



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 6, Issue 1

Spring 2023

Review: Decadence and the Fairy Tale Symposium, Goldsmiths, University of London, 24 March 2023

Eleanor Keane

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 20 March 2023

Date of Publication: 24 July 2023

Citation: Eleanor Keane, 'Decadence and the Fairy Tale Symposium, Goldsmiths, University of London, 24 March 2023', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 6.1 (2023), 131-34.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v6i1.1730.g1830

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Decadence and the Fairy Tale Symposium
Goldsmiths, University of London, 24 March 2023

Eleanor Keane

Goldsmiths, University of London

On 24 March 2023, international scholars, academics, early career researchers, and members of the public attended the symposium ‘Decadence and the Fairy Tale’, hosted by the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths in association with Goldsmiths’ Centre for Comparative Literature. The symposium was the first of its kind to examine the importance of the fairy tale in the context of the wider decadent tradition and the fairy tale’s own decadent tendencies. The fairy tale has long been perceived as a text intended for children, yet this symposium sought to highlight how decadent writers and artists drew upon this same tradition as a source of inspiration for some of their most subversive and sexually dissident adult texts. Oscar Wilde, Olive Custance, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Jessie Marion King, to name just a few writers of interest during the symposium, all viewed the fairy tale’s engagement with fantasy and escapism as an opportunity to explore occult esotericism, transgressive forms of sexuality, fluid gender identities, and queer desire. Culminating in an afternoon roundtable that brought the speakers together in order to discuss the significance of the decadent fairy tale and its continuing relevance for the twenty-first century, the symposium highlighted ground-breaking research in the fields of both decadent studies and the fairy tale tradition.

The symposium began with Alessandro Cabiati’s keynote, ‘Marvellous Abnormalities: Fairy Tales, Decadence, and Deviance in the Late Nineteenth Century’. Using the pathological treatises of Richard von Krafft-Ebing as a framework, Cabiati provided compelling evidence of decadent themes of sexual fetishism and psycho-sexological obsession, termed ‘monomania’, in a close reading of Mary de Morgan’s ‘The Seeds of Love’ (1877), Wilde’s ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), and Marcel Schwob’s ‘La petite femme de Barbe-bleue’ [‘Bluebeard’s Little Wife’] (1894). Cabiati’s paper demonstrated how British and French decadent writers integrated adult

concerns over mental illness and sexual ‘deviance’ into a genre traditionally viewed for children. Marie-Claude Canova-Green chaired an engaging question session that further discussed the decadent treatment of fairy tale figures such as Bluebeard and the ogress, who Cabiati argued were repeatedly compared against real life examples of criminals seen as socially or sexually deviant.

Cabiati’s keynote paper was followed by the first panel of the day, ‘Oscar Wilde, Olive Custance, and Jessie Marion King’. The panel opened with Megan Williams’s paper “‘An artist Slaying his own Soul’: Oscar Wilde, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and l’aube de siècle radical culture’. Through a comparative reading of thematic parallels and similar imagery in Holdsworth’s ‘The Blind Prince’ (1913) and one of Wilde’s best known fairy tales, ‘The Happy Prince’ (1888), Williams drew thought provoking new connections between the socialist fairy tales of the working-class writer Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and Wilde, an influence on her work. The second paper, Frankie Dytor’s ‘Olive Custance and Fairy Tale Renaissance’, explored the potential for both the fairy tale and fairy tale landscape to disrupt and query traditional forms of gender, sexuality, and desire, and took as a primary example the shifting gender identities of the poet Custance, who identified as a prince, princess, and page in both her literary work and her relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Dytor’s paper offered an effective counterpoint to the perception of the fairy tale as a predominantly heteronormative genre, and Michelle Reynolds, in ‘Decadent New Women in Jessie Marion King’s Illustrated Edition of Oscar Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates*’ emphasised the importance of illustration in providing a visual representation of alternative decadent womanhood and proto-feminist sexuality. In her close examination of King’s illustrations for Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Reynolds provided new insight into how King’s work represented a ‘fusion’ of her Scottish identity, Wilde’s Irish national identity, and her interest in the ‘New Woman’ figure.

After a magical lunch and a browse of the Snuggly Books book stall, the second panel, ‘Decadence, the occult, and folklore’ chaired by Alessandro Cabiati, opened with Damian Walsh’s paper, ‘Many secrets and many answers: the occult rituals of Wilde’s fairy tales’. Walsh’s paper explored themes of secrecy and mysticism in *A House of Pomegranates* and offered new insights into

Wilde's interest in the occult and the esoteric, which Walsh argued was evidenced in the symbolic language of his fairy tales. The significance of symbolism and mystery was also a key concern for James Dowthwaite in his paper, "‘Nous n'avons pu sortir du château enchanté’: The Use of the Barbe-bleu Story in Huysmans and Maeterlinck". As with Cabiati's earlier keynote, Dowthwaite outlined the pervasive interest in the 'Bluebeard' motif in the French decadent fairy tale, and traced the recurrence of the 'Bluebeard' figure in key decadent texts such as Huysmans' *Là-bas* (1891) and dramatic works such as Maeterlinck's *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* [*Ariadne and Bluebeard*] (1899). Dowthwaite identified fairy tale elements in the latter work, yet also suggested points where Maeterlinck deviated from the textual model circulated by Charles Perrault, for instance, in the ambiguity and dissembling of gender relations that results from the author's choice to depict the survival of Bluebeard's wives. Both *Là-bas* and *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* subvert the language of the fairy tale in order to ensure that the mystery and secrecy at the heart of each work remains intact.

Naomi Fukuzawa's 'Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* as Japanese Decadent Folklore' transported the audience from the French decadent fairy tales of Maeterlinck to the Japanese folk tales of Lafcadio Hearn (also known as Koizumo Yakumo). She presented Hearn as a fairy tale writer, and discussed the influence of the rise of Japanese modernity upon his interpretation of traditional folk tales. Fukuzawa identified how Hearn's prodigious work drew on various diverse cultural influences, including Hearn's own Greco-Irish background, to forge a relationship between Western fairy tales, ancient medieval Japanese tales, and decadent tropes. One memorable example was Hearn's reinterpretation of the Japanese 'Yuki-Onna' [Snow Woman] legend, which subverted a predatory nature spirit known as 'Yuki-Onna' into a decadent *femme fatale*. Fukuzawa's paper concluded with several compelling examples of modern filmic and televisual adaptations of Hearn's tales that fuse concepts of decadent Orientalist sexuality with folkloric horror and supernatural transformation, asserting Hearn's continuing significance for modern global perspectives on decadence studies.

Similarly, transformation was a key theme in Victor Rees' 'An Empire of Trees: B. Catling's *The Vorrh* as 21st-century decadent fairy tale'. Rees' presentation delved into how the novelist and performance artist B. Catling drew on the fairy tale's turn towards hybridity to construct the world of the 'Vorrh', a vast, uncharted forest that casts a supernatural pull over Essenwald, a small colonial town on its border. Rees underscored the decadent connotations of Catling's work, particularly in regard to the transformative, subversive potential of the aestheticization of nature, and the decline of empire – two prominent decadent concerns. Rees argued that Catling's construction of the Vorrh parallels the decadent treatment of the natural world as a source of monstrosity and excess but claimed that this emphasis on excess enables the decadent tradition and the fairy tale tradition to exist simultaneously. Rees' paper provided an ideal pathway through to the plenary roundtable, chaired by Lucia Boldrini, during which speakers and attendees reflected further on the ambiguities and complexities of the decadent fairy tale and its enduring subversive appeal. This engaging debate carried through into a drinks reception, and the perfect conclusion to a memorable and thought-provoking day.

The considerable interest in the symposium has resulted in a selected number of the presented papers being recorded and made available on the [British Association of Decadence Studies' website](#). A special issue of *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, dedicated to the decadent fairy tale and with the aim of reflecting and expanding upon the findings of the symposium, is planned for the future.