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Review: Sarah Green, *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023)

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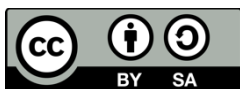
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Sarah Green, *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*,  
Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 266 pp.  
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*Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience* opens with a reading of Walter Pater's short story 'Hippolytus Veiled' in which the author presents the Greek myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus in an unexpected way. In Pater's telling, Green contends, Phaedra's filicidal madness is a product of her inability to understand her son's willingness to resist her incestuous sexual advances. Hippolytus himself, despite his horror at his mother's actions, is shown to remain 'cheerfully and healthily celibate' as a result not of his ignorance or naivety but of his self-conscious restraint (p. 1). Drawing on Pater's approach to the myth and similar examples, Green argues that in the late nineteenth century the idea of sexual restraint, a withholding of or refraining from sexual activity, was frequently conceptualised as a positive, even beneficial, behaviour that was artistically and aesthetically productive for the individual who practised it. This concept of fruitful restraint is shown to be an influential part of contemporary discourse on sexuality in medical and popular literature, and to have had a significant impact on British literary decadence, suggesting an unfamiliar attitude. This aesthetically or sexually restrained decadent figure is at variance with those we are accustomed to reading about, the archetypal epicures with Beardsley leers who *flâne* into view when we imagine the *fin de siècle*.

This work makes a compelling case for understanding restraint as more than a coded means of indicating sexual deviance or queerness that could not be expressed in the Victorian context, but as a vital element in a wider discourse of 'continence'. This 'sexual continence', Green's preferred term since it is frequently instanced in period literature, 'presented genuine non-sexuality as a perfectly possible state', one that could have the effect of 'intensifying sensuousness, without such sense experience becoming sensual' in of itself (p. 8 & 11). Green proposes this

sexually continent decadent as co-existent with the 'queer sexual radical' that has been a significant focus of scholarship. These two decadent types are not mutually exclusive but the discourse of continence permitted a means of exploring 'new ways of being' that did not depend on sexual transgression (p. 75).

Chapter 1, 'Loss and Gain: The Victorian Sexual Body', is an excellent review of mid-to-late nineteenth-century medical writing, encompassing William Acton and Havelock Ellis as well as lesser-known figures such as James Richard Smyth, that relates contemporary currents of medical thought to wider preoccupations with the New Woman, Platonism, and Tractarianism. In a survey that will be of great utility to historians of sexuality, Green traces the concept of productive continence by noting its pre-Victorian origins and highlighting its surprising adaptability. It is latent, for instance, in the common injunction to take periods of abstinence from certain activities or substances, and it is versatile, not allied in principle to any one model of bodily health and capable of being applied to most. It aligns, for example, with the concept of the human body as a regulatory system wherein the loss of fluids, especially sperm (the posited 'spermatic economy' in the terminology of Ben Barker-Benfield (p. 39)), was perceived as debilitating, an anatomical approach that was being supplanted by a psychological and psychiatric understanding of health; and yet, just as successfully, the idea of continence could be compatible with emerging ideas around 'radical politics, changing gender roles, and non-normative sexualities' (p. 33).

Chapter 2 pursues a further objective of this work: to provide 'an alternative Paterianism to that generally explored by Decadent Studies' (p. 4). Building on the work of Linda Dowling, Gerald Monsman, Adam Lee, William Shuter, Kate Hext, and Herbert Sussman, Green reads Pater's *Renaissance* alongside the unpublished 'The Aesthetic Life', and *Marius the Epicurean* in parallel with the unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour*. These texts evidence a recurrent return to an aesthetically selective and discerning form of restraint as an active and productive stance; indeed, in Green's reading of Pater this is a necessary part of the 'process of aesthetic self-cultivation' prompted by engagement with the world of the senses (p. 113). This chapter acknowledges the

significance of, and discussion generated by, the object of sexual desire in Pater's work, and indeed his life, but qualifies this in light of his depiction of continence. For example, Green's treatment of Pater's 'Winckelmann', often of particular interest to scholars for its handling of homoeroticism, sees this theme as being tempered and balanced by Pater's notion of a restraint that informs aesthetic decision-making. In general, Green argues that Pater's 'aesthete-heroes' recognise that 'while sex is an important part of the world and, within certain limits, of the lives of most people, their aesthetic temperaments make continence the more comfortable and productive choice' since it does not place them in direct conflict with conventional standards of conduct (p. 96).

The remaining chapters are also focused on individual literary figures: Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee, and George Moore. Johnson, as the paradigmatic male decadent poet, is proposed as an inheritor of Pater's version of productive continence. His poem 'The Dark Angel', for instance, is not to be read as primarily concerned with alcoholism or repressed homosexuality, but as expressing the conflict between innocent and sensual experience of the world. This chapter adroitly explores this Paterian heritage but is less successful in defining the precise form that productive continence takes in Johnson's work, perhaps because the idea, as Green shows, was often implicit rather than explicit in contemporary thinking. Vernon Lee is included as an emblematic female decadent and as another writer who utilises the idea of continence as a means of 'filtering good from bad' (p. 148). Like Johnson, with his interest in sainthood, Lee idealises a form of love that is pure and spiritual, drawing on medieval poetry such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Green skilfully constructs Lee's concept of continence by close reading of her pre-1900 non-fiction works: *Althea*, *Baldwin*, *Belcaro*, *Euphorion*, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, and more, thereby also creating a basis for future scholarship on Lee's discourse of continence in later publications. This chapter provides a framework for understanding Lee's conception of the artist as a person who requires harmony to function; self-control and sexual restraint are key components of artistic equilibrium.

Chapter 5 develops Green's previous work on George Moore and undertakes to establish a discourse of continence in the work of a writer who was vehemently pro-sexual experience.<sup>1</sup> As

with Lee, Green strives to make sense of Moore's articulation of this concept, not simply as a consequence of his own personal dysfunction in later life, but as a vital element in his idea of life as an 'art-sex-humanity nexus' (p. 184). The hyphenation suggests the difficulty in grappling with Moore's thinking and attempting to crystalise a system out of his unsystematic and disparate writings on the topic. Persuasively though, Moore is seen as reconciling art and sex through a 'non-reproductive, imaginative, "intellectual" sexuality' akin to the aesthetic selectivity of Pater or Lee's advocacy of aesthetic filtration (p. 200).

This work will be of particular use to historians of sexuality, Pater studies and in the study of late nineteenth-century decadence. It opens many avenues for further research and demonstrates the effectiveness of single-author studies; Green recommends a similar approach to Henry James' use of continence and one wonders if the poise of Oscar Wilde's dandies, Lord Goring or Lord Henry Wotton, owes something to their aesthetic or sexual discernment, in contrast to the hedonistic failure of Dorian Gray. This work succeeds in finding 'new coherence in the tangle of discourse' about sexual continence and presents scholars with a productive alternative to the stereotypical decadent libertine forever in pursuit of direct sensory experience (p. 206).

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<sup>1</sup> See Sarah Green, 'Impotence and the Male Artist: The Case of George Moore', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 24.2 (April 2019), 179-92.