



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 1, Issue 2

Winter 2018

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 30 November 2018

Date of Publication: 21 December 2018

Citation: Patricia Pulham, 'Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichens's *Flames: A London Phantasy*', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1.2 (2018), 97-115.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichens's *Flames: A London Phantasy*

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Decadent literature is often characterized by lives lived at the fringes of convention. While the intersections between Victorian literature and the supernatural in its various forms have been the topic of considerable discussion, the presence and function of occultism in Decadent literature remain relatively underexplored. In contrast, occultism's contribution to modernist literature and culture has received continued attention, most recently in John Bramble's *Modernism and the Occult* (2015) and in Tessel M. Baudin and Henrik Johnsson's collection, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (2018).¹ The existing lacuna in Decadence Studies is particularly surprising given that Decadent literature, with its noted focus on the strange and the curious, lends itself to such critical scrutiny. This essay is the first to examine how the *homme fatal* – a key Decadent trope notoriously explored in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91) – sits at the intersections between Decadence, occultism, and homoerotic desire in Robert Smythe Hichens's *Flames: A London Phantasy* (1897). Here I argue that, though Hichens is best known for *The Green Carnation* (1894), the homosocial and homoerotic triangulations of desire in Hichens's *Flames* imply that Wilde's novel had a far more serious impact on Hichens's writing than his scandalous parody might suggest.²

Decadent Terrors

In his afterword to *Decadence and the Senses* (2017), David Weir comments on the problematic nature of Decadence, noting how the concept is 'hard to make sense of because it is attached to so many different ideas, attitudes, orientations, movements, histories, arts, [and] artists'.³ However, on the issue of Decadent taste, Weir offers a valuable definition. While observing that, traditionally, beauty is associated with delight, while ugliness disgusts, Weir asks: 'what happens

when disgust delights?’ and confirms that the ‘taste for decadence involves precisely such delight in disgust’ as well as an ‘uncommon sense that finds delight in things that people who have normal taste react to with revulsion’.⁴ He adds that ‘If disgust seems too strong a word’ we should remember that ‘the Latin *gustus* at the root of it simply means “taste”, so the uncommon sense of decadence involves a taste for the distasteful’ (original emphasis).⁵ He proceeds to suggest that this ‘taste for the distasteful’ might serve as a significant link between the ‘sublime taste for terror’ that manifests itself in eighteenth-century fiction and in the Decadent literature of the *fin de siècle*. Remarking that ‘the taste for terror’ contributed significantly to the rise of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction, Weir writes that ‘Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might be advanced as a concrete case of decadent sublimity since that novel is nothing if not neo-Gothic’ and notes how in Huysmans’s *À rebours* Des Esseintes is similarly ‘overwhelmed’, ‘petrified and hypnotized’ by the ‘terror’ of Gustave Moreau’s *Salomé*.⁶ Yet, as he points out, the significant difference between the Gothic fiction of the eighteenth century and its late nineteenth-century counterpart is that the basis for that terror in Decadent literature is often not nature, but art: ‘the mysterious portrait in the case of *Dorian Gray*, the painting of *Salomé* in the case of *Des Esseintes*’.⁷ This aesthetic form of Decadent sublime is equally present in *Flames: A London Phantasy* (1897).

Hichens’s interest in the occult emerges not only in *Flames* – a novel that has much in common with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – but also in his supernatural short stories, his non-fiction writings on Egypt, and in his 1911 novel *The Dweller on the Threshold*. Although at the *fin de siècle* he moved in literary circles that included George Moore, E. F. Benson, Arthur Symons, Henry James, and Marie Corelli, his work has received comparatively little attention.⁸ Aside from Nick Freeman’s recent analysis of ‘What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea’, the most commonly anthologized of Hichens’s tales, there is scant scholarly criticism available.⁹ The reasons for this neglect are unclear, especially when one considers that not only was he a journalist whose writing career spanned almost sixty years, but also a lyricist and a well-known

novelist whose works were adapted for stage and screen.¹⁰ *Flames*, too, was made into a film produced by Maurice Elvey and released in 1917, sadly now lost. Contemporaneous reviews written at the close of WWI, within the first six months of 1918, suggest that the film tapped into the needs of a population heavy with loss and mourning; one reviewer comments on how the war had ‘given an impetus to the cult and study of telepathy and spiritualism’, while another reflects on the fact that, at that time, spiritualism was a topic that attracted ‘a great deal of interest’.¹¹ The *Aberdeen Evening Express* of 7 June 1918 describes Hichens as ‘An ardent disciple of psychic research’ and in his autobiography, *Yesterday* (1947), he confesses that at the time of writing *Flames*, he ‘was interested in “spiritualism,” [...] attended several séances, and knew various people who claimed to have occult powers’.¹² The novel, which engages with the ‘unending struggle between good and evil’, is therefore written with some first-hand experience of occult practices.¹³

Set in London and dealing with the descent of its monied characters into the city’s urban underworlds, *Flames: A London Phantasy* offers a tale of vice and virtue. The novel revolves around an angelic and ascetic young man, Valentine Cresswell, known as ‘The Saint of Victoria Street’, and his friend and close companion, Julian Addison, who is often tempted to explore and enjoy London’s illicit pleasures but who, inspired by Cresswell’s example, initially remains ‘pure’. A third, older, man, Dr Hermann Levellier, who dabbles in psychology, is a frequent visitor to Cresswell’s home and a close friend and advisor to both young men. One night, at a dinner hosted by an aristocratic acquaintance, Julian meets a dangerous occultist aptly named ‘Marr’ who encourages him to experiment and to develop his ‘latent powers’.¹⁴ While discussing Julian’s meeting with Marr, Valentine confesses that he is somewhat tired of his own saintliness and desires to experience life’s temptations; Julian, in turn, reveals that he is only kept from such temptations by Valentine’s goodness. Prompted by Marr’s advice, they resolve to attempt a séance at which they hope that they will be able to exchange souls so that the nature of each might counter the excesses of the other, thus enabling them both to reach moral equilibrium.

While the first three sittings are unsuccessful, the fourth results in Valentine's collapse into a death-like trance. As Valentine falls into this trance, Julian hears 'a strange and piercing' cry, and sees a 'tiny', 'faint' flame – a flame that he later understands to be Valentine's soul – emerge from his friend's body and vanish.¹⁵ On that same night, as Julian later discovers, Marr is found dead in a hotel in Euston Road after spending the night with a prostitute known both as 'Cuckoo Bright' and 'The Lady of the Feathers' due to her penchant for sporting an elaborately feathered hat. While strolling through the London streets, Julian meets her by chance and is drawn to her despite her lowly status. By some strange and undisclosed mechanism, Valentine's virtuous but dispossessed soul, now displaced by the evil soul that had resided in Marr, seeks refuge and finds a home in Cuckoo's worn and sullied body.

Modern Occultism

The friends' experiment proves a disaster. Now living in Valentine's body, Marr's soul leads Julian astray and encourages him to indulge in vice and sin. As the evil Valentine and Julian both descend into debauchery, it is Cuckoo who, though a fallen woman, seemingly functions as the moral centre of the novel. This aspect of the story did not sit well with the anonymous reviewer whose assessment of the novel appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 18 March 1897, but the article's importance lies in its recognition of *Flames* as a new form of fiction that sits apart from the conventions of the Victorian ghost story. The reviewer comments:

It was not so long ago that no tale which respected itself and put forward pretensions to the miraculous but took the realm of ghosts in hand ... But in these latter days we are fallen upon other expedients. Ghosts are *démodés*; they are but kept in the cupboard to affright children. [...] For a man to see a ghost is to confess himself a subject for the comic papers. But the unseen powers and forces have usurped the place of precedence. Mr. Stevenson's 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' was, in its way, a very perfect example of the newer method, more recondite, more elusive, and more ineluctable. Mr. MacLaren Cobban, too, wrote an excellent tale upon the modern lines, called 'The Master of His Fate.' These are the progeny of modern occultism. And in a way Mr. Hichens's elaborate story stands upon the same base. He carries on the modern tradition, and exemplifies it extremely well.¹⁶

Flames, then, can be read in the context of what this review calls ‘modern occultism’. As Alex Owen observes in *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (2004), in the last decade of the nineteenth century, ‘the terms mysticism and mystical revival were in general use to refer to [...] the widespread emergence of a new esoteric spirituality and a proliferation of spiritual groups and identities’.¹⁷ By the 1890s, the Theosophical movement was in ‘full swing’, surviving the death of Madame Blavatsky to continue as an international association; the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which had established its first temple in London in 1888, had spread to Bradford, Edinburgh, and Paris; and such endeavours were accompanied by a revival of interest in the esoteric religions of ancient Greece and Egypt.¹⁸ Characteristic of this ‘spiritual movement’ was a growth of interest in Christian mysticism, and ‘most notably, a nondenominational – sometimes non-Christian – interest in “esoteric philosophy,” or occultism’.¹⁹

In contrast to the Victorians’ ubiquitous engagement with spiritualism that crossed class boundaries, *fin-de-siècle* occultism attracted a higher class of aficionado; though often aligned with women’s suffrage and socialism, it functioned as ‘a somewhat elitist counterpoint’ to the spiritualist movement that had preceded it.²⁰ Yet *fin-de-siècle* ‘occultism’, like spiritualism before it, also encompassed a wide range of beliefs and practices including ‘divination (astrology, palmistry, tarot reading, crystal gazing, and so on), sorcery, and black magic (the manipulation of natural forces, often for self-interested purposes), and various kinds of necromancy or spiritualist-related practices’, and the new occultism owed much to its popular predecessor, especially to the development of latent powers in those individuals who sought them.²¹ This aspect of occultism is one that Owen explores in her study, locating it in relation to secular advances ‘in the understanding of mind and consciousness’, developments that were beginning to examine the ‘dynamic relationship between the rational and the irrational’.²² Acknowledging a consciousness of the interactions between Decadence and occultism, Owen opens *The Place of Enchantment* with a quote from Holbrook Jackson’s 1913 study of the eighteen nineties and the spirit of the age:

It was an era of hope and action [...]. Life-tasting was the fashion, and the rising generation felt as though it were stepping out of the cages of convention and custom into a freedom full of tremendous possibilities. [...] The experimental life went on in a swirl of song and dialectics. Ideas were in the air. Things were not what they seemed, and there were visions about. The Eighteen Nineties was the decade of a thousand 'movements.' People said it was a 'period of transition,' and they were convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, from one culture to another, and from one religion to a dozen or more. [...] There was so much to think about, so much to discuss, so much to see. 'A New Spirit of Pleasure is abroad amongst us,' observed Richard Le Gallienne, 'and one that blows from no mere coterie of hedonistic philosophers, but comes on the four winds.'²³

This spirit of the age is very much in evidence in *Flames* in which 'Life-tasting' is indeed the fashion, in which the nature of morality is discussed, and in which the impact of *fin-de-siècle* ideas and the influence of occultist theories are explored.

In Hichens's novel, it is the figure of 'Marr' both in his original incarnation and in his later possession of Valentine's physical body around whom occultist questions and practices arise, and it is Marr, described as 'Satanic', who discusses soul transference with Julian and encourages him to experiment with Valentine.²⁴ Prior to the successful fourth sitting during which the transfer of Marr's soul to Valentine's body is completed, Julian tellingly sees Marr at the theatre where 'a modern allegory of the struggle between good and evil', reminiscent of the Faust legend, is being performed.²⁵ When Julian hears of Marr's death, he expresses regret and tells Valentine how the former had 'gained a sort of influence' over him, and how Marr 'had a power, a strength about him, even a kind of fascination'.²⁶ However, his significance becomes clear when Valentine, now possessed by Marr's malevolent soul, visits Cuckoo with the intention of cautioning against her friendship with Julian, fearing that Valentine's lost soul resides in her and that she may challenge his control. Though the uneducated Cuckoo can only guess at the meaning of Marr's ensuing diatribe on the notion of the will, we, as readers, recognize his adherence to Nietzschean philosophy. 'My religion is will, my gospel is the gospel of influence, and my god is power', he tells Cuckoo.²⁷ He proceeds to explain the nature of that power and the process by which he has possessed Valentine's body:

Will binds the world into a net, whose strands are like iron. Will dies if it is weak, but if it is strong enough it becomes practically immortal. But, though it lives itself, it has the power

to kill others. It can murder a soul in a man or a woman, and throw it into the grave to decay and go to dust, and in the man it can create a second soul diametrically opposite to the corpse, and the world will say the man is the same; but he is not the same. He is another man. Or if the will is not strong enough actually to kill a soul [...] it can yet expel it from the body in which it resides, and drive it, like a new Ishmael, into the desert, where it must hover, useless, hopeless, degraded and naked, because it has no body to work in.²⁸

He considers his possession of Valentine's body and the expulsion of the latter's soul a special triumph; although 'saintly' and 'pure' and expressing 'a definite repugnance to sin', Valentine's 'original dissatisfaction with his own goodness' is 'the weapon' that brings about his own destruction. It is the loss of the *will* to be good that makes Valentine vulnerable for, Marr suggests, 'will is personality, soul, the ego, the man himself'.²⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, translations of important works by Nietzsche had introduced his ideas to erudite readers, and concepts relating to the 'superman', to 'the sovereignty of the self as creator and arbiter of all "truth," and emphasis on the all-powerful will spoke with great immediacy to occult endeavours'.³⁰ Although there is no direct reference to Nietzsche in Hichens's novel, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the first English translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was published by Macmillan in 1896, the very year during which Hichens was in the process of writing *Flames*.³¹ However, Schopenhauer is mentioned; in conversation with Dr Levillier, Marr, disguised as Valentine, claims that 'To deny the will is death, despite Schopenhauer' while to 'assert the will is life and victory'.³² Contesting Schopenhauer's philosophy, this reference functions, I suggest, as a tacit acknowledgement of Marr's Nietzschean ideology.³³

Spiritual Affinities

While soul transference is at the centre of Hichens's novel, other aspects of the occult play a significant part in *Flames*. At the fourth séance, Valentine and Julian engage in table-turning; the table shifts along the carpet and twists under their hands, raps, trembles, and pulsates, stirred by 'Animal Magentism'.³⁴ Mesmeric trances feature in some of the sittings, most notably during the fourth, where Marr's soul expels Valentine's from the latter's body, but also in the final sessions

where Marr asserts his will over Cuckoo. In addition, Hichens's choice of 'Valentine' as the name for his 'Saint of Victoria Street' alludes not only to the Saint Valentine we recognize – the third-century Roman saint who became associated with courtly love in the middle ages – but also, and more knowingly, to Valentinus (c.100–c.160 AD), the early Christian gnostic theologian, for whom people were classified as spiritual, psychical, and material, and according to whom only the spiritual were given the knowledge required to receive divine powers.³⁵ Most interestingly, perhaps, early conversations between Julian and Valentine prior to the possession signal allusions to a belief in Swedenborgian correspondences; a theory of twin souls, soul-mates, and spiritual affinities.³⁶

That Valentine and Julian are soul-mates is evident from the beginning of the novel. While Julian is 'Valentine's singularly complete and perfect opposite, in nature if not in deeds', they 'respond closely' to each other and are '*en rapport*'.³⁷ Initially, Dr Levillier, too, is part of that precious circle. Before the fatal evening on which Marr asserts his will over Valentine, Levillier sits with Julian while the latter plays the piano in a 'pretty' drawing-room where all was 'complete human sympathy', a 'sympathy' that springs 'from their vitality'.³⁸ Once Valentine's soul comes to lodge in Cuckoo, it is in her that Julian finds a sympathetic soul, a spiritual affinity who, despite her fallen status is willing to risk her life for him.

While Hichens takes pains to assert the purity of the male friendships and, indeed, of Julian's relationship with Cuckoo which, barring a single lapse, remains a platonic one at her request, the novel suggests a coded homoeroticism that emerges through allusions to celibate same-sex communities; through the novel's engagement with artworks; through veiled references to unspoken 'sins'; and through the contact between Julian and Valentine that is facilitated through occult means. Moreover, the novel's sets of triangular relationships and the unwitting Faustian pact that triggers Marr's possession of Valentine, recalls Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a similarity of which Hichens, a sometime friend of Wilde's and Alfred Douglas, and author of *The Green Carnation* could not have been unaware. As in Wilde's novel, homosocial

connections lie at the heart of *Flames*. All three male protagonists are bachelors; the 55 year old Dr Levillier has ‘never married’ and has a ‘double mind’ of ‘a great doctor and [...] a great priest’.³⁹ Following the possession, Valentine bewails the fact that he lives ‘in a sort of London cloister’ with Julian for his companion and, later, Julian observes how ‘For a long time he had gloried in living in a cloister with Valentine’.⁴⁰ After his first night of debauchery, Julian claims that he feels ‘like a monk who had suddenly thrown off his habit, broken his vows and come forth into the world’.⁴¹ While these references appear to reinforce the celibacy and purity of these relationships, a dedication to and love of God, they suggest a world of men who worship Christ, who is God made man. In fact, Julian’s adoration of Valentine borders on religious worship: ‘Valentine was to Julian, a god’ and he, like Christ, ‘had ever been, and still remained, to him a perpetual wonder, a sort of beautiful mystery’.⁴² Even more telling, perhaps, is Valentine’s own love for an image of Christ, *The Merciful Knight*, a watercolour by Edward Burne-Jones, that takes pride of place in his drawing-room. Prior to Marr’s possession of Valentine, we are told, he adores its depiction of the saviour:

This was the only picture entertaining a figure of the Christ which Valentine possessed. He had no holy children, no Madonnas. But he loved this Christ, this exquisitely imagined dead, drooping figure [...]. He loved those weary, tender lips, those faded limbs, the sacred tenuity of the ascetic figure, the wonderful posture of benign familiarity that was more majestic than any reserve.⁴³

Valentine’s focus on the body of Christ is echoed in the text by Julian’s own focus on Valentine’s body as the latter contemplates this image while playing the piano. Julian remarks on how Valentine’s eyes ‘perpetually sought this picture, and rested on it while his soul, through the touch of the fingers, called to the soul of music that slept in the piano’.⁴⁴ Julian, in turn, rests his gaze on Valentine, comparing ‘the imagined beauty of the soul of Christ with the known beauty of the soul of his friend. And the two lovelinesses seemed to meet, and to mingle as easily as two streams with one another’.⁴⁵

As Dominic Janes has discussed, *The Merciful Knight* (1863-64) is one of Burne-Jones’s ‘most important early works’.⁴⁶ The painting depicts a Florentine knight, St John Gualberto, who,

according to legend, was ‘miraculously embraced by a wooden figure of Christ while praying at a wayside shrine’ in acknowledgement of Gualberto’s forgiveness of a kinsman’s murderer.⁴⁷

Despite its worthy subject matter, the painting was not well received by critics who complained about the relational composition of the bodies. As Janes explains:

The depiction of an intimate bodily encounter of a man with Jesus was clearly one that made many viewers uneasy. It is important to emphasize, however, that the artist had, if anything, radically toned down the level of intimacy on display. A series of sketches for the work now at the Tate Gallery, London, show him struggling with the question of how to render physical contact between Jesus and the suppliant. One of these shows the knight and Christ in a mouth-to-mouth kiss that acts to link their bodies into a single sinuous band.⁴⁸

Given this context, Julian’s conflation of Valentine’s soul with Christ’s and the mingling of their ‘two lovelinesses’ implies the substitution of physical desire with spiritual love.⁴⁹

Occult Sins and Substitutions

Substitutions, overt and covert, are a feature of Hichens’s novel, the most significant of which is implicit in the relocation of Valentine’s soul in Cuckoo’s body. Although it does not fully displace hers, it possesses it and bends it to its will. During the night of Bacchanalian revelry that follows their attendance at a performance of the ballet, *Faust*, at the Empire, Leicester Square, Valentine, now possessed by Marr, falls from his pedestal and becomes Julian’s ‘comrade instead of a god’.⁵⁰ However, the night also ends in the only sexual encounter that occurs between Julian and Cuckoo, the fallen woman whose soul is now fused with Valentine’s. In the chapter that follows this event, Cuckoo is aghast and, though she loves Julian, begs that theirs should be a platonic relationship, a request to which Julian willingly accedes, claiming, ‘I do not think of you in that way. I never shall’, and adding, ‘You and I are to like each other thoroughly, never anything more, never anything less. Like two men’.⁵¹ Julian’s heterosexual relationship with Cuckoo is thus replaced by a homosocial one that is nevertheless replete with homoerotic tensions for, in having bedded Cuckoo, Julian has also bedded Valentine regardless of Hichens’s efforts to restore the chastity of this friendship. In addition, in the latter chapters of the novel,

Cuckoo is repeatedly referred to ironically as ‘the blessed damozel’.⁵² Rossetti’s poem ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (1850) and, by implication, his painting of the same name, recall an idealized love between a lover and a dead beloved and function here as counterparts of the spiritual love depicted in *The Merciful Knight*. In conversation with the evil Valentine, Julian alludes to the poem while meditating on the image of the flame as soul, exclaiming, ‘By God, Vall! [...] do you know what I read in a book I took up from your shelves the other day – something about souls being like flames? It was in Rossetti: Flames!’⁵³ Turning to Cuckoo, he stares into her eyes where Valentine’s soul manifests itself precisely in such flames. Arguably, Cuckoo’s newly-recognized blessedness is due to her secular martyrdom: having renounced her profession and unable to support herself in any other way, she has driven her body to the point of starvation. Furthermore, she is co-opted by Dr Levillier to effect Julian’s salvation: ‘The fallen creature’ becomes the ‘protector’, and ‘the unredeemed’ the ‘redeemer’, thus aligning Cuckoo, ‘that Magdalen of the streets’ simultaneously with Mary Magdalene, the recipient of Christ’s forgiveness, with Christ himself, and with the Christ-like Valentine, the object of Julian’s love.⁵⁴

However, the novel’s concerns with decadent sins and their redemption are complicated by the inexplicit nature of some of the sins that are to be forgiven. Freeman suggests that such ‘sins’ might include: ‘prostitution, alcoholism, chain-smoking, drug use, and homosexuality’.⁵⁵ Certainly we see that Julian is indulging in sex with prostitutes and that he drinks absinthe every night.⁵⁶ Additionally the doctor remarks during the last, vital, sitting that on this occasion, ‘No drowsy poppy-bed was Julian’s’, ‘No opiates gave him peace’ implying that, by this point, he has also become an opium addict.⁵⁷ Yet other sinful pleasures remain unarticulated. We learn that prior to his fall, Julian has battled with unspoken ‘temptations’,⁵⁸ and when Dr Levillier meets Julian following a period of indulgence in such ‘temptations’, the narrator comments on the physical changes that have been wrought on him. His cheeks are ‘no longer firm, but heavy and flaccid’, his mouth ‘deformed by the down-drawn looseness of the sensualist, and the complexion beacons with the unnatural scarlet that was a story to be read by every street boy’.⁵⁹

Moreover, under the influence of the evil Valentine, Julian has been taught to love ‘sin, vice, degradation of every kind’.⁶⁰ While the exact nature of Julian’s vices is unclear, they are written on his body, and Hichens’s references to ‘street boys’ and ‘degradation of every kind’ point to secret vices whose names dare not be spoken.⁶¹ Julian’s hunting ground is Piccadilly Circus, an area of London that had ‘a subcultural and more general notoriety for renters and homosexual cruising’, and it was here that ‘a cross-dressing “Piccadilly vulture”’, who featured in the *Illustrated Police News* in 1889, had ‘handed out cards referring men to the Cleveland Street brothel’, the site of a major homosexual scandal that year.⁶²

Interestingly, Julian’s physical degeneration is prefigured in a discussion between Basil Hallward and Dorian in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which shares with *Flames* a focus on homosocial/homoerotic relationships; both novels are concerned with the consequences of sin and hidden vices, both mediate homosexual attraction through heterosexual substitutions,⁶³ and both explore the influence of a corrupt older man on younger, more beautiful boys. In Wilde’s text, Hallward confronts Dorian with the fact that ‘dreadful things are being said’ about him, that people speak of him as ‘something vile and degraded’, but claims that, despite this, he finds it difficult to accept the rumours when he sees Dorian, who has maintained his youthful beauty. He explains that:

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even [...]. But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth – I can’t believe anything against you.⁶⁴

In *Flames*, it is not Julian but the evil Valentine who maintains a beautiful exterior, and Julian functions as the double on whom the ravages of his sins are etched. Valentine is a saintly, Christian version of the pagan Dorian. While Dorian is likened to the beautiful boys of Classical history and myth – Adonis, Narcissus, Antinous – and looks as if he were ‘made out of ivory and rose-leaves’, Valentine is a ‘saint’, and ‘like some ivory statue’.⁶⁵ ‘Tall, fair, [and] curiously innocent looking’, Valentine’s visage resembles Dorian’s ‘pure, bright, innocent face’, though his

is not the face of a Greek god but of 'a blonde ascetic'. His blue eyes are passionless, his mouth 'made for prayer, not for kisses', yet he inspires desire and admiration and women long to kiss him.⁶⁶ Though possessed by Marr, Valentine ostensibly retains his beauty. Subtle changes are visible only to Dr Levillier who notices that Valentine's 'frigid and glacial purity had floated away' from his face 'like some lovely cloud', and that now there was 'something hard and staring about it'. While his features 'were still beautiful', their 'ivory lustre was gone'.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, Valentine's newly demonic nature reveals itself in other ways: his dog disowns him and growls in fear whenever he approaches; he can no longer sing and play beautiful music, producing instead dissonant and disturbing sounds; and he destroys his formerly beloved painting, *The Merciful Knight*. In an act that resembles Dorian's destruction of his portrait in the closing scene of Wilde's novel, the evil Valentine slashes it in such a frenzy that the canvas hangs from 'the gold frame in shreds, as if rats had been gnawing it'.⁶⁸ Other changes manifest themselves in ways that are distinctly Decadent. When Valentine and Julian return from a trip to Paris, Dr Levillier visits Valentine's home and discovers that the drawing-room's décor has been significantly altered. A curious black cabinet covered with 'grotesque gold figures' has replaced the piano, 'a gigantic rose-coloured jar filled with orchids', those 'Messalinas of the hothouse' sits above it, and, in contrast to the pale, ascetic elegance that formerly characterized it, the room is now littered with strange, curious ornaments, and predominated by an unsettling shade of red.⁶⁹

This colour has a debilitating synaesthetic effect on Dr Levillier's rational mind:

Glancing from this cabinet, and those that stood upon it, the doctor was aware of a deep and dusty note of red in the room, sounding from the carpet and walls, tingling drowsily in the window curtains and in the cushions that lay upon the couches. [...]. It was a dim and deep colour, such as a dust-filled ruby might emit if illuminated by a soft light. [...] Despite his own complete health of mind, and the frantic disquisitions of the morbid Nordau, the little doctor felt as if he heard the colour, as if it spoke from beneath his feet, as if it sang under his fingers when he laid them on the heavy brocade of the couch, as if the room palpitated with a heavy music which murmured drowsily in his ears a monotonous song of dull and weary change. No silence had ever before spoken to him so powerfully.⁷⁰

The colour scheme is accompanied by notable changes in Valentine's taste in art: where *The Merciful Knight* had once hung, 'a Cocotte by Leibl smoked a pipe into the room', and where,

formerly, classical figures and atmospheric landscapes had set the tone, ‘Jockeys and street-women painted by Jan Van Beers and Degas, Chaplin and Gustave Courbet’ now ‘leered down’ on him.⁷¹

Decadent Dialogues

Valentine’s new interior bears more than a passing resemblance to Baudelaire’s Parisian rooms, a décor that, for Gary Lachman, resonates with his ‘satanic’ or ‘decadent philosophy of life’:

[H]e furnished his rooms lavishly and frequently changed the décor [...]. He papered his rooms in red and black and hung curtains of heavy damask. [...] Delacroix adorned the walls, thick carpets muffled the urban cacophony, and voluptuous perfumes filled the air. This atmosphere of sensuous and aesthetic refinement would be codified years later in Huysmans’ influential novel *A Rebours*.⁷²

Whether Hichens was drawing on Huysmans or Baudelaire we cannot be certain, but Dr Levillier’s synaesthetic responses certainly suggest Baudelaire’s poem ‘Correspondences’, in which ‘Perfumes, sounds, and colours correspond’,⁷³ and it is in this room, this domestic, Decadent version of Hell, that Levillier believes, despite his rationality, that he sees the flames of lost souls that burn brightly for a moment and then die ‘into the red of the room’.⁷⁴ However, one might argue that Hichens’s greatest influence is Wilde. Though *Flames* is a powerful novel that stands on its own merits, it nevertheless echoes aspects of Wilde’s novel: its unleashing of hedonistic impulses through occult means recalls *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as does its appropriation of Walter Pater’s conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Pater’s exhortation, ‘To burn always’ with a ‘hard, gem-like flame’, that we ‘may grasp at any exquisite passion’ or ‘knowledge that will set our spirits free or stir our senses’, is, in Hichens’s novel, as in Wilde’s, repurposed and framed by occultism.⁷⁵ Moreover, Hichens plays with the implicit homoeroticism in that ‘stirring of the senses’, that sensory pleasure Pater suggests one might find in ‘the face of one’s friend’.⁷⁶ The delight that Julian initially takes in Valentine’s face is ‘pure’ but is corrupted once Marr is in possession of Valentine’s body, something Julian recognizes towards the end of the novel when the evil Valentine asks, ‘You say I am a stranger?’ to which Julian

replies, ‘Yes, with the face of my friend’.⁷⁷ Pater’s suggestion that what we must forever be ‘curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions’, that we must fit ‘as many pulsations as possible’ into our given time, is reflected in Julian as he contemplates the possibility of accessing London’s pleasures in the evil Valentine’s company.⁷⁸ As they survey London’s street life from a window in the Victoria Street apartment, Valentine hooks his arm through Julian’s. As he does so, he renders Julian’s arm ‘a line of living fire, compelling that which touched it to a speechless fever of excitement’, and the latter’s ‘pulses’ throb and hammer as two inebriated men pass below ‘embracing each other by the shoulders’ in ‘protestations of eternal friendship’.⁷⁹ The unmistakable thrill Julian experiences at Valentine’s touch, and his agitation at the sight of love expressed between men cannot help but invite a homoerotic reading.

As Elizabeth Lorang has observed, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is itself informed by ‘modern occultism’. In her discussion of the serialized version of the novel in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (1890-91), she notes that it appeared alongside Edward Heron-Allen’s article ‘The Cheiromancy of To-Day’ and asserts that the two pieces ‘form a dialogue on the occult and the desire to know one’s soul via outer appearances’, that it is a conversation that ‘draws on and engages the nineteenth century’s fascination with occultism and the pseudosciences’.⁸⁰ She argues that ‘the very metaphor of Dorian Gray, that the portrait reflects Dorian’s real character and the state of his soul, is an extended form of cheiromancy (palmistry), or other of the arts of divination by outward appearance’.⁸¹ This suggests that Wilde, like Hichens, responds in his novel to contemporary interests in the occult; we know that Wilde asked Heron Allen to cast his son Cyril’s horoscope a few days after the child’s birth, and that, in March 1895, Wilde and Bosie consulted Mrs Robinson, the ‘Sibyl of Mortimer Street’, indicating his belief in such practices.⁸² But the occult in both texts also provides a covert platform for the representation of dark urges and unarticulated desires. In *Flames*, it permits physical touch: during one of the séances, Julian believes that his hand is being held by Valentine’s, his ‘little finger [...] tightly linked’ in his, only to discover that it is a phantom hand that belongs to an unspecified owner.⁸³ The novel allows

such contact between men, while simultaneously disavowing it. It is a strategy that Hichens also employs in ‘What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea?’ where the eponymous professor is pursued by a phantom lover, and who, like the men in *Flames*, is an academic of the period who lives primarily among men and counts a priest as his closest friend.

As Freeman acknowledges, Hichens’s sexuality remains mysterious, although recent critics have suggested that he shared Wilde’s ‘homosexual proclivities’.⁸⁴ We do know that he never married. In addition, we know from his autobiography that he knew Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde well enough to lunch with them at London’s Café Royal though he later attempts to distance himself from the Wilde scandal by adding: ‘I never came across Oscar Wilde after the tragedy which overtook him. We were never in the same place or neighbourhood to my knowledge. I only saw him in his days of success and social popularity’.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, as John Clute argues, Hichens seems forever ‘haunted by a horror of exposure’.⁸⁶ While Hichens may insist on no more than a passing acquaintance with Wilde, the affinities between *Flames* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are difficult to ignore. Describing his first meeting with Dorian, Basil Hallward recalls the terror he experienced under Dorian’s gaze. Explaining the unsettling nature of Dorian’s power, he says: ‘I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it do to so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself’.⁸⁷ That in *Flames*, the dangerous *homme fatal* is an equally beautiful, demonic male figure who fascinates, who exudes ‘an electric warmth’, and who makes the blood in Julian’s veins course with excitement and desire might lead us to draw our own conclusions about the nature of the revelation which, following the Wilde trials of 1895, had the potential to elicit in Hichens its own very real terror of social exclusion.

¹ John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson (eds), *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities, 2018).

² *The Green Carnation* was published anonymously in 1894. A parodic take on Wilde’s circle, it featured recognizable characters based on Wilde (Esmé Amaranth) and Lord Alfred Douglas (Lord Reginald Hastings).

- ³ David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219-28 (p. 219).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.* Gustave Moreau produced numerous drawings, paintings, and watercolour versions of Salome, the most famous of which are *The Apparition* (1874-76) and *Salome dancing before Herod* (1876).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ⁸ See Robert Smythe Hichens, *Yesterday: The Autobiography of Robert Hichens* (London: Cassell & Company, 1947).
- ⁹ Nick Freeman, 'What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea? Robert Hichens, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Ghosts of Hyde Park', *The Modern Language Review*, 111.2 (2016), 333-51.
- ¹⁰ Hichens produced several collections of short stories and thirty-eight novels, including a major bestseller, *The Garden of Allab* (1904), that became a popular stage play, and was filmed three times: in 1916, 1927, and 1936. The 1936 film featured such famous actors as Marlene Dietrich and Charles Boyer and was produced by David Selznick who went on to work on such film classics as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940). A much later novel, *The Paradine Case* (1933), was filmed in 1947 and directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
- ¹¹ Anon. 'Pictures and Players in the City', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 7 June 1918, p. 2; Anon. *Cambridge Daily News*, 19 March 1918, p. 4. Special thanks to Matthew Sweet for drawing my attention to these reviews and for his help in certifying the loss of the film version of *Flames*.
- ¹² Hichens, *Yesterday*, p. 77.
- ¹³ Anon. 'Pictures and Players in the city', p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Robert Smythe Hichens, *Flames: A London Phantasy* (London: William Heinemann, 1897), p. 9. The film version may have represented Marr as one of the undead: the reviewer writing in the *Cambridge Daily News* on 19 March 1918 describes him as 'a vampire' with 'considerable occult power'.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ¹⁶ Anon. 'Reviews', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1897, p. 4. Other examples of this shift from the ghosts of spiritualism to occult mysticism in popular culture would include Corelli's novels *The Soul of Lilith* (1892) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), both of which overtly deal with occult topics. Notably, *The Sorrows of Satan* shares a Faustian narrative with Hichens's *Flames*.
- ¹⁷ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 4.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Movements such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, for example, encouraged their initiates to engage in a complex programme of study that would lead to secret erudition. See, for example, Israel Regardie and John Michael Greer, *The Golden Dawn: The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites, and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2016).
- ²¹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, pp. 19-20.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ²³ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1922), pp. 30-31.
- ²⁴ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 97.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36.
- ³⁰ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 133.
- ³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Alexander Tille (New York and London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1896). Tille was authorized to produce English editions of Nietzsche's work: see *Morning Post*, 17 July 1896.
- ³² Hichens, *Flames*, p. 273.
- ³³ Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/19) 'overpowered' Friedrich Nietzsche during his student days at Leipzig, though he later contested Schopenhauer's thinking; see Christopher Janaway, 'Introduction', *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*, ed. by Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 1-12 (p. 1). Schopenhauer's discussion of saintliness and ascetism also resonates with the figure of Valentine as 'The Saint of Victoria Street' who is presented initially as removed from worldly desire and emotion. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols, trans. E. F. J. Payne, I (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 384.
- ³⁴ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 57.
- ³⁵ For a brief introduction, see 'Valentinus and the Valentinian Tradition', The Gnostic Society Library, <<http://www.gnosis.org/library/valentinus/index.html>> [accessed 27 October 2018]. For a more comprehensive

discussion of Valentinus in the gnostic context, see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 99.

³⁷ Hichens, *Flames*, pp. 4-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 118; 173.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 52.

⁴⁷ Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Explicit and implicit references to the Faust legend recur as a form of leitmotif in *Flames*. Early in the novel, Dr Levillier takes Valentine and Julian to see a play at the Duke's Theatre that functions as 'an allegory of good and evil which has been illustrated in so many different ways since the birth of the Faust legend' (p. 40) and, here, at the end of Book 2, Valentine takes Julian and Cuckoo to a Faust ballet at the Empire (pp. 158-61). In *Yesterday*, Hichens acknowledges the impact the Empire's ballets made on him as a young man, and how he incorporated these experiences into *Flames* (pp. 39-40).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵⁵ Freeman, 'What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea?', p. 342.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁶¹ For discussions of physiognomic signs of degeneracy in Gothic fiction, see Bridget M. Marshall, 'The Face of Evil: Phrenology, Physiognomy, and the Gothic Villain', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 6.2 (Fall, 2000), 161-72 and Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The changes in Julian's looks may also refer to opium addiction and/or onanism; see Diane Mason, *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 124.

⁶² Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.

25. Reference to such an incident (though not cross-dressing) appears in the *Illustrated Police News*, 7 December 1889.

⁶³ In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian falls in love with the cross-dressed Sybil Vane, thus enabling 'boy love' through ostensibly heterosexual means, while in Hichens's *Flames*, 'boy love' is facilitated through Valentine's inhabitation of Cuckoo's body.

⁶⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward Lock & Co. Ltd., 1891), p. 225.

⁶⁵ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 4; Hichens, *Flames*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁷² Gary Lachman, *The Dedalus Book of the Occult: A Dark Muse* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2003), pp. 129-30. These Parisian rooms were those in the Hôtel Pimodan (now the Hôtel de Lauzun) on the Île Saint-Louis, where Baudelaire lived from 1843-45.

⁷³ Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondences', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 19.

Baudelaire's poem is influenced by the teachings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), which proposed affinities existed between the spiritual and physical realms (see Culler's explanatory notes to 'Correspondences', p. 352).

⁷⁴ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 259.

⁷⁵ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 120.

⁷⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 120.

⁷⁷ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 401.

⁷⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 120.

⁷⁹ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 120.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Lorang, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray in Context: Intertextuality and *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 43.1 (Spring 2010), 19-41 (p. 22).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. 23; Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Arrow Books), p. 477.

McKenna notes how Wilde's consultation with Mrs Robinson resulted in a misplaced belief of success in the Wilde v. Queensbury trial. Wilde's wife, Constance, was also interested in the occult and became a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888, the year in which it was founded. See Franny Moyle, *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs Oscar Wilde* (London: John Murray, 2011).

⁸³ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 28.

⁸⁴ Freeman, 'What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guilden?', p. 339. See also Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Denisoff maintains that 'Hichens was sexually attracted to men' (p. 115).

⁸⁵ Hichens, *Yesterday*, p. 69.

⁸⁶ John Clute, 'Hichens, Robert (Smythe) 1864-1950', in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. by John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997), p. 466.

⁸⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 9.