While today’s writers have access to numerous constructions of queer sexual identity, no such notion is available to late eighteenth-century authors. Because there is no place for “queerness” and no means to express it, I propose that another figure of absence, death, comes to stand in for the articulation of queer desires, and it is the link between same-sex desires and representations of dying, death, and the afterlife that my essay investigates. I begin with the close reading of passages from Karl Philipp Moritz’s novel Anton Reiser that support a queer reading of its title character. Bringing Anton Reiser out of the textual closet is a first step in understanding how queerness might have been experienced an age in which homosexual desire could not and would not be spoken. In my reading of Moritz’s text, death comes to signify both the absence of communication about desire and the unspeakable homoerotic desire itself. Death thus materializes as an affirmation of queer desires in a literary period that engaged in the endeavor of expressing the inexpressible.

Queer studies and especially queer approaches to eighteenth-century literature have been criticized for applying a late twentieth-century concept to an age that did not possess such a concept. Indeed, even critics sympathetic to queer approaches to the eighteenth century comment on this potential disjuncture: emphasizing that this is a question of positioning and perspective, Robert Tobin asserts that “[t]o queer the eighteenth century is to look at it differently, from a new perspective informed by the sexuality and theory of a later century”.¹ While today’s writers have access to a plethora of constructions of queerness, no notion of queerness is available to late eighteenth-century authors.² I argue that this very lack manifests itself indirectly and brings about rhetorical

² Because multiple notions of queerness circulate today, I should clarify which understanding of the term I am working with here. Like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conception of the term, the notion of queer that I invoke is broad and destabilizes identity categories, while at the same time maintaining a focus on issues of gender and sexuality. Sedgwick describes queerness as evocative of a constellation of possibilities rather than referencing a specific, limited area: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press 1993. P. 8). Along these lines, I use ‘queer’ to denote a range of desires and practices that resist easy assignment to other discursive categories.
effects that fill in for the absence of queer signifiers. Because there is no place for “queerness” and no means to express it, another figure of absence — death — enters the realm of the queer. What we could understand from a twenty-first century standpoint as queerness, then, finds expression in a lingering of death in or behind a character, an act, or a situation. It is this link between same-sex desires, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, dying, death, and the afterlife, that my project examines.

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, it seeks to identify the title character of Karl Philipp Moritz’s novel *Anton Reiser* as a queer figure. *Anton Reiser* is an especially interesting subject for the exploration of sexuality and desire for several reasons. The novel, with the subtitle *ein psychologischer Roman*, invites its readers to examine its protagonist’s mental processes and emotional structures. In addition, Moritz’s psychological novel has been read by scholars as a largely autobiographical work, a reading supported by the preface to its first book, in which the narrator asserts the impossibility of delineating distinct boundaries between fictional and autobiographical elements. Taken alone or together, these psychological and biographical layers point to the very real stakes of reading queerness between the lines of the text, for sublimations and negotiations of desire often bring about consequences not only at the psychological, but also at the cultural, social and political levels.

Bringing Anton Reiser out of the textual closet is a first step in understanding how queerness might have been experienced an age in which homosexual desire could not and would not be spoken. While the first part of my essay focuses on outing Moritz’s character, the second part takes constructions of sexuality and desire in the novel as a starting point for exploring the rhetorical connections between same-sex desire and death. My work takes its cue from Tobin’s claim that a “queer analysis can produce interpretations that both resonate with the modern-day reader, while at the same time allowing for the eighteenth-century text to speak more fully than it has been able to previously”. Reading death as part of the vocabulary of queer acts and identities

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In my discussion of *Anton Reiser*, I consciously play with the indeterminacy and destabilizing potential of the word queer, for I do not wish to claim that Anton is homosexual any more than I would call him heterosexual. My intention is rather to demonstrate the queer potential of his desire, a desire whose representation exists in excess of that which may be described as the default conventional heterosexual desire of his time.


4 Tobin: *Warm Brothers*. P. 1.