volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 2

Winter 2025

Review: Chris Foss, *The Importance of Being Different: Disability in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales*, Peculiar Bodies: Stories and Histories (University of Virginia Press, 2025)

Aaron Eames

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 December 2025

Date of Publication: 31 December 2025

Citation: Aaron Eames, 'Review: Chris Foss, *The Importance of Being Different: Disability in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales*, Peculiar Bodies: Stories and Histories (University of Virginia Press, 2025)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.2 (2025), pp. 207-211.

volupte.gold.ac.uk

Review: Chris Foss, *The Importance of Being Different: Disability in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales*, Peculiar Bodies: Stories and Histories (University of Virginia Press, 2025) 198 pp. ISBN 9780813953014

Aaron Eames

Independent Scholar

Chris Foss's *The Importance of Being Different* is the first monograph study of Oscar Wilde's works from a disability studies perspective, perhaps one of the few lenses through which Wilde has yet to be extensively observed. Indeed, the study proposes to counteract the tendency in scholarship to read 'Wilde's nonnormative bodies […] simply as code for queer bodies' and to explore 'the nexus of the crip and the queer' in Wilde's writings (p. 16). Wilde's fairy tales, in particular the stories from the collections *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), are presented as 'fantastical reflections on the Victorian abjection of peculiar bodies': a selfish giant, a living statue, a dwarf (Wilde's term), witches, mermaids, fauns, talking animals, and gossiping flowers, as well as many other supernatural beings (p. 141). *The Importance of Being Different* therefore builds on major works in the field of Wilde studies – Jarlath Killeen's *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (2007), Anne Markey's *Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales: Origins and Contexts* (2011), and *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood* (2017), edited by Joseph Bristow – and also the work of key scholars in disability studies, such as Kylee-Anne Hingston and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, to produce close literary readings of Wilde's fairy tale texts attending to the extraordinary bodies foregrounded within them. The four chapters explore 'The Birthday of the Infanta', 'The Fisherman and His Soul', 'The Star-Child', and 'The Happy Prince' respectively.

'The Birthday of the Infanta' is a logical starting point for Chapter 1 since the story presents a protagonist in the Dwarf who is not the dwarf of fairy tales but a little person referred to in the common parlance of the period. The Dwarf has been brought to the palace as entertainment for the twelfth birthday of the Infanta of Spain. Foss utilizes scholarship on the Victorian treatment of 'freaks' and the perception of disability in the nineteenth century by Leslie Fiedler, Betty M.

Adelson, and Lillian Craton to contextualize and discuss Wilde's portrayal. Here, as elsewhere, the book finds no simple answer for how to comprehend Wilde's depiction of such characters but instead investigates potential and coexistent readings, guiding the reader – especially those unfamiliar with disability studies as a discipline – through the resultant implications. The Dwarf's tragic end is clearly to be pitied, which could suggest a progressive, sympathetic reading, but what are we to make of the fact that he dies of heartbreak at the recognition of his own perceived ugliness? Is this Wilde ironically 'exposing the mechanisms through which sentimental stories tend to stigmatize or romanticize strange bodies' (p. 50)? Or is the point of view given to this 'different' protagonist in a Baudelairean move to privilege the Dwarf's ugliness over the titular princess's beauty?

One of the main strengths of the book is Foss's ability to balance and juxtapose such competing interpretations of Wilde's 'peculiar bodies' and reveal what Regina M. Ponciano refers to as the 'productive tensions […] Wilde deliberately wove into his short fiction' (p. 178).[1] The stories are often complex, their themes and content sometimes mature and there is a distinct stylistic variance between the volumes, with *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) written in an mannered style akin to passages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or *Salomé* (1893), and *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) described by its author as 'meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness'.[2] Wilde also observed in a letter to a Northumberland headmaster on the subject of how to interpret 'The Nightingale and the Rose':

> I like to fancy there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it, and the others, I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets, and many answers.[3]

Foss navigates this complexity and provides thought-provoking readings that generate many answers – and many questions – not only on the topic of disability and difference but also Wilde's motivations and intentions in crafting these multilayered texts.

Chapter 1 also introduces the conceit of linking each of Wilde's tales to a narrative from Charles Dickens and, in this instance, Foss's contention that the plot is akin to an inversion of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) is an intriguing one, drawing parallels between the naivety of the Dwarf and the cruelty of the antagonist Daniel Quilp as well as the personalities of Little Nell and the spoiled Infanta. While it is perhaps fair to describe Dickens and Wilde as 'two serviceable bookends to Victorian literary history', the phrase 'the rise of Boz and the fall of Bosie' is somewhat specious (p. 29); Wilde's young lover Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas was not directly implicated in Wilde's trials, though he brought about his own downfall of a kind in 1923 when he was imprisoned for criminally libelling Winston Churchill. This is an example of an alliterative tendency that may be an homage to Wilde's purple prose but may not be to every reader's taste. As another example, of Wilde's Fisherman we are told that he 'cuts away his soul in order to free himself to follow his fish-girl full fathom five for a fantastic life with her family of freaks' (p. 74). I am unsure if this is well-suited to an academic text, just as a reviewer of *A House of Pomegranates* for the *Pall Mall Gazette* wondered if its prose was suitable for the British child; Wilde's response was that '[n]o artist recognises any standard of beauty but that which is suggested by his own temperament'.[4]

Since Wilde's characters are not all 'disabled' in the sense of lacking physical or intellectual abilities, and since use of the term 'disability' in relation to nineteenth-century contexts is contested, Foss proposes the term 'disability-aligned'. This is intended to capture the ways in which the physical difference of Wilde's fairy tale characters routinely determines how they are seen and treated within their literary contexts: 'their unusual physical appearance or attributes spur conditioned pejorative responses' making them representative of lived experiences past and present (p. 29). On the one hand, it is to be expected that an innovative study will need to adopt idiosyncratic terminology and this nomenclature facilitates varied readings of Wilde's characters, especially those that are non-human such as the Remarkable Rocket in the Conclusion or the Happy Prince in Chapter 4. On the other hand, it occasionally feels as though the terminology is too broad in its application. While the discussion of 'The Fisherman and His Soul' in Chapter 2 is

an engaging study of a largely overlooked text, the treatment of the removal of one's soul as a 'disability-aligned' attribute over-extends the relationship of the events of the story to 'lived experience'. This is not simply because 'The Birthday of the Infanta' is more naturalistic – there is, after all, a talking sundial in the palace garden – but because the 'ableism' of the story (p. 70), that for a human to live with the merfolk one must relinquish one's soul, is unique to the world of the narrative and not immediately analogous to reality. Such wide parameters would seem to allow that, for instance, in the fictional world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it could be 'disability-aligned' to be born in a handbag or to not have been baptised (though such a reading would certainly be interesting). The extension of disability alignment to include the child in 'The Selfish Giant' being too small to reach the branches of a tree is too generalised to read as 'difference': some children are tall, some children are not tall, as *Earnest*'s Jack Worthing might retort.

Chapter 4 on 'The Happy Prince' contains the most convincing reading of a non-human character via a disability studies approach, examining the eponymous statue's lack of mobility, as he is attached to a pedestal, and his blindness after he asks his companion the Swallow to pluck out the rare sapphires that serve as his eyes. The Happy Prince's request to be blinded is interrogated as an act of choice in response to the misery and poverty he witnesses in the urban environment and the Swallow's repeated decision to delay his migratory flight to Egypt occasions a discussion of the two characters in terms of dependency. Foss goes on to explore the interconnection of Wilde's handling of difference with his treatment of the socio-economic conditions of the Victorian age. This is a point carried over from Chapter 3's interpretation of 'The Star-Child' in which the protagonist, fallen from the sky as a child wrapped in a golden cloak and blessed with great beauty, is magically disfigured for his narcissistic arrogance. Foss articulates the problematic nature of this deformity-as-punishment plot device and considers Wilde's conceptualisation of pity. In the Conclusion the author positions Wilde's *De Profundis* – the long letter addressed to Bosie born out of the suffering he endured in the Victorian penal system – in relation to the fairy tales, establishing a throughline and seeing the missive as 'reconsolidating the

insights from his fairy tales into a robust formulation of a Wilde Philosophy' that encourages 'the embrace of marginalized bodies and minds with loving-kindness and compassionate action' (p. 123). These readings also suggest the generative possibilities of similar investigations into Wilde's other writings. For instance, one can imagine a productive disability studies interrogation of Septimus Podgers, the weak-sighted cheiromantist from the short story 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime'.

Overall, *The Importance of Being Different* demonstrates the value of exploring Wilde's work through a disability studies lens. Foss's close reading approach might also profitably be applied to the perverse and uncanny characters of fin-de-siècle fiction, perhaps even the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, in the same manner as Wilde's fairy tales. With regard to the latter, the book consistently highlights the mixture of problematic and progressive aspects in Wilde's portrayal of difference, insights that contribute to our broader understanding of Wilde's intellectual and artistic position. We might relate Foss's findings to the critical attention given to Wilde's stereotypical portrayal of a Jewish theatre owner in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or his general attitudes regarding race.[5] Such approaches continue to challenge and negotiate Richard Ellmann's phrase (from the 1980s) that Wilde 'belongs to our world more than to Victoria's', encouraging us to query how far Wilde belongs to the twenty-first century.[6]

---

[1] Regina M. Ponciano, 'Revaluing Oscar Wilde's Short Fiction', *The Wildean*, 67 (July 2025), pp. 178-85.
[2] Oscar Wilde, 'To G. H. Kersley', in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 352.
[3] Wilde, 'To Thomas Hutchinson', in *The Complete Letters*, p. 354.
[4] Wilde, 'To the Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*', in *The Complete Letters*, p. 503.
[5] For the former see Christopher S. Nassaar, 'The Problem of the Jewish Manager in "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', *The Wildean*, 22 (January 2003), pp. 29-36; for the latter see Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 118-20.
[6] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Penguin, 1988), p. 553.