



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 2

Winter 2025

‘Strangely at Home in Fairyland’: The Faun in Laurence Housman’s Garden

Samuel Love

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 December 2025

Date of Publication: 31 December 2025

Citation: Samuel Love, “‘Strangely at Home in Fairyland’: The Faun in Laurence Housman’s Garden’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.2 (2025), pp. 57-83.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

‘Strangely at Home in Fairyland’: The Faun in Laurence Housman’s Garden

Samuel Love

University of York

In his 1983 study of the illustrator and writer Laurence Housman (1865-1959), Rodney Engen affirms the centrality of fairy tales to his artistic and personal life on its first page. Housman, Engen writes, was ‘a true romantic with a childish love of fantasy’, one who ‘learned to turn his sensitive, private nature into an escapist world filled with fairies... [and later] recalled how essential those fantasies were to his struggles’.¹ To support this characterization, Engen quotes from Housman’s musings on the purpose of fairy tales and from critical reactions to his works. ‘The true end and object of a fairy tale is the expression of the joy of living’, Housman argues,

so for the true and unpolluted air of fairyland we have to go back to the old and artless tales of a day purer and simpler than our own; purer because so wholly unconcerned with any questions of morals, simpler because so wholly unconscious of its simplicity.²

Despite its apparent remoteness, however, at least one critic – the writer and editor Charles Kains Jackson – found Housman’s work suggestive of the fact that he was ‘strangely at home in fairyland’.³

Housman’s contributions to the literary fairy tale have been gestured towards in classic studies of the genre, his stories viewed as emblematic of its late nineteenth-century iterations. This is not without justification: alongside Housman’s conception of ‘fairyland’ as a pure and unpolluted escape from contemporary society, he described his beloved childhood garden. This garden is the focal point of the early pages of his autobiography and the site where Housman’s narrative voice magically transforms into that of his own fairy tales. Fancifully suggesting the garden was ruled over by a ‘Garden-God [...] a very enjoyable God, but a God whom morals did not concern’, Housman explains that the joy of the garden for him and his siblings was its seclusion and the secrecy it engendered.⁴ ‘Under [the Garden-God’s] guidance we did things which were not wicked, only “naughty” – that is to say, natural’, he clarifies, as the garden itself was ‘a protector of our

liberties [...] we were able to get out of sight and hearing of our elders, and do very much as we liked'.⁵ The iconography of Housman's fantasy was so common that 'secret gardens' gave their name to Humphrey Carpenter's classic study of Victorian and Edwardian children's literature, *Secret Gardens* (1985). Carpenter muses whether Romantic notions

that, to children, the earth appears as beautiful and numinous as it did to Adam and Eve [...] have a little to do with the Victorian and Edwardian children's writers' fondness for the symbol of a garden or Enchanted Place, in which all shall be well once more.⁶

The Janus-faced nature of these common fantasies, located in a prelapsarian past but promising to reassert themselves in a brighter future, also occupies the theories of the fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, for whom 'once upon a time is not a past designation but futuristic'.⁷ Owing to their narratological reliance upon transformations and fantastic otherworlds, fairy tales are 'endow[ed] [...] with utopian connotations'.⁸ Housman is identified by Zipes as one such author who 'expressed their utopian inclinations' through his engagements with fairy tales, producing work which 'portrayed Victorian society symbolically as a rigid enclosure'. For Zipes, Housman is an inheritor of a mid-Victorian 'quest for a new fairy tale form [which] stemmed from a psychological rejection and rebellion against the "norms" of English society'.⁹

In this article I investigate the nature of Housman's fairyland, its origins and its purpose, by exploring the nature of some of its most curious inhabitants. In doing so I demonstrate that the secret pleasures of his enchanted childhood garden were translated into realizations of, and meditations upon, the homosexual pleasure that Housman sought greater acceptance of through his political activism. Examining Housman's illustrative work, I focus on the recurrent appearances of fauns, the goat-footed creatures who roam the arcadian woodlands of the classical imagination just as they roam the enchanted gardens of Housman's work.

In stark contrast to his work as a writer and political activist, Housman's career as an illustrator was remarkably brief: as he later recorded, his faltering eyesight and greater interest in writing led to his virtual abandonment of visual art in 1901 and his mature work thus belongs in its entirety to the fin de siècle.¹⁰ I therefore situate these drawings and engravings within the nexus

of decadence, not solely owing to their stylistic proximity to the work of better-known illustrators such as Charles Ricketts but also to Housman's evident investment in the iconographies of classical myth which were central to dissident sexual politics.¹¹ The figure of the faun does, indeed, appear to have represented to Housman a personal ideal. Discussions of classical imagery in his work have typically focused on the recurring figure of Mercury. Audrey Dossot views Mercury as a partial self-portrait, one who 'embodies the journey to Fairyland [...] on which Housman wants to take his readers'.¹² Mercury (or Hermes) certainly appears as one figure to whom the protagonist of Housman's novel *A Modern Antaeus* (1901) is likened. The protagonist was apparently based on an eye-catching undergraduate Housman briefly but memorably met in a train station.¹³ But of this fictionalized youth Housman writes that

faun and Hermes rolled into one gave a better vision of his style: or were one to emulate the exactness of a compass indicating that the wind's way lies north-north by west, Faun should be named twice to once for the lightheeled messenger of Zeus.¹⁴

The faun is thus seemingly tied to Housman's personal conception of beauty, a vanished but intensely remembered glimpse of idealized youth.

Housman's commitment to promoting greater understanding and tolerance of the homosexual passion he felt for this faunlike youth found clearest expression through his founding membership of the British Society for Study of Sex Psychology in 1913. The society staged public speeches and published pamphlets related to the issue. His earlier artistic work has been convincingly read through such a lens. Kristin Mahoney, in her examination of Housman's political activism and his 'queer' living arrangements, argues that his activism 'began [...] with his own immediate community, with fellow-feeling for Wilde and other Uranian men', and that his fairy tales were concerned with a utopian understanding of queer desire enacted by 'figures who love with a difference and in surprising ways'.¹⁵ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra similarly positions Housman within 'a new coterie of radical writers at the fin de siècle' whose fairy tales 'critique[d] existing norms and posit[ed] utopian alternatives founded on notions of equality and social justice', with his own examples unambiguously 'celebrat[ing] [...] the potent possibility of love and justice'.¹⁶ By

focusing on Housman's comparatively overlooked graphic work, however, I complicate accounts of Housman's fairyland as purely 'utopian' in this sense. The development of his work across the 1890s shows increasingly destabilizing anxieties over the realization of homosexual desire, something first expressed through the figure of the faun in one of Housman's earliest fairy tale commissions as an illustrator: Jane Barlow's 1894 poem *The End of Elfintown*.

The End of Elfintown

Housman was commissioned to provide illustrations for Barlow's *The End of Elfintown* after the success of his contributions to an 1893 edition of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, and the resulting drawings are counted by Rodney Engen as among the best-known of his career.¹⁷ Strangely, Engen does not linger upon the peculiarities of the illustrations themselves, which interpret Barlow's poem relatively loosely, although his identification of the two most pronounced influences over their style – Charles Ricketts and Aubrey Beardsley – is indicative of their thematic content.¹⁸ Despite its early point in Housman's career, he had by this stage fallen under the pervasive influence of Ricketts and, through an invitation to Ricketts's home, also met Oscar Wilde, to whose cause he would remain devoted long after the watershed of 1895.¹⁹ Meanwhile Beardsley, as we shall see, was responsible for the publication of one of Housman's most symbolically complex interpretations of the figure of the faun. While developing his illustrations Housman was already, in Caroline Sumpter's assessment, a 'minor figure in the avant-garde circles that gathered around the Café Royal in the 1890s [who was] active in underground homosexual circles'.²⁰ This final point has been attested to by repeated suggestions within Housman scholarship that he was a member of the Order of Chaeronea, a secret society of homosexual men modelled on classical precedents, although this is difficult to substantiate owing to Housman's much later claim that he 'hadn't the faith' to join.²¹ Irrespective of Housman's membership of this society, however, his personal networks clearly indicate his placement at the intersecting loci of homosexual politics and artistic decadence. This early foray into 'fairyland' is thus legible through

these lenses: it is perhaps worth noting that Charles Kains Jackson, the writer who initially observed Housman's curious intimacy with the imagined place, was a member of the Order of Chaeronea and a frequent advocate for 'Uranian' love.

Barlow's text gave Housman the chance to address a fairy tale that, to some extent, aligns with the arguments of Carpenter and Zipes that many fairy tales of the period function as utopian protests against an urbanized, industrialized society, invoking a vanished and prelapsarian world (such as Housman's garden) to condemn the conditions of modernity. The narrative of *The End of Elfintown* is simple: Oberon, the fairies' king, is hexed by an evil witch whose magical influence convinces him to put the fairies to work building an enormous city which effaces their pastoral kingdom. Realizing that this must be madness, the fairies decide to enlist the help of a kindly witch to break the spell. She equips them with a magical mirror that they place over Oberon as he sleeps, causing him to see a prophecy terrible enough to overpower the evil witch's spell. On waking, he orders the immediate destruction of his new city and leads the fairies into the starry heavens. The prophecy which shatters the spell and drives the fairies from earth is, Barlow writes, never revealed, but she speculates that it may have shown

Days when round earth, once green and lone,
Shall whirl with cities all o'ergrown [...]
Where men ground down 'neath labour's yoke,
Toil to the mad wheel's thunder.²²

As if the metaphorical resonances of Barlow's rudimentary narrative were not clear enough, with the destruction of a rural idyll by the construction of an urban environment figured as an act of bewitched derangement, her revelation confirms that the poem somewhat unimaginatively embodies common tendencies within Victorian fairy tales to bemoan the Industrial Revolution and pine for the world it was felt to have swept away.²³

While Housman appeared to have shared the nostalgic impulse upon which such fantasies were founded, locating his 'fairyland' in his childhood garden, his *Elfintown* illustrations betray little immediate interest in the ills of industrialization. Rather, Barlow's poem allows Housman to

visualize his utopian fairyland, its inhabitants, and their relationships with one another. Strikingly, the first full-page illustration Housman provides is a depiction of the fairies, exhausted by their labours, finally at rest (fig. 1).

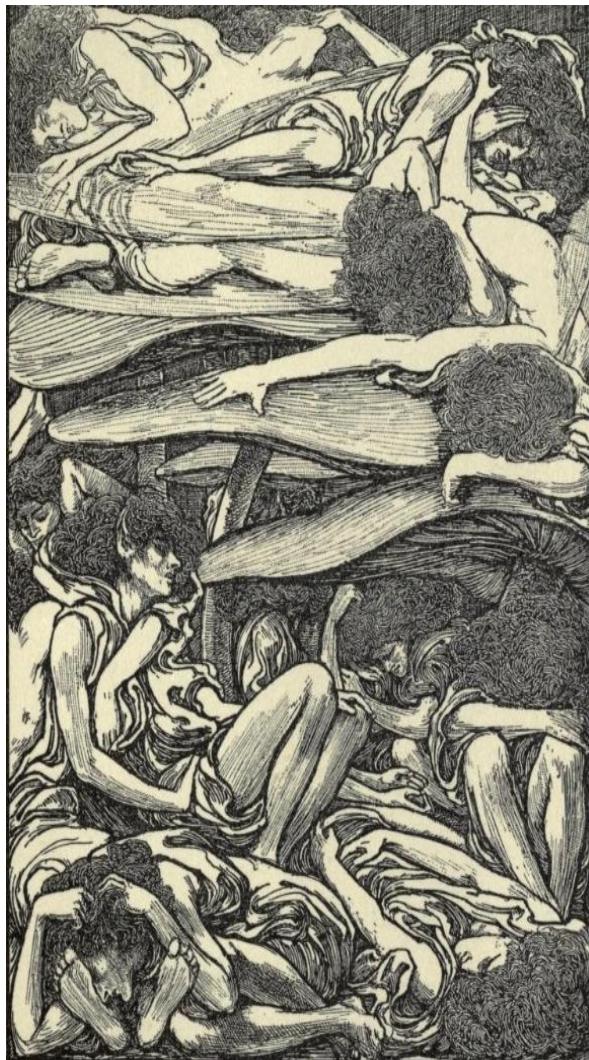


Fig. 1: Laurence Housman, illustration for *The End of Elfintown*, 1894. Wood engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Toronto Public Library.

Evincing Ricketts's influence in the flowing hair and androgynous features of the company – who are, nonetheless, all male – the drawing confronts the viewer with a bewildering vision of interconnectivity and entwinement: possessed of a certain *horror vacui*, Housman's dense linework eradicates clear divisions between vegetation, hair, and bodies. Chaotically scattered amongst toadstools, the bodies of the slumbering fairies press against one another in contorted

formulations. At the lower left, one fairy lays his head on another's feet, who in turn seems to drape his arm around another figure; at the top right another seems to bury his head in the thighs of the fairy whose body forms the drawing's only orderly horizontal. Housman's opening drawing confirms both Mahoney's argument that Housman's fairy tales present 'a more thoroughly united world, one in which individuals can feel across boundaries and forge unconventional bonds' and Kooistra's observation that Housman typically 'positions his protagonists in larger familial or social contexts'.²⁴

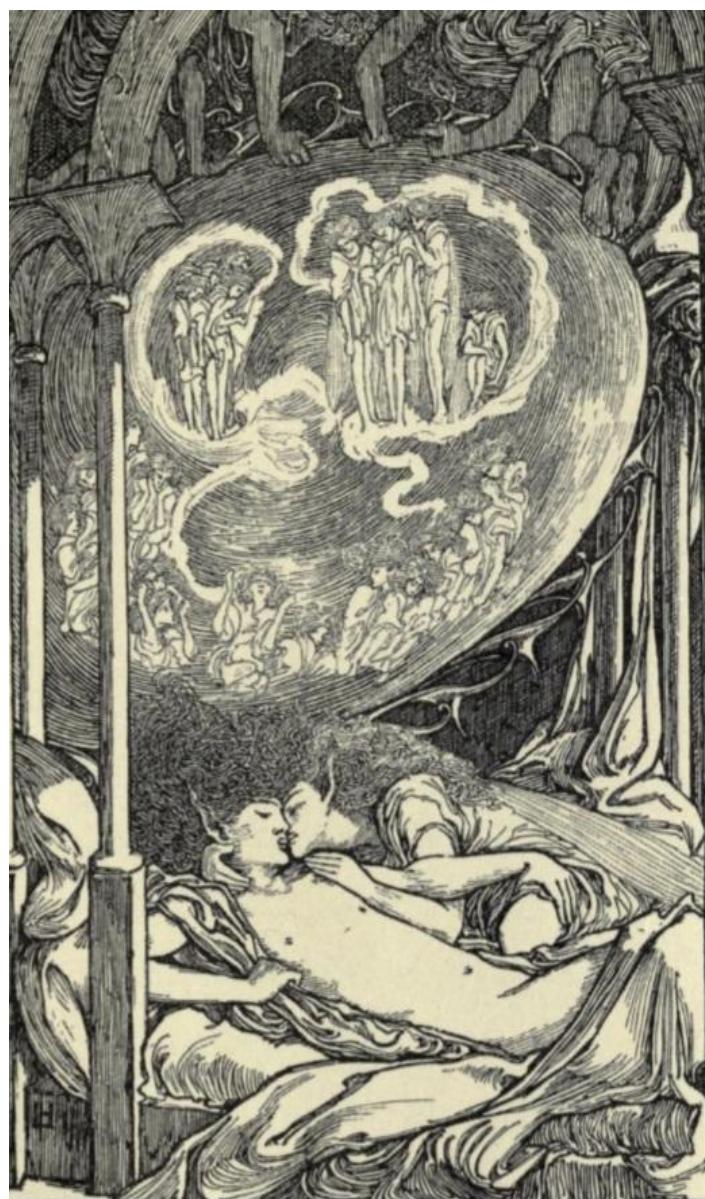


Fig. 2: Laurence Housman, illustration for *The End of Elfintown*, 1894. Wood engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Toronto Public Library.

Importantly, however, Mahoney specifies that it is Housman's conception of 'queer desire' that produces such a united world, and Kooistra likewise sees Housman 'exploring the possibilities of queer kinship beyond heteronormativity' in his group arrangements.²⁵ Certainly, the interconnectedness of these supine, androgynous exquisites is not without its attendant homoeroticism, and the potential note of desire in Housman's fairyland is arguably sounded more clearly in the drawing of Oberon receiving the prophecy from the magic mirror (fig. 2). The revelation of the prophecy is not described in Barlow's poem, but the good witch's instructions make clear that the fairies need only ensure the mirror is 'hung ere fall of night, | Near Oberon's couch'.²⁶ This is certainly depicted in Housman's drawing, with two fairies holding the mirror above the bed with the grace of twin cherubs in a baroque altarpiece. The only oddity in this is that the prophecy shown in the mirror is clearly recognizable as a miniature of Housman's own subsequent drawing depicting the fairies' melancholy desertion of their woodland idyll (fig. 3), rather than the vision of dark satanic mills hinted at in Barlow's text. This is a minor indication that the lure of Housman's fairyland is not its essentially rural character. In addition to this, however, Housman incorporates another fairy who is perhaps whispering prophecies into the sleeping Oberon's ear and who is evidently an invention on Housman's part. The prophecy is, arguably, the flimsiest of veils so that Housman can include a more blatantly homoerotic scene than his earlier iteration of sleeping fairies. Lying so close to one another that their hair intertwines, the fairies are locked in an affectionate embrace, with Oberon's hand resting on the thigh of his companion. Oberon's other hand appears to pull his robe open to reveal his body, which is uncovered to the knee; the other fairy, meanwhile, caresses his face. It is not immediately clear as to whether this fairy leans into Oberon in order to impart a whisper or a kiss, and the scene registers on the viewer more immediately as a clandestine glimpse of two lovers than as anything described in Barlow's poem.

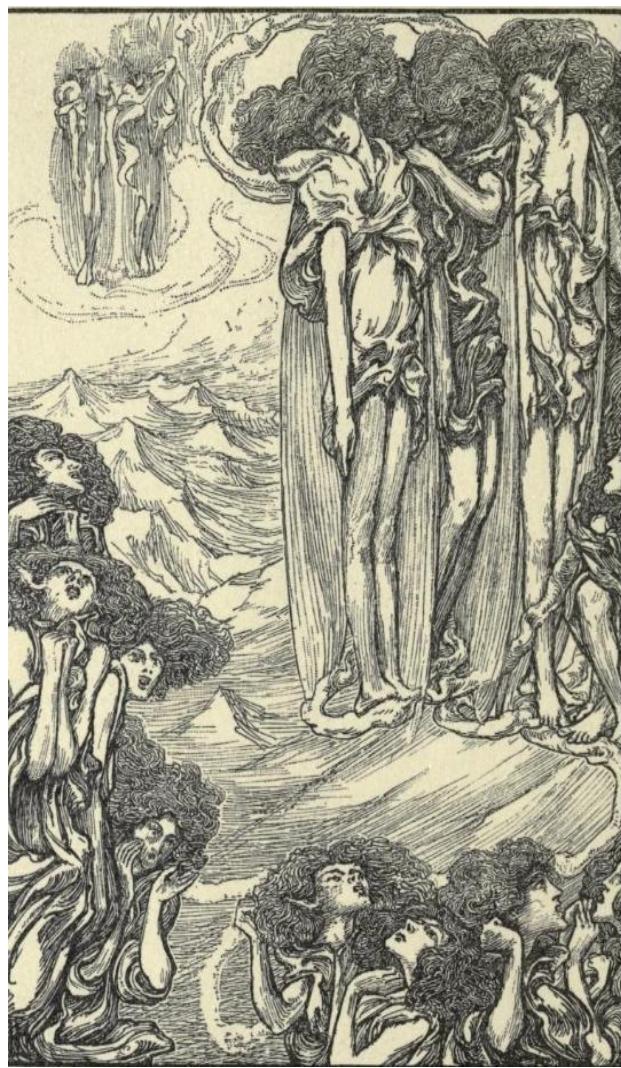


Fig. 3: Laurence Housman, illustration for *The End of Elfintown*, 1894. Wood engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Toronto Public Library.

Housman's fairyland is imbued with sexual politics, with his fairies inhabiting a seemingly homosocial and permissively homosexual space. It is indeed significant that at the moment of the fairy's amorous embrace, twinned in Housman's drawing with the moment of prophetic revelation, fairyland is redeemed and its destruction halted. This drawing also reveals another peculiarity of Housman's vision: his fairies are fauns, or at least legible as such. While fauns are typically defined by their hybrid physiognomy, largely human above the waist and animal beneath it, numerous examples would likely have been available to Housman of fauns which are designated as such only by the elongated, pointed, equine ears that his fairies clearly share. Indeed, Charles Kains Jackson perceptively noted the 'faun-eared' appearance of these fairies in his appreciation of Housman's

illustrations, enthusiastically praising the ‘strangeness in beauty’ exemplified in one *Elfintown* illustration.²⁷ The much-admired Hellenistic sculpture known as the *Barberini Faun* was often reproduced in engravings, and appears entirely human beyond its subtly demarcated tail and pointed ears.²⁸ The *Barberini Faun* certainly shares the supine position common to many of Housman’s fairies in *Elfintown* and is, moreover, loaded with homoerotic potentialities: it is, as Amanda Herring pithily has it, a ‘sexy beast’, an ‘overtly sexual object’ whose ‘sleeping pose [is] a crucial element in creating its message of sexual vulnerability’ and mirrors that of Oberon.²⁹ Housman may equally have been inspired by the Praxitelean sculpture *Resting Satyr*, which lacks even the tail of the *Barberini Faun* and conveys the mythological nature of its subject through the elongated ears which bear a striking resemblance to those of Housman’s fairies.³⁰ The sculpture enjoyed a considerable vogue in the late nineteenth century owing to its starring role in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s bestselling novel *The Marble Faun* (1860), the first chapter of which contains a lengthy ekphrasis concerning it. As Gary Scrimgeour notes, an illustrated version quickly appeared reproducing the *Resting Satyr* as its opening full-page illustration, making it a familiar image for the British public.³¹

Richard Warren points out that fauns were a common sight in western art in the late nineteenth century. They were a special favourite, for example, of Housman’s erstwhile friend Beardsley, whose illustrations return often to them.³² The *Resting Satyr* was of particular appeal to literary aesthetes owing to its attractive, youthful grace. John Addington Symonds praised ‘the mystery of the Praxitelean Faun (*Resting Satyr*) whose subtle smile is a lure for souls’, and it is evidently this sculpture that Walter Pater is thinking of in his essay ‘A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew’, republished in the posthumous collection *Greek Studies* of 1894.³³ Here Pater appreciates that, ‘in the later school of Attic sculpture [fauns] are treated with more and more of refinement’ until Praxiteles carved ‘a model of dainty natural ease in posture, but with the legs slightly crossed, as only lowly-bred gods are used to carry them’.³⁴ This sculpture is animated, Pater says, by ‘some puzzled trouble of youth’ which ‘you might wish for a moment to

smooth away, puckering the forehead a little, between the pointed ears, on which the goodly hair of his animal strength grows low'.³⁵ This artistic treatment of fauns is the result of Praxiteles recognizing 'the true humour concerning them', surely placing him among 'the best spirits [who] had found in them [...] a certain human pathos'.³⁶

Symonds's appreciation of the *Resting Satyr* is relatively blatant in its homoeroticism; Pater's is denser, but his equally amorous account is no less potent. His argument that only the 'best spirits' fully understand the nature of what others dismiss as grotesque beckons us into a minority position. The tactility of Praxiteles' sculpture has aroused the suspicion of Lene Østermark-Johansen who characterizes these passages as Pater 'toy[ing] with the idea of touching some of the most distinctly animal parts of the statue'; in this Pater puts us into the position of the homosexual classicist Joachim Winckelmann, who, he approvingly wrote, 'fingers those pagan marbles with unsinged hands, with no sense of shame or loss'.³⁷ In both cases, homosexual desire is stimulated by and inscribed into the lissom, youthful features of Praxiteles' marble, the features of which blend with the androgynous ideal of Pre-Raphaelitism in Housman's fairies. The importation of the distinctive ears of fauns such as Praxiteles' was, within the cultural currents of Aestheticism and decadence, not a neutral gesture, for the writings of the likes of Pater and Symonds established the creature as a fitting subject for the erotic gaze. Wilde's letters are instructive in recognizing the cementation of the linkages between fauns and homosexual desire amongst decadent artists and writers in the 1890s. To Reginald Turner, Wilde recalled a 'young Corsican' called Giorgio whose 'position was menial, but eyes like the night and a scarlet flower of a mouth made one forget that'. 'I am great friends with him', Wilde gloated, concluding that he was 'a most passionate faun'.³⁸ To the publisher Leonard Smithers two years later he wrote that he missed an unnamed youth who, like Giorgio, was 'a brown faun with his woodland eyes and his sensuous grace of limb'. The attractions of other men could 'not console me for the loss of that wanton sylvan boy from Italy'.³⁹ In an earlier letter to Robert Ross, Wilde rhapsodized about his travels through Morocco with Lord Alfred Douglas, where the 'villages [were] peopled by fauns [...] beggars [who] have profiles,

so the problem of poverty is easily solved'.⁴⁰ And writing again to Smithers from the south of France in 1899, Wilde complained that he was 'leading a very good life' which 'does not agree with me' because of 'a sad lack of fauns' in the vicinity.⁴¹

Housman's fairyland, conversely, teems with fauns, and not only in his *End of Elfintown* illustrations. The *Elfintown* commission afforded Housman the opportunity to visualize a world of secret, but freely indulged, pleasures, a freedom enjoyed under the auspices of the 'Garden-god' of Housman's childhood. Beyond *Elfintown*, however, a palpable note of anxiety enters Housman's depictions of fauns in fairyland, which problematizes the commonplace notion of Housman as a 'utopian' artist and writer.

The Reflected Faun

Fauns were evidently a preoccupation of Housman's in 1894. Engen records that Housman was drawn into conflict with the publisher John Lane over a commissioned frontispiece which 'depicted a number of male nudes posed alongside a stream'.⁴² The design was, somewhat unsurprisingly, rejected, but Housman 'refused to forget the offending drawing' and instead found a more sympathetic recipient in the form of Beardsley, who accepted it for the inaugural issue of the *Yellow Book*.⁴³ The drawing was entitled *The Reflected Faun*.

Housman's drawing evidently underwent some significant changes before its public appearance, but retained its transgressive connections to Housman's sexuality. The image in the *Yellow Book* (fig. 4) dispenses with the row of male nudes and transforms the stream into a pond. Most significantly, it also dispenses with what sounds like a continuation of the *Elfintown* evocations of a homoerotic arcadia in favour of a more symbolically and emotionally complex meditation on the nature of homosexual desire. *The Reflected Faun* depicts a faun, this time with the legs of a goat, craning over a pool of water in a forest glade. One hand grips the etiolated stem of a lily, which it smells; in its reflection, however, the flower has transformed into the head of a figure rushing upwards from the depths to embrace and kiss it. The gender of this figure is difficult

to ascertain, as despite its flowing hair there is no obvious curvature of the breasts, and its body is muscular. Its relatively rugged features would also suggest that it is easier to view this figure as male, and its pronounced androgyny would seem to indicate that Housman is inviting the viewer to make, or at least entertain, this assumption. It would appear that the faun is lost in a moment of erotic reverie; it would also appear to be in grave danger.



Fig. 4: Laurence Housman, *The Reflected Faun*, 1894. Pen-and-ink drawing.
University of Heidelberg Library, Heidelberg. © Toronto Public Library.

Like the hybrid body of its titular character, *The Reflected Faun* is something of a hybrid creation itself, synthesizing diverse iconographic and compositional elements to convey a fraught atmosphere of erotic promise and impending peril. Its most obvious point of reference is the myth of Narcissus, whose role the faun assumes through its placement next to a body of water and its

evident fascination with its reflection. This alone should indicate an element of danger in its attachment to the vision revealed. Within Housman's own œuvre, however, there are further compositional precedents which intensify this notion and further indicate that *The Reflected Faun* occupies the same imagined world of the faun-fairies of *Elfintown*. A figure crouching over a pool in which they are reflected appeared in Housman's *Goblin Market* illustrations of the preceding year. This was a depiction of the poem's ill-fated protagonist Laura at the moment she is tempted by Rossetti's nefarious goblins (fig. 5). The recollection of this image in *The Reflected Faun* is inexact: Laura looks up at the animalistic goblins, not down at her own reflection, the composition is significantly more crowded with figures, and the landscape lacks the lush verdancy of the faun's forest idyll. And yet the two drawings seem nonetheless related. A parallel can be found in Housman's first volume of his own fairy tales, *A Farm in Fairyland*, which also appeared in 1894 and featured stories which an anonymous journalist for *The Graphic* noted were 'full of dainty conceits, provided young readers are not frightened away by the eccentric illustrations'.⁴⁴ One such eccentric illustration accompanies Housman's fairy tale 'Japonel', which is itself derived from the Narcissus theme. 'Japonel' tells the story of a preternaturally beautiful woodcutter's daughter, the Japonel of the title, who delights the plants and animals of a nearby forest with her beauty before developing an obsessive desire to regard her own reflection in a mirror she discovers. Against her parents' wishes, she then goes and discovers a pool in the forest. This is haunted by an evil witch who jealously steals her reflection, a curse Japonel reverses at the end of the story by heeding the advice of the birds she has neglected since finding the mirror. Housman illustrated the tale with an image of Japonel reaching into the pond to touch her reflection while a flock of birds fly overhead and the witch lies corpse-like upon the water. *The Reflected Faun* shares several compositional elements with this image. Most obviously, both works feature a central figure captivated by their reflection in the water. *The Reflected Faun* also reprises the Japonel illustration's flock of birds flying nearby or overhead, a detail which has no obvious relevance to the faun's plight whatsoever. In *The Reflected Faun* these birds appear to be purely decorative, indicating that

they have been imported from the Japonel illustration, in which they have an obvious connection to the narrative. Even the basic shapes of its fauna, with the clump of trees behind the faun mirroring those behind the pool into which Japonel peers, suggest that Housman understood the scene of *The Reflected Faun* to be connected to that of the Japonel story.



Fig. 5: Laurence Housman, illustration for *Goblin Market*, 1893. Wood engraving. Royal Academy, London. © Toronto Public Library.

The precedents for *The Reflected Faun* in Housman's own career make evident that we should consider this image within the list of Housman's fairy tale pictures. It also indicates that we should detect a sense of dangerous temptation as it parallels the temptation of Laura in *Goblin Market* and the zenith of Japonel's destructive desire for her own likeness, and possibly that we should question notions of gender and sexuality as the role the faun performs is not merely that of Narcissus but also of two female protagonists. Its closest visual parallel is, as we have seen, with Japonel, and like her the faun is simultaneously drawn to the water over which it cranes, and menaced by what lies in its depths. Rather than the witch of Japonel, however, the threat is the androgynous but masculine figure whose embrace can be read as fatal to the faun through the overlaying of another point of reference. Depicting a body surging upwards from watery depths to embrace a male figure also calls to mind contemporaneously popular imagery of water-dwelling

female creatures who ensnared their prey through similarly seductive methods. Such imagery typically revolved around the mythological figure of the siren or, in interpretations which removed these classical trappings, the mermaid (with whom the siren was frequently confused).⁴⁵ An emblematic example may be found in *The Fisherman and the Syren* (1858) an early work by Housman's fellow *Yellow Book* contributor Frederic Leighton, in which a siren surges forth from the water to embrace her unconscious, or perhaps mesmerized, male target, the coiling of her mermaid's tail around his leg indicating entrapment and danger.⁴⁶ The commonalities between the figure in the pool and the sirens and mermaids of the contemporary imaginary suspend straightforward understandings of gender in *The Reflected Faun*: there is something effeminate about both the faun and the imagined object of its desire.

Housman's three points of reference – Narcissus, sirens, and the characters of his own fairy tale illustrations – compound one another and confer upon *The Reflected Faun* its veiled meaning. The invocation of the Narcissus myth makes clear that the faun desires what it sees in the pool, like Narcissus and, indeed, like Housman's own Japonel. The visual reference to the imagery surrounding mermaids and sirens indicates that what the faun desires, the suffocating embrace of its hallucinogenic lover, is a profound threat. The references to Housman's own temporally proximate fairy tales intensify both of these aspects of the composition and invite us to regard this faun as kindred to the faun-like creatures of *The End of Eftontown*. This to say that its sexual desires are Housman's as well as those of the 'Uranian' networks Mahoney situates at the core of Housman's political activism. *The Reflected Faun*, therefore, suggests that Housman's graphic work cannot be considered purely 'utopian' in its sexual politics, nor can its visions of fairyland be considered entirely divorced from Housman's reality. Housman's illustration is more clearly legible as a cautionary tale, covertly dramatizing the stark dangers attendant upon the pursuit of homosexual passion, both for the artist and his contemporaries. The following year, the anxieties at play in *The Reflected Faun* would explode spectacularly and traumatically into the public

consciousness with the arrest and trials of Housman's friend Wilde. Housman's final engagement with the goat-footed creatures of antiquity arguably bears the mark of this watershed.

The Sensitive Plant

Housman's memoir indicates that the visual form taken by the anxieties over homosexual desire in *The Reflected Faun* returns us obliquely to the childhood garden I have assumed as the origin of his conception of fairyland. Of these bucolic early years, Housman wrote that he particularly remembered

an early attempt to drown in six inches of running water [...]. Of that I have a memory of lying face downward in the brook, and seeing strange weeds swaying under me – not conscious that I was in any danger; and then of screaming violently when restored to dry land.⁴⁷

Within this vignette is contained both the seductive lure and terrible danger of the depths which occupied Housman's mind in *The Reflective Faun*, 'Japonel', and beyond. Indeed, Housman's 1896 drawing *Death and the Bather* (fig. 6), also appearing in the *Yellow Book*, returns even more explicitly to this theme. *Death and the Bather* closely resembles Housman's original composition for *The Reflected Faun*, as Engen describes it, with its somewhat chaotic arrangement of male nudes along a stream. The foremost of these figures, posed frontally with his gaze engaging the viewer's, smiles mysteriously, perhaps an invitation to join the all-male group in their idyll like the fairies of *Elfintown*. However, an element of danger is indicated by a submerged figure lurking in the water beneath him, whose hands begin to encircle his feet. The face of the interloper, whose flowing hair, parted lips, and deadened gaze so readily recollect the lifeless *Ophelia* of Millais' famous canvas, is evidently Death, come to claim the youthful bather in an idiosyncratic rendering of the *et in arcadia ego* motif. Whether the warning is intended for the doomed bather or for the viewer he tempts in remains ambiguous in Housman's peculiar vision.

The foreboding note first sounded in *The Reflected Faun* evidently continued to preoccupy Housman in his graphic work, with *Death and the Bather* once more intertwining homosexual

passion and terrible punishment. In both works, Housman returns to the dangers that faced him in the enchanted garden of his infancy in order to dramatize this danger. Housman's final engagement with fauns and their ilk appeared two years later, in 1891, in an edition of Percy Shelley's poem *The Sensitive Plant* in which the transformation of *Elfintown* into *The Reflected Faun* is completed and in which Housman's garden retains its symbolic potency. From embodying the secretive pleasures of fairyland to discovering the dangers that awaited them even there, such mythological creatures and the forces they represent become themselves the threat to the survival of the enchanted garden. In pursuit of this message, Housman makes an important substitution, inserting into Shelley's poem not the anonymous fauns of his previous work but the goat-footed god Pan himself.



Fig. 6: Laurence Housman, *Death and the Bather*, 1896. Pen-and-ink drawing. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Fondren Library, Rice University.

It should be noted that Pan is not invoked in Shelley's lines. However, his appearance in Housman's drawings can be explained by the artistic tastes of the period. To quote Pater, Pan is 'quite different from [fauns] in origin and intent, but confused with them in form' owing to his hybrid physiognomy; he is 'but a presence; the *spiritual form* of Arcadia, and the ways of human life there'.⁴⁸ In this role he is a minor part of the early forms of Dionysian worship, which Pater characterizes as nature-worship 'between the ruder fancies of half-civilized people concerning life in flower or tree, and the dreamy after-fancies of the poet of the *Sensitive Plant*'.⁴⁹ For Pater, Pan has an 'uneventful' existence, and 'no story', but this dismissiveness runs counter to broader trends in art and literature in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁰ As Patricia Merrivale demonstrates in her classic study of the deity, Pan is easily the most frequently invoked Greek god in what she terms the 'minor lyric poetry' of the late nineteenth century.⁵¹ In these poems he could appear in the guise Pater assigns to him, as an essentially benign spirit of bucolic places, but Merrivale also notes his growing association with fear, violence, and the panic to which he gives his name in the fiction of the 1890s.⁵² While Merrivale traces the development of this increasingly common role to Charles Algernon Swinburne, the most immediate and pronounced influence would likely have been that of the writer Arthur Machen, whose *The Great God Pan* appeared in 1894. Machen's novella boasted a cover design by Beardsley, featuring a faun who is androgynous enough to make Housman proud.⁵³ J. A. Spender, who self-consciously identified himself as an enemy of the decadents in adopting the moniker 'The Philistine', memorably referred to it as 'an incoherent nightmare of sex and the supposed horrible mysteries behind it'.⁵⁴ The story concerns the exploits of Helen, the daughter of Pan, who arrives in London to terrorize the West End's most clubbable bachelors and drive several of them to suicide before Villiers, the novella's amateur detective, forces her to commit suicide in turn. As she dies, she becomes a 'hideous form upon the bed, changing and melting before your eyes from woman to man, from man to beast, and from beast to worse than beast'.⁵⁵ An implicit part of the horror is that Helen, who Machen strongly implies has seduced her victims, is not a woman at all. While these dalliances are not strictly homosexual, Helen's final

transformations reveal them to be certainly queer in the broader sense of standing at a pronounced distance from heterosexuality. As Mark de Cicco has argued, works like *The Great God Pan* popularized a vision of Pan whose power (as embodied by Helen) ‘sexually and behaviourally queers the individual who ventures near, it swallows and disintegrates logic and order, and finally it washes away the moral, religious, sexual, and social structures that anchor Victorian society’.⁵⁶

Housman’s insertion of Pan into *The Sensitive Plant* can arguably be interpreted as an inheritance from Machen’s sensational novella, just as the Praxitelean features of the *Elfintown* fairies borrow from an object of Pater’s and Symonds’s fascination. Shelley’s poem tells the simple story of an idyllic garden tended by a lady whose death leads to its dereliction. Housman, in an explanation of his illustrations, identifies her as ‘the garden deity’, assumedly and pointedly a correlate of the ‘Garden-God’ who presided over his childhood garden: perhaps recognizing this, or at least the totemic importance of the garden for Housman, Engen describes Shelley’s garden as ‘the ideal world of Laurence’s dream’.⁵⁷ His illustrations utilise the figure of Pan to embody the forces which overwhelm and destroy the garden. ‘[O]ver all such things at last comes the tread of Pan, effacing, and replacing with his own image and superscription [...] the garden deity’, Housman writes, arguing that the poem dramatizes the conflict between ‘the garden, fine and elaborate, full of artifice’ and ‘the random overgrowth of the wilderness which seeks jealously to encroach on it’.⁵⁸ Ultimately, ‘Pan is stronger than any form of beauty that springs out of modes and fashions’, and thus the garden is ruined.⁵⁹ At no point in Housman’s illustrations, however, does Pan interact with the ‘garden deity’ herself. Pan interacts instead with a figure who may be the ‘sensitive plant’ at the core of the beautiful garden personified. In *Dying Narcissus*, the narcissus flower is certainly treated in this manner, allowing Housman to return to an epicene nude posed as the mythological Narcissus who is once again on the brink of death (fig. 7).

In *Pan Covetous*, Pan and the ‘garden deity’ are separated by a low wall which bifurcates the composition and preserves the modesty of the flower-figure (fig. 8). Pan we glimpse from behind, with Housman bequeathing to the god an improbably muscular posterior. Laying one hand on the

wall as if to establish contact with the male figure, Pan appears to be menacing his companion – we cannot see his face, and thus cannot ascertain whether he is speaking, but the other figure raises his hands and seems to cover his ears as if to drown out Pan's words. Equally, however, one hand does not touch his head, as if he has lowered it to cautiously listen. Pan himself is depicted in a blatantly homoerotic manner and the figure he covets is seemingly on the brink of giving in to his seduction. *Pan Covetous* functions as an inverted mirror image of *The Reflected Faun*, with a youthful male nude being tempted by the goat-footed god who is evidently both seductive and dangerous.

Pan's second appearance in *The Sensitive Plant* comes in an illustration titled *The Garden Panic* (fig. 9). By this point the 'garden deity' has died, and Pan, as the embodiment of the encroaching wilderness, has conquered the immaculate hedges which surround the enchanted garden. The 'garden panic' refers to the fact that Pan is now chasing the male figure, who appears weak and stricken, across the garden wall. Pan is wreathed in sinister shadow and seems far more dynamic than his target, whose etiolated limbs appear cumbersome and whose movement seems dangerously weary. The illustration that immediately follows, *Pan Paramount* (fig. 10), confirms the dire prognosis of *The Garden Panic*.

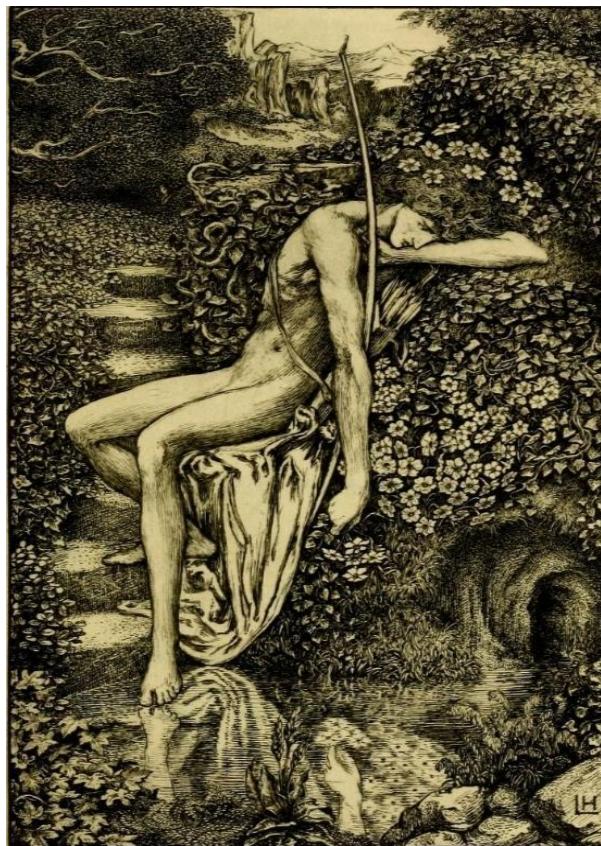


Fig. 7: Laurence Housman, *The Dying Narcissus*, 1898. Wood engraving. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

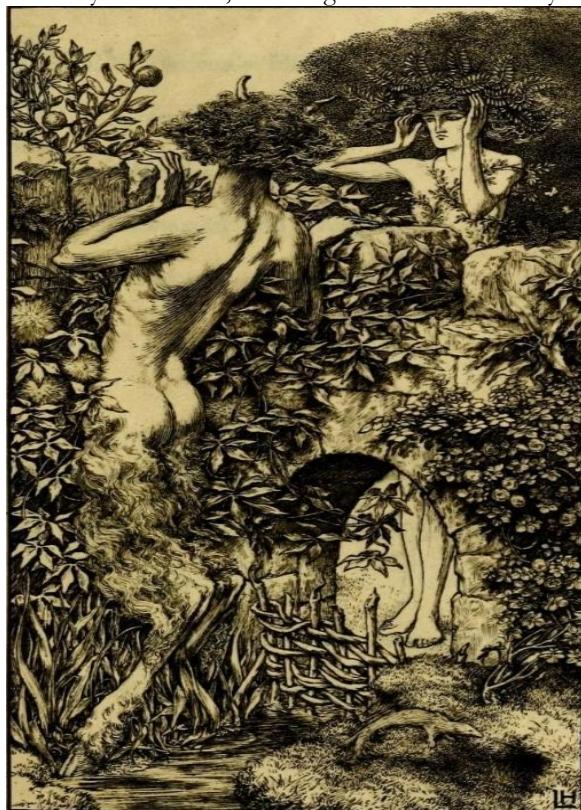


Fig. 8: Laurence Housman, *Pan Covetous*, 1898. Wood engraving. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.



Fig. 9: Laurence Housman, *The Garden Panic*, 1898. Wood engraving. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

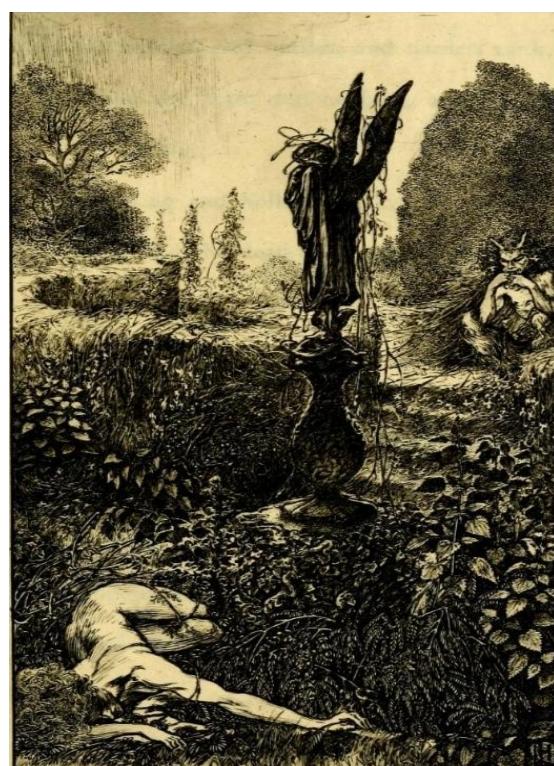


Fig. 10: Laurence Housman, *Pan Paramount*, 1898. Wood engraving. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

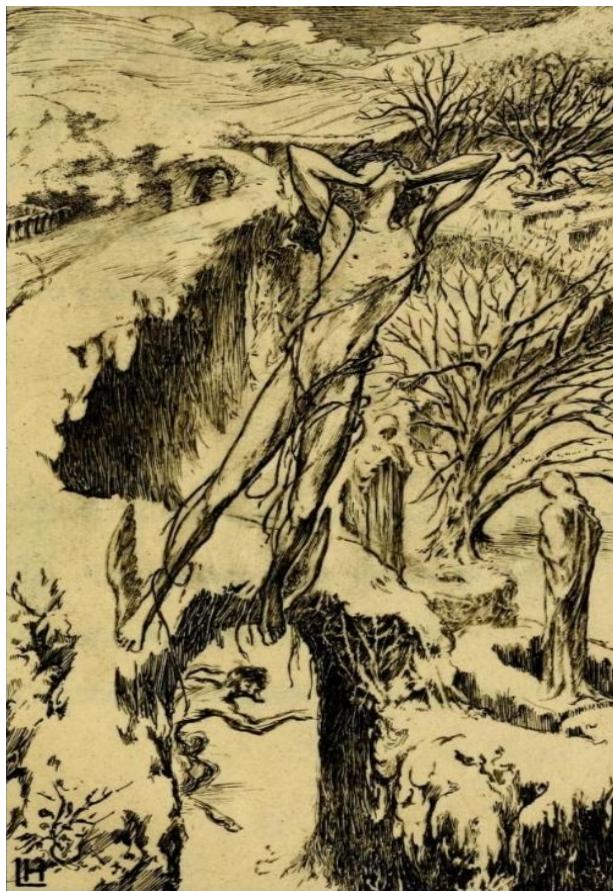


Fig. 11: Laurence Housman, *The Garden Entombed*, 1898. Wood engraving. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

In *Pan Paramount*, the figure whom Pan has been pursuing has collapsed while he looks on, impishly. Pan's depravity is signalled to the reader through a statue of an angel which has fallen into a state of decay, its hooded face turned away from the scene. It is also suggested by Housman's compositional precedents, as in *The Reflected Faun*. The placement of Pan beside a supine nude is redolent of a familiar classical device in which a sleeping nymph is approached by either Pan or a faun, whose intention is to assault them sexually. Housman appears to recall this because the sleeping figure is carefully posed with one hand placed behind the head, identified by Millard Meiss as 'the typical Greco-Roman gesture of sleep'.⁶⁰ Indeed, this obvious recollection suggests to us that *The Garden Panic* too can be read as Housman employing common compositional devices pertaining to Pan, with the subject of the god chasing a nude in a bucolic landscape suggesting the popular theme of Pan and Syrinx, another nymph Pan attempts to rape but who thwarts him by

transforming into a reed. Housman's final illustration, *The Garden Entombed* (fig. 11), shows us that the only way Pan's male victim can escape him is through death. Here we see the figure's soul ascending while an aggrieved Pan looks on from below, the wings of the figure's feet – attributes associated chiefly with the psychopomp Hermes – suggesting that the figure has indeed died.

The dereliction of the garden in Shelley's narrative becomes, in Housman's visual interpretation, a deflowering. Housman laces his illustrations with compositional allusions to recognizable stories or instances of sexual aggression. In this final instance of Housman's engagements with the goat-footed creatures of antiquity we find, therefore, that they remain associated with homosexual desire. But they also embody the dangers which threatened them in *The Reflected Faun* and which thus threaten the very fabric of the enchanted garden at the heart of the *Elfintown* idylls. Moving from the faun at the centre of the homoerotic fantasies of fellow aesthetes such as Pater, Symonds, and Wilde to the more powerful and terrifying figure of Pan drawn from the likes of Machen's fiction, Housman's *Sensitive Plant* illustrations depict sexual desire as the dangerous but undeniable force of nature which lies beneath and beyond – and inevitably overcomes – the impermanent order of the garden. The wilderness in *The Sensitive Plant* is to the garden what the depths of the pond in *The Reflected Faun* are to the water's surface: the space in which the destructive consequences of criminal sexual indulgence lurk. *The Sensitive Plant* is undoubtedly the most sinister and deeply pessimistic of Housman's illustrational projects, and is perhaps significantly the only one examined in this article that came after the cultural trauma of the Wilde trials, in which the potential threats in *The Reflected Faun* became unignorable realities. In *Elfintown*, fairyland functions as a haven for homosexual desire; by the time Housman illustrates *The Sensitive Plant* the two have become incompatible, the indulgence of the latter now destroying the safety of the former.

Taken together, *The End of Elfintown*, *The Reflected Faun*, and *The Sensitive Plant* demonstrate that Housman was not merely involved in the broader decadent investigations into expressing and exploring homosexual desire through recourse to classical iconographies. Rather, navigating this

territory necessitated equal recourse to his own conception of fairyland: this is most evident in *Elfintown*, but the sylvan glade and the mounting peril of *The Reflected Faun* are derived with some directness from Housman's *Goblin Market* and 'Japonel' illustrations, while the world of *The Sensitive Plant* returns us to Housman's original basis for fairyland, his own childhood garden. The personal importance of fairyland in Housman's life has long been attested to, but its multifaceted nature in his work has rarely found expression. Limited explorations of his fairy tales have characterized his work as profoundly 'utopian' in its sexual politics. Focusing on Housman's comparatively understudied graphic art allows a more sophisticated picture to emerge, one in which fairyland becomes less exclusively a site in which to realize homosexual desire and more one in which contemporary issues surrounding homosexuality could be interrogated and articulated.

¹ Rodney Engen, *Laurence Housman* (Catalpa Press, 1983), p. 11. Currently, this is the only biography of Housman (1865-1959).

² Engen, *Laurence Housman*, p. 60.

³ Charles Kains Jackson, quoted in Engen, *Laurence Housman*, p. 60.

⁴ Laurence Housman, *The Unexpected Years* (Jonathan Cape, 1937), p. 13.

⁵ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, p. 13.

⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Houghton Mifflin, 1985), p. 9.

⁷ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (Routledge, 2007), p. 4.

⁸ Zipes, *When Dreams Come True*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162 and 154.

¹⁰ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, p. 133.

¹¹ Audrey Doussot, 'Laurence Housman (1865-1959): Fairy Tale Teller, Illustrator and Aesthete', *Printemps*, 73 (2011), pp. 131-46 (p. 132).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹³ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, p. 135; Laurence Housman, *A Modern Antaeus* (Doubleday, 1901), p. 383.

¹⁴ Housman, *A Modern Antaeus*, p. 383.

¹⁵ Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship After Wilde: Decadence and the Family* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 59 and 63.

¹⁶ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Wilde's Legacy: Fairy Tales, Laurence Housman, and the Expression of "Beautiful Untrue Things"', in *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 89-118 (pp. 90 and 114).

¹⁷ Engen, *Laurence Housman*, p. 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, pp. 115-16.

²⁰ Caroline Sumpter, 'Innocents and Epicures: The Child, the Fairy Tale and Avant-garde Debate in fin-de-siècle Little Magazines', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 28.3 (2006), pp. 225-44 (p. 227).

²¹ See Mahoney, *Queer Kinship*, p. 86, and Doussot, *Laurence Housman*, p. 142; for Housman's letter, see Fiona McCarthy, *The Simple Life: C. R. Ashbee in the Cotswolds* (University of California Press, 1981), p. 144.

²² Jane Barlow, *The End of Elfintown* (Macmillan, 1894), pp. 68-69.

²³ Zipes, *When Dreams Come True*, pp. 150-53.

²⁴ Mahoney, *Queer Kinship*, p. 63; Kooistra, *Wilde's Legacy*, p. 102.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Barlow, *End of Elfin town*, p. 53.

²⁷ Charles Kains Jackson, 'The Art of Laurence Housman', in Engen, *Laurence Housman*, p. 235.

²⁸ See Barberini Faun, c. 2 BC. Marble. Glyptothek, Munich.

<<https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/barberini-faun>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

²⁹ Amanda Herring, 'Sexy Beast: The Barberini Faun as an Object of Desire', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 25.1 (2016), pp. 32-61 (pp. 32 and 36).

³⁰ After Praxiteles, *Resting Satyr*, c. 117-138AD. Marble. 170.5 cm. Capitoline Museum, Rome.

<<https://www.collezione-galleria-borghese.it/en/opere/resting-satyr>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

³¹ Gary Scrimgeour, 'The Marble Faun: Hawthorne's Faery Land', *American Literature*, 36.3 (1964), pp. 271-87 (p. 271).

³² Richard Warren, *Art Nouveau and the Classical Inheritance* (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 111.

³³ John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, vol. I (Macmillan, 1880), p. 289.

³⁴ Walter Pater, *Greek Studies* (Macmillan, 1925), p. 16.

³⁵ Pater, *Greek Studies*, pp. 16-17.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁷ Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Ashgate, 2011), p. 224; Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Macmillan, 1928), p. 234.

³⁸ Oscar Wilde to Reginald Turner, 26 November 1898, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart Davis (Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 1104.

³⁹ Wilde to Leonard Smithers, 2 September 1900, *Complete Letters*, p. 1196.

⁴⁰ Wilde to Robert Ross, 25 January 1895, *Complete Letters*, p. 629.

⁴¹ Wilde to Robert Ross, 25 January 1895; Wilde to Smithers, 3 January 1899, *Complete Letters*, pp. 629 and 1117.

⁴² Engen, *Laurence Housman*, p. 54.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Anon., 'Our Christmas Bookshelf', *The Graphic*, 1 December 1894, p. 632.

⁴⁵ Bram Dijkstra identifies this trend in relation to sirens, mermaids, and nymphs, in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 269; for a specific examination of mermaids, see Vaughn Scribner, *Merpeople: A Human History* (Reaktion Books, 2020), pp. 174-78.

⁴⁶ Frederic Leighton, *The Fisherman and the Syren*, 1856-1858, oil on canvas. Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol. <https://collections.bristolmuseums.org.uk/collections/e3375e76-02f7-3f34-bae1-9cff566744ec/> [accessed 10 January 2025].

⁴⁷ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Pater, *Greek Studies*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵¹ Patricia Merrivale, *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* (Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 118.

⁵² Ibid., p. 154.

⁵³ Aubrey Beardsley, frontispiece for *The Great God Pan*, 1894, process engraving. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <<https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/beardsley/61.html>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

⁵⁴ J. A. Spender, 'The New Fiction: A Protest Against Sex-Mania', *Westminster Gazette*, 8 March 1895, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* (John Lane, 1894), p. 86.

⁵⁶ Mark de Cicco, 'The Queer God Pan: Terror and Apocalypse, Reimagined', in *Monsters and Monstrosity from the Fin de Siècle to the Millennium*, ed. by Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown (McFarland and Co., 2015), pp. 49-68 (p. 51).

⁵⁷ Laurence Housman, 'A Note Upon the Illustrations', *The Sensitive Plant* (Privately Printed, 1898), p. 17; Engen, *Laurence Housman*, p. 87.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁰ Millard Meiss, 'Sleep in Venice: Ancient Myths and Renaissance Proclivities', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 110.5 (1966), pp. 348-82 (p. 351).