volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 2

Winter 2025

'[I]n the midst of fierce forces': Orientalizing Decadence in A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994)

Roslyn Joy Irving

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 December 2025

Date of Publication: 31 December 2025

Citation: Roslyn Joy Irving, "'[I]n the midst of fierce forces": Orientalizing Decadence in A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.2 (2025), pp. 1-18.

volupte.gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

'[I]n the midst of fierce forces': Orientalizing Decadence in A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994)

Roslyn Joy Irving

University of Mainz

The closing and titular novella in A. S. Byatt's collection of five fairy stories, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), introduces an unlikely decadent heroine, the narratologist Gillian Perholt, 'an unprecedented being, a woman with porcelain-crowned teeth, laser-corrected vision, her own store of money, her own life and field of power'.[1] The fairy tale plays with the tropes of the *1001 Nights* (also referred to as *The Arabian Nights*), and wish-fulfilling lamps (found in associated tales such as 'Aladdin'), as Gillian finds a glass bottle containing a djinn in an Istanbul market. The world in Byatt's novella is one she understood and constructed through a variety of sources, by reading *The Arabian Nights* and undertaking academic research related to the tales, and through dialogue with fellow writers, notably the Turkish poet Cevat Çapan (pp. 279-80). Gillian's encounter with the 'Oriental Daimon', largely staged in her hotel room, involves the granting of three wishes: one for Gillian's body to be restored to a younger version of herself; another, that the djinn might fall in love with her; and a third, gifted back to djinn for his freedom (p. 206). It also involves the djinn telling the Romance of his multi-millennia-long history, including his periods of confinement, his rivalry with Suleiman, and more significantly his great loves the Queen of Sheba and Zefir. The story closes with the djinn gaining his freedom and Gillian's ongoing successful career in academia, with the promise her lover will occasionally visit her, being no longer bound to the glass bottle. In the article that follows, I will trace the ways in which Byatt's fairy tale might be read through a decadent critical lens with cross-cultural implications.

The tale begins with brilliancy: the thrill of an aeroplane taking off as Gillian, '[i]n the midst of fierce forces', muses on John Milton and the idea of '[f]loating redundant' (p. 98). Far from being redundant, moments of stillness reveal Gillian's disinclination for nothingness, her mind, it seems, is filled up with questions of what her floating might entail both as a woman and as an

academic invested in the literary works of great poets and storytellers. There are several bids for freedom in the opening sequence: the body liberated from the ground, the wanderings of the mind, and the history of the protagonist at liberty to travel to conferences around the world as her children are grown up and she is now divorced. The story really begins at a conference in Ankara, where Gillian, a career academic, presents on Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Patient Griselda', a paper included in full in the book. As a speaker she favours narrative, retelling Chaucer's tale in modern English, detailing the life of a woman who endures the abuses of her husband, a man who first takes her children (and makes her believe he has killed them) and later dissolves their marriage, only to reveal that their children are alive and well and that his wife has duly proven her commitment to him by agreeing to his demands. Gillian interrupts her narration only to draw connections between Griselda and other women in the English literary canon, such as Hermione in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, and is herself interrupted by a figment of her imagination.

During her paper, Gillian is distracted by a vision, the manifestation of a devastated being designed to parallel Griselda, and perhaps even Gillian herself:

> she saw a cavernous form, a huge, female form, with a veiled head bowed above emptiness and long slack-sinewed arms, hanging loosely around emptiness, and a draped, cowled garment ruffling over the windy vacuum of nothing, a thing banal in its conventional awfulness, […] it was many colours, and all of them grey, grey. (p. 118)

This is the storyteller's gift. She is able to conceive of the subjects of her tales as immaterial beings before her, unseen by others. These lines, which do little to progress Byatt's plot, are essential in articulating something of the writer's style: digression and description replete with symbols. Byatt's concern is pleasure, its absence, and, as I will argue, a decadent falling away. Out of 'emptiness' Byatt establishes what might be the fate of a 'patient' woman: a disproportionate figure, characterized by banality, or 'grey, grey'. At the close of Gillian's talk, she asserts that 'the stories of women's lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies' (p. 121).[2] One might also trace parallels between this scene and images, both in art (particularly sculptures of women) and in

literature, of veiled women in the nineteenth century. As Teresa A. Goddu points out in her reading of American Gothic works, such a figure has a 'dual role as the soul transcending the market economy and the slave imprisoned in it'.[3] Gillian is held prisoner herself before the image, compelled to witness and testify, at the very least, to the transactions of women's stories.

Recent discourse on *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* has largely focused on Byatt's redevelopment and incorporation of fairy tales and myth as forms, her feminist impetus, and the ways the collection is essentially 'postmodern'.[4] Take, for example, Kathleen Renk's criticism of the limited presentation of feminism in the final novella, in which, the critic suggests, Gillian is 'concerned with her individual rights, autonomy, and self-fulfilment'.[5] Of the use of an 'erotic and exoticized djinn', telling stories about 'harems and sultans', Renk levels an accusation of 'blatant orientalism'. The story does not do the work of protecting women – as found in the *1001 Nights*, which served as Byatt's inspiration – but instead, if we are to follow the accusation of Orientalism, repeatedly and programmatically sacrifices Eastern women.[6] Thus, Renk concludes, 'Byatt has created a myopic orientalized, first-world feminist point of view that relies heavily on the tenets of liberal feminism, ignoring how gender as "fate" is shaped by national history, religious affiliation and the material conditions of women's lives'.[7] Byatt's acknowledgement at the end of the 1995 Vintage edition, however, might tell a different story, as the author points to her close engagement with Turkish stories of the djinn, Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994), and various Turkish verse. Such a range of references is at least suggestive of an effort to avoid Orientalist tropes. Renk's reading forms a sharp contrast to Defne Çizakça's (admittedly brief) discussion of the novella as an 'anti-tale' that not only resists more familiar conventions around women in fairy stories but also ensures that the East has space to 'speak', and to do so 'voluntar[ily]'. Çizakça suggests that the 'equal' relationship forged between the djinn and Gillian ensures that the so-called Orient is 'unobjectified'.[8] But perhaps that is because the 'objectification' of the 'Orient' was not really Byatt's aim for the novella in the first place. In the interaction between the

supernatural and the academic, I suggest that Byatt is exploring a desire to engage in different forms of aesthetic experience.

While there have been some efforts by scholars to connect Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) with decadence,[9] it is not necessarily a tradition with which the writer is usually associated. In descriptive material accompanying an interview with Byatt, Sam Leith terms the author a 'disciple' of George Eliot – implying a relationship with realism.[10] But what would it mean to take *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* as a decadent work, set in Türkiye and England (the historical centres of two recently dissolved Empires, Ottoman and British); one that is occupied by the artistry of storytelling, and plays with symbolism and pleasure-seeking? In what follows, I will explore the ways in which Byatt's heroine, the setting, and the histories bound up in the sexual encounter between the djinn and the academic, render this novella a decadent work.

It is apropos to briefly mention the ways in which Byatt has, in interviews and essays, invited a consideration of decadence in an academic sense into discussions of her work, tastes and method. For example, commenting on *The Children's Book* (2009), she states, 'I don't understand why, in my work, writing is always so dangerous. It's very destructive. People who write books are destroyers.'[11] Dangerous writing, or at least storytelling, is a leitmotif in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*: an art form and mechanism designed to disorientate and disturb. It appears to be irresistible, rather than intentional, for Byatt. In the novella, Gillian's engagement with the djinn configures her own falling away. As Byatt puts it in her collection *On Histories and Stories* (2001),

> I knew when I began that the Djinn himself figured both death as an invigorating force, and also the passion for reading tales. […] The Djinn is immortal, as the tales are. At one point my heroine (who has an Alice-in-Wonderland English empirical stubbornness) realises that both the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus and the Djinn are more real than she herself, in her mortal and fragile body.[12]

This realization is articulated in the keynote paper Gillian delivers close to the end of the novella, in which she states that '[w]hen we imagine happy-ever-after we imagine works of art' (p. 266). Byatt's examples of a vital and permanent kind of happiness are deliberate, drawn from everyday objects – 'a family photograph' and a snow globe – and high art: 'a Gainsborough lady and her

children in an English meadow under a tree' (p. 266). The novella is circumspect about any sense of permanence outside of art: 'It was Oscar Wilde's genius to make the human being and the work of art change places' (p. 266). And as Susan Sellers puts it, Gillian's 'decision to give her third wish to the djinn indicates both her acceptance of […mortality] and her faith in the power he does represent: that of art, through which human beings may briefly transcend their fate'.[13] High art is a vestige of the past and a site through which the protagonist might dream, but the state of permanence accomplished in fiction is the preserve of the imagination and the djinn.

Sellers's reading of *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, while not focused on decadence, does explore the effects of pastness and language. Referencing both Mikhail Bakhtin's 'double-voice' and a Freudian interest in the notion of jokes and desire, Sellers demonstrates the importance of 'play' in storytelling,[14] and traces the ways in which definitions slip.[15] Most relevant for my discussion however, is Sellers's passing comment that, 'Gillian – djilyan's – incarnation of her djinn enables her to recover a self-image she is happy with and retain her childish faith in the power of art'.[16] Faith in art might be inherently decadent, a fundamental belief that something transformative remains in human creativity, in fancy. This need not be 'childish' but could instead be thought of as a lifelong commitment. Is it inherently childish to believe that cultural products are powerful, beautiful and moving, or only childish because of the consistency of Gillian's responsiveness to art (as storytelling) from childhood into her adult life?

Discussing the authors she admires, Byatt states, 'I wish there to be a literary world in which people are not writing books only about people's feelings. If you notice, all the ones I like write also about ideas.'[17] It is from this I take my lead in understanding *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* as a work of decadence. The story, despite following one protagonist and the life she has devoted to tracing and telling stories, is not so much invested in the feelings of the characters than it is in the question of art. Indeed, despite considering the role of women and their experiences of ageing and marriage, from beginning to end we are reminded of Gillian's satisfaction with her life and her relative independence. As her material circumstances are little changed by her encounter

with the djinn, the protagonist, by virtue of her profession, allows Byatt instead to engage in an almost academic discourse around art and by extension decadence. This too is in keeping with Byatt's wider body of work, which as Elizabeth Hicks demonstrates, consistently engages with ekphrasis and 'still-life'.[18] Without labouring the point, Byatt understood writing in terms of art: a 'pleasure', 'endlessly inventive', even sculpted.[19] It is through this aesthetic foundation that I will continue my discussion of *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*.

Setting and the Continuing Question of Orientalism

If decadence grew out of a concern with the falling away of culture and by extension of empire, then to read Byatt's novella as a decadent work requires at least some consideration of her choice of settings. It is significant that 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' occupies the spaces of former empires. Katharina Herold-Zanker's *Decadence and Orientalism in England and Germany, 1880-1920: 'The Indispensable East'* (2024) demonstrates that Orientalism (now an analytical frame) and decadence are overlapping critical concepts and points of aesthetic contact. Both explore 'a paradoxical dynamic of simultaneous attraction and repulsion by a subject, its objectification through aestheticization, and the principle of "othering"'.[20] Reading Arthur Symons's and Violet Fane's writings on Istanbul, Herold-Zanker suggests both employ 'orientalist decadences' as 'aesthetic shields of resistance against a modern world in disarray, a world which increasingly seemed to lose its constancies such as Europe's empires'.[21] For Byatt, writing at the end of the twentieth century, such constancies had fully dissolved, and aesthetic resemblances between post-imperial spaces constitute a new kind of decadence for the author.

The first of the dissolved imperial settings, repeatedly mentioned rather than described at length, is Britain. Gillian's home in Primrose Hill is the image of a fractured middle-class domesticity. Prior to the action of the novella, it seems to have been a space of transience – her children have left and her husband has moved out and proposed divorce following an affair. It is at this moment that the house, a site of absence and nostalgia, transforms. Gillian's 'imagined' grief

is immediately interrupted by the sunlight: 'the walls of the study were a cheerful golden colour, and she saw the room fill up with golden light and felt full of lightness, happiness and purpose'. One could read this according to 'feeling', as one is invited to consider Gillian a 'prisoner bursting chains and coming blinking out of the dungeon' (pp. 103-04) but, following Byatt's own literary taste, we might consider the domestic space in England and its reinvention after a divorce in terms of 'ideas'.[22] Following a moment of decline, the breakdown of a marriage, the scene is recoloured in gold and the home is once again vibrant and Gillian's to fully claim. This she undertakes by bringing back objects from her travels, such as a tapestry of a tree of life she finds in a market in Istanbul. Decadence might play with 'falling away' but rather tellingly, in the case of Byatt's work at least, it demonstrates what might be allowed to fall and be rendered more beautiful as a result.

A far more confronting moment of British imperial tension occurs in the 'Haghia [*sic*] Sophia', in Istanbul. Accompanied by her friend and fellow narratologist Orhan Rifat, Gillian encounters a Muslim family from Pakistan on a pilgrimage. The space attests to a long, even ancient history, as 'church and mosque and modern museum', a veritable 'meeting-place of cultures', 'exhausted by battle and pillage and religious rage' (pp. 172-73). Here, Orhan translates a guidebook for the father of the family, which results in a candid conversation, and subsequently a pointed critique of what Britain constitutes, from a man who might be taken to represent the voice of the formerly colonized. Istanbul is a space of post-imperial reckoning in which western Europe, and Britain in particular, is characterized as 'Evil, decadent, and sliding into darkness' (p. 175). Gillian is a representative of England and Englishness.[23] For the pilgrim she is the displaced embodiment of London, 'a sewer of decay', and a representative of the ideals of the Commonwealth, which he terms 'a dead body, putrefying and shrivelling away to nothing' (p. 177). Thus, a multiplicity of decadent tropes are available in the novella. Gillian, excited by the possibility of seeing 'the Golden Horn, the Bosphorus and the shores of Europe and Asia face to face' (p. 97), in other words of living out a historical tension around culture and empires, is uncomfortable when this becomes pressingly contemporary and personal.

Ayşe Naz Bulamur argues that Istanbul occupies the space of fairy tale in the novella, partly because Gillian can identify too much of 'home' in Ankara: 'Gillian's conflation of Ankara with Yorkshire suggests that the former is not unfamiliar, different, Oriental enough to produce sexual fantasies with supernatural daemons'.[24] Bulamur continues, '[i]t is in Istanbul, not in Ankara, after all, that nineteenth-century European travelers [*sic*] such as Edmondo De Amicis saw the phantoms of the Arabian Nights' characters pass before their eyes'.[25] Marina Warner points out that 'Orientalising' functions to produce a kind of liberty, often read as erotic, but really encompassing 'enjoy[ment in] the irrational, the imaginary and the fraudulent', to which I might add, the artistic.[26] Furthermore, Warner suggests, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalist commentaries 'reveal inquisitiveness about the exact means of wealth production and military effectiveness in the Ottoman empire. They are examining the success of a formidable rival'.[27] Returning to the resemblances which Bulamur characterizes as problematically Orientalist, more could be done to understand Gillian as a representative of Britain visiting the seat of another former empire, the Ottoman. Hence, the novella configures imperial powers coming face to face after their respective declines in the twentieth century. Following Warner, perhaps Byatt's writing reveals an 'inquisitiveness' around the decaying aesthetics of a fellow former empire, one whose history is made accessible through the djinn. While Byatt might see Istanbul as the appropriate space to construct fairy tales, it is not just because of an Orientalist association with the *1001 Nights*, but also because Türkiye in the novella is conceived as a decadent post-Imperial space not so different from Britain itself.[28] Indeed, Byatt goes to some effort to bring together Europe and Asia, not merely geographically but also historically and artistically, and not always comfortably. Hence, Gillian can find Yorkshire in Ankara, and the criticism and testimony of a presumably postcolonial subject of the British Empire in the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

Where Orientalist excesses are found, they are caught up in questions of artistry, beauty, and post-imperial worlds. Gillian's hotel, for instance, is emblematic of a post-Ottoman Türkiye. She stays in the 'Peri Palas Hotel, which was not the most famous Pera Palas, in the old European

city across the Golden Horn, but a new hotel' (p. 168). Byatt repeatedly reminds the reader of the tension between Europe and Asia embodied in the image of Istanbul and the ways in which this is sustained. The name of the hotel 'Peri Palas' [Fairy Palace], as Bulamur suggests, only reinforces the protagonist's understanding of Istanbul as a fantastic space appropriate to living out a fairy tale.[29] One should take seriously the implied history of Orientalism caught up in Byatt's writing of Türkiye. Edward Said considers Britain's and France's implicit and explicit designs for the future of Türkiye during the First World War as a significant moment of 'convergence between latent Orientalist doctrine and manifest Orientalist experience'. In the early twentieth century and in the face of a rapidly changing Europe, Said claims, 'Asiatic Turkey was being surveyed by Britain and France for its dismemberment'.[30] The perceived break between Europe and Asia manifested in and through Türkiye is topographical as much as ideological and externally imposed – found in maps from the Middle Ages to the present day, at the heart of Istanbul, at the heart of the space in which Byatt sets her novella.

To better illustrate the tension underlying the setting of the novella, I include here a fifteenth-century map of Constantinopolis and Pera, which seems to be conjured in the new/old designation of the Pera Palas/Peri Palas. It is a map of the city divided into parts, perhaps representing two cultures [fig. 1]. Fairy tales are so often associated with the medieval, and the image of a map such as this aptly constructs the kind of far-away land Gillian imagines as she flies to Türkiye. The hotel in the novel, despite its newness, is a celebration of the artistry and architectures for which Türkiye has been renowned for centuries: 'tiled fountains', vibrant hues, 'carpets woven with abundant silky flowers in the small sitting rooms and writing rooms' (pp. 168-69).

Türkiye is a literary and aesthetic space for the protagonist, and for Byatt. But it is not, I would argue, one of stagnation or isolation, which so often feature in Orientalist discourse.[31] Even the description of the 'silky translucent white-gold curtains' of the hotel might parallel the earlier goldenness of Gillian's home in England – both become spaces for the protagonist's pleasure.

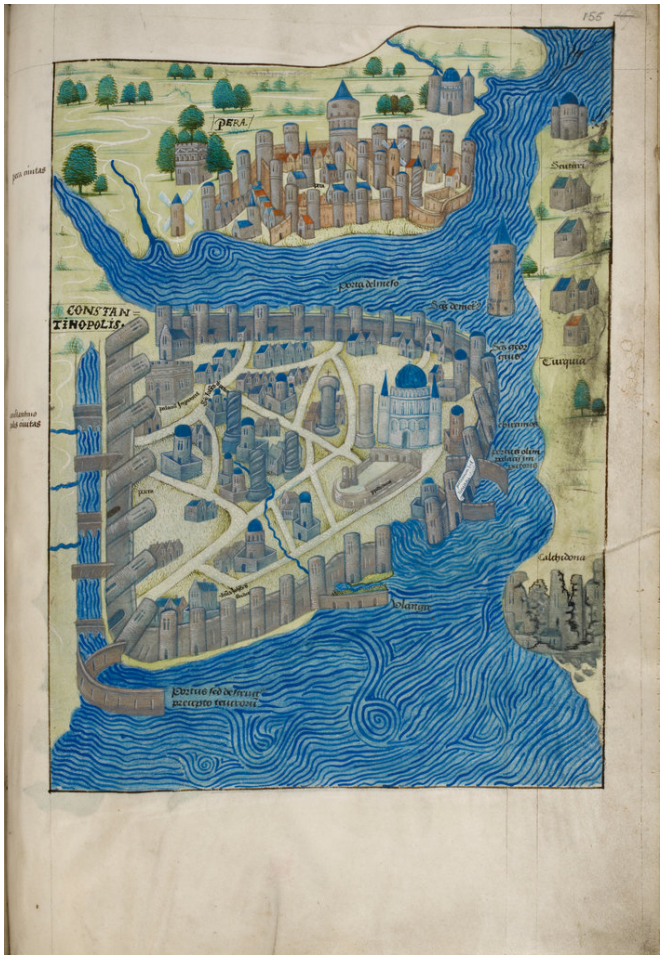

Fig. 1: Map of Constantinopolis and Pera dated ca. 1485, Liber insularum Cycladum
© British Library Board, Arundel 93, f.155

Decadence and Djinns

Özen Nergis Dolcerocca has recently written about the ways in which decadence manifested in Türkiye in the late nineteenth century, as Ottoman aesthetics met with largely French decadent impulses. The 'avant-garde journal Servet-i-Fünun', Dolcerocca contends, was a meeting place of 'fin-de-siècle decadent motifs, styles, and themes [and] an uncompromisingly elaborate language in an outmoded and lofty linguistic register' characteristic of earlier Turkish writing.[32] Dolcerocca's work is important in demonstrating that decadence itself has a place in the literary culture and history of Türkiye and that such aesthetic modes are not monolithic and nor do they belong

exclusively to Western Europe and Northern America. With this in mind, one might read Byatt's decadent constructions as sensitive to a shared aesthetic agenda.

While in Izmir, Gillian finds herself in the society of great thinkers, 'scholars and writers, journalists and students', where she hears a recitation of 'Göksu' by Faruk Nafiz Çamlibel (two stanzas of which are printed in the text). Subsequently, in the market, while purchasing the Çesm-i bülbül [Nightingale's Eye] glassware that is later revealed to house the djinn, Byatt offers 'Evening' by Ahmet Haşim. The translated verse was minorly altered for the book by Byatt, with 'river' given in the singular rather than the plural form, and the word 'pearl' replaced with 'bead'. Both poems are taken from the 'Modern Poetry 1923-75' section of *The Penguin Book of Turkish Verse*, a slightly later period than the 'avant-garde' decadent poetics Dolcerocca discusses but signalling a post-Ottoman frame.[33] Verse is used by Byatt to give a sense of Türkiye's aesthetic history, captured in the nightingale from which the glass takes its name, and to demonstrate her own writerly commitment to pulling on those same aesthetic threads. Gillian's attraction to the bottle is explained simply: 'I must have this. Because the word and the thing don't quite match, and I love both of them' (p. 184). There is, I would suggest, a parallel between the art of the glass, and the characteristics Dolcerocca attributes to the emergence of decadence in Türkiye, in which tradition met with a newfound 'estrangement' and produced an 'acute sense of melancholy, ennui, and entrapment, conveyed by means of a self-enclosed, autotelic structure'.[34] Gillian appreciates the glass first and foremost because it is beautiful and jarring, and it ultimately becomes a symbol of the djinn's entrapment. Gillian's purchases at the market in Istanbul might result from a 'European fascination with the orient' as Bulamur claims,[35] but might also be taken as a decadent appreciation of art.

It is in the interaction with the djinn that the story manifestly becomes a decadent fairy tale rather than a travel narrative. This is partly because it is a sexual encounter: from heating and cleaning the bottle under blood-temperature water until it 'leap[s] in her hand', to the djinn escaping his bottle. In those initial moments, Gillian observes the 'complex heap of his private

parts in the very centre of her rosy bed' (pp. 190-95), and watches the supernatural being stretch to his full size and then shrink back to human proportions. Later, satisfying the second of Gillian's wishes – to fall in love with her and by extension, make love with her – the djinn continually changes form. '[T]he djinn could prolong everything, both in space and in time, so that Gillian seemed to swim across his body forever', and his body becomes a topography to explore, of 'sea', 'tunnels' and 'caverns' (p. 251). If we are to follow Said in thinking 'Geography was essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient',[36] hence the extensive cartographic practices undertaken from the late eighteenth through to the early twentieth century by European visitors, then there is something of mapping to the love-making between Gillian and the djinn. Byatt produces an erotic and decadent map of the djinn's green-gold body.

The first of Gillian's wishes is inherently aesthetic: she asks to be made younger, to be returned to the state of her mid-thirties, when her hair was vibrant, her body firm and 'smooth' (pp. 202-03). The beauty of the female body configures one source of temporal and perhaps cultural tension between Gillian and the djinn, who considers a modern taste for thinness '[a] curious form of asceticism' (p. 204), self-denial perhaps being antithetical to the decadent impulses of the djinn. He admires full figures.[37] Bulamur has characterized the first of Gillian's wishes as an example of Western beauty standards proven irrational by the djinn and affording a wider critique of the 'masculine gaze'.[38] Indeed, the figure of the supernatural broadens the pleasures of attraction. Recollecting his time serving the Queen of Sheba, the djinn notes, 'never have I desired any creature so, woman or djinn, or peri or boy like a fresh-peeled chestnut' (p. 211). The djinn speaks liberally of attraction, to fairy tale and human lovers, male and female, and they are likened to a chestnut – soft and consumable. The novella is not advocating for the absence of a gaze, and arguably it is masculine, but it is a gaze motivated by beauty. As the Queen of Sheba sleeps with Suleiman (the djinn's rival for Sheba, and eventually his captor), the djinn sees the 'little love bites – most artistically placed, and unfortunately not invisible – in the soft hollows of her collar-bone, and – elsewhere, you may imagine' (p. 212), thus appreciating beauty made available to another.

The Queen of Sheba is rendered an art piece decorated by Suleiman's kisses, and perpetually distant from the djinn.

After spending over two-thousand years contained in a metal flask in the Red Sea, bound by Suleiman's mark, the djinn's container is pulled up by a fisherman and finds its way to Istanbul and another royal palace, Tokapi. Here, he remains 'half-emancipated' in the service of a maid who dies before making her final wish. He is only noticed again around a century later, when a voluptuous woman of the harem of Ibrahim 'dislodged the tile under which […his] bottle lay concealed' (pp. 220-21), and simply wishes him back into his container. Interestingly, while this episode occupies relatively little space in the novella, it represents one of the most aesthetically extravagant moments in George Miller's adaptation of the tale, *3000 Years of Longing* (2022). Miller works through layering – large bodies rendered highly visible through revealing clothes, a harem filled with potential lovers dressed in vibrant hues, moments of nudity, and of debauchery, set in the aesthetic ideals of the palace and bathhouses.[39]

As mentioned at the opening of this article, the most detailed moments of the djinn's history recollect his lost lovers. The final woman to participate in the djinn's story, this time in the mid-nineteenth century, is Zefir, the embodiment of a Renaissance Woman, who craves knowledge, encompassing languages, literatures, histories, and sciences. It is with Zefir that the djinn will fall in love and conceive a child. In her chambers in Smyrna the djinn creates 'a whole world': 'I brought things from all over the world – silks and satins, sugar-cane and paw-paw, sheets of green ice, Donatello's Perseus, aviaries full of parrots, waterfalls, rivers' (p. 228). At this moment in the story, we see complete satisfaction, that is a transient state in which intellectual, artistic, material and sexual impulses and desires are fulfilled both for Zefir, and, it would seem, the djinn. The tension is brought about by Zefir's unwillingness to accept that it must be temporary. The djinn becomes trapped in a glass bottle, the Nightingale's Eye that Gillian purchases over a century later in the market. His captivity is the result of a binding spell designed as a kind of sex game that, in being in Zefir's power, allows the djinn the erotic experience of contemplating 'extinction' (p.

230). The consequences of the djinn's incarceration – the inevitable loss of his lover, of never witnessing his child be born or grow up – are presented simply as facts. Byatt's story determinedly resists the kind of heartbreak one might associate with such a sequence of events, because ultimately, this is not a book about feelings, but ideas. The idea of satisfaction in all its forms, and the question of the permanency of that state, is, I believe, the most significant idea running through the tale. Louisa Hadley has compellingly argued that we should pay particular attention to fate in the *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* and the ways this renders the collection a cycle. Fate, Hadley points out, is bound to the 'repetitions' that characterize fairytales.[40] Thus, the story cycle, turning on a series of heroines, characterizes the 'life cycle of women'.[41] Such an awareness of form has tended to look for narrative patterns and the ways they compound a polemic around women's experience, rather than on the symbolic potential of the stories, even when engaging with relatively esoteric concepts such as fate. Hadley suggests that Gillian, bucking convention as a result of her age and marital status, is in many ways 'exclu[ded] from the fairy-tale narrative', and that this becomes a 'form of freedom and independence'.[42] Ultimately, however, icons of the first story in the collection are found in Gillian's story perhaps signalling a return to the opening short story, 'The Glass Coffin'.[43] While I do not necessarily disagree with Hadley's understanding of the wider collection and Byatt's embedded storytelling, it seems to me that in order to fully consider 'freedom' in the novella one should perhaps abandon efforts to read Gillian's story against a fairy tale tradition. Fate might be more productively understood as an aesthetic of freedom manifest in ideas, and thus, in the djinn, living to satisfy or failing to satisfy the pleasures that govern his existence; he is in many ways the embodiment of art, as signalled in Byatt's critical writings and, therefore, of decadence.

When the tale shifts to Gillian's history, she offers the briefest of reflections on her childhood and on the tale she attempted to write out of the condition of isolation – 'the emanation of an absence' – which results, in her opinion, in a rather poor story. Here Gillian reveals that the 'emanation' accompanied her as 'a golden boy', with whom she shared a language (pp. 232-34).

Gillian realizes that this imaginative or aesthetic conjuring is one that other writers and creatives might also experience, as she finds the golden boy's likeness in a poem by W. J. Turner. 'Romance' (1916), quoted in full in Byatt's story, suggests that such presences command the senses, accompany the storyteller, and ultimately, become a new reality:

> I walked in a great golden dream
> To and fro from school –
> Shining Popocatapetl
> The dusty streets did rule. (pp. 235-36)

For Gillian, storytelling creates distance, and Byatt herself seems to speak through Gillian in the following sentences, unable to resist an interpretation:

> 'I love that poem', said Dr Perholt. 'It has two things: names and the golden boy. The names are not the names of the boy, they are the romance of language, and *he* is the romance of language – he is more real than – reality – as the goddess of Ephesus is more real than I am – .' (p. 236)

It is worth dwelling on this analysis because here we come close to Byatt's self-confessed understanding of the purpose of the djinn and the realization of the heroine in her novella. That is, of impermanence and the attraction of storytelling. The analysis also exposes Byatt's particular brand of decadence; quoting a poem allows the author to suspend narrative and to bring fairy tale into the realm of high art. Turner is not well-known as a poet, but was, in the early twentieth century, actively involved in the artistic scene, with discussions around aestheticism and poetics, and was known to figures including W. B. Yeats and Dorothy Wellesley.[44] Gillian's history exists not by retelling her story, or re-emphasizing her position as isolated figure of an often disappointed womanhood, as some critics have understood her, but rather an aesthetic being that finds her likeness, or history, in art itself. There is a return to colour – to gold, in fact – and to disjuncture that fully realizes the beauty of language. The analysis is left hanging in the air, a kind of frisson of passion that the djinn does not close but rather compounds with the simple statement: 'And I am here' (p. 236).[45]

Towards the end of the novella, Gillian's career ambitions are satisfied as she presents a keynote lecture on storytelling at a conference at the University of Toronto. The presentation, a

paper manipulated in parts by the djinn, is 'judged a success, if somewhat confused' (p. 269). Indeed, there is a kind of pastiche working through the presentation that ultimately proves that Byatt's use of fairy tale is designed to play with aesthetics. Reading the paper one rapidly shifts from the story of Samarra to *Middlemarch*, to *À la recherche du temps perdu*, to a fable about a wish-fulfilling ape, to references to the Brothers Grimm and Aladdin, to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to *La Peau de Chagrin*, before settling on Freud. This list alone signals something of Byatt's delight in imaginative literature itself, and of a kind of storytelling that might bring different forms of writing into conversation, an eclecticism of sorts, meant to provoke thinking rather than to guarantee coherence. Taken together, Gillian's paper, redirected, even put off course by the interventions of the djinn, is a decided convergence of different cultural modes and voices, across modern traditions, and recalling much older traditions.

At the beginning of this article, I asked what it would mean to take *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* as a work of decadent writing. As this discussion has demonstrated, it would entail engaging with the ideas underpinning the tale, emerging through the artistry of desire and a desire for artistry, rather than the pragmatics of the fairy tale/anti-tale and feminist revisioning it contains. It would also mean reading for the literariness of ideas assembled in Byatt's writing. It might also mean accepting the inherent entanglement of decadence and Orientalism caught up in writings of the East imagined by writers embedded in Western epistemologies, but it might also mean putting aside some of the ethical criticisms of Byatt's position – feminist or otherwise – to understand that a space such as Istanbul and the tales of a djinn perpetuate an 'inquisitiveness' and enjoyment of Türkiye, to borrow from Warner. Compounding this, it might mean a recognition of decadence itself as an inherently malleable mode that exists in many cultural centres, and an acknowledgement that Türkiye, like Britain, constitutes the site of an empire fallen away – itself one of the most significant cultural concerns of decadent writers a century before Byatt's novella was published.

[1] A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (Vintage, 1995), pp. 104-05. Subsequent references to the novel are given inline.
[2] See also, Mounira Monia Hejaiej, 'The Motif of the Patient Wife in Muslim and Western Literature and Folklore'. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.1 (2010): https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1573. While exploring the ways in which stories of 'patient wives' are shared across cultures, Hejaiej has presented Byatt's version as an overt criticism of Chaucer's tale. I am not sure that is the case. Byatt was aware of the nuance of the original story, which is why she could rewrite it as Gillian's paper. Byatt's broader agenda might be understood as a reflection on creative 'energy', that is both at stake and imaginatively conjured through the story and made visible to Gillian, these are figures that disturb the academic that she cannot quite describe (Byatt, *Djinn*, p. 122).
[3] Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 98.
[4] See for example Margarida Esteves Pereira, '"Telling stories about stories": Embedded Stories, Wonder Tales, and Women Storytellers in A. S. Byatt's Novels', in *Wonder Tales in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt*, ed. by Alexandra Cheira (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), pp. 101-17; Marzia Beltrami, 'Fairy-Tale Strategies Revisited: Constraints as Sources of Creativity and Ethical Reflection in A. S. Byatt's Fairy Stories', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 76 (2021) http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/3488 [accessed 27 September 2025]; Celia Wallhead, 'Material Things in the Struggle of the Female Writer/Artist in the Stories of A. S. Byatt', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 76 (2021) http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/3469 [accessed 27 September 2025]; Louisa Hadley, 'The Fateful Cycle of Fairytales: Reading A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*', *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*, ed. by Patrick Gill and Florian Klaeger (Routledge, 2018), pp. 142-58.
[5] Kathleen Williams Renk, 'Myopic Feminist Individualism in A. S. Byatt's Arabian Nights' Tale: "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8.1 (2006), pp. 114-24 (p. 116), https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/8 [accessed 2 October 2025].
[6] Ibid., p. 117.
[7] Ibid., p. 123.
[8] Defne Çizakça, 'A. S. Byatt and "The Djinn": The Politics and Epistemology of the Anti-Tale', *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment*, ed. by Catriona McAra and David Calvin (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 264-74 (p. 272).
[9] See for example Regina Rudaitytė, '(De)Construction of the Postmodern in A. S. Byatt's Novel *Possession*', *Literatura*, 49.5 (2007), pp. 116-22 (p. 120): doi: 10.15388/Litera.2007.5.7941; Tine Engel Morgensen, 'Love and Art Strike Back – A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 16.29-30 (2004), pp. 60-75 (pp. 70-71): doi: 10.7146/nja.v16i29-30.3039.
[10] Sam Leith and A. S. Byatt, 'Interview: Writing in terms of pleasure', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/25/as-byatt-interview [accessed 30 September 2025].
[11] Ibid.
[12] A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (Harvad University Press), p. 132; see also Byatt *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, p. 236.
[13] Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairytale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Palgrave, 2001), p. 49.
[14] Ibid., pp. 47-48.
[15] Ibid., pp. 42-43.
[16] Ibid., p. 48.
[17] Leith and Byatt, 'Interview: Writing in terms of pleasure'.
[18] Hicks mentions the description of interiors in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye,* pp. 68-69. Elizabeth Hicks, *The Still-Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).
[19] Leith and Byatt, 'Interview: Writing in terms of pleasure'.
[20] Katharina Herold-Zanker, *Decadence and Orientalism in England and Germany, 1880-1920: 'The Indispensable East'* (Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 3.
[21] Ibid., p. 116.
[22] See also Hadley, 'The Fateful Cycle of Fairytales', p. 153.
[23] This is attested to through her language and behaviours. For example, her 'English hygienic horror of something so much touched by so many' (pp. 174-75) – a response to a hole in a pillar in the Hagia Sophia meant to confer luck on those who perform a ritual of touching the inside of the stone; and earlier in the novel, as Byatt describes Gillian's penchant for travel: 'Who can tell that she travelled because she was English and stolid and could not quite imagine being blasted out of the sky, or because, […] she could not resist the idea of the journey above the clouds…?' (p. 97).
[24] Ayşe Naz Bulamur, 'Representations of Istanbul in A. S. Byatt's "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"', *The AnaChronisT*, 16 (2011), pp. 117-34 (p. 121): https://doi.org/10.53720/AZFC7997.
[25] Ibid., p. 122.
[26] Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 363.
[27] Ibid., p. 165.

[28] For a sense of the significance of and parallels between the twentieth-century end to several empires, including the British, Romanov, Ottoman, French and so on, see E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The End of Empires', in *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires*, ed. by Karen Barkey and Mark Von Hagen (Routledge, 1997), pp. 12-16.
[29] Bulamur, 'Representations of Istanbul', p. 122.
[30] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979), p. 223; see also pp. 219-25.
[31] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 96.
[32] Özen Nergis Dolcerocca, 'Turkey: Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 245-63 (p. 247).
[33] For the poems see *The Penguin Book of Turkish Verse*, ed. by Nermin Menemencioğlu in collaboration with Fahir Iz (Penguin, 1978), pp. 187 and 189.
[34] Dolcerocca, 'Turkey: Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire', p. 247.
[35] Bulamur, 'Representations of Istanbul', p. 124.
[36] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 216. It is also worth noting that such practices overlap with the tours undertaken by decadent writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., J. A. Symonds, see Herold-Zanker, *Decadence and Orientalism*, p. 93) and even earlier Orientalist enthusiasts and travellers who propagated iconic and monolithic understandings of the East in the popular European imagination (e.g., T. E. Lawrence, see Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 242-44).
[37] A theme addressed across several pages, see, e.g., Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye,* pp. 203-04 and p. 209.
[38] Bulamur, 'Representations of Istanbul', p. 126.
[39] *3000 Years of Longing*, dir. George Miller, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 2022, 57:15-58:59, online film recording, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1tUMntnxwg&t=3670s> [accessed 9 October 2025].
[40] Hadley, 'The Fateful Cycle of Fairytales', p. 142.
[41] Ibid., p. 144.
[42] Ibid., p. 153.
[43] Ibid., p. 144.
[44] Jacquetta Hawkes and Sayoni Basu, 'Turner, Walter James Redfern: (1889-1946)', *ODNB*, September 2004 <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-36589> [accessed 9 October 2025].
[45] Benjamin Eldon Stevens notes that this is not the only occasion Byatt meditates on this poem, and he suggests it has biographical significance for the author. For Stevens, in reference to Byatt's Virgilian incorporations in *The Children's Book*, this poem surfaces as evidence that Byatt is '[n]o less astute a critic than artful an author, [who was] richly aware of, and interested in, her literary debts' (p. 549). Fairytales, like myths, are a kind of popular debt, a storytelling shared across generations and communities, even internationally. Benjamin Eldon Stevens, 'Virgilian Underworlds in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 8.4 (2016), pp. 529-53.