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The Decadent Fairy Tale: An Introduction by the Guest Editors

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How can a fairy tale be 'decadent'? The question itself highlights the seemingly oppositional nature of the fairy tale tradition and decadence. On first reading, the former appears to be organized around principles of conservatism, moralism and narrative resolution; the classic 'happily ever after' now synonymous with the numerous cinematic fairy tale adaptations led by Walt Disney. In literary fairy tales such as 'La belle au bois dormant' ['Sleeping Beauty in the Wood'] (1697) by Charles Perrault, the union of the prince and princess and their establishment of a domestic family life stands as a symbolic means to reinscribe a heteronormative social order threatened by an ogress. In 'La Belle et la Bête' ['Beauty and the Beast'] (1740) by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, the Beast's human transformation is catalysed by the love and compassion evinced by Beauty, highlighting the importance of her moral virtue. Nor is this drive towards upholding the heteronormative as a moral and social ideal solely confirmed to the French tradition of *contes des fées*. In the Grimms' 'Schneeweißchen und Rosenrot' ['Snow White and Rose Red'] (1815), the titular Snow White helps a bear who later magically transforms into a prince bridegroom, while her sister agrees to marry the prince's brother. In contrast, decadence is concerned with concepts of sexual dissidence, sexual contagion, and social degeneracy, with ideas and forms that result in visual and literary imagery of transgressive queer couplings, poisoned lineages, and families in states of decline. Where the fairy tale tradition is rooted in earlier, folk-tale narratives that often double as moral warnings, the decadent fascination with 'unhappily ever after' is clearly developed from the Gothic and important forebears such as Charles Baudelaire. In its latter, decadent form, the fairy tale's reliance on magical transformation and enchantment is subverted into occultism and forbidden desire for hybrid animal-human bodies – for example, in Vernon Lee's tale 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (1896). Impossibly beautiful and preserved figures such as Snow

White and Sleeping Beauty are replaced by forms that harness ambiguity in their capacity to be at once monstrous, othered, and beautiful, in a manner that forces us to recognize the similar otherness of such fairy tale figures.

However, viewing the fairy tale as a new, decadent form enables a consideration of the various ways in which they intersect and complement one another. Both rework the body in complex and innovative ways, and both overlap in their embrace of ambiguity and paradox, and their encouragement of creative expression and 'play'. Viewing the decadent fairy tale as an important sub-genre of literary and visual decadence casts doubt on the efficacy of the reliance on heteronormative marriage found in the classic fairy tale, and leads us to wonder: is the 'happily ever after' an illusion? Is the fairy tale, at its heart, a decadent form? For example, viewing the fairy tale through a decadent lens shines a light on the latent violence, both sexual and physical, and societal transgression present in these narratives. To return to a previous example of an apparently 'traditional' heteronormative fairy tale narrative, the earliest form of the 'Sleeping Beauty' narrative, *Il Pentamerone* [*The Pentameron*] (1634) by Giambattista Basile, contains a shocking incident of sexual violence. The 'Sleeping Beauty' figure, Talia, is raped and impregnated by an unknown prince. In Perrault's later version, Sleeping Beauty's mother-in-law is an ogress who attempts to eat not only Sleeping Beauty, but her own grandchildren. The themes of sexual violation and taboo female appetite in this tale in particular have been reinterpreted in several notable feminist postmodern retellings, by authors including Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, and Deirdre Sullivan.[1] Is the neat romantic resolution offered by the fairy tale form truly a reliable counterpoint to the taboo violence and transgression found in these tales, or does it merely serve to show the ambivalence of the fairy tale, the ubiquitous threat of such violence, and the continual need for the fairy tale to stage a moral defence?

As this special issue of *Volupté* demonstrates, many decadent fairy tales – including those by Oscar Wilde and Renée Vivien – respond to this challenge by further dismantling the façade of comfort and morality provided by the fairy tale, and offer us narratives that cement the fairy tale's

unique capacity for subversion and creative experimentation. Instead of baulking at the violence and sexuality contained in narratives by Perrault and the Grimms, the decadent writers, artists, and illustrators featured in this issue, including Wilde, Errol Le Cain, Aubrey Beardsley, Laurence Housman, and many others turned to the fairy tale in order to encode their own covert interpretations of queer identity and sexual difference. Such figures enthusiastically engaged with the ambivalence and ambiguity at work within the fairy tale to represent not only new and transgressive sexual possibilities, but the fluid and shifting nature of fin de siècle sexuality and gender identity itself. In this way, the decadent fairy tale offers us a fresh opportunity to reconsider the variety of representations of difference and desire during this time, and the unique ways in which the fairy tale form accommodated – and even facilitated – such representations.

That the fairy tale held a significant appeal for decadent writers can be seen in the fact that two of the writers whom Arthur Symons once identified as representative of the Symbolist faction of decadence, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Maurice Maeterlinck, both turned to the genre in interesting ways. First, Huysmans, whose first novel after his infamous *À rebours* (1884), *Là-Bas* (1891), is an extended treatment of contemporaneous satanism, the spiritual condition of modern France, and of the future of the novel form itself. Symons refers to this book as 'a study in the hysteria and mystical corruption of contemporary Black Magic'.[2] *Là-Bas,* however, hinges on the image of a historical figure transformed into a fairy tale character: the mass murderer, Gilles de Rais, who was identified in the late nineteenth century with the 'Bluebeard' myth (most commonly known from its inclusion amongst Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye*, 1697). This link has been called into significant doubt, and the protagonist of *Là-Bas,* the historian Durtal, who is writing a realistic, graphic biography of Gilles de Rais, challenges it himself in one passage.[3] Nevertheless, Huysmans – via Durtal – draws on the potent effect of the image of Bluebeard in order to escape the drudgery of everyday life and of literary naturalism. For example, we find Durtal described thus in the second chapter:

> Il commença de vivre dans le pacifiant mépris des alentours, s'organisa une existence loin du brouhaha des lettres, se cloîtra mentalement, pour tout dire, dans le château de Tiffauges auprès de Barbe-Bleue et il vécut en parfait accord, presque en coquetterie, avec ce monstre.[4]
>
> [He affected a tolerant indifference towards his actual surroundings, reorganized his social life out of reach of the hustle and bustle of the literary world, mentally cloistering himself, so to speak, in the Château de Tiffauges with Bluebeard, the ogre of the fifteenth century, with whom he lived in perfect, almost flirtatious accord.][5]

While Durtal may call the link between Perrault's fairy tale and Gilles de Rais into question, any attempt at demythologizing fails and, over the course of the novel, he discovers a spiritual world filled with horrors, one requiring a more supernatural approach. Both aesthetically and spiritually, the transformations of history and of the folk tale into the literary genre of the fairy tale cannot be dismissed as a loss of reality; rather, it captures something of hidden realities, realities an age of decadence apparently exposes.

Maurice Maeterlinck also turned to the Bluebeard myth, writing his own version of the fairy tale in the play, *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* in 1899. Maeterlinck is a writer Symons identifies with terror, with the cultivation of an art of 'atmosphere', one which

> outlines change and become mysterious, in which a word quietly uttered makes one start, in which all one's mental activity becomes concentrated on something one knows not what, something slow, creeping, terrifying, which comes nearer and nearer, an impending nightmare.[6]

Certainly this is evident in *Ariane et Barbe-bleue,* even if his version of the fairy tale is not the best known of his works. There is a summative quality to the play, the culmination of an aesthetic vision of mystery and terror, developed in plays such as *La Princesse Maleine* (1889) and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893), with their doom-laden, decayed atmospheres, or his haunting pieces written for the marionette theatre, such as *Intérieur* (1894) or *La Mort de Tintagiles* (1894). This summation can be seen in the fact that Bluebeard's former wives, locked away in the darkness in a dungeon beneath his castle, are named after the tragic heroines of his plays: Mélisande, Ygraine, Bellangère, Alladine, and Sélysette all appear in his most celebrated works of the fin de siècle.[7] In *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*, Maeterlinck reverses his usual dramatic ending. His plays usually end with a terrifying ambiguity

that either shows a meaningless death or heavily implies one; his fairy tale ends with meaningless life. Ariane, his latest victim, frees Bluebeard's wives, and confronts the monster himself, but instead of killing him, simply leaves him in a dishevelled and beaten state, flinging the doors to his castle open. The other five, however, seemingly choose to remain, though the play ends in stasis. Bernard Miall's (deeply flawed) translation renders the ending so:

> ARDIANE (embracing her in turn, and softly disengaging herself, in tears)
> You too remain,
> Alladine! O be happy! And farewell. […]
>
> *She goes out hastily, followed by the NURSE. The five women look at one another and at BARBE BLEUE, who slowly raises his head. BELLANGÈRE and YGRAINE shrug their shoulders, and go to dose the door. Silence.*
>
> THE CURTAIN FALLS.[8]

What was it that Maeterlinck saw in Perrault's figure of the *Barbe-bleue* that inspired such a consummative, if necessarily vague, vision? A chance, perhaps, for a refined decadence: the figure of the monster, pathetic and powerful at once, holding – weakly – on to his victims, victims that, after all, were made up of Maeterlinck's own heroines. In the decayed castle, Maeterlinck offers us a disturbing portrait of monstrosity, one both real in its weakness and estranging in its power. The world of Maeterlinck's marionettes and his fairy-tale characters accords with Perrault's worlds and with the tempting figurative suggestions of Gilles de Rais as Bluebeard because of the opportunity to move beyond the habitual world of bourgeois sensibility, with its too stale sense of reality. Fairy tales offered Huysmans and Maeterlinck a serious opportunity for rethinking the nature of spiritual reality.

This sense of opportunity is further extended to the range of criticism and creative works within this issue, which is the first academic journal issue of its kind to explore the significance of the decadent fairy tale. Furthermore, while recent symposia and conferences have attested to the presence of transgressive elements at work in the fairy tale, this issue follows on from the success of the *Decadence and the Fairy Tale* symposium, held at Goldsmiths on 24 March 2023, which was the first symposium focused solely on the topic of the decadent fairy tale.[9] It provided significant

examples of both contemporary and modern decadent fairy tales, and focused on discussing the connections between the decadent tradition, occultism, folklore, and literature, and important interpretations of gender fluidity, deviance, and sexuality at work in the decadent fairy tale. The new and innovative work gathered in this issue expands on the topics raised in the rich and fascinating papers presented at the symposium, which attracted scholars, postgraduates, academics and external researchers from across Europe.

Like the attendees of the conference which inspired it, the contributors to this special issue offer a range of topics spanning the late nineteenth century and the century and a half since then. They also cover a variety of locations, including England and France, central and southern Europe, Asia, and Japan. They do not provide an answer to the question 'what is the decadent fairy tale?'. Such questions are often unprofitable and are particularly so in the case of a field of study as necessarily diffuse, complex, and varied as decadence. Instead, they offer far more useful, concrete instances of how the fairy tale might appear in a decadent mode, and how decadent writing approaches the genre of the fairy tale. This sense of approach, exploratory, somewhat shadowed by the sense of mysterious attraction that accompanies both senses of decadence and the formal appeal of the fairy tale as genre is characteristic of what me might – but perhaps only might – call the decadent fairy tale.

As the fairy tale genre has undergone numerous transformations throughout its long history, shifting from oral traditions to literary conventions, its modern iterations, from the fin de siècle to today, often reflect on the past. For this reason, we have decided to structure the critical articles in this issue in reverse chronological order, capturing the sense of retrospective transformation that is at the heart of the modern fairy tale. We have also chosen to conclude the critical section with two articles which reflect both the importance of France, as the centre of the *conte de fees*, and the importance of cross-cultural encounters in the movement of the fairy tale through time and place.

A backwards-looking, cross-cultural encounter opens this issue, in the form of Roslyn Irving's treatment of A. S. Byatt's orientalized fairy tale, 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' (1994), the titular story of Byatt's collection of fairy stories. Nominally an east-west, romantic encounter between an English academic and a djinn in Ankara, Irving, however, shifts the grounds of interpretation away from orientalism proper to a decadent notion of it. It is a shared sense of history, and of the decadent sense of a collapsed empire, she argues, that draws Britain and Türkiye together in the story; the sense of indulging in the collapse, of the collapse as a sensual, perhaps eroticizing event. Byatt thus provides a contemporary continuation of decadent affordances, particularly in the forms of the fairy tale genre, developed, like the story of the djinn's life, across the centuries.

Continuing to move back through time, Lina Vekeman's essay concerns Errol Le Cain's 1977 illustrations of Walter Pater's translation of Apuleius' version of the Cupid and Psyche story, which is embedded in the fifth chapter of Pater's only completed novel, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). While 'Cupid and Psyche' might not be considered a fairy tale in the *contes de fées* tradition, its relation to the older tradition of the fable ties it to an expanded notion of what fairy tales might be, and what we might consider as their literary history. Vekeman offers a discussion which thus ranges across literary and artistic history: from ancient Rome to Pater's fin de siècle translation to Cain's Beardsleyesque illustrations. The persistence and recovery of both story and style is at the heart of this essay, and for this reason it opens a special issue which is concerned with the relation of both.

Di Cotofan Wu explores the decadent dimensions of the fairy tale in a different literary context: the Japanese writer Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, who, like many of the writers and artists discussed in this issue, is a figure associated with the sensual and erotic elements of decadence. Tanizaki holds a considerable reputation in the West but, as Wu points out, his fairy tales have been largely neglected, and were only recently translated into English in 2023. Wu explores Tanizaki's 1917 story, 'The Siren's Lament' in the context of a Wildean decadence to which it is often understood

to respond, but to this she adds a uniquely Japanese form of decadence, 'demonism'. This provides the context for a trans-cultural, cosmopolitan decadence – something which Matthew Potolsky and Stefano Evangelista have demonstrated was a cornerstone of decadent literature and arts.[10]

From the grandeur of cosmopolitanism to the intimacies of private gardens, Samuel Love offers a no less sensual portrait of decadence and the fairy tale in his discussion of the faun in Laurence Housman's work. Love shows how Housman uses the figure of the faun in the garden, a figure which was somewhat in vogue in the fin de siècle, to symbolize both a personal, aesthetic vision of beauty and, second, to elicit greater understanding and tolerance for homosexual passion. It is primarily Housman's illustrations that are under discussion, and Love outlines the ways in which the sensual beauty of their forms is meant to evoke that understanding and tolerance. Fairyland was thus a space of aesthetic and moral vision, and a place for both intimate understanding and the rigour of a political conviction. And yet, like the garden which serves as the private fairyland itself, it is a space at odds, at times, with a broader public.

Complexity, particularly of relations caught between hidden alcoves and public displays, is also at the heart of T. N. Hutchinson's discussion of Beardsley's little-discussed, unfinished pornographic novel, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (1907). Beardsley, Hutchinson claims, is primarily, but by no means exclusively, concerned with a feature of fairy tales which distinguishes it from the oral tradition of the folk tale: self-reflexive treatment of itself as an aesthetic object. Hutchinson demonstrates that Beardsley draws constant attention to the fictionality and artificiality of the story as artwork throughout *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. We might see this as reflective of a decadent concern not only with artificiality but with irreverence, playful sensuality, and a distinction of distancing irony, all qualities we associate readily with Beardsley's contribution to the visual arts; we must attend to the same qualities, Hutchinson argues, in his writing.

We should, of course, never forget the intended audience of many, if not even most, fairy tales, namely the child. This is the subject of Katie Nunnery's discussion of Wilde's fairy tales. Nunnery claims that many readers have overlooked the demands that Wilde makes of children in

offering them his morally and aesthetically complex stories. There is the danger with Wilde's fairy tales that we might assume that such complexity – a complexity drawn from the affordances of decadence – cannot really be for children. There is, equally, a danger that, in assuming that if the audience actually is children, that they therefore have a deceptive simplicity. Nunnery challenges this assumption by assuming, first, that children are capable of grasping the aesthetic and moral complexity, and the relation between the aesthetic and moral, in the stories, and, second, that Wilde appeals to a far more socially-engaged child than many representations of the late Victorian era conceive.

We then move to Francophone literature, the site of the fairy tale's establishment as a genre in the European literary imagination. If Housman, Beardsley, and Wilde, for example, had to negotiate between public and personal, the Lithuanian writer Oskar Miłosz (Oscar Vladislas de Lubicz Miłosz) had to negotiate between the personal and (at least) two different publics. Ian T. Gwin outlines the life and work of a Francophone writer who was born into Polish-Lithuanian aristocratic stock, and who then went on to represent the nascent Lithuanian Republic at the League of Nations. This complex, and complicated, nation question is something that Gwin explores in the context of Miłosz's adaptation of an old Lithuanian folk tale into a French, literary *conte de fées*. Thus, this is also a negotiation of forms, a bringing together of different media, the oral (the acoustic), and the literary genre (the written, the stylized). More than this, however, the fairy tale in this context is the working out of personal and political drama, as well as the assertion of a national culture by one who bore a difficult relationship to it. Miłosz is a striking example of the personal and political significance of stories, and his fairy tale demonstrates this consummately.

The fairy tale's capacity for imaginative reinvention and adaptation is also reflected in the variety of original creative works featured in this issue. 'Charming', an innovative object-poem by Julia Biggs, brings 'Prince Charming' (1905), a prose piece by Vivien into dialogue with Vivien's own earlier photographic self-fashioning as a dandified 'Prince Charming' figure. Biggs's reworking of these two mediums – text and photograph – explores the importance of queer desire, sexual

transgression, and gender fluidity in Vivien's poetry and prose, and their role in forming her personal identity. Claire Cunningham's short fiction 'La Serre' is a decadent reimagining of the Grimms' 'Die zertanzten Schuhe' (1815), translated as 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses', that refigures the original tale's examination of excessive dance into a bacchanalia of transgressive desire and hedonism. In 'La Serre', an underground ballet theatre and a secret glass-walled studio become the loci of sensory intoxication and eroticized female violence, reminding the reader of the decadent preoccupation with the figure of the female performer and dancer, and the permissive aspects of decadent performance spaces: within the decadent imagination, the ballet theatre, dance stage, and studio are transformed into spaces where other, more transgressive, identities can be adopted and explored away from conservative moralism or critique. Further to Nunnery's critical examination of the significance of the Wildean child, this issue also features 'Oscar, Nightingale, Rose' by Margaret D. Stetz, a poetic engagement with Wilde's fairy tales, and an interrogation of Wilde's own fairy-tale like 'transformation' from the height of fin de siècle literary society to his disastrous love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas (also known as 'Bosie') to public shame and incarceration. This evocative poem reflects upon these seismic events in Wilde's life and the memorable and melancholy imagery of his fairy tales, in particular drawing upon Wilde's 'The Nightingale and the Rose' (1888) to reflect upon the public indifference experienced by Wilde and the scorn of both aestheticism and homoerotic love following his trial and imprisonment, and the pain of clandestine queer desire that runs throughout many of Wilde's fairy tales,

In addition, we are pleased to feature a new translation of Carl Einstein's 'Leda' by Frank Krause. As with the underground space of sexual dissidence explored in 'La Serre', 'Leda' also conjures up a provocative erotic fantasia that explores the consequences of expressing forbidden or taboo sexuality. In particular, the subversive style, imagery, and examination of sexual depravity in 'Leda' parallels Beardsley's 'The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser', a text placed in conversation with the fairy tale by Hutchinson. Not only does this new translation of Einstein's work explore

how the text functions as a parody of the decadent fairy tale, the text also satirises the fin-de-siècle culture of decadent materialism and artifice.

[1] See Anne Sexton, 'Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)', in *Transformations* (1971), included in *The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, ed. by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Virago, 1991), pp. 169-76; Angela Carter, 'The Lady of the House of Love', in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), included in Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (Vintage, 1996), pp. 195-209; and Deirdre Sullivan, 'Waking Beauty' in *Tangleweed and Brine* (Soft Island, 2018), pp. 158-66;

[2] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* 87 (November 1893), pp. 858-67 (p. 866).

[3] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *The Damned* [*Là-Bas*], trans. by Terry Hale (Penguin, 2001), p. 153.

[4] Ibid., p. 16.

[5] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (Tresse & Stock, 1895), pp. 24-25

[6] Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 864.

[7] Mélisande is from *Pelléas et Mélisande,* Ygraine and Bellangère from *La Mort de Tintagiles*, Alladine from *Alladine et Palomides* (1894), and Sélysette from *Aglavaine et Sélysette* (1896).

[8] Maurice Maeterlinck, *Sister Beatrice and Ardiane & Barbe Bleue*: *Two Plays*, trans. by Bernard Miall (G. Allen, 1901), p. 186.

[9] 'Decadence and the Fairy Tale', one-day symposium at Goldsmiths, University of London, on 23 March 2023. <https://bads.gold.ac.uk/decadentfairytale> [accessed 6 January 2026].

[10] See Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (University Pennsylvania Press, 2012), and Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English* Fin de Siècle: *Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 2021).