse his work once again with an eye on the research already done, so a clear and comprehensive image can be given of what Symonds' legacy truly is. His most important essays in regards to homosexuality will be discussed first even though they were published at the end of his career, so it will be easier to understand how his earlier work ties into them. Aside from his published work and the aforementioned articles, the original memoirs, which the London Library kindly provided me access to, will be used to try and explain why Symonds made the choices he did.

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<sup>5</sup> Jana Funke, "'We Cannot Be Greek Now': Age Difference, Corruption of Youth and the Making of Sexual Inversion', *English Studies* 94 (2013) 139-153.

## Symonds' plea:

One thing that must be made clear before anything else can be discussed; is that John Addington Symonds was not a defender of sex between men. Symonds' search for redemption, and his attempts to make homosexuality more accepted within society, was not about the carnal side of things. While he himself eventually, after years of struggle, also became a practicing homosexual, he still clung to the knowledge that he was on a quest for love. He believed that people should strive for a pure love, regardless of gender, and that men who loved men could not be condemned for such a thing. In his memoirs, there is a passage where he describes how he felt after reading Plato's symposium, which happened a few years after attending Harrow.<sup>6</sup> The time he spent at Harrow was a rather turbulent one. He struggled a lot with his sexuality. Something that had in some part to do with the vulgarity of the things he had seen, and continued to see, at the all-boys school. Plato's Symposium was a true revelation for Symonds.

*For the first time I saw the possibility of resolving in a practical harmony the discords of my instincts. I perceived that masculine love had its virtue as well as its vice, and stood in this respect upon the same ground as normal sexual appetite. I understood, or thought I understood, the relation which those dreams of childhood and the brutalities of vulgar lust at Harrow bore to my higher aspiration after noble passion.*<sup>7</sup>

It was not the first time in Symonds' life that he felt a kinship with the thoughts of the Greeks from the antiquities<sup>8</sup>, but here he found a way to try and justify his own desires. His love for the antiquities would stay with him for the rest of his life, and his *magnus opum* would be several volumes about the Italian Renaissance. Symonds' obsession with striving for this *noble passion* is important to keep in mind while examining his work. There is a risk of assuming that because he sought to defend masculine love, that he was a defender of all acts

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<sup>6</sup> JA Symonds attended Harrow school of boys from the age of eleven until he was almost eighteen years old. During these years he witnessed sexual acts between fellow schoolboys, and he became a part of a large scandal involving an, at that time, good friend of his who had an affair with Vaughan, the headmaster who retired following the scandal.

<sup>7</sup> John Addington Symonds, *Memoirs* ((Unpublished) 1893).(P 85)

<sup>8</sup> As a young boy he read the classics, and believed that several poems were about homosexual eros, rather than that of a heterosexual nature. Symonds, *Memoirs*

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between men. It's exactly his rejection of lust without love that made him believe that, despite the fact that it was a sin and unnatural, that there was a redeeming quality to his desires.

His memoirs were written near the end of his life, which makes them prone to twisted facts, and wrongly recalled memories. The work is still an invaluable piece when it comes to understanding Symonds and his life however. While it may not be an objective piece of work, it still is a reflection of his mind and how he wished to be seen. Phyllis Grosskurth's biography of Symonds has since its publication been scrutinised by fellow researchers of John Addington Symonds, and it has received some points of critique. Yet she hit the nail right on the head in her introduction of the book: The memoirs the man had left behind were, in the end, a plea for love.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J.A. Symonds en P. Grosskurth, *The memoirs of John Addington Symonds* (1984). (P 28)



## Late Style:

During the nineteenth century, homosexuals were repressed more than ever in England, and openly talking about the subject was simply not done. The Victorians operated under the impression that as long as one did not speak about what was going on, then it simply didn't exist.<sup>10</sup> Oscar Wilde, for instance, was a rather well known homosexual, and yet it wasn't until he was actually accused of such behaviour that his fellow Victorians stopped pretending to know nothing about it. Many homosexuals in the upper class therefore tended to be well known secrets. Not being allowed to talk about it directly became an attempt to silence same-sex desire. They simply erased it from their language. Euphemisms like 'unnatural crime', and 'nameless' or 'abominable' offence, became part of their vocabulary instead. Despite this, and the obscene publications act of 1857<sup>11</sup>, there were still active subcultures where homosexuals could meet and talk. Places like the Royal Parks at night, and the West End music halls, were well known for male prostitution. A new slang was developed amongst men who met up for sex, called Polari or Parlare.<sup>12</sup> It wasn't just within these grounds that a new language was needed to be able to talk about sex between men. It also became part of the academic debate about same-sex desire. To avoid public disgrace and being banned from the country, which was the best case scenario when caught, Symonds and other nineteenth century writers developed and participated across a range of coded homosexual discourses. They were recognisable only to others who shared their predilections and sympathies.<sup>13</sup>

Symonds' most famous, in his time, published work about the Italian Renaissance and its art were harshly critiqued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whilst few reviews dared to formally point out that Symonds was a homosexual, they did allude to the fact that his own desires got in the way of true objective appreciation of art. It was too chaotic and he lacked restraint, even if he had an abundance of passion for the subjects he wrote

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<sup>10</sup> Ari Adut, 'A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde', *American Journal of Sociology* 111 (2005) 213-248.

<sup>11</sup> Also known as Lord Campbell's act, the obscene publications act was a piece of legislation that prohibited the sales of anything that was deemed obscene. Making it a statutory crime, which gave the courts power to seize and destroy offending material. There were several other legislations passed before this ruling including the Vagrancy Act in 1824, which worked to the same effect, though it was only considered a misdemeanour rather than a statutory crime.

<sup>12</sup> M. Cook e.a., *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages* (2007). 107-108

<sup>13</sup> Amber K. Regis, 'Late Style and Speaking Out: J. A. Symonds's In the Key of Blue', *English Studies* 94 (2013) 206-231. P. 207

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about.<sup>14</sup> While they are in no doubt right about his lack of objective reasoning, his publications were still widely read in his own time and his work on the Italian Renaissance was extremely well received, despite the negative reviews. Regis divides Symonds' bibliography, which aside from his volumes on Italy also contained several translations and biographies about Italian and Greek subjects alike, in Early and Late Style. This particular division comes from Edward Said, who considered late style to be where there is a large dissonance between what the author believes and writes and the society the work is meant for, which usually happens as they approach the end of their life and/or their career.<sup>15</sup> Symonds was only fifty-two when he died, but after a lifetime of suffering from bouts of consumption<sup>16</sup> and a rather frail constitution in general, he had seen it coming if his letters are to be believed. There is no proof that the need to speak out in his later years was tied to his impending death which would happen in 1893, but there is a very clear dissonance between what Symonds feels should be the situation in England, and the actual reality of it. From his letters during the last six years or so of his life it becomes clear that the matter certainly was troubling him. In a letter to Edmund Gosse<sup>17</sup>, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1890, he writes rather openly about his need to speak out.

*When I last wrote, my soul was troubled and perplexed not so much with any sorrows of my own –....- but I had been musing on the insolubility of the whole problem & the terrible amount of pain and misunderstanding in the world of men around us – once more wondering whether nothing can be done to put things straighter and saner.*

*You will not doubt, I am sure, that what you call “The central Gospel” of that essay on the Greeks, has been the light and leading of my own life. But I had to arrive at this through so much confusion of mind & such a long struggle between varied forms of inclinations and abstentions, that a large portion of my nervous force and mental activity was engaged in the concentration during the years when I most needed them for tranquil study & patient labour at art. It was also the main reason of the breakdown in my health.*

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<sup>14</sup> Booth, "A Certain Disarray of Faculties': Surpassing the Modernist Reception of Symonds'.

<sup>15</sup> Regis, 'Late Style and Speaking Out: J. A. Symonds's In the Key of Blue'. (P. 209)

<sup>16</sup> It's an archaic name for tuberculosis.

<sup>17</sup> He was a fellow author, and nine years Symonds junior. Gosse however wasn't always in agreement with Symonds in regards to how openly Symonds sometimes wrote in defence of homosexuality. Fearing the opinion of society.

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*It seems not only sad & tragic, but preposterous & ludicrous, that this waste should have to be incurred by one man after another, when the right ethic of the subject lies in a nutshell.*

*“To refine and cultivate”: Yes, that’s the point. To see the making of Chivalry, where the vulgar only perceive vice. To recognize the physiological & psychological differences in individuals, wh render this process of elevation necessary, & the process of extirpation impossible. That’s the duty wh society neglects.<sup>1819</sup>*

The ‘essay of the Greeks’ that is being referred to here is Symonds’ privately published ‘A problem in Greek Ethics’. The essay was written in the early 1870’s but printed in 1883, only seven years before this letter was sent, and shared amongst Symonds’ acquaintances of who he knew to be interested in the topic. It detailed the history of pederasty in the ancient Greek world.<sup>20</sup> Symonds used the essay to make it clear that love between men was as old as time itself, and that the bond contained something beautiful in the way it was depicted by the ancient Greeks. He laments in his memoirs however that due to the social changes, it was simply impossible to have that same bond nowadays.<sup>21</sup> Funke points out in her article that Symonds was acutely aware of the fact that there were some worries amongst the people within English society about the corruption that reading such texts as the classic Greek stories might cause amongst the youth. Fears of that they might make the young boys susceptible to falling into such relationships with men themselves. Symonds actually writes to one of his old teachers and close friends Jowett about that same topic. He relates to how frustrating it must be for boys who feel a desire for the same sex, to read about same-sex relationships in classical texts like those of Plato. They could recognise themselves in those words about Greek Love, but the society they live in prohibits them from acting upon those desires. So he too sees an issue in giving young boys the classical texts to read, but he sees it as a wholly different kind of problem. He does attempt to make it clear in Greek Ethics that while there are descriptions of relationships between older and younger men, the love that should be pursued, as it was meant by the ancient Greeks, is that of love between men that have an understanding of the relationship and are on equal footing. The ancient Greeks were

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<sup>18</sup> J.A. Symonds, H.M. Schueller en R. Peters, *The Letters of John Addington Symonds: Volume III 1885-1893* (Detroit 1968). (P 447 - 448)

<sup>19</sup> This is a direct copy, and any shortenings used were done by Symonds himself, and not my own.

<sup>20</sup> It’s a term used to describe the sexual acts between men and boys during the antiquities.

<sup>21</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs* (P 169)

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no more interested in that what we could consider to be paedophilic relationships nowadays, than the English were. Symonds' ideal of Greek love cannot be reconciled with the idea of lusting after young boys who benefit in no intellectual way from a relationship with an older partner.<sup>22</sup> Symonds himself had several younger male partners during his lifetime, and in the earlier mentioned article from Sally Newman she too notes that Symonds held the position of teacher in his possible (intellectual) love triangle with Vernon Lee and Mary F. Robinson.<sup>23</sup> He saw the love described in ancient Greece as a form of Pedagogic Eros: A love between a teacher and his student, which may also involve sexual acts, but is in no way intended, as a purely sexual relationship. He doesn't put down a specific age restriction to the ideal though. He simply states that the Greeks had a way of making sure that there was an actual point to these relationships, rather than just a display of wanton desire. Here you can find once again his defence of a pure love rather than lust. Symonds defends the Greeks and their culture and relationships, because he feels it has very little to do with the base desires he abhors within himself, and far more with love, education and a true appreciation for beauty. To avoid causing a scandal and being too straightforward, he makes no real connection to his own era in this essay other than to point out that people studying sexual inversion<sup>24</sup> should take a look at its history, as well as the situation at present. It's a way of making sure, that should he ever be accused to be a defender of sodomites with his article, he can argue that while he defends masculine love, it's the defence of an act in the past, rather than a critique on his own society.

While he holds off on giving his opinion on his own era in 'The problem of Greek Ethics' it's not the case for his later work. The letter to Gosse makes it very clear that Symonds was not content anymore with staying away from talking openly about their current situation. One of the ways in which Symonds and other likeminded people were able to express themselves, was through a loophole within the Obscene Publications Act. A topic like homosexuality could be freely discussed when it was for medical purposes. It was not obscene when it was a scientific study about the problem. Following a little less than a year after the letter, was a private publication of 'A problem in Modern Ethics'.<sup>25</sup> It was still only meant for a selective circle of friends, but it would be released to a larger crowd in 1896 after Symonds'

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<sup>22</sup> Funke, "'We Cannot Be Greek Now": Age Difference, Corruption of Youth and the Making of Sexual Inversion'.

<sup>23</sup> Sally Newman, "'Bizarre Love Triangle": Tracing Power and Pedagogy in the Letters of John Addington Symonds, A. Mary F. Robinson and Vernon Lee, 1878-90', *ibidem* 154-170.

<sup>24</sup> The medical term used for homosexuality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>25</sup> J.A. Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics: Being an Inquiry Into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists* (1891).

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death. 'A problem in Modern Ethics' was an essay that was aimed at the medical psychologists and jurists in England. The essay addressed something that would become the reason for chemical castration and the attempts for treatment later in the twentieth century: Namely that homosexuality was something a person was born with. It was not a choice, but an affliction.

*What the law punishes, but what, in spite of law, persists and energises, ought to arrest attention. We are all of us responsible to some extent for the maintenance and enforcement of our laws. We are all of us, as evolutionary science surely teaches, interested in the facts of anthropology, however repellent some of these may be to our own feelings. We cannot evade the conditions of atavism and heredity. Every family runs the risk of producing a boy or a girl whose life will be embittered by inverted sexuality, but who in all other respects will be no worse or better than the normal members of the home. Surely, then, it is our duty and our interest to learn what we can about its nature, and to arrive through comprehension at some rational method of dealing with it.*<sup>26</sup>

Symonds uses history here to point out that, regardless of which day and age you lived in, there were always cases of sexual inversion<sup>27</sup> present, and that something so pervasive should be studied to be better understood. He proposes that instead of fighting it, that the law should make adjustments to rationally deal with it, rather than to resort to the harsh punishments that were currently reserved for those acting upon their perversion. One of his inspirations for this essay was Walt Whitman, a homosexual writer from America.<sup>28</sup> Within Whitman's poetry Symonds considered himself to have found a kindred spirit. Whitman considers the comradeship between men to be an ennobling aspiration according to Symonds<sup>29</sup>. It's the same comradeship that Symonds idealised in 'A problem with Greek Ethics'. He still held on to the idea that a love between men was not wrong. The comradeship and strong bond would in fact elevate society, in his personal opinion, as it would promote chivalry and good relationships between all men in society. He does note that those are futuristic ideals however, and impossible to fully implement in English society as it was in his

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<sup>26</sup> Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics: Being an Inquiry Into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists*. (P 3)

<sup>27</sup> Sexual Inversion was the term used by the medical profession to describe homosexuality.

<sup>28</sup> He would later on also publish a biography about Whitman.

<sup>29</sup> Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics: Being an Inquiry Into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists*.

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time. He abandons all subterfuge in the essay, which may very well be why he did not let it be widely published before he died. 'A problem in modern Ethics' doesn't contain anything that might go beyond simple suggestion that Symonds was a practicing homosexual. He even makes it clear that while he believes sexual inversion to be an affliction, he does understand why some might feel repulsed by it. Up until the day he died, Symonds considered his more base desires for men to be an illness. Something that was inherently wrong with him, yet impossible to rid himself of. Together with Havelock Ellis, an English Physician and writer, he worked on another paper about sexual inversion.<sup>30</sup> This one was never finished within Symonds' lifetime however, and in the end Ellis published it without Symonds' contributions. It would not be until years later that the work in its entirety would come to light. There have been many discussions on whether Ellis simply wanted the credit for himself, and if Symonds was pushed aside and his chapters taken out without his consent. Funke did an extensive research into the relationship between Havelock Ellis and Symonds however, and disagrees with the notion that those chapters were taken out without Symonds' knowing. They both agreed that the historical aspect of sexual inversion, which Symonds provided, simply would not add any value to the point they were trying to make. Symonds had come to the same conclusion here as he had come to in 'A problem in Modern Ethics': You could not implement something from the past into current society, and therefore it was pointless to add it to an article that tried to argue for changes as it could not be compared to one another. Victorian England could not be equal to ancient Greece, or any other previous era.

Symonds' attempts to speak out did not end with medical papers. He also published a collection of essays called 'In the Key of Blue and other prose essays'.<sup>31</sup> The collection consists of several earlier written, published and unpublished, work that had been collected over time. It was a daring move to have it published, and it would be the last publication he would see in print before his death in that same year. Where he still hid behind the excuse of his work being a scientific or an historic account of homosexuality, 'In the Key of Blue' he simply is about celebrating masculine love in his own era. The collection genre gave Symonds the chance to publish his earlier essays in a way that allowed him to create new inferences on the topics he discussed.<sup>32</sup> Now he could add author's notes and other ways to change the meaning of what he had written, and point the readers to what was there between

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<sup>30</sup> Havelock Symonds Ellis, John Addington, *Sexual Inversion* (Basingstoke 1897).

<sup>31</sup> J.A. Symonds, *In the Key of Blue and Other Prose Essays* (1893).

<sup>32</sup> Regis, 'Late Style and Speaking Out: J. A. Symonds's In the Key of Blue'.

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the lines. While the book itself contains many different stories, there is cohesiveness to it, and the reader cannot escape Symonds' intention to celebrate masculine love within these stories. Symonds had moved to Davos Am Platz in Switzerland in 1877, in an attempt to improve his health, though the main land's more tolerant view of homosexuals was probably a factor as well. He was in a self-imposed exile, and it probably made it easier for him to start the work on these publications in those last few years of his life. Away from England's oppression and laws, Symonds found the strength to challenge the system that oppressed so many others. Despite the fact that it's clear that 'In the Key of Blue' is in favour of the kind of love that the Victorians did not dare to mention, Symonds still clings to certain anonymity even then. No names are mentioned within the stories, and there is no part in which he confesses to be a homosexual himself. It takes his memoirs to actually figure out who the people in Symonds' prose actually refer to.

Symonds' memoirs are the last piece of the puzzle. The memoirs are Symonds' final contribution to queer history, and they are his masterpiece in a way. The document, which spans two large leather bound volumes, was left with careful instruction to his good friend Horatio Brown, along with letters and other still unpublished essays that were carefully selected by Symonds himself. He notes in his letter to Brown that the time they lived in was not ready yet for the confessions within his memoirs. The book tells the story of his life as Symonds recalled it, including his urges, desires and the lovers he had throughout his life. Had the memoirs been published without Brown's careful editing, they would no doubt have ended up being seized and destroyed, and Symonds' next of kin would be disgraced for having an openly homosexual man within the family. No matter if he was deceased or not. To save the book from destruction, Brown donated the original memoirs to the London Library, which Phyllis Grosskurth would later use to finally let John Addington Symonds' confession be heard by the world. So while it takes nearly seventy years, his memoirs turn out to still be a great contributed to the subject of homosexuality in the nineteenth century.



## The importance of Symonds' earlier work:

Symonds clearly became more outspoken in his later years about his ideas on homosexuality, and the place homosexuals held in society. His essays dealt in a quite direct manner with the topic, and Symonds' letters make it quite clear as to why he wrote them. This doesn't mean however, that his earlier work holds no value in regards to the debate on same-sex desire. There is an underlying thought process within his work that probably spoke to a lot of men that struggled in the same way as he did. Both Amber Regis and Howard J. Booth point out that Symonds was in fact looking for a way to reconcile his own desires, with his position in society. The revelation he had thanks to Plato's Symposium, was only the beginning of his lifelong search for acceptance not just by society, but also by himself. Symonds placed the blame for society's inability to accept masculine love for a large part with religion. In 'A problem in Modern Ethics' he mentions passages from the Bible, along with the fact that it was the first Christian emperor to lay down the law which would become, according to him, the basis for the current legal system in England.<sup>33</sup> Everything that came before Christianity, was paganism. Symonds longed for that pagan ancient world and their acceptance of homosexuality, but he understood that such an acceptance was never possible within his own society. The appreciation of the fine arts by a Christian society was therefore a paradox to him.<sup>34</sup> There is a sensual side to the art from the ancient world, which cannot seem to co-exist with the morality of a Christian. In Symonds' opinion one cannot look at art, and feel completely detach from the desire it was meant to inspire. Within the Italian Renaissance, he seemed to find the perfect solution to this seemingly impossible combination. While the art made in that period was made for a Christian society, and oftentimes depicts scenes from the Bible, it still could hold the pagan adoration of the beauty of the body. Symonds belonged to a group in the nineteenth century that found beauty to be a thing to strive for.<sup>35</sup> This aesthetic movement gave homosexual men like Symonds an excuse to speak about art in the way that he did. Where the medically scientific excuse allowed Symonds to talk about sexual inversion, it was this which allowed him to talk about the male body as beautiful, because it was simply aesthetics and not the gender he was concerned with. He was free to show his

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<sup>33</sup> J.A. Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics: Being an Inquiry Into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists* (1895). (P.2)

<sup>34</sup> Hilary Fraser, "'Always Reminding Us of the Body': J. A. Symonds on the Fine Arts", *English Studies* 94 (2013) 188-205.

<sup>35</sup> M.M. Kaylor, *Secreted Desires: The Major Uranians - Hopkins, Pater and Wilde* (2006). (P 213 -214)



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adoration for the male figure without it being directly linked to his more personal desires for men.

Symonds was trying to find his place in the world, by finding historic precedent. He did for instance quite a lot of research into Michelangelo, and was thrilled when he found what he considered to be proof that the artist had had an amorous relationship with one of his male models. Michelangelo had relationships with both women and men according to his research, and Symonds considered that to be the clearest example of a love and adoration that surpassed gender. Michelangelo's male lover also was younger than the artist, playing into Symonds' fantasy of the relationship earlier discussed of an older man as the teacher and a younger student. These papers don't openly deal with how they relate to his own life as a homosexual, but they are the key to his later work that do deal with these issues. His conclusion about the paradox between the lust filled fine arts and the morality of the Christian tradition, give him an understanding of why one cannot keep things the way they were in the past, but that there is instead a need to find a way to create a compromise. The historic precedents he found would make the basis for his arguments in 'A problem in Modern Ethics', but they also show his personal struggle with himself, and therefore cannot be left out when it comes to understanding his later work, and Symonds' own character.

## Conclusion:

John Addington Symonds was a man whose life was an endlessly long struggle to reconcile who he was, with the idea of what the society he lived in believed he should be. In the previous chapters it has become clear that his final pieces on the defence of the oppressed English homosexuals are what his earlier work eventually led up to. Symonds first needed to find a way to make peace with himself, before he could start his fight with the system that oppressed him. His research gave him the basis to prove that sexual inversion had been part of European history for centuries. Not just that, but that it actually had been celebrated in other countries. Symonds reconciled his own upbringing and the belief that was instilled in him, by constantly trying to aspire to a higher ideal that he believes everyone should aim for. An ideal he found with the Greeks about a true devotion to love and beauty, rather than purely lusting after the male gender. This conviction is an important factor within his entire body of work, and it's what gives him enough peace of mind to speak in defence of the homosexual community. In the end Symonds wrote some of the most important work in regards to sexual inversion, and what it means to be a homosexual in nineteenth century England.

In all these publications, Symonds argues for more understanding and a shift within society. Not just a change in mentality, but in the actual laws that prohibit men like him to freely express their love and make peace with who they are. Sexual Inversion was, according to Symonds, an affliction. It was inborn and therefore should not be punished. Those who suffered from it should be helped, rather than jailed or hanged for it. It's these essays that try to further break the silence around 'the love that dare not speak his name'. Despite all his brave words, Symonds held back on confessing to suffering from the affliction himself, because he understood that the world was not ready yet to accept him. As Symonds himself states:

*It were well to close upon this note. The half, as the Greeks said, is more than the whole; and the time has not yet come to raise the question whether the love of man for man shall be elevated through a hitherto unapprehended chivalry to nobler powers, even as the barbarous*

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*love of man for woman once was. This question at the present moment is deficient in actuality.  
The world cannot be invited to entertain it.*<sup>36</sup>

Symonds still saw a hopeful future for his fellow man, which is why at the end of his life he felt the need to speak out and help set them on the course for change. He believed that there would come a time when his memoirs could be published fully without it being grievous to his family's reputation, and that until that time was there the document needed to be protected. His work with Havelock Ellis laid part of the foundation for more medical research into sexual inversion in the twentieth century. Symonds, as it turned out, was much more than a historian or writer. He was a man ahead of his time.

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<sup>36</sup> Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics: Being an Inquiry Into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists*. (P 126)

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