Christopher Looby, Bret Harte’s “In the Tules”

Axel Nissen categorically claimed in 2004 in a programmatic essay on “The Queer Short Story” that “there is something queer about the short story.” He called it the novel’s generic “other,” and discussed its status as a “minor” genre in relation to the “major” form of the novel. His contention was that this formal binary between short and long narrative genres operated in a charged and dynamic relationship to other standard binaries structuring the cultural field such as man/woman, central/marginal, normal/abnormal, and heterosexual/homosexual. Thus, he contended, the short story is to the novel as queer is to straight.

Many other scholars and critics have recently been attentive to the complex relationships between narrative forms and various sexualities—the ways in which, for instance, standard narrative logic or sequence may conspire with heteronormative assumptions or imperatives.

In light of these issues, Christopher Looby will analyze Bret Harte’s late story “In the Tules” (1895), written and published in London in the year of Oscar Wilde’s trial, i.e., after the emergence of homosexual identity; Harte was returning to romantic same-sex material he had broached much earlier in his career in such stories as “Tennessee’s Partner” (1869), and the differences between the tales measure the time that had passed and the history of sexuality that had occurred in that interval.