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Preface

Once upon a time there was no such thing as a decadent fairy tale. People throughout the land read fairy stories to their children at bed-time, but no one thought to question the presence of queer monsters, poisonous flora, and violent and subversive animals, even less the fetishisation of hair and feet, the uncontrollable cravings of mothers and step-mothers, and the disproportionate number of half-humans and secret hothouse chambers. No one thought to question the excess of sugar in the forest house of Hansel and Gretel, the ruinous eloquence of wolves, or the large number of bleeding women.

Then, came to this land in the late 1970s a wise and clever woman who spoke of the cruel eroticism of the stories fed to small children. She wove extraordinary magic with her words, transforming kings into sadistic gourmands, fairy castles into torture chambers, and capes and breeches into the robes of seduction. Above all, she pointed out that the moral of the tales served no one because the female body in these stories resembled a slab of meat on a banqueting table.

At first, people shunned the decadence of her fairy stories. 'There are no fairies!', they cried. But a few sages came forward and argued that the stories were actually Gothic. Sellers of books began to take notice and after two decades scholars in seats of high learning woke from their slumber. Two families of critics, one Feminist the other Comparatist, came together and revealed to each other the decadent power of the woman's writing, and after that her work was read widely by adults of all ages. People savoured her stories, but they did not share them with their children. They realised that their moral lessons were closer to an awful truth than anything they had read before.

By the time the century's clock heralded a new digital dawn, many people had developed a taste for Gothic decadence and were buying the woman's books and reading her work online. Young readers feasted on its weirdness. This weirdness was later named 'core literature' and 'PostModern Rupture'. No one saw Cinderella in the same way again. The decadent fairy tale was finally established and it was loudly proclaimed an object of dark beauty. People up and down the land were transfixed. Over the sea, King DreamWorks™ was delighted.

One day in the year 2023, in an ivory and gold tower in the south east of that great city, London, a group of early career researchers (and a few gnarlèd and degenerate elders) united to celebrate with readings and wine the decadent fairy tale, which by now was much more than a children's bed-time story. And in their speeches they paid homage to that wise woman who showed that the stories people once read to their sleepy sons and daughters were bizarre decadent tales of monstrous cruelty and obsession.

Ad honorem Angelae Carter (1940-1992), quae fabulas cruentas, voluptuosas, et veras reddidit.[1]

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
31 December 2025

[1] *In homage to Angela Carter (1940-1992), who made fairy tales bloody, voluptuous, and true.*

The Decadent Fairy Tale: An Introduction by the Guest Editors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[4] Ibid., p. 16.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'[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

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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.

Anachronistic Decadence in an Antique Nineteenth-Century 'Fairy Tale': Walter Pater and Errol Le Cain's *Cupid and Psyche*

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In 1977, Errol Le Cain (1941-1989) illustrated Walter Pater's retelling of the story of 'Cupid and Psyche'.[1] Le Cain was a British animator and children's book illustrator who was born in Singapore, where he spent most of his childhood, as well as in India. He is best known for his illustrations of numerous fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as Russian and Chinese folktales. In addition to these fairy tales, he also illustrated literary works such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Pater's version of Cupid and Psyche. The story originates as a frame narrative in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* (second century CE), but Pater recontextualized it through his own translation in his only completed novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). For Le Cain's illustrated version, the text, as translated and altered by Pater, was again shortened and adapted to better suit the intended younger audience. Although Le Cain's work is set in the twentieth century, a clear decadent influence is evident in his 'Cupid and Psyche', While Pater was not a decadent writer per say, his work reflects aesthetic and decadent ideas. It might not be prototypical, but it can be seen as a predecessor to the fairy tale genre or, in Stijn Praet's words, 'an Antique "fairy tale from before fairy tales"'.[2] While the Romans did not use the generic classification of the 'fairy tale' (this occurred in the late seventeenth century), 'Cupid and Psyche' is a narrative that could be identified today as a fairy tale - – Praet, for examples, draws attention to the 'happy end marriage' and the 'striking structural and thematic affinities with other well-known fairy tales',[3] such as the story's formulaic opening sentences, 'once upon a time in a certain city there lived a king and queen'.[4]

The combination of Pater's retelling of the myth with Le Cain's large-scale black-and-white drawings with curved, swooping lines and exaggerated depiction of emotion makes for a fascinating case study of fairy tales and decadent illustration. Examining how a narrative originating

in the second century CE is reconfigured within the nineteenth-century context of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and reinterpreted in a 1977 illustrated edition reveals the shifting aesthetic values that shape each retelling and this raises intriguing questions: why did Le Cain specifically choose Pater's version of the Cupid and Psyche myth for his illustrated edition, even more so since it was intended as a children's book? Why did he choose to work with a Beardsleyesque aesthetic for the illustrations? How should we interpret these decadent, anachronistic illustrations created for this reimagined text? In what ways do they aid our understanding? Attempting to answer these questions will make it clear that Le Cain's illustrations are much more than a complement to the narrative. Instead, a more sophisticated and complex synthesis of text and image is at work. The images are not secondary to the text; rather, they contribute to the narrative by creating their own sequence of events that is integral to the story, reflecting a deliberate effort to harmonize the visual and verbal elements. As writer, artist, poet, and illustrator Mervyn Peake puts it, rather than merely repeating what the author has said, the illustrations 'attempt to capture the "colour" of the writing'.[5] In this way, Apuleius' writing, Pater's retelling, and Le Cain's illustrations, to use a phrase of Pater's, 'reciprocally […] lend each other new forces'.[6] In addition, by foregrounding Le Cain's work, this paper draws attention to an artist who has been overlooked in scholarship.

The Case of the Three Cupid and Psyche

Apuleius places the tale of 'Cupid and Psyche' at the heart of his *Metamorphoses*, framing it as a comforting story told by an old woman to Charite, a young girl who has been kidnapped and is being held captive alongside the novel's protagonist, Lucius, who at that moment is trapped in his asinine form. The story follows Psyche, a mortal whose exceptional beauty incurs the wrath of Venus. Venus commands Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a monstrous creature, but instead Cupid himself becomes enamoured of her, placing Psyche in a luxurious home and visiting her in secret. After being persuaded by her jealous sisters, Psyche betrays her husband's trust by attempting to uncover his identity. This betrayal leads to Cupid's departure and subjects Psyche to

a series of trials imposed by Venus. After overcoming the challenges, Psyche is redeemed and secures her immortality with the approval of the gods. The story ends with Cupid and Psyche's wedding banquet and the introduction of their child Voluptas or Pleasure.[7]

In both Apuleius' and Pater's version, 'Cupid and Psyche' functions as a narrative frame. For Apuleius, it provides infinite mirroring, or *mise en abyme*, of the main plot – both protagonists, Lucius and Psyche, face the consequences for their curiosity but are rescued by the intervention of a divine power.[8] Throughout *Metamorphoses*, the homodiegetic narrator, Lucius is at times replaced by other narrators through narrative framing, such as the *anus narratrix* comforting the girl.[9] According to Praet, the narrative frame of Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche' serves a dual purpose: on 'the chronological level of events', it is a comforting, but ultimately deceptive tale told by an old woman to a kidnapped bride-to-be, offering false hope of a happily ever after in contrast to the girl's and her beloved's tragic deaths a little later on, and on 'the level of the narrative as a structured whole', the tale mirrors Lucius' journey. as he fails to recognize its relevance to his own life.[10] Both Psyche and Lucius 'originally lead comfortable lives, lose their bliss through misguided curiosity and have to endure relentless suffering before giving themselves up to divine grace'.[11] This highlights the paradox that fiction can both be misleading and revealing of the truth, depending on the reader's perception, as 'those who seek meaning in fiction and mistake it for truth are eventually duped by reality, while those who are duped by reality might very well find guidance and truth in fiction'.[12]

Interestingly, Matthew Potolsky attributes a similar paradox to Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, specifically in the fate of the character Flavian, with whom the protagonist, Marius, reads the story of 'Cupid and Psyche'. The two boys reading the story together in an old granary, creates a frame narrative within the novel that serves a similar purpose to the one in *Metamorphoses*. Potolsky comments on Pater's note 'that art can have too much of an impact, that its effects can exceed the intentions of those who would use it'.[13] *Metamorphoses*, or 'The Golden Book' as it is called by Marius and Flavian, becomes a symbolic object that draws attention to the danger of conflating

life with art, as Flavian's intellectual and aesthetic ideas fail to protect him from the realities of life and his untimely death. This is not just a decorative strategy, but rather demonstrates how literature overtakes lived experience. Flavian's identity and influence on Marius are inseparable from Apuleius, as he becomes an almost living version of the text: beautiful, sensuous, golden, but also fatal.[14] In other words, in both versions, the story functions as a conduit for the tension between idealized beauty and reality, leaning into decadent ideas of the double-edged power of art to both deceive and reveal. While reality or life can be approached as fiction or a work of art, this pursuit comes with seductive promises and existential risk.

The designation of *Metamorphoses* as 'The Golden Book' gives *Marius the Epicurean* a distinctly decadent undertone. As Potolsky argues, decadent writers deliberately created networks of references to one another to place themselves within this selective literary lineage, giving the example of Wilde praising Pater's *Renaissance* as a 'golden book', 'a term he borrowed from a poem by Swinburne praising Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1836), and from the term Pater himself used in *Marius the Epicurean* to describe Apuleius' *Metamorphoses'*.[15] In general, Pater's approach of interpreting ancient history and philosophy in light of modern concerns mirrors the visions of decadence by both the Romans and Pater. According to Isobel Hurst, the 'transitional nature of imperial decline and the rise of Christianity' resonates with the present, while specifically foregrounding the 'elaborate literary Latin of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses'*.[16] Similarly, Giles Whiteley has shown how Pater aligns Apuleius' euphuistic style with his own notion of aesthetic decadence.[17] This superimposition of 'different decadent temporalities of Roman antiquity and the present' is also discussed by Stefano Evangelista, who shows that Pater frames his inclusion of Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche through 'a number of recognizably decadent tropes'.[18] As Evangelista notes, Pater describes the book itself as having a 'handsome yellow wrapper', being 'perfumed with oil of sandal-wood, and decorated with carved gilt ivory bosses', and depicts Marius' and Flavian's fascination with it in terms that are explicitly anachronistic.[19] In Pater's words, their response is

aligned with 'what the French writers called the macabre', 'that luxury disgust in gazing corruption', that renders certain scenes from Apuleius 'worthy of Théophile Gautier'.[20]

The narrative framing of the story in both Apuleius' original story and Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, thus serves similar functions. Contextualizing 'Cupid and Psyche' as a frame story within a larger story links the tale with 'a long history of intricately framed fairy tale collections'.[21] However, scholars have since long treated these tales in a vacuum separately from their original context, robbing them of their possible different interpretations and nuances of meaning.[22] Notably, this is precisely what happens in the illustrated edition. The tale is set on its own, without any context. This does not, however, necessarily mean that meaning or interpretation is lost, as the combination of the text and illustrations leave room for the reader's own interpretation. Moreover, as Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has explored in her work on Christina Rossetti, 'illustrated books are not simply physical objects or "products"' but also 'social *processes*, involving a complex network of relationships in historically specific situations that change over time'.[23] In the case of *Cupid and Psyche*, Le Cain provides a visual reinterpretation of a text that has been both shortened and altered twice.

In addition to being extracted from its original context, the text used in Le Cain's edition not only differs from the original, but also from Pater's own text. Pater's translation as included in *Marius the Epicurean* is approximately one third shorter than the original story. He made omissions and changes to the text, often, as Eugene J. Brzenk has argued, 'directed toward the exclusion of unseemly touches of comedy and distracting naturalism' and this way restored 'a simple classic quality to a discursive and embroidered version of a Greek myth'.[24] In fact, while the text emphasizes sensory vividness it does so in a rather simple or sober way, following the principle of omission Pater coined in his essay on *Style*.[25] In Pater's own words, the story of 'Cupid and Psyche', as remembered by Marius, takes on a more serious tone than its original version and stands out as an image of pure beauty and ideal love:

> So the famous story composed itself in the memory of Marius, with an expression changed in some ways from the original and on the whole graver. The petulant, boyish Cupid of Apuleius was become more like that 'Lord, of terrible aspect', who stood at Dante's bedside and wept, or had at least grown to the manly earnestness of the *Erôs* of Praxiteles. Set in relief amid the coarser matter of the book, this episode of Cupid and Psyche served to combine many lines of meditation, already familiar to Marius, into the ideal of a perfect imaginative love, centered upon a type of beauty entirely flawless and clean – an ideal which never wholly faded from his thoughts, though he valued it at various times in different degrees.[26]

In comparing the original Latin text with Pater's translation, Paul Turner has argued that although Pater has a 'sure eye for stylistic superfluity, and is largely successful in his attempt to tell Apuleius' story more simply and efficiently', his version of the essence of the story 'is too narrow an abstraction, in that it excludes all the humour, and most of the connections with actual human life'; accusing Pater of applying a 'too narrow conception of beauty' reflecting a broader Victorian tendency to avoid uncomfortable or messy truths about human nature.[27] However, Pater's generalizing of specific vocabulary (for example, 'uterus' becoming 'boson', 'necklace' becoming 'ornaments, or 'marriage' becoming 'sweet usage') creates an atmosphere that is more evocative than descriptive, more impressionistic than narratively precise. In line with Pater's theme of 'imaginative love', he is not merely simplifying but rather reimagining the story.

The text for the illustrated edition is again shorter, approximately half the length of Pater's original. In comparison to Pater's more expansive and elaborate version, the illustrated text is more concise with simpler and plainer phrasing. Take, for example, the first paragraph of the illustrated version:

> In a certain city lived a king and queen who had three daughters exceeding fair. But such was the loveliness of the youngest that men's speech was too poor to commend it worthily, The fame of her beauty went daily further into distant lands, so that many people were drawn together to behold her. Men sailed no longer to Paphos, to Cnidus or Cythera, to the presence of the goddess Venus: her sacred rites were neglected, her images stood uncrowned, the cold ashes left to disfigure her forsaken altars. It was to a maiden that men's prayers were offered, and when the girl went forth in the morning they strewed flowers on her way.[28]

The narrative here is direct, with Psyche's beauty described as overwhelming but in rather straightforward terms. Pater's original version, on the other hand, is more elevated, stressing the ritualized gestures and the mythic dimension:

> In a certain city lived a king and queen who had three daughters exceeding fair. But the beauty of the elder sisters, though pleasant to behold, yet passed not the measure of human praise, while such was the loveliness of the youngest that men's speech was too poor to commend it worthily and could express it not at all. Many of the citizens and of strangers, whom the fame of this excellent vision had gathered thither, confounded by that matchless beauty, could but kiss the finger-tips of their right hands at sight of her, as in adoration to the goddess Venus herself. And soon a rumour passed through the country that she whom the blue deep had borne, forbearing her divine dignity, was even then moving among men, or that by some fresh germination from the stars, not the sea now, but the earth, had put forth a new Venus, endued with the flower of virginity. This belief, with the fame of the maiden's loveliness, went daily further into distant lands, so that many people were drawn together to behold that glorious model of the age. Men sailed no longer to Paphos, to Cnidus or Cythera, to the presence of the goddess Venus: her sacred rites were neglected, her images stood uncrowned, the cold ashes were left to disfigure her forsaken altars. It was to a maiden that men's prayers were offered, to a human countenance they looked, in propitiating so great a godhead: when the girl went forth in the morning they strewed flowers on her way, and the victims proper to that unseen goddess were presented as she passed along.[29]

The shortening of the story, however, provides, literally and figuratively, more room for the illustrations. Le Cain's illustrations challenge the viewpoint that Pater's conception of beauty is too abstract or idealized. For instance, the illustrations show faces full of expression (fig. 1), inserting the rawer emotions that Pater hides in his text. This way, even if Pater reduced Venus to a tame antagonist lacking psychological realism, as Paul Turner argues, the jealousy and rage do come to the foreground in Le Cain's drawing (fig. 2).[30] The text of 'Cupid and Psyche' changes throughout the three different editions. In the case of the 1977 edition, the large black and white drawings, the curved, swooping lines, and the exaggerated, almost grotesque, depiction of emotion, all stand in contrast to the isolated, simplified, and shortened version of the text. As Matthew Eve argues, the story transforms from purely verbal to imaginatively visual – in this 'remarkably delicate book […] classically inspired designs [are] imbued with a sense of the forbidden as strange creatures and landscapes cascade across the page in a macabre carnival'.[31]

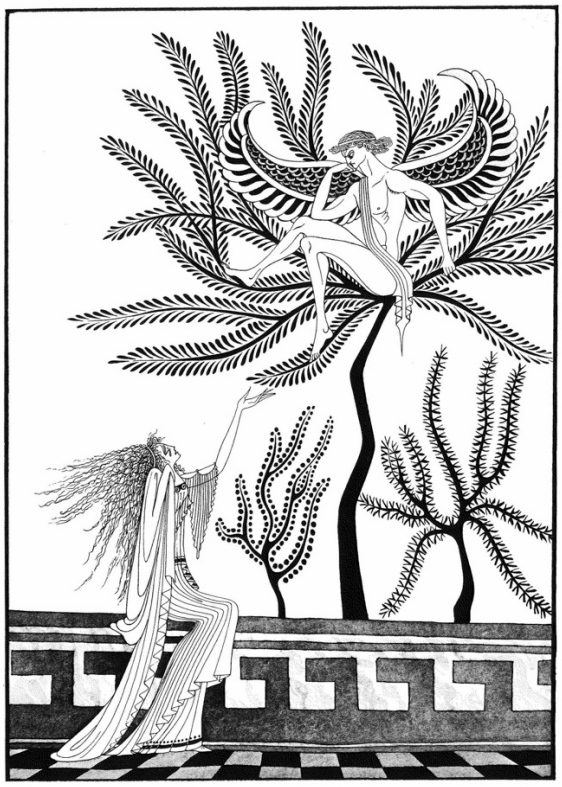

Fig. 1: Errol Le Cain, 'Psyche and Cupid', illustration for Walter Pater, *Cupid and Psyche* (Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 20.
© Maximilian Le Cain

Fig. 1: Le Cain, 'Psyche and Venus', illustration for *Cupid and Psyche*, p. 27.
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The 'Macabre Carnival' of Le Cain and Pater's 'Cupid and Psyche'

Le Cain's illustrations for Pater's retelling of the story are a rare example of 'Pater illustrations', as illustrated works of Pater's texts are scarce. Only a few examples have emerged since the late nineteenth century.[32] Other notable examples include two different illustrated editions of Pater's story 'Sebastian van Storck', one illustrated by the German artist Alastair (Hans Henning Otto Harry Baron von Voigt) in 1927 and the other by Dutch artist Frank Leenhouts in 1993. There are also two other illustrated editions of 'Cupid and Psyche', one illustrated by the French-British artist Edmund Dulac in 1951 and another published in 1901 as *The Story of Cupid and Psyche*, illustrated with reproductions of Raphael's paintings.[33] Lene Østermark-Johansen has written of Pater's reluctance to have his books illustrated and notes that 'Pater's surviving letters to his publishers reveal his obsession with bookbinding and paper, but he clearly intended his words to carry their own powers and not be rivalled by any interfering images'.[34] Such avoidance of illustration by writers was not uncommon during this period.[35] Kooistra, for example, has shown how writers such as Alfred Tennyson, who was one of the most illustrated poets of his period and enjoyed 'commercial viability of reissuing his poetry in illustrated form', was nevertheless 'a confirmed literalist when it came to visual representation' and 'convinced that "an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text"'.[36] A few decades earlier, William Wordsworth described illustrated poetry as 'evidence of regression to a lower, more material, stage of life', connecting pictures 'with the childlike and primitive, which are in turn […] associated not with innocence and spiritual elevation, but rather with a dangerous femininity undermining a noble masculine culture'.[37] In general, nineteenth-century illustration theory often framed image/text relations in gendered, hierarchical terms, casting the pictorial as 'a lesser art associated with such "feminine" attributes as imitation, sympathy, charm, grace and beauty, and the verbal as a superior art associated with such "masculine" attributes as intellect, power and mastery'.[38] Interestingly, for Pater, these 'feminine' attributes such as charm, grace, and beauty are rather integral aspects to his work.

However, as Kooistra goes on to argue, Pater's British contemporaries, such as William Morris and Christina Rossetti, 'stand out as artists who actively sought out opportunities for visual/verbal collaboration'.[39] Moreover, the story of 'Cupid and Psyche' was popular in Pater's time, with various illustrated versions appearing. Morris and Edward Burne-Jones planned to publish an illustrated edition of Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* (1868), containing a series of woodcut illustrations of Morris' retelling of Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche', but this project was ultimately never finalized. The fascination with the story of Cupid and Psyche was not limited to the British aestheticist circle, however. In the German context, for example, Max Klinger provided illustrations for Reinhold Jachmann's translation (1880), Robert Hamerling retold the story with Paul Thumann's illustrations (1882), and Walter Tiemann created illustrations for the translation of Eduard Norden (1902). As Christoph Leidll posits, all of these can be compared to Morris' ideals of 'the artistic shaping of the book – as a work of art and beauty, which would stand in contrast to the industrialized environment'.[40] In this way, the different illustrated editions of 'Cupid and Psyche' serve as an excellent example, Leidl argues,

> of keeping a text alive through adaptation and illustration, in close connection with both the development of the material culture of book-illustration […] on the one hand and the interplay of the old and frequently reinterpreted story with modern sensibilities on the other.[41]

In line with Morris' ideals, the idea of 'the artistic shaping of the book as a work of art and beauty' is again encountered in Pater's and Le Cain's version of 'Cupid and Psyche'.

According to Matthew Eve, Le Cain started his career in a very favourable environment with, firstly, 'technical changes in the reproduction process of line and tone' which 'made available a superb explosion of colors and visual effects'. Secondly, there was more attention and recognition for 'word and picture in a child's book, balancing text with image, and book production with overall architectural shape'. Thirdly, the dominance of nostalgia towards late Victorian and Edwardian illustrators (such as Edmund Dulac, who also provided illustrations for Pater's 'Cupid and Psyche') made it fashionable to fuse contemporary with classic forms of illustration, something which Le

Cain mastered. Lastly, fairy tales proved to be an excellent 'fantasy outlet' to detach from the 'ever-threatening external realities of the Cold War'.[42] The idea for an illustrated 'Cupid and Psyche', in particular, came when Le Cain shifted his work to more diverse texts instead of traditional fairytales. Together with Phyllis Hunt, the children's book editor at Faber and Faber, Le Cain wanted to create a black and white picture book for slightly older children, based on Pater's text. In the end, 'Cupid and Psyche' was a long and complex piece, considered 'too adult' for its intended audience. Le Cain tried to market it as an art book, but this, too, only enjoyed limited success.[43] Despite this lack of commercial success, Eve describes the book as 'one of the artist's most harmonious attempts at marrying different styles with his own mannerisms'. Indeed, the book combines Art Nouveau curvilinearity and classical visual language with a decadent atmosphere, drawing inspiration from figures such as Beardsley and Harry Clarke. It follows the style of Pre-Raphaelite illustrations with its rectilinear borders, where the pictures frames do not fade or are not fuzzy, making it possible, in Kooistra's words, to 'incorporate a wealth of symbolic detail; and to feature a large, central figure or figures in a dramatic and defining moment'.[44]

The illustrations in the book consist of a frontispiece (showing the same image as depicted on the cover), twenty illustrations (alternating from the left page to right page, with the text consistently on the opposite page), and lastly a double-page spread depicting the wedding of Cupid and Psyche. The black and white illustrations are dark and intense with curved lines and a grotesque distortion of form, and other influences include Greek vases with their classical faces and postures as well as, Eve argues, cartoons such as '*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinoccio*, and *Fantasia*', 'the visual style of Hollywood designers and early Disney features', and the work of 'Nielsen, Dulac, and Beardsley' who 'filtered through the Hollywood system', making 'this stylistic amalgam […] one of many clearly discernible elements'.[45] In addition, Le Cain 'added his own idiosyncratic Eastern flavor by disproportionately elongating each character, placing emphasis on stylized folds of drapery and the masklike head, hands, and feet'.[46] Le Cain's decadent style not only takes

inspiration from artists such as Beardsley but also exhibits an Indonesian influence of *wayang kulit* [shadow puppetry], offering a broadened interpretation of decadent form (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Le Cain, 'Psyche and her Sisters', illustration for *Cupid and Psyche*, p. 16.
© Maximilian Le Cain

This comes close to Beardsley's art. However, Rachel Teukolsky comments that 'Beardsley's visual experiments were famously influenced by foreign styles – most strikingly, those of nineteenth-century Japan and eighteenth-century France', with Japanese prints making him experiment with 'linear forms and flattened picture planes'.[47] The elongated figures are also reminiscent of Edward Burne-Jones' *Psyche's Wedding* (1895), and, given Le Cain's familiarity with decadence and the aesthetic movement, it is plausible that he was inspired by, or at least familiar with *Psyche's Wedding* or with the 1860s illustrations of Morris' and Burne-Jones' *Story of Cupid and Psyche*.

As these diverse sources of inspiration demonstrate, Le Cain was an eclectic artist who was constantly changing and adapting 'his style, according to the prose, its tone, and the setting',

working 'consistently on rejuvenating traditional fairy tales, legends, myths, and the old stories of different countries that fired his interest and imagination'.[48] He did not hesitate to draw inspiration from different time periods, different traditions or different cultures. In an interview from 1987, Le Cain provides insight into his eclectic creative process and describes himself as 'a thieving magpie':

> […] because I work in the cinema and think theatrically rather than as an illustrator. People who work for films, set designers, tend to find the key to a story's setting through looking at various paintings. There isn't actually anything original around: the only original thing is you as the filter through which all your experiences pass. The Cabbage Princess, my first real book, happened to come out of a book I was looking at about the commedia dell'arte. That was the key, but I didn't rigidly sit down and study it, it was just the inspiration. The spinning-wheel scene in Thorn Rose was actually inspired by Rembrandt, and yet when you look at it now it isn't at all Rembrandt. And I always loved the way the grass is laid out in those 'Lady and the Unicorn' tapestries, spangled with flowers… But I don't sit with the thing in front of me. Copying it. I just remember what I've seen.[49]

Rather than shiny objects, Le Cain draws inspiration from a synthesis of influences and ideas borrowed from others. Absorbing different visual influences and reinterpreting them through his own perspective enable him to combine inspiration with originality. Interestingly, Pater suggests something similar when he claims that experiencing art is about finding beauty and inspiration in various forms. This makes Le Cain the quintessential aesthetic critic – or, in this case, aesthetic artist:

> What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done.[50]

Later in the interview, Le Cain states that his background in film, and his experience of working as an animator at the Richard Williams Studios, influences his approach to visual art, making him think 'theatrically rather than as an illustrator'. This means that his approach is dynamic, focusing on the storytelling aspects of visual art.[51] Although he received no formal art education, he stated in an interview that the Roxy Cinema next door to where he grew up provided his art training: 'I always think in terms of film, working out different angles to lead you dramatically through the

book'.[52] It is therefore unsurprising that cinema and animation were Le Cain's most important sources of inspiration. Indeed, his illustrations for 'Cupid and Psyche', though inanimate, create the illusion of movement within and between the still images. In addition to his love of film, he was familiar with rod and shadow puppetry from growing up in India, which operate on a similar principle of balancing movement and stillness.[53] This is evident in his illustrations, which sometimes appear as inanimate figures that 'move' within the illustration. In 'Cupid and Psyche', Le Cain's drawing of Psyche, her two sisters, and their elongated shadows, is reminiscent of the visual language of shadow puppetry. The cinematic quality of his illustrations is further enhanced by the sense of movement within stillness and the incorporation of certain practices characteristic of cinematic language, such as the use of a close-up in the illustration of Psyche's eye (fig. 4).[54] Le Cain's approach to the relationship between the text and illustrations likewise develops the filmic quality. While the illustrations closely follow the story and Pater's text, the sequence of twenty-one illustrations forms its own visual narrative. The drawings effectively 'translate' the narrative, into a comprehensible visual work while maintaining an equal balance between text and image. Le Cain speaks of an 'imaginative text' where the words and drawings belong to each other inseparably:

> The first task of an illustrator is to be in full sympathy with the writer. No matter how splendid and exciting the drawings may be, if they work against the mood of the story the picture book is a failure. I am all for illustration with a lot of relevant detail [in which] a child can discover fresh things at every look. I like bold 'simple' pictures which are humorous or dramatic, subtly underlining and extending the story, giving the young imagination something to feed on. Some graphically superb books are often too abstract and pseudo-childlike. They please adults but children get very little out of them. My idea of the perfect picture story-book is one with an imaginative text, simply told, where the words and drawings belong to each other inseparably.[55]

The illustrations follow Pater's text closely, yet they still exhibit the same tendency of essentially telling their own visual story by combining the text with the image. Le Cain's and Pater's

'collaboration' thus demonstrates how this synthesis between the written and visual can even cause an image to adopt characteristics from text and film.

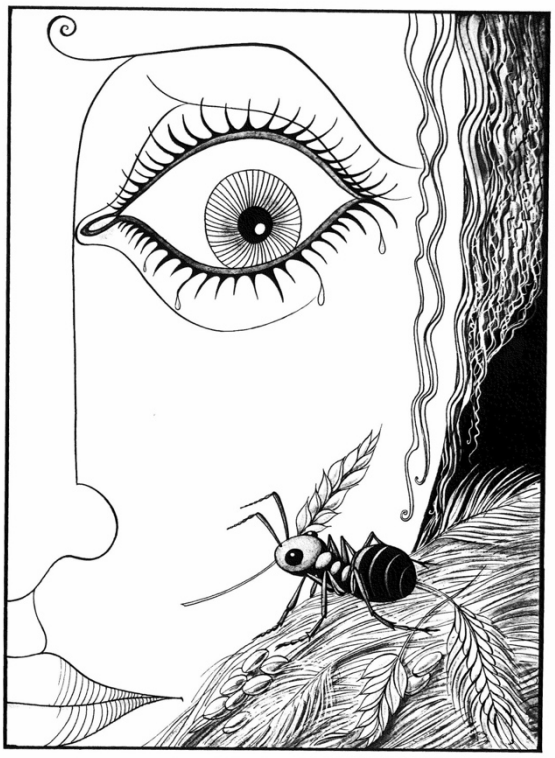

Fig. 4: Le Cain, 'Psyche's Eye', illustration for *Cupid and Psyche*, p. 28.

In his conception of the idea of 'Anders-streben' in *The Renaissance*, Pater, like Le Cain, emphasizes a synthesis or rather a border-crossing of art forms, where each art form enhances the other.[56] Pater writes that 'the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces', which translates into 'delightful music' approaching 'pictorial definition', architecture aiming 'at fulfilling the conditions of a picture, as in the Arena chapel', or the condition of 'sculpture, as in the flawless unity of Giotto's tower at Florence', or even of 'true poetry, as in those strangely twisted staircases of the chateaux of the country of the Loire'.[57] Similarly, Le Cain's illustrations aim at fulfilling an equal condition as the written text, and at times even approaches the condition of moving pictures.

Beardsley's influence is evident not only in Le Cain's use of line and figure, but also in the way he relates the illustrations to the text. This reflects the influence of *The Yellow Book* and the idea of placing art and literature on an equal footing. Decadent illustrators such as Beardsley

demonstrate that illustrations can function as more than mere pictorial paraphrases of a text. Jane Desmarais argues that the 'description of one art in terms of another was common among aesthetes and decadents on both sides of the Channel' drawing on 'the tendency to emphasize the plastic qualities and visceral effect of great art on the viewer'.[58] Specifically, 'the decadents revolted against the idea that the arts were rigidly distinct from one another and they implemented their belief in what Walter Pater termed 'Anders-streben'; the condition whereby the arts 'reciprocally lend each other new forces'.[59] Similarly, while Le Cain's illustrations do provide insights into Pater's narrative, underlying themes and settings, they are, however, not secondary to the story. In the book, this translates to each illustration occupying an entire page and accompanying a piece of text. The illustrations and text alternate between the left and right sides of the page, often referring to passages from preceding or subsequent pages. This reinforces the sense of a sequence of moments, recalling not only the temporality of literature, but also that of film. Although each illustration is framed by a black line, this framing does not isolate the images from the text. On the contrary, it emphasizes their equal importance.

Conclusion

Although the choice of Pater's 'Cupid and Psyche' made the illustrated book perhaps too complex for its intended young audience, it endures today as a valuable work of art. The recurring motif of decadent influences in Le Cain's illustrations makes 'Cupid and Psyche' seem anachronistic for its time and align more with Pater's aesthetic. As we have seen, this decadent influence is not only noticeable in the illustrations itself, but also in the way the text and illustration relate to each other. It is precisely the lending of 'new forces' that Pater describes that shapes the artistic 'collaboration' between Pater and Le Cain. Le Cain's illustrations follow Pater's descriptions, but at a different, yet harmonious, pace that creates a story of its own. Moreover, since the text is a condensed version of Pater's translation (which in its own turn is a condensed version of the original), that uses simpler and more factual language, the illustrations add an additional layer of emotional depth that aid the

reader in interpreting the text. If fairy tales, in Maria Tatar's words, 'open up a theatre of possibilities and create and unparalleled sense of immediacy, at times producing somatic responses with nothing but words',[60] then this effect becomes even more pronounced in 'Cupid and Psyche' through Le Cain's illustrations.

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[1] I am grateful to Maximilian Le Cain for granting permission to reproduce Errol Le Cain's illustrations for *Cupid and Psyche*.
[2] Stijn Praet, 'Reader Beware: Apuleius, Metafiction and the Literary Fairy Tale', in *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment*, ed. by David Calvin and Catriona McAra (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 37-50 (p. 37). For another discussion of how the story is a 'predecessor' of the fairy tale genre, see Hendrik Wagenvoort, 'Cupid and Psyche', in *Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion* (Brill, 1980), pp. 84-92.
[3] Praet, pp. 37-50 (p. 38).
[4] Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*), Volume I: Books 4-6, ed. and trans. by J. Arthur Hanson, Loeb Classical Library, 44 (Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 195-293 (p. 195).
[5] See the transcription of Mervyn Peake's talk in the series entitled 'As I See It', recorded on 20 May 1947. Reprinted in Mervyn Peake, 'Illustration', *Peake Studies*, 12.2 (2011), pp. 15-21 (p. 17).
[6] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Louis Hill (University of California press, [1873] 1980), p. 105.
[7] Apuleius, pp. 195-293.
[8] Stephen Harrison, 'Some Epic Structures in Cupid and Psyche', in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass II, Cupid and Psyche*, ed. by Maaike Zimmerman, Vincent Hunink, Thomas D. McCreight, Danielle van Mal-Maeder, Stelios Panayotakis, V. Schmidt, and B. Wesseling (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), pp. 51-68 (p. 64).
[9] Danielle van Mal-Maeder and Maaike Zimmerman, 'The Many Voices in Cupid and Psyche', in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass II, Cupid and Psyche*, pp. 83-84.
[10] Praet, p. 47.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Matthew Potolsky, 'Fear of Falling: Walter Pater's "Marius the Epicurean" as a Dangerous Influence', *ELH*, 65.3 (1998), pp. 701-29 (p. 721).
[14] Ibid., p. 707.
[15] Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters. Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (University of Philadelphia Press, 2013), p. 93.
[16] Isobel Hurst, 'Nineteenth-Century Literary and Artistic Responses to Roman Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 47-65 (p. 59).
[17] Giles Whiteley and Cecilia Lindskog Whiteley, 'Decadence and Euphuism: Walter Pater, John Lyly, and "New English" Style', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 73.1 (2025), pp. 7-19 (p. 9). See also Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater's European Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 171-172; and Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 121-124.
[18] Stefano Evangelista, 'Transnational Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 316-31 (p. 319).]
[19] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (Macmillan and Co., [1885] 1910), i, pp. 55-56, quoted by Evangelista, p. 319.
[20] Pater, *Marius the* Epicurean, pp. 60-61, quoted by Evangelista, p. 319.
[21] Praet, p. 44.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti and Illustration: A Publishing History* (Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 6-7.
[24] Eugene J. Brzenk, 'Pater and Apuleius', *Comparative Literature*, 10.1 (1958), pp. 55-60 (pp. 57 & 60).
[25] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (Macmillan and Co., [1889] 1910), p. 16.
[26] Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, p. 92.
[27] Paul Turner, 'Pater and Apuleius', *Victorian Studies*, 3.3 (1960), pp. 290-96 (p. 296).
[28] Walter Pater, *Cupid and Psyche*, illustrated by Errol Le Cain (Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 1.
[29] Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, pp. 61-62.

[30] Turner, 'Pater and Apuleius', p. 294.
[31] Matthew Eve, 'Errol Le Cain: The Very Best Aspects of Book Illustration', *Children's Literature in Education*, 30.2 (1999), pp. 85-102 (p. 94).
[32] In addition to these illustrated books, there have been several standalone or 'loose' illustrations made for Pater's text. For example, British artist Reginald Arthur 1891 engraving called *Marius the Epicurean*, depicting the character Marius from Pater's eponymous book. In 1895, the Irish artist Phoebe Anna Traquair created a series of four pieces of embroidery called *The Progress of a Soul* based on Pater's story of 'Denys L'Auxerrois'. Lastly, American artist Charles Demuth's 1918 sketch for Pater's 'A Prince of Court Painters'. For more on Demuth and Pater, see my paper, Lina Vekeman, 'A Study of Art Crossing its Borders: Walter Pater's *Anders-streben* and Charles Demuth's *Aucassin and Nicolette* and *A Prince of Court Painters*', *Word & Image*, 41.1 (2025), pp. 104-13.
[33] Walter Pater, *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche*, illustrated by Edmund Dulac (The Heritage Press, 1951), and Walter Pater, *The Story of Cupid and Psyche: with Illustrations by Raphael*, ed. by R. H. Russell (Merrymount Press, 1901).
[34] Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'Serpentine Rivers and Serpentine Thought: Flux and Movement in Walter Pater's Leonardo Essay', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.2 (2002), pp. 455-82 (p. 456).
[35] See, for example, Anna Sigrídur Arnar's discussion on Stéphane Mallarmé, in *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 60-68.
[36] Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 392-418 (p. 394).
[37] Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', pp. 395.
[38] Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', pp. 395-96.
[39] Ibid., p. 404.
[40] Christoph Leidl, 'Between Symbolism and Popular Culture. Cupid and Psyche in Fin de Siècle Book Illustration', in *Cupid and Psyche: The Reception of Apuleius' Love Story since 1600*, Trends in Classics: Pathways of Reception 1, ed. by Regine May and Stephen Harrison (De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 247-72 (p. 247).
[41] Ibid., p. 248.
[42] Eve, p. 85.
[43] Ibid., p. 94.
[44] Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture* (Ohio University Press, 2011), p. 59.
[45] Eve, p. 87
[46] Ibid., p. 94.
[47] Rachel Teukolsky, 'On the Politics of Decadent Rebellion: Beardsley, *Japonisme*, Rococo', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), pp. 643-66 (p. 643).
[48] Eve, p. 100.
[49] Penny Sibson, 'Authorgraph No. 47: Errol le Cain', *Books for Keeps*, 47 (1987), https://booksforkeeps.co.uk/article/authorgraph-47-errol-le-cain/ [accessed 29 December 2025].
[50] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Louis Hill (University of California Press, [1873] 1980), p. xxi.
[51] Lee Kingman, Grace Allen Hogarth, and Harriet B. Quimby, eds, *Illustrators of Children's Books 1967-1976* (The Horn Book, 1978), p. 138.; Sibson, 'Authorgraph No. 47: Errol le Cain'; and Eve, p. 88.
[52] Sibson, 'Authorgraph No. 47: Errol le Cain'.
[53] Eve, p. 87.
[54] It is interesting to note that the motive of a close-up or standalone eye is also present in Harry Clarke's illustrated *Faust* (1925). Perhaps Le Cain was likewise inspired by Clarke's prominent use of the eye as a decorative motif.
[55] Kingman, et al., p. 139.
[56] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Louis Hill (University of California Press, [1873] 1980), p. 105. The original title *Studies in the History of the Renaissan*ce was revised as *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in 1877.
[57] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 105.
[58] Jane Haville Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France 1893-1914* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998), p. 124.
[59] Desmarais, pp. 124-25.
[60] Maria Tatar, 'Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative', *Western Folklore*, 69.1 (2010), pp. 55-64 (p. 56).

Unhappily Ever After: Surface, Queer Bachelorhood, and Occidental Desire in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's 'The Siren's Lament' (1917)

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University of Kurdistan Hewlêr

What becomes of the fairy tale when world-weary bachelors and aesthetic exiles enter its enchanted terrain? In the decadent tradition, the happy endings and moral certainties of the genre begin to dissolve. The arc of wish fulfilment gives way to ennui, longing, and the restless pursuit of unattainable beauty. This shift in tone and focus found an enduring embodiment in the figure of the eccentric dandy bachelor, first portrayed by Joris-Karl Huysmans in *À rebours* (1884) and later refined by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). More than a stock character, he became a vehicle for transnational reworkings of the fairy tale within a decadent mode.

In East Asia, writers adapted this lineage to their own cultural and historical contexts. One of Japan's greatest modern writers, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886–1965) initiated a new genre of 'demonism', the Japanese literary equivalent to European decadence.[1] His works are notable for their portrayal of aberrant characters, the pleasures of sadism and masochism, and the unsettling beauty of women amidst cruelty and violence, which is clearly modelled after Wilde's Salomé. Nevertheless, even though Tanizaki has long enjoyed an esteemed reputation in the West, his fairy tales rarely appear in scholarly criticism, and those collected in *The Siren's Lament and Other Essentials* (1917) were only translated into English for the first time in 2023.[2]

My study thus turns to these undiscovered jewels of early twentieth-century Japanese decadent literature. In this article, I focus on 'The Siren's Lament', which is widely read as a reworking of Wilde's fairy tale 'The Fisherman and His Soul'.[3] It stands out for its distinctive treatment of the fetishisation of surface, queer bachelorhood, and self-conscious Occidentalism. By situating this neglected work within the transnational history of decadence, I aim to reveal how

Tanizaki transforms Western motifs into culturally specific meditations on desire, visuality, and aesthetic distance.

In 'The Siren's Lament', the melancholy Chinese Prince Meng Shidao is born into immense wealth and noble lineage. Blessed with striking beauty, refined education, and every imaginable sensual pleasure at his disposal, he grows weary of ordinary delights and finds himself numbed by ennui. Seeking a new source of wonder, he acquires a Mediterranean mermaid from a Dutch merchant and installs her in a glass tank. Her beauty, kept always just out of reach, begins to haunt him from behind the transparent barrier. The prince's longing transforms into a kind of aesthetic worship, focused on this unattainable and exotic being whose allure depends on her perpetual separation from him. As his obsession deepens, the mermaid becomes a symbol of foreign wonder and an Occidental fantasy of Western civilisation. Eventually, moved by her pleas, Prince Shidao releases her on his voyage to England in search of new sensation.

This story turns away from the fairy tale's promise of union and fulfilment. Instead, it dwells on a queer lifestyle that privileges surfaces over substance, bachelorhood over procreation, and the bittersweet pleasure of the unattainable over closure or redemption. By situating this story within the broader, transnational lineage of decadent aesthetics, I show that Tanizaki did not simply imitate Western forms of decadence, but created new, resonant variations on European forms.

Decadence in Japan: Transnational Lineages

Before turning to a close reading of Tanizaki's decadent fairy tale, it is essential to situate his work within the ideological and cultural climate of Taishō-era Japan (1912–1926). This was a period marked by rapid modernisation, urban growth, and the emergence of a mass consumer culture that both fascinated and unsettled intellectuals. The decades following the Meiji Restoration (1868–1889) had already brought extensive contact with the West, and by the turn of the century,

foreign travel, study abroad, and translation had introduced European aestheticism and decadence to Japan.[4]

As Stefano Evangelista observes, the relationship between decadence and Japan emerged from a 'historical convergence' of *japonisme* and art-for-art's-sake aesthetics in the late nineteenth century, when Japanese culture became a mirror for Western artists' own anxieties about modernity.[5] The fascination with Japan as a site of exotic beauty and spiritual refinement largely influenced European decadent writing from Walter Pater to Wilde, yet, as Evangelista notes, this cultural traffic was reciprocal: Japanese artists and writers 'reversed the orientalist gaze',[6] transforming Western decadence into new local idioms of aestheticism.[7] By the early twentieth century, the circulation of decadent forms in Japan was not a mere imitation but an act of translation and transformation – what Evangelista elsewhere describes as a 'transnational network of ideas and authors'.[8]

It was also in this era that Wilde's works entered Japanese translation, were circulated through periodicals, and were adapted into plays performed across the Japanese Empire, including in its colonies of Manchuria, Taiwan, and Korea.[9] Wilde's artistic credo came to define the Taishō zeitgeist. The publication of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* in Japanese in 1920, accompanied by editor Tatsu Yaguchi's injunction that readers should 'kneel before him', cemented Wilde as an icon of dangerous beauty and moral defiance.[10] For Japanese readers, *Salomé* (1893) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embodied the allure of forbidden desire and the exaltation of art beyond ethics.

By the 1910s, the Japanese literary scene was polarised between naturalism and anti-naturalism. Within the latter camp, *tanbi-shugi* or *tanbism* (lit. 'addicted-to-beauty-ism'), inspired by British aestheticism and inflected by social Darwinism that were popular during this era,[11] championed beauty as a supreme value. The Taishō era's relative liberalism, compared with the stricter Meiji and militarist Shōwa periods, created fertile ground for experiments with form, eroticism, and moral transgression.[12]

Ikuho Amano further argues that Japanese decadence internalised fin-de-siècle European themes (i.e., artificiality, pathology, and erotic neurosis) but transformed them through the lived tensions of Taishō modernity. The Taishō decadents are 'subtle individual (*awai kojin*)',[13] as she notes, who embody a psychic retreat into 'personal artificial paradise' that resists both capitalist productivity and Confucian moral order.[14] This psychology of self-withdrawal, expressed through nervous illness, doppelgängers, and an obsession with the grotesque, marks the Japanese decadent's negotiation with Western ideas of the self and modernity.

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's early works, such as *Shisei* [The Tattooer]' (1910), *Qilin* (1910), *Shōnen* [The Youth] (1911), *Himitsu* [The Secret] (1911), and *Akuma* [Devil] (1912), bear the imprint of this decadent sensibility. His fiction reimagined the *femme fatale*, like Wilde's Salomé, for a Japanese and Chinese context, presenting women of demonic beauty and erotic power (often they entwine sensuality with sadomasochism). In *The Tattooer*, for example, the artist lures an innocent woman into becoming his model and tattoos a monstrous red spider onto her back, which transforms her from a timid virgin into a cruel seductress who ensnares men as a spider traps prey.[15] Here, art does not exist merely 'for art's sake' but transcends moral frameworks, justifying cruelty and perverted acts in the pursuit of aesthetic excellence. *Qilin* offers an even more extreme vision of beauty's tyranny. Nanzi, the ethereally beautiful concubine of Duke Ling, competes with the moral authority of Confucius for her husband's attention, embracing sensual corruption. She constructs a garden of hell where men who offend her and women who flirt with the Duke are mutilated, caged, and forced to fight for her amusement.[16] The story fuses the sublime and the depraved, revealing a fascination with beauty's capacity to enthral and destroy.

This elevation of art over ethics, often described as 'art supremacism',[17] became a hallmark of Tanizaki's style. It also reflected a broader Taishō-era preoccupation with the erotic, the grotesque, and the absurd, that which Suzuki summarises as 'a season when two or three emotions – of looseness or ennui, of seeking liberation or relief – coalesced and haunted intellectuals'.[18] Another Japanese literary titan of this era, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927), similarly explored

the dark potential of artistic obsession in 'Hell Screen' (1918), depicting an artist who sacrifices his own daughter to achieve a masterpiece.[19] Both writers probe the limits of artistic perfection, presenting a fascination with grotesque beauty, deviant sexual desire, and the transgression of ethical boundaries in the name of art.

As Evangelista observes, such transformations make decadence inherently transnational, its 'power to dissolve national boundaries through shared forms of aesthetic rebellion' allowing Japan to participate fully in the modernist dialogue of moral and artistic defiance.[20] Tanizaki's work thus stands at the crossroads of this global and local nexus. Through his obsession with surface, artifice, and unattainable beauty, he redefines decadence as both an imported form and a distinctly Japanese reflection on desire, estrangement, and the aesthetic labour of art.

The Dandy, Surface Aesthetics, and *Objet Petit a*

Wilde famously declares in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril',[21] adding provocatively, 'it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible...'.[22] These aphorisms encapsulate the decadent valorisation of surface aesthetics and the scepticism towards hidden moral depths. For Wilde and the decadent tradition, surface is not merely the entry point to meaning but the very locus of aesthetic experience.

What Wilde promotes is not trivial superficiality but a philosophical defence of form. His aesthetic credo, indebted to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), treats beauty as a 'purposiveness without purpose',[23] that is, appearance has value independent of function or morality. This defence of surface elevates artifice and visible harmony as legitimate ends in themselves, rejecting Victorian utilitarianism and moral didacticism. For the decadent bachelor, surface and artifice promise an experience beyond the useful or the temporally bound.

Despite the high value placed on outward beauty, its pursuit often results in fatigue and dissatisfaction for prominent characters in literary decadence. Both Des Esseintes in Huysmans's

À rebours and Dorian Gray in Wilde's only novel exemplify this predicament. Des Esseintes, unable to find satisfaction in nature or society, remakes the world as a gallery of artificial, ornamental surfaces. The quintessential decadent act in this infamous French decadent novel was when des Esseintes had a living tortoise encrusted with precious gems, which transforms a creature of nature into a living *objet d'art*, a pure surface severed from natural substance.[24] The tortoise's inevitable death beneath the artificial splendour symbolises the paradox of decadent aesthetics. The attempt to preserve beauty as pure surface ultimately destroys its material basis. Dorian Gray, likewise, loves only the image of Sybil Vane as a series of Shakespearean heroines and 'pretty boys',[25] not as a real woman. When Sybil abandons theatrical illusion for sincere emotion, she ceases to fulfil Dorian's aesthetic desire. Her transition from artifice to authenticity collapses the Imaginary register of the psyche understood in Lacanian theory as the domain of fantasy, projection, and idealized identification, upon which his attraction depends. Her death, as Jack Halberstam observes, becomes a symbolic punishment for breaching the decadent boundary between art and life, surface and substance.[26] For Dorian, and one presumes for Wilde, the surface is all that identity consists of. As Wilde warns us, 'those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril'.[27]

This compulsive fascination with surface, and its self-destructive beauty, provides a critical lens for reading Tanizaki's 'The Siren's Lament'.' At the beginning of the fairy tale, the reader is informed that in the flower of his youth, Prince Meng Shidao, like Dorian, is blessed with 'a countenance of rare beauty and a mind endowed with exceptional qualities' – he often indulged in the pleasures of the flesh and 'had tried every extreme that this world could offer by way of extravagance and debauchery'.[28] By the time we meet him in the narrative, Shidao has already succumbed to a sense of deep ennui. No longer finding interest in the pleasure quarters he once frequented, he ends up cloistering himself in his mansion, passively 'watching dreamily on as the days and months slipped by'.[29] This predicament firmly places Meng Shidao within the lineage of decadent bachelors. Like his Western predecessors, Shidao shares an unassuageable melancholy arising from desires that, without any meaningful purpose, increasingly turn toward the exceptional,

the forbidden, and ultimately, the impossible, that spectral object whose elusive pursuit defines both his pleasure and pain.

It is at this point of world-weariness that the mermaid enters Shidao's life. Hearing of Prince Shidao's relentless quest for novel delights and his readiness to spare no expense, a Dutch merchant brings to his mansion a remarkable treasure, a Mediterranean mermaid captured off the shores of Canton. Shidao finds himself completely enthralled when introduced to the mermaid in a glass tank. Her beauty is so ethereal, so exquisitely transcendent, that it holds him utterly spellbound.

The narrative's language is explicitly visual and almost clinical in its focus on her appearance/surface. Her eyes are vividly described as enormous, 'phosphorescent blue, at times becoming clear indigo, as if crystals or drops of water had solidified within their depths'.[30] Her facial features surpass ordinary beauty, approaching a divine perfection and harmony. Her hair, dark emerald in colour, moves languidly in the water, resembling either drifting seaweed or spreading peacock feathers. Her body possesses graceful curves from her neck down to her shoulders and breasts, exhibiting flawless symmetry and an entrancing harmony of strength, agility, and divine allure. Most striking to the Prince is the remarkable luminosity and purity of her skin, which radiates an intense brilliance surpassing conventional whiteness, seemingly glowing from within. Upon closer inspection, her skin is revealed to be delicately covered in tiny, curling white hairs tipped with minute, pearl-like bubbles, 'resembling a shimmering silk gauze embroidered with countless gems'.[31]

Here, the Prince's gaze is entirely aesthetic, almost sacred in its reverence, and deliberately sexless. His pleasure lies in the sustained act of looking, not in possessing. This pleasure is best understood through Lacan's reworking of Freud's notion of scopophilia. Lacan's model should serve not as a universal grid imposed upon a Japanese text, but as a heuristic tool to explain how Tanizaki reimagines the structure of desire through his own aesthetic of distance and melancholy artifice. While Freud conceived scopophilia as the erotic pleasure derived from looking, Lacan

reformulates it as the 'scopic drive', in which the gaze becomes one of the partial objects functioning as *objet petit a.*[32] The gaze marks a point where the subject faces their own lack, drawn toward something that can be seen yet never reached.[33] Later in this essay, I will examine the specific form of 'lack' Shidao experiences after gazing upon both the Dutch merchant and the mermaid – figures who embody the exquisite European features he believes himself to lack. The mermaid is not simply a beautiful object but the unreachable locus of Shidao's desire. Her perfection is visible yet perpetually withheld, sustaining his enjoyment in the endless act of beholding her.

While Shidao's harem of ten most beautiful and accomplished concubines could offer every pleasure and companionship imaginable, the mermaid's appeal is matchless because of her very unattainability. Shidao's desire is structured around lacking. Here, the Lacanian structure of desires could shed some light on this dynamic. Desire, for Lacan, is never satisfied by possession of an object, since what we seek is not the object itself but the absent remainder that sustains longing through its very lack, which Lacan defines as the *objet petit a.*[34] The decadent protagonists' endless pursuit of surface and the unattainable thus reflects a psychic structure in which fulfilment is perpetually deferred. Slavoj Žižek explains the paradoxical dynamic even more vividly, noting that the *objet petit a* embodies a fragile oscillation between the sublime and the abject, the 'sublime Grail' will eventually degrade into 'a piece of shit' when the desired object is obtained.[35]

In this fairy tale, the mermaid is the Prince's 'sublime Grail', forever shimmering on the horizon of fulfilment yet always just beyond his grasp. His pleasure depends on the very postponement of satisfaction. She is a surface that can be seen, admired, and cherished, but never possessed. To claim her entirely collapses illusion into reality, turning aesthetic transcendence into substance, and thus destroying it. Tanizaki continues:

> Separated by a simple wall of glass, he and the mermaid would face each other in silence all day long, she breathing heavily underwater and he tormenting himself outside, one lamenting the fate that forbade her to leave her watery element, while the other cursed his inability to dive right into it. And so, the gloomy and desolate hours passed by.[36]

The glass tank functions as more than a physical barrier, but also a psychic screen that maintains the mermaid as pure surface, the projection site of Shidao's longing. His desire survives only through this separation, ensuring the pleasure is endlessly renewed. Then the mermaid would never turn into 'shit' like his other concubines. Though purchased like a commodity, she can never truly be owned, as she is simultaneously present and absent, a 'remainder of the Real' that both anchors and destabilises desire.[37]

At the climax of the story, Tanizaki dramatically literalises this impossibility. When Shidao attempts to bridge the gap by kissing her, he nearly dies from the mermaid's icy embrace. Her beauty 'like that of Beardsley's Salomé in *The Dancer's Reward*',[38] proves fatal when approached too closely:

> she reached out her arms and wrapped them around the young Prince. He felt a strange, cold sensation about his neck, where his skin came into contact with the mermaid's, as though a block of ice had been applied to it, and, before he knew it, his neck had frozen. The more the mermaid tightened her embrace, the more the icy cold that emanated from her snow-white skin penetrated his bones, piercing him to the marrow.[39]

Her very existence marks the fatal boundary between surface and substance. The attempt to turn aesthetic into physical intimacy results in dissolution.

Wilde's *Dorian Gray* repeatedly enforces the rule that those who seek to penetrate surface to reach substance are destroyed for their transgression. Sybil desires to transition from symbolic artifice into lived reality, namely, to marry Dorian in real life, to cross from Dorian's Imaginary into the Symbolic. Her wish for a future union destroys the pageantry and results in her death. Basil's fate is similarly sealed when he insists on seeing the hidden portrait, seeking substance behind Dorian's glamorous surface. For both, the attempt to transition is the act of drawing the boundary. However, marking a firm dialectic line between illusion and life is fatal. In Tanizaki's fairy tale, the mermaid is less like Sybil than she is like Dorian's portrait. She is a beautiful surface whose mystery and allure are preserved only so long as the boundary remains uncrossed. The punishment for seeking to pierce that surface is fatal, in this case, for the desiring subject himself.

Moreover, the mermaid will never fulfil the roles of a wife or lover (what Sybil and Basil desire to be). She is perfectly preserved as a spectacle that resists incorporation into the heteronormative order. In this way, Tanizaki's tale aligns closely with the Aestheticist credo that art should remain beautiful, not useful. Her 'uselessness' embodies Wilde's dictum that 'all art is quite useless'.[40] Were she to assume domestic or erotic function, she would, in Luce Irigaray's terms, acquire a 'use-value',[41] and then her body would be inscribed with economic or social purpose.[42] Instead, like the 'virginal women' Irigaray describes,[43] the mermaid circulates as pure exchange value, passed between the merchant and prince Shidao, yet she would never enter into the circuit of use. Her inaccessibility preserves her perfection and gestures toward the figure of the queer bachelor, whose devotion to surface and refusal of reproduction sustain the melancholic pleasure of unattainable beauty.

Queer Decadent Bachelorhood

In the dénouement of 'The Siren's Lament', Prince Shidao pities the mermaid and decides to release her on his way to England, where he is heading to pursue his new-found obsession with European civilisation. This moment represents not simply a relinquishment of a love object, but a deliberate refusal of the heteronormative obligations that define Confucian and Chinese masculinity.

In traditional Confucian societies, the imperative of filial piety anchors the entire social and familial order. In both China and Japan, the duty to continue the family line by producing an heir is among the most sacred of obligations. As the Confucian sage Mencius famously states, 'there are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them'.[44] The extinction of a family line is a transgression against parents, ancestors, and the moral order itself. Against this backdrop, Shidao's obsession with the unobtainable mermaid, who is impossible to be integrated into the heteronormative order of wife or mother, is a direct repudiation of Confucian filial piety.

Although he has ten beautiful concubines, Shidao fathers no children. In releasing both the mermaid and his ties to the family line, he ensures the extinction of his noble house. In a world where reproduction is both social imperative and moral virtue, Shidao's bachelorhood is decidedly decadent and a fundamentally modern refusal. As Katherine Snyder observes, the bachelor is always a 'threshold figure' who marks 'the boundaries of normative bourgeois familial and sexual relations, as well as the permeability of those boundaries'.[45] In this tradition, 'bachelorhood is sustained by a range of familial and quasi-familial affiliations, varying in their degree and kinds of reciprocity, dominance, even voluntariness'.[46] For the decadent bachelor, lack itself – lack of family, lack of procreative purpose – becomes the very foundation of pleasure. The extinction of the house is a chosen path.

Moreover, Shidao's rejection of reproductive destiny is also intimately tied to his fascination with the Dutch merchant. The narrative describes how Shidao, upon meeting the man, is 'deeply impressed by the foreigner's appearance', noting in him 'a nobility and an authority that somehow managed to overwhelm him'.[47] Once celebrated for his own beauty, Shidao now measures himself against the European and finds himself lacking. The text lingers on the merchant's exquisite features:

> The foreigner's green eyes, just like tropical seas of emerald and sapphire, beckoned his soul to fathomless depths. Moreover, with his well-defined eyebrows, his broad forehead, and his snow-white complexion, his face was incomparably more refined and handsome than that of the young Prince, who prided himself on his own beauty, not to mention capable of a richness of expression that showed every nuance of the most complex emotions.[48]

The attention given to these details invites a reading that moves beyond mere admiration. Shidao's contemplation of the merchant's beauty carries an unmistakable erotic charge, intensified by the moment in which he compares the man to the mermaid: 'although the man did not attain the perfection or delicate beauty of the mermaid, still he had the latent possibilities of attaining them some day'.[49] The merchant becomes both a masculine double of the mermaid and an object of longing in his own right.

This dynamic strongly recalls Eve Sedgwick's argument in *Between Men* (1985) that the triangulated relation between two men and a woman often masks male-male erotic investment beneath the guise of rivalry or shared pursuit of a female object.[50] In 'The Siren's Lament', the mermaid mediates the relationship, yet the most charged moments lie in Shidao's interactions with the merchant. The rivalry that arises when Shidao measures himself against the European heightens rather than obscures the erotic current. His plea to join the merchant in Europe – 'please, take the mermaid and me back to your country and introduce us among the superior race that resides there. There is nothing to keep me in China any longer', and his 'grabbing at the hem of his [the Dutchman's] cloak'[51] – read less as casual wanderlust than as pleas for intimate escape, an elopement in all but name. In this light, Shidao's rejection of filial obligation and reproductive duty is also inseparable from his erotic investment in another man. The triangle of prince, merchant, and mermaid encapsulates the logic of decadent bachelorhood, in which the woman remains a luminous yet unpossessable surface, while the most urgent attachments pass between men.

Furthermore, Christopher Reed's *Bachelor Japanists* (2016) highlights the queer potential of bachelorhood and cross-cultural collecting, defining bachelorhood not simply as a euphemism for homosexuality but as an identity 'united less by eroticism between men than by a shared alienation from powerful cultural imperatives during the century historians call "the era of mandatory marriage"'.[52] Figures such as Wilde and Roland Barthes, Reed notes, turned to Japan as a space where authoritative 'truths' from their home cultures could be unlearned, allowing self-invention and offering a form of belonging for men whose homoerotic desires ostracise them.[53] Kristin Mahoney adds that some, like Harold Acton, sought kinship and a sense of asylum in the 'decadent Orient', where same-sex desire was tolerated so long as family lineage remained intact.[54] For these Western queer bachelors, collecting and identification with Eastern cultures served as a form of resistance against bourgeois norms and Christian heterosexuality.

Tanizaki reverses this dynamic. Instead of Western bachelors collecting Eastern artefacts and bodies, Shidao, an Eastern bachelor, collects Western exotica: the mermaid and the Dutch

merchant. Both become objects of longing and symbolic acts of resistance against the Confucian imperatives of filial piety, reproductive duty, and patriarchal lineage. The mermaid's unattainable beauty and the merchant's alluring masculinity are catalysts for Shidao's rejection of the social order to which he is bound.

Reading a fairy tale through the lens of its author's historical and cultural context always risks the charge of over-interpretation. However, the seismic changes that marked the turn of the twentieth century in Eastern societies are difficult to ignore, and the idea of 'decadence' – originally used to describe the decline of the Roman Empire – finds a noticeable echo in the twilight of Chinese Empire. The fairy tale opens its narrative by introducing its background as set after the flourishing era of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty under the House of Aisin Gioro, situating its narrative at the zenith of imperial grandeur – just before the decline precipitated by China's defeat in the Sino-British Opium War (1840–1842). In this context, the tale reads as both an elegy for a fading aristocratic order and a prophecy anticipating the drastic transformations brought by modernity and foreign invasion.

The melancholia of the bachelor protagonist is thus not merely personal but acquires a civilizational dimension, representing the final flicker of an aristocracy poised to vanish in the tides of republican modernity. As Amano notes, Japanese writers of Tanizaki's generation translated this fin-de-siècle languor into a 'Taishō malaise', transforming the exhaustion of empire and industrial modernity into an aesthetic of idleness and luxurious decline.[55] Shidao's refusal of procreation and his obsessive attachment to the Western mermaid and merchant allegorise this broader historical mood, namely, a withdrawal from productivity that mirrors the decadence of both late imperial China and Taishō Japan.

This sense of decadent finality intensifies when Shidao lavishes great fortunes on the mermaid without any hesitation, offering 'seventy diamonds of Arabia, eighty rubies of Cochinchina, as well as ninety peacocks from Annam and a hundred tusks of elephant ivory from Siam'.[56] The narrative invites readers to savour this extravagant display. Rainbow-coloured

gemstones, vessels of silver and gold, the magical mermaid herself, and the sensuous, ornate language together create an opium-induced dream, a final, luxuriant pageant of wealth and beauty poised on the brink of oblivion.

Racialised Melancholy

Finally, contemporary readers, particularly those from East Asian backgrounds, may find themselves unsettled by the fairy tale's overt Occidentalism and worship of whiteness. This is most striking when the Prince implores the merchant to take him to Europe: 'Rather than remain a prince and end my days in Nanjing, I should prefer to die a lowly pauper in your country!'[57] Such words reveal a strong sense of racial inadequacy, mirroring an inferiority complex that was widespread in Taishō and the Early Shōwa (1926–1945) era.

In fact, the entire fairy tale is haunted with an internalised racism. Shidao contrasts the merchant with the people of his own land, remarking 'compared to the inhabitants of the territories of China, with their sallow skin and flat faces, he [the Dutch merchant] gave the impression of being altogether a creature of a race closer to that of the siren'.[58] This alignment of the merchant's beauty with the mermaid's divine perfection frames whiteness as both aesthetic ideal and unattainable standard.

Shidao's admiration for the merchant's beauty also quickly transforms into a longing to travel to Europe. The prince makes a plea:

> If all the men of your country have as august a face as yours, and if all the women of your country have as white a skin as that of the mermaid, what an unspoilt land, what a fair paradise Europe must be! Please, take the mermaid and me back to your country and introduce us among the superior race that resides there.[59]

In this moment, longing for Europe is inseparable from the melancholic awareness of his perceived racial inferiority, producing a vision of paradise defined by the gaze of the white European upon the East Asians.

Ayu Majima's monograph *The Melancholy of the Skin Colour* (2014) explores the racial experience of modern Japan, and Majima observes that the internalisation of racial hierarchy and self-doubt among Japanese intellectuals and students who studied in the West deeply influenced Japanese cultural and literary identity. For example, the renowned Japanese author Sōseki Natsume (1867–1916), who spent a year studying in England, recorded his time abroad with bitterness and self-pity. He described himself as feeling like 'a country bumpkin who just entered the city'; 'as tiny as a monkey from the mountain'; and while walking on the street of London he felt extremely self-conscious of his different appearance, feeling 'like a ink stain on a British gentleman's white shirt'.[60] Natsume lamented his short stature and sallow skin, even reasoning that it was understandable for Westerners to look down upon him because of his ugliness.[61] These experiences of inferiority persisted even as Japan rose to the status of a modern superpower after its victory over a Caucasian imperial power in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905). In his novel *Sanshirō* (1908), Natsume's protagonist muses that if he were to stand among Westerners, 'he would surely feel inferior', lamenting the 'ugly faces' and 'frail bodies' of his compatriots, thus Japan's victory is still 'not good enough'.[62]

Majima further demonstrates how such experiences of humiliation abroad contributed to a new kind of racial hierarchy within East Asia itself, with Japanese intellectuals blaming the racial discrimination against East Asians on Chinese and Koreans.[63] Because Japanese individuals were frequently misidentified as Chinese and subjected to similar forms of discrimination, many Japanese students and expatriates developed deep resentment towards Chinese and other East Asian peoples. For example, Viscount Yatarō Mishima (1867–1919), who later became a successful banker, was among the early Japanese overseas students in the United States. In his diary, he describes the pain of constantly being mistaken for Chinese and enduring racial slurs and attacks. He even found it necessary to walk with American women to attend a circus show, reasoning that 'ladies were treated like goddesses with the utmost respect in American society' and hoping this would shield him from anti-Chinese abuse. Mishima recalls that such experiences made him begin

to hate the very word 'China', expressing, 'I really wish Japan would stop using Kanji, as this writing system is appropriated from China. In the US, China was seen as an inferior and lowly country.' He concludes, 'as Japanese, we should fight against Chinese'.[64]

Mishima's reaction exactly echoes what Frantz Fanon theorises as a symptom of colonial subjectivity: 'people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave – position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture',[65] and thus 'the black man will endeavour to seek admittance to the white sanctuary from within'.[66] When the colonised subject, confronted with the stigma imposed by the dominant race, sometimes turns against neighbouring or kindred groups, seeking proximity to the oppressor by distancing themselves from those deemed inferior. Indeed, Majima observes that such experiences in the West led many Japanese to develop a strong desire to 'leave Asia', distancing themselves from Chinese culture and the Asian race.[67] Fuelled by social Darwinism and eugenic thought prevalent in the early twentieth century, these sentiments later developed into the infamous 'Datsu-A Ron' (lit. Argument for Leaving Asia), advanced by Yukichi Fukuzawa. Fukuzawa urged Japan to Westernise fully and to break off all ties with the 'lowly Mongolian race', so that the nation could join and compete alongside Western powers.[68] This ideology ultimately contributed to the rationalisation of Japanese imperial expansion and racial genocide perpetrated against Chinese and Koreans during the Second World War.

Although Japan was never colonised militarily, its rapid modernisation following the Meiji Restoration entailed what Amano argues as a 'pseudo-colonial situation', namely, a form of voluntary Occidentalism in which Japan 'drastically Westernised' itself to achieve parity with Europe.[69] From this perspective, Japan internalised the West as a virtual coloniser, adopting Western modernity as the standard of civilization and replicating the cultural mimicry that Frantz Fanon identifies as central to the colonised psyche.

This context illuminates why Shidao's obsession with the unattainable mermaid may also be read as a metaphor for racial segregation. The mermaid of Mediterranean origin and with the

almost translucent fair skin remains forever unattainable for Shidao, mirroring the persistent exclusion of East Asians from the fantasy of full acceptance by the West. The narrative recalls Fanon's analysis of the colonised subject's desire to imitate the coloniser, hoping for acceptance but always meeting disappointment. No matter how intense the longing, or how closely one imitates Western ideals, the racial boundary remains insurmountable.

Shidao's journey to Europe, which concludes the story, acquires a deeply melancholic resonance for modern readers familiar with the experiences of Japanese travellers and intellectuals described in Majima's study. The 'beautiful and noble' European paradise he seeks is likely to greet him with alienation and discrimination, echoing the bitter disappointments recorded by Natsume, Mishima and their contemporaries out of the fictional world. In this sense, 'The Siren's Lament' does not merely reflect personal longing or aesthetic fascination, it also could read as the psychic wounds and impossible desires produced by racialised modernity and cross-cultural encounter.

Conclusion

In 'The Siren's Lament', Tanizaki transforms the fairy tale into a melancholy meditation on the decline of lineage, the lure of the unattainable, and the psychic fractures of modernity. Prince Meng Shidao's journey from decadent opulence to Occidentalist longing is neither a straightforward escape nor a simple tragedy, but a richly layered parable of refusal and desire. His aesthetic worship of the mermaid, his fascination with the Dutch merchant, and his ultimate severance from filial duty enact a modern bachelorhood poised at the threshold between eras – a last flicker of aristocratic splendour shadowed by the oncoming tides of republicanism, Westernisation, and racial self-doubt.

This tale's ending, with the prince setting sail for a Europe that will likely remain forever out of reach, dramatizes the central paradox of decadent longing: that desire is most powerful when it is never fulfilled, and that beauty exists most intensely at the moment it slips beyond our grasp. Shidao's refusal to procreate, his squandering of inherited wealth, and his melancholic

admiration for Western ideals are not just symptoms of personal malaise; they function as a synecdoche for the broader dislocations of a world in transition. The story's surfaces – be they the mermaid's luminous skin, the merchant's Caucasian features, or the glass that separates longing from fulfilment – become the true locus of meaning and loss.

In bringing together the motifs of unattainable beauty, bachelor melancholia, and racialised yearning, Tanizaki's fairy tale compels us to reconsider the geography and genealogy of decadence itself. 'The Siren's Lament' is not simply a tale of unhappy endings, but a contemplation of surfaces, distances, and the bittersweet allure of what can never be attained. In its exquisite refusal of closure, it offers an enduring vision of modernity's discontents and the queer, spectral afterlives of the fairy tale.

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[44] Ke Meng 孟軻 [Mencius 孟子], 'The Chinese Classics/Volume 2/The Works of Mencius/Chapter 07: Li Lou [離婁] Part 1', trans. by James Legge, n.d., p. 26 <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Chinese_Classics/Volume_2/The_Works_of_Mencius/chapter07> [accessed 8 August 2025].
[45] Katherine Snyder, 'The Necessary Melancholy of Bachelors: Melancholy, Manhood, and Modernist Narrative', in *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel, 1850–1925* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 172-210 (p. 172).
[46] Snyder, 'The Necessary Melancholy of Bachelors', p. 173.
[47] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 102.
[48] Ibid., p. 102.
[49] Ibid., p. 109.
[50] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 21 & 25.
[51] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 110.
[52] Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities (Modernist Latitudes)* (Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 5.
[53] Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*, p. 4.
[54] Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 126-56.
[55] Amano, *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan*, pp. 103-07.
[56] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 103.
[57] Ibid., p. 110.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Sōseki Natsume, *Complete Literary Works of Meiji Era Vol. 55: Sōseki Natsume* [明治文学全集 55: 夏目漱石集] (Tsukuba-shobo, 1971), p. 355.
[61] Ayu Majima, *The Melancholy of the Skin Colour: The Racial Experience of Modern Japan* ["肤色"的忧郁:近代日本的人种体验], trans. by Xiaoyu Song, Qiwei Shuxi, Chinese edition (Social Sciences Academic Press, 2021), p. 78.
[62] Sōseki Natsume, *Sanshirō* [三四郎], Soseki literary works collection (Iwanami Shoten, 1990), p. 22.
[63] Majima, *The Melancholy of the Skin Colour*, pp. 30-53.
[64] Yatarō Mishima, *The Letters of Mishima Yatarō: A Pioneer Meiji-Era Student Abroad in America* [三島弥太郎の手紙: アメリカへ渡った明治初期の留学生], ed. by Yoshiatsu Mishima (Rakuseisha, 1994), pp. 67-68, 75-76, 93, and 127-29.

[65] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox (Grove Press/ Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008), p. 17.
[66] Ibid., p. 39.
[67] Majima, pp. 40-41.
[68] Ibid., pp. 51-53.
[69] Amano, pp. 2-3.

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

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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).

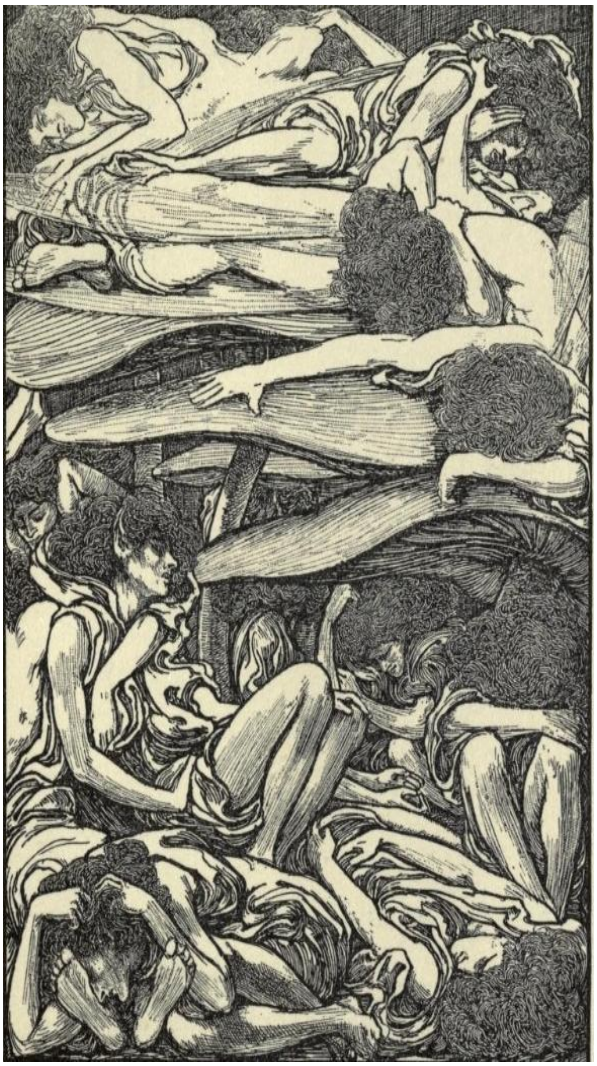

Fig. 1: Laurence Housman, illustration for *The End of Elfintown*, 1894. Wood engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Toronto Public Library.

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 Elfintown*. 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.

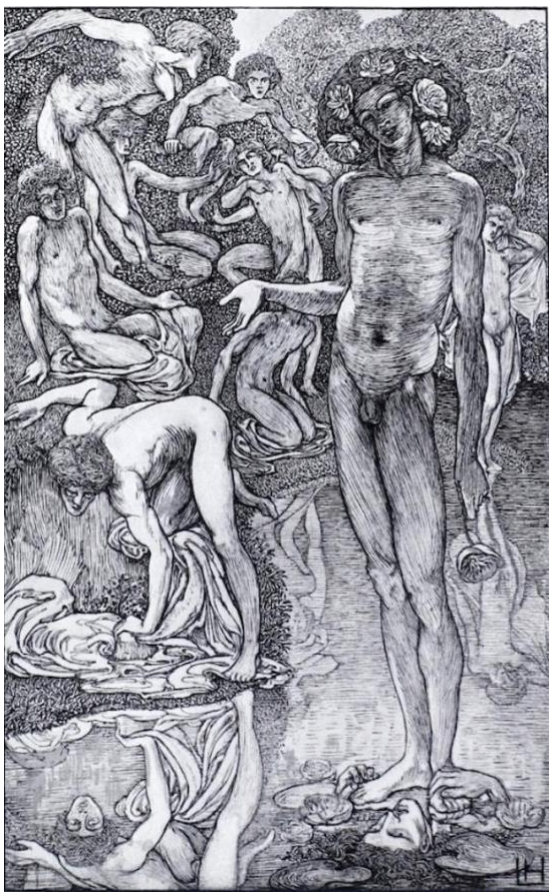

Fig. 6: Laurence Housman, *Death and the Bather,* 1896. Pen-and-ink drawing.
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Fondren Library, Rice University.

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.*

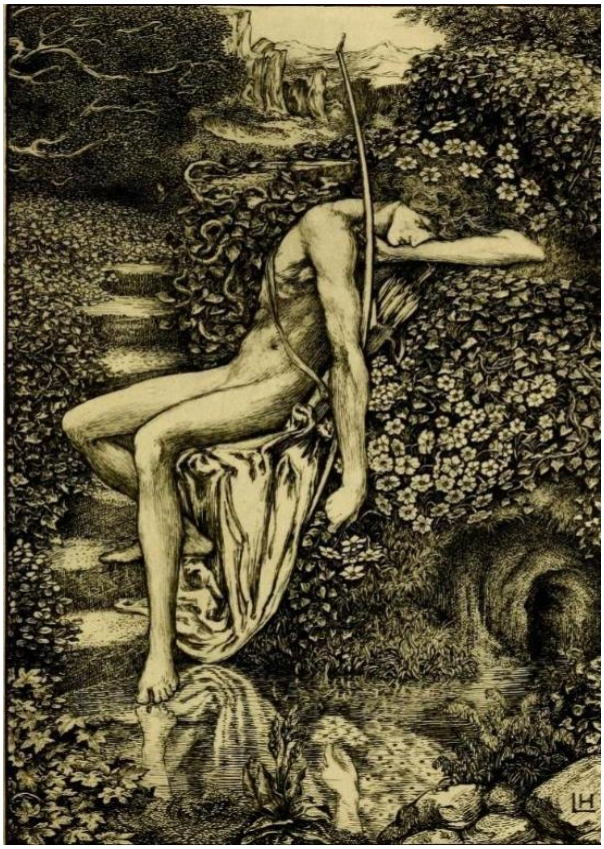

Fig. 7: Laurence Housman, *The Dying Narcissus,* 1898. Wood engraving.
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

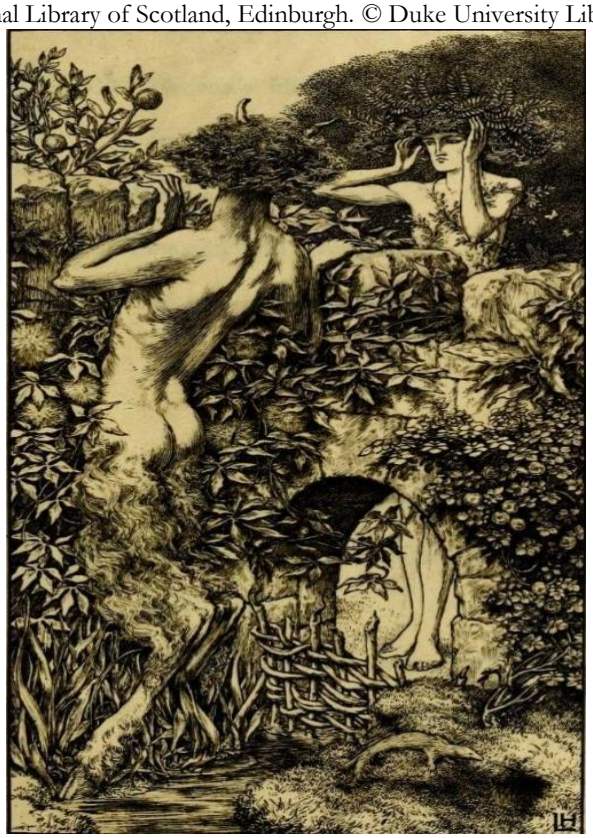

Fig. 8: Laurence Housman, *Pan Covetous*, 1898. Wood engraving.
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

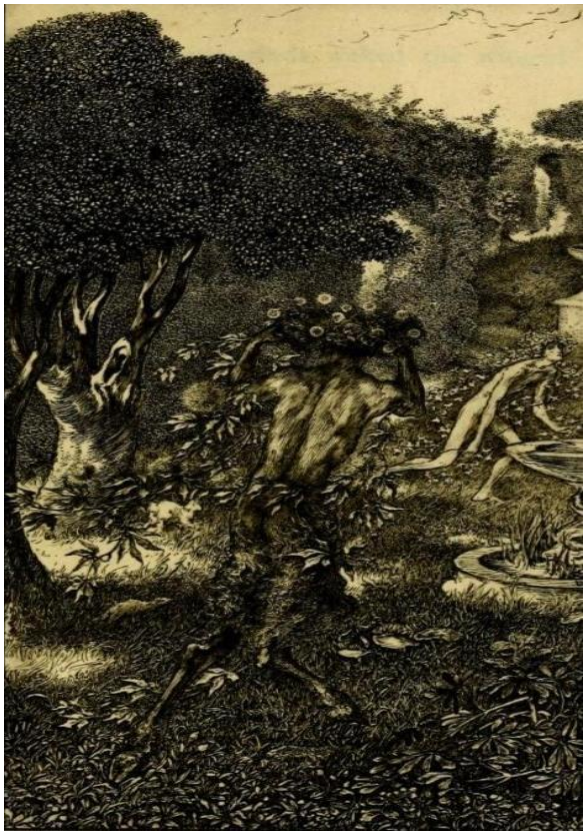

Fig. 9: Laurence Housman, *The Garden Panic*, 1898. Wood engraving.
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

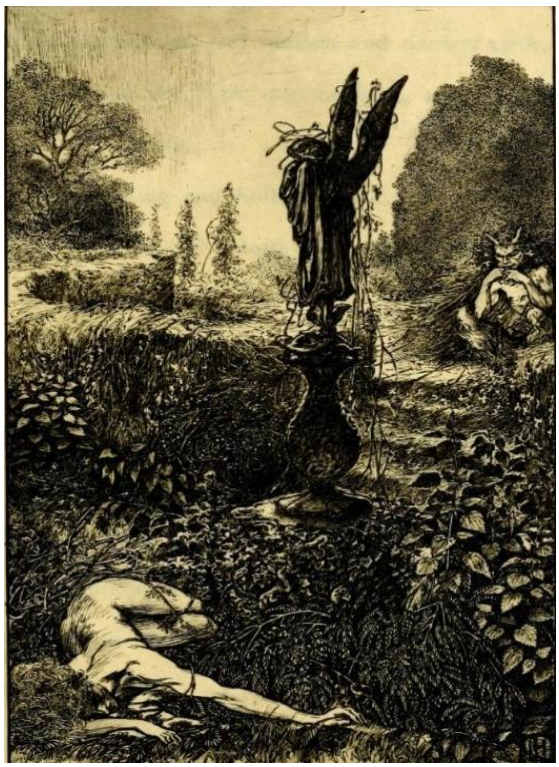

Fig. 10: Laurence Housman, *Pan Paramount*, 1898. Wood engraving.
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

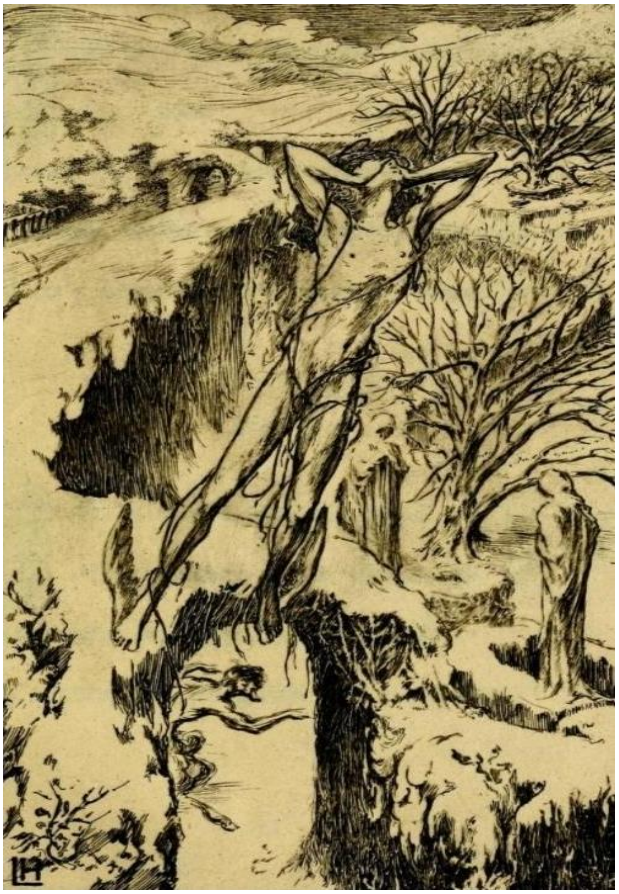

Fig. 11: Laurence Housman, *The Garden Entombed*, 1898. Wood engraving.
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. © Duke University Libraries.

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.

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[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 Elfintown*, 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.collezionegalleriaborghese.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.
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Aubrey Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* as a Decadent Fairy Tale

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In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, fairy tales were in vogue. The painter John Anster Fitzgerald saw his piece *The Fairy's Lake* shown at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1866, and contributed various works to the Christmas editions of *The Illustrated London News*; for the stage, James Robinson Planché adapted the fairy tales of Madame D'Aulnoy to great success, and, by the 1890s, Andrew Lang's 'coloured' Fairy Books were a staple of the middle-class nursery.[1] Perhaps inevitably, however, much discussion ensued as to what the fairy tale should do or be, and what they might inculcate in the child reader. As John Ruskin writes in his 1869 introduction to an edition of stories by the Brothers Grimm:

> In the best stories recently written for the young, there is a taint which it is not easy to define, but which inevitably follows on the author's addressing himself to children bred in school-rooms and drawing-rooms, instead of fields and woods. […] The fairies who interfere in the fortunes of these little ones are apt to be resplendent chiefly in millinery and satin slippers, and appalling more by their airs than their enchantments.[2]

The fairy tale reveals a series of opposing themes: the rural and the metropolitan; the socialised and the natural. Juliana Horatia Ewing references these contrasts in her 'Preface' to *Old-Fashioned Fairy Tales* (1888):

> In these household stories (the models for which were originally oral tradition), the thing most to be avoided is a discursive or descriptive style of writing. Brevity and epigram must ever be soul of their wit, and they should be written as tales that are told.[3]

Here, Ewing emphasizes the way in which language participates in these oppositions during the late nineteenth century, a period that Linda Dowling refers to as the 'post-philological moment'.[4] As she explains, this consists in the opposition between the organic and ephemeral nature of the oral tradition (J. G. Herder's concept of the *Volksstimme* or voice of the people: protean, earthy, and unselfconscious)[5] and the curated, embalmed nature of the written word. For W. B. Yeats, this is the mannerism and sterile artifice resulting from the excessive contemplation of a generation raised on the works of Walter Pater and his circle – from 'too much brooding over methods of

expression, and ways of looking upon life, which come, not out of life, but out of literature, images reflected from mirror to mirror'.[6] The oral tradition derives its language from the *Volksmärchen* [folktale], contrasted with the curated language from that of the *Kunstmärchen* [literary fairy tale] – an opposition which the German philologist Jens Tismar points up in his 1977 study *Kunstmärchen.* Jack Zipes glosses this opposition between the natural and the artificial: the *Kunstmärchen* is 'written by a single identifiable author [and] thus synthetic, artificial, and elaborate in comparison to the indigenous formation of the folk tale that emanates from communities'. [7] The decadent fairy tale as a genre, then, is something of an oxymoron. An artificial product of nature, the fleeting made permanent.

There is perhaps no fairy tale which makes such a fetish of these oppositions between nature and artifice as Aubrey Beardsley's unfinished pornographic novel *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, a retelling of the Tannhäuser legend.[8] The text itself is preceded by a mock-dedication to the fictive prince and clergyman Giulio Poldo Pezzoli, before the story opens with the arrival of the German knight at the mystical grotto ruled by the Goddess Venus. Beardsley then goes on to record the orgiastic revels enjoyed by Venus, Tannhäuser, and the inhabitants of Venus' realm in explicit detail. The rococo, decadent aesthetic of the grotto described in the text, meanwhile, is paired with various illustrations by Beardsley including *The Toilet of Venus* (fig. 1) which I discuss below. At every point, in both language and content, a cloying atmosphere of artifice prevails, the abstraction from nature to which Yeats's 'images reflected from mirror to mirror' allude. We might remember that for Pater's Flavian in *Marius the Epicurean* 'all that can be achieved in these latter days is the self-conscious *imitation* of simplicity […] artificial artlessness, *naïveté*'.[9] In the case of Beardsley's novel, however, it is the very process of imitation itself which is staged. In an ongoing process of making the internal workings externally visible, the crafted, mannered nature of his language becomes the end in itself. Dowling characterises the *Volksstimme* as a poetic language 'so transparent as to leave a very minimum of verbal interposition between the reader and the feeling of the poet', but interposition is one of Beardsley's most practised skills.[10]

Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Toilet of Venus*, c. 1896. © Public Domain

Indeed, this interposition can be understood as a display of sprezzatura. Harry Berger Jr. glosses this notion in its original context of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* as 'the cultivated ability to display artful artlessness', a hair's breadth away from Pater's 'artificial artlessness'.[11] Berger also describes sprezzatura as 'the display of the ability to deceive' and, more playfully, 'the ability to show that one is not showing all the effort one obviously put into learning how to show that one is not showing effort'.[12] In this sense, Beardsley seeks not to imitate the authenticity of the *Volksmärchen*, that is to say the oral tradition, but rather to advertise his disinterest in doing so, and his work's status as *Kunst* ('artifice'). This, for Kostas Boyiopoulos, is the very essence of decadence: 'a style in which the mental process of absorbing impressions draws attention to itself by exposing its apparatus and grafting it onto the textual surface'.[13] *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, then, is a kind of literary case study in revealed construction. At every turn, it shows but refuses to

sublimate its influences, displaying the morbidity of its status as a reconstituted patchwork of other texts. In this way, the Beardsleyean text is a kind of composite, the stitches of which remain visible. As I will discuss, this showcased artifice is the fundamental decadent means by which Beardsley engages with the oppositions that the fairy tale represents.

If Wordsworth felt, along with Coleridge, that a true poetic language of the people meant doing away with all the 'motley masquerade of tricks, quaintnesses, hieroglyphics, and enigmas',[14] it is as well that he never read *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. The book opens with the dedication I mention above, addressed to the fictional 'Prince Giulio' by the fictionalised sycophant 'Aubrey Beardsley', who writes: 'I must crave your forgiveness for addressing you in a language other than the Roman, but my small freedom in Latinity forbids me to wander beyond the idiom of my vernacular'.[15] Here, the word 'Roman' introduces an uncanny hermeneutic ambivalence in that it remains unclear whether it refers to Italian, Latin, or perhaps French, given the chivalric tone suggested by the subtitle 'A Romantic Novel'. The word 'Latinity', likewise, serves to subtly destabilise meaning in that it typically refers to the use of Latin style, not the language itself, and often in a pejorative sense. Indeed, in creating a language which is hyper-ornamented to the point of near exhaustion, makes an almost archetypally decadent show of gilding the lily, parodying himself even from the first line. Already, then, his language has something of the rococo about it in its being over-refined and playfully insincere. This is the essence of Beardsleyean interposition: language which continually comes between the reader and the percept described, representing only itself. Such manipulation of language equally reminds the reader of the role played in this *Kunstmärchen* by authorial curation, given the emphasis it places upon the writer's ability to be glib, should he so choose. This latent threat begins to take shape when 'Beardsley' states that 'the writing of epistles dedicatory has fallen into disuse, whether through the vanity of authors or the humility of patrons'.[16] In this line, he appears overweening in his praise of Pezzoli's humility, yet creates a subtle and insidious equivalence between himself and Pezzoli through parallelism of syntax in the pairing of 'vanity' with 'humility' and 'authors' with patrons'.

Such a decision deftly conveys an unsettling amount of power to the authorial presence who, it seems, is minded to be glib. This is further suggested by the unusual syntax of 'epistles dedicatory' which, in aping French syntax, recalls the very particular diction of Pater, and the critical pedigree enjoyed by the use of French mannerisms in decadent literature. Consider, for instance, the French cadence in this sentence from Pater's *The Renaissance* (the famous conclusion of which marked a foundational moment for aesthetes and decadents).

> To such a tremulous wisp constantly reforming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down.[17]

Pater creates an increase in elan and pace when he builds his verbs into adjectival phrases, writing of a 'wisp constantly reforming itself' (as opposed to a 'wisp which constantly reforms itself'). Like Beardsley's 'epistles dedicatory', the French syntactical pattern which places the adjective after the verb ('le chat noir' for instance), is close at hand. Again, Pater writes of 'a relic more or less fleeting' (as opposed to 'a relic which is more or less fleeting', or perhaps 'a more or less fleeting relic'), evoking French syntax once again. The phrase 'moments gone by' continues this impression, the adjectival phrase again falling after the noun. In making indirect reference to this legacy of Francophilia, the fictional author 'Beardsley' seems more lettered than he professed to be only a moment earlier.

Later in the text, however, he turns the use of French mannerism into a conspicuous tick, littering the text with unglossed French vocabulary. He writes of 'pantoufles', slippers 'scented with maréchale', a 'finely curled peruke', and Venus' servant the 'fardeuse'.[18] This is not the earnest Latinity of Pater, nor the Romantic rhythms of certain scenes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when Wilde describes '[t]he mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated'.[19] Discussing scenes such as this last, Matthew Creasy notes that '[a] recursive loop of influence runs through this kind of writing, which occupies an uncertain space between translation and imitation as it seeks to evoke and enact the complex music of Huysmans's French'.[20] Yet, crucially, Beardsley seeks neither to

evoke nor to imitate but, rather, to make the act of imitation conspicuous by exaggeration. In this sense, Beardsley's co-option of French represents polished clumsiness, or 'artificial artlessness'.[21] This is the process of construction made externally visible, the stitches I spoke of above. To paraphrase Berger, Beardsley puts a great deal of effort into showing how little effort he has put into not showing effort.

It is significant, too, that such construction makes continual reference to existing forms:

> Those who have only seen Venus in the Vatican, in the Louvre, in the Uffizi, or in the British Museum, can have no idea of how very beautiful and sweet she looked. Not at all like the lady in 'Lemprière'.[22]

Venus here is compared to a patina of Latinate and pre-existing cultural forms. She is not an organic figure of the oral fairy tale, at home in the fields and woods of Ruskin's description, nor the Anglo-Saxon, primal language of Coleridge, Yeats, or Wordsworth. She is, instead, the recomposed product of two millennia of civilisation. The prevailing critical narrative in Beardsley scholarship would typically cast this hyper-referentiality and campy Francophilia as an example of Beardsley parodying the craze for pseudo-French sophistication at the fin de siècle. Jennifer Higgins, for instance, states that 'the cultural eclecticism of his references, especially his French ones, are fundamental agents in the satirical impact of his work', 'targeting the English literary establishment'.[23] While this is certainly true, such a reading undersells Beardsley's ambition in using this technique. By continuously reminding the reader that this text is made up not of organic material – a product of nature – but of reconstituted forms, Beardsley creates a hackneyed, recomposed text which hints perpetually at its own disintegration. Paraphrasing the philologist Max Müller, G. W. Cox writes that 'after having been established as the language of legislation, religion, literature, and general civilisation, the classical Latin dialect became stationary and stagnant […] it was haunted by its own ghost'.[24] In this sense, the crude Latinity and patina of references to other art forms render *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* a composite of dead forms. Considered from this angle, the text also recalls Symons's description (borrowed from Huysmans) of decadence as a style that is 'tacheté et faisandé': 'gamy and spotted with corruption', that is to

say, putrescent.[25] Such is the implication of double-entendres like the 'cultured flesh' of the inhabitants of the Venusberg: superlatively refined, yet artificially bred, evacuated from nature.[26] As Pater's Flavian states, this 'artificial artlessness […] might have its measure of euphuistic charm . . . but only of a bunch of field-flowers in a heated room'.[27] The concerns of Ruskin and Ewing seem altogether confirmed by the Beardsleyean fairy tale, then: a bravura display of interposition. Indeed, nature itself is repeatedly made subject to art in the scene of Tannhäuser's arrival.

> Huge moths so richly winged they must have banqueted upon tapestries and royal stuffs, slept on the pillars that flanked either side of the gateway, and the eyes of all the moths remained open, and were burning and bursting with a mesh of veins.[28]

Such descriptions are of the variety which Ewing might find troubling. If the organic world is likened not only to art, but to art that has consumed only other art forms in a uroboric process of infinite regress, the reader proves multiply abstracted from nature (the 'fields and woods'). Though the alliterated phrase 'burning and bursting with a mesh of veins' might suggest a certain rank vigour, the healthful vigour of nature is at a great remove from this description. To be sure, that the consumer of art might take on something of its essence is a decadent idea with roots. Grace Lavery explains that the 'fleshly poet' Bunthorne describes himself as, 'A Japanese young man, | A blue-and-white young man', comparing this to Wilde's epigram: 'I find it harder and harder to live up to my blue china'.[29] Such *topoi* speak to the archetypal decadent question of mimesis which Wilde addresses in *The Decay of Lying*. In this last, he states that 'Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, [keeping] between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style', before 'Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness'.[30] It is this same fraught relation between nature and art which emerges from Beardsley's descriptions of rose trees as being 'wound and twisted with superb invention over trellis and standard'.[31] It is not the beauty of the rose trees that is of note, but the 'invention' by which nature has been made subservient to design. Elsewhere Beardsley writes of stone carved with 'such a cunning invention', and 'buckles of very precious stones set in most strange and esoteric devices', glorying with a little nasty relish at the triumph of art over nature.[32] The torsional motions 'wind' and 'twist' in the quote above are

also of particular significance, suggesting the inversion – something directed back towards itself – which characterises the self-referential nature of the text. This also distantly recalls the sexual perversion associated with decadents of the 1890s (remembering the fact that the term 'invert' was used to describe homosexuals, and the Latin etymon *perversus*: 'turned the wrong way'). Later in the text, Tannhäuser stands 'like Narcissus gazing at his reflection in the still scented water'.[33] That Tannhäuser reflexively observes himself on the face of the stagnant water, itself an artificial simulacrum of the natural pond, is a further condensation of this airtight, hyper-artificial aesthetic and enslavement of nature. If the body of water constituted the unrestrainable sublime for the Romantics, here it has been domesticated: scented, bounded, stilled, and turned into an object for the indulgence of vanity. The word 'still', moreover, emerges as a particularly considered word choice. In the grounds of the Venusberg, 'through the trees, gleamed a *still*, argent lake', comparable to the point earlier in the text when Tannhäuser encounters '*still* lakes strewn with profuse barges full of gay flowers and wax marionettes'.[34]

Such a repeated emphasis upon barrenness as a motif is also something commonly found in the decadent canon. Congress with Swinburne's *Hermaphroditus*, a 'thing of barren hours', yields only the 'waste wedlock of a sterile kiss',[35] for example, while the love of Wilde's Salmacis is '[f]ed by two fires and unsatisfied/Through their excess'.[36] As Clifton-Everest notes, however, this suspension also characterises the realm of fairylands across cultures.

> The common picture is of a realm which is idealised in terms of normal human experience: while pleasures abound, pain and sorrow are entirely absent. […] '[N]o snow falls, no strong winds blow and there is never any rain ...' says Homer of Elysium; in *Owen Miles* the Earthly Paradise is reported to have no night, no winter, no heat and no cold; Tennyson employs the same formula in his *Morte d'Arthur* to evoke the fairyland serenity of Avalon.[37]

There is, in fact, direct precedent for this sense of a barren, hermetic enclosure in the Tannhäuser legend. In Andrea da Barberino's *Guerrino, Detto il Meschino* (1410/1473), a Renaissance iteration of the story, such overtones appear as Tannhäuser (named Guerrino in this work) is led into the Venusian grotto.

> After lunch they led him into a garden that seemed a second Eden, laden with fruit of every kind. However, when he looked closely at the fruit he had the sneaking feeling that there was something very wrong, and potentially dangerous: it was the wrong season for many of the varieties to be growing.[38]

The Venusberg is a kind of sealed vault, like a bottle garden, and is thus cut off from the processes of nature. In the same vein, the richness and beauty of the Venusberg exists only in suspended animation, at a remove from the seasons of the natural world; in short: from life itself. The beauty of the grotto can therefore only give the airless, fixed impression of Pater's 'field-flowers in a heated room', and the still figures depicted on Keats's Grecian urn. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that the word 'grotesque' – applied so frequently to the Beardsleyean – originates from the Italian *grotta* ('cave'), that is to say, an isolated enclosure.

Fig. 2: The artificial grotto of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the 'Märchenkönig'. 29 August 2014.
© Wikicommons

Tonally, this sense of hermeticism in the myth owes a great deal to the decadent mythos of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the *Märchenkönig* ('fairy tale king'), a hermetic aesthete lionised by the Romantics and, later, the continental Symbolists, for his reclusive adherence to the cult of beauty. A great patron of the composer Richard Wagner, the King had an entirely artificial underground grotto constructed at Linderhof Palace in the 1870s (fig. 2) to model the scene from

Wagner's opera in which Tannhäuser arrives at the Venusberg. August von Heckel's painting *Tannhäuser in the Venusberg* (1876-1877) adorns one of the walls of the grotto, and a boat in the shape of a shell rests on water as still as that in which Beardsley's Tannhäuser sees himself reflected. Later, in 1892, the Symbolist poet Stefan George canonised King Ludwig's hermetic realm in his poetic cycle *Algabal*, in which he reimagines the King as the Roman emperor Elagabalus, a decadent figure par excellence.[39] The image of a vaulted, self-contained space, then, has a charged legacy in decadent aesthetics. Its mythopoetic significance lies in its status as the preserve of art, and as a refuge to house the poetic mind. It is, furthermore, the veneration of this imagined space which enables the artist-as-warrior mythos in which Stefan George, Thomas Mann, and the Baltic German writer Elisàr von Kupffer, among others, take part.[40] To be sure, it is not incidental that Beardsley's Tannhäuser is a knight.[41] This sense of an hermetic realm in which art responds only to art – a kind of vivarium - also underpins Beardsley's decision to decorate his rooms on Cambridge Street as a simulacrum of Des Esseintes' interior in *À rebours* (the 'breviary' of decadence).[42] As is the case of the moths mentioned above, artifice for Beardsley responds to and engages with other forms of artifice, given the fact that George Moore also modelled sections of his *Confessions of a Young Man* (1887) on Des Esseintes' interiors.[43] It is likewise this sacral refuge of artifice which Beardsley consciously courted when he asked Ada Leverson to arrive an hour before his dinner party to help 'scent the flowers'. On arriving she found him 'spraying bowls of gardenias and tuberoses with opopanax' and was handed 'a spray of frangipani for the stephanotis'.[44]

No feature of the text gives the impression of a closed loop system so exactly as Beardsley's decision to illustrate it himself. In the line drawing *The Toilet of Venus*, she is depicted a few pages after the reader encounters the line '[h]er neck and shoulders were wonderfully drawn', setting up the Venusberg as the result of a mirroring effect between text and image.[45] Remembering the dedication by the fictionalized 'Beardsley', it does not even seem clear whether the illustrations are by the real or fictive version of the author himself. This being the case, the word 'drawn' instead emerges as Beardsley's underhand but polished way of praising his own artwork within the text,

such that a word which might initially evoke the broadening of *ut pictura poesis* gives way only to a performance of narcissism. The reader is firmly in the realm of the *Kunstmärchen* then, a world away from the organic, unselfconscious quality of the authorless *Volksmärchen* tradition. This is an effect continued by the word 'drawn', given its appearance in the insinuating dedication in which the author states that he must praise the fictional Pezzoli: 'else I should be forgetful of the duties I have *drawn* upon myself in electing to address you in a dedication'.[46] Given Symons's claim that Beardsley's 'whole conception of writing was that of a game with words', it would be remiss to overlook the double meaning of 'drawn' here ('assumed', but also 'elaborated'), and the possibility that Beardsley is again reminding that his text takes art, not nature, as its point of reference.

Because abstracted from nature, the hermetic, calcified impression created by the Beardsleyean fairy tale can be understood as the aesthetic equivalent of the embalmed language which characterises the written word for Dowling, and thus the *Kunstmärchen*. When removed from the axis of time as the oral folktale is when transcribed, only barrenness can result. It is to this end that, as though under a bell-jar (or depicted on Keats's Grecian urn), many of Beardsley's characters take on a miniaturised, inanimate quality.

> Within the delicate, curved frames lived the corrupt and gracious creatures of Dorat and his school; slim children in masque and domino, smiling horribly, exquisite letchers leaning over the shoulders of smooth doll-like ladies […] terrible little Pierrots posing as lady lovers and pointing at something outside the picture, and unearthly fops […].[47]

Like a vivarium, the picture acts as a self-contained world in which 'slim children' will never broaden with the physical changes of adulthood, and 'doll-like ladies' exist in extended, ossified maidenhood. The fops, too, are 'unearthly', the kind of characters who might know 'no night, no winter, no heat and no cold'. Equally, the ekphrasis creates the impression of a *tableau vivant* (or, as it were, *tableau mort*) within the text itself, like *The Toilet of Venus*. This again heightens the sense that the Beardsleyean text takes as its source material not life, but the artistic, artificial product of a developed civilisation. Even this mise-en-abyme allows for various decadent *topoi* to be brought together, given the references to Dorat and the Commedia dell'arte in the pictures. The marmoreal,

sterile impression also recalls the Pygmalionic; one is reminded of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandmann* (1816) – the archetypal Romantic *Kunstmärchen* – and to *The Borghese Hermaphrodite* (1620) in the Louvre. Venus herself is described in terms which recall the puppet-like: '[h]er arms and hands were loosely, but delicately articulated, and her legs were divinely long. From the hip to the knee, twenty-two inches; from the knee to the heel, twenty-two inches'.[48] Even the measurements here recall the language of a wall label in an art gallery: 'length: 22 in.'. The words of Pater come to mind, for whom Winckelmann's conception of Attic marble epheboi involved 'a premonition of the fleshless consumptive refinements of the pale mediæval artists' and 'a touch of the corpse'.[49]

In view of the deathful atmosphere created by the description above, the cadaverous element to the reconstituted text comes once again to the fore. That such references are barely disguised is another example of visible stitches. *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* has been accused by some of Beardsley's more myopic critics of a heavy-handed attempt at euphuism, a kind of formulaic deployment of cross-references, as though regurgitating Lemprière as a form of automatic writing. Haldane MacFall sees only 'laboured literary indecency' and 'fantastic drivel, without cohesion, without sense, devoid of art as of meaning – a sheer laboured stupidity, revealing nothing – a posset, a poultice of affectations'.[50] Mario Praz's comment on the text maintains much the same view: '[t]here are passages which read like romanticised excerpts from the *Psychopathia Sexualis* of Krafft-Ebing'.[51] But, if there is one fact which emerges from consideration of Beardsley's line drawings, it is that Beardsley is only heavy-handed when he means to be. In Kostas Boyiopoulos' words, the calculated, clumsy agglomeration of unhidden references instead represents 'the mental process of absorbing impressions draw[ing] attention to itself by exposing its apparatus and grafting it onto the textual surface'.[52] As suggested by Beardsley's pseudo-imitation of Pater, this is not mimesis proper, but the process of construction exposed and placed front and centre. That this internal process is externalised as a conspicuous display of learning adsorbed to the surface of the text is, as before, an example of Beardsleyean sprezzatura.

The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser, then, is a kind of meta-*Kunstmärchen*, a meditation on the opposition between nature and artifice which is endemic to the decadent fairy tale as a genre. This opposition, though, finds many correlates. It is also that of the oral and the written tradition, the internal and the external, the cohesive and the disaggregating, the microcosm and the chaos of the real world. In this way, study of Beardsley proves illuminating of both the general and the particular. His text provides numerous tiny footholds for inquiry, an almost infinite miniature, a grotto in its own right. Yet, likewise, it sheds light on our understanding of the fairy tale genre, both across time and as a feature of the late Victorian era, in addition to the particular rhythms and *topoi* of decadence during the 1890s (the 'Beardsley period').[53] *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* will always remain unfinished, but its critical legacy must continue to be written.

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[1] See John Anster Fitzgerald, *The Fairy's Lake*, oil on board, exhibited 1866, Tate, London; Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and James Robinson Planché, *Fairy Tales / by the Countess D'Aulnoy; Translated by J. R. Planché* (George Routledge and Sons, 1855; reissued 1888); and Lang's series of 'coloured' fairy tales, starting with *The Blue Fairy Book* (1888), which were originally published by Longmans, Green & Co.

[2] John Ruskin, 'Introduction', in *German Popular Stories: With Illustrations after the Original Designs of George Cruikshank*, by Wilhelm Grimm and others, ed. by Edgar Taylor (J. C. Hotten, 1868), pp. v-xvi (p. v).

[3] Juliana Horatia Ewing, 'Preface' to *Old-Fashioned Fairy Tales* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Pott, Young & Co., 1882), pp. v-vii (p. v).

[4] Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton University Press, 1986), p. x.

[5] Ibid., p. xiv.

[6] W. B. Yeats, 'Preface to the First Edition of *The Well of the Saints*' [1905], in *Essays and Introductions* (Collier, 1968), p. 298.

[7] Jack Zipes, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. xv-xxxii (p. xv).

[8] Aubrey Beardsley and John Glassco, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (Book-of-the-Month Club, by arrangement with New York: Blue Moon Books Inc., 1995). Begun around 1895, it was Beardsley's only published prose work and was first serialized in *The Savoy* from 1896 to 1897 before being published in expurgated form by John Lane in 1904. However, it was not until 1907, nine years after Beardsley's death, that the original unexpurgated text was published in full, though only for private circulation, by Leonard Smithers. The version I cite consists of the original unfinished text (pp. 15-80), followed by a theoretical second half to complete the text (pp. 80-140) written by the poet, memoirist and pornographer John Glassco (1909-1981).

[9] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas,* 2 vols (Macmillan, 1914), I, p. 102.

[10] Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, p. 21.

[11] Harry Berger, *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books* (University of Standford Press, 2000), pp. 9-10. This work is the most in-depth treatment of sprezzatura as a concept, and considers its development in both *The Book of the Courtier* and Della Casa's *Galateo, Or: The Rules of Polite Behaviour*.

[12] Berger, *The Absence of Grace*, p. 9.

[13] Kostas Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 15.

[14] 'Appendix' in William Wordsworth, *Poems / by William Wordsworth: Including Lyrical Ballads, and the Miscellaneous Pieces of the Author: With Additional Poems, a New Preface, and a Supplementary Essay* (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1815), pp. 395-400 (p. 397).

[15] Beardsley, *Tannhäuser*, p. 16.

[16] Ibid., p. 15.

[17] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry; With a New Introduction by Louis Kronenberger* (New American Library, 1959), p. 157.
[18] Ibid., pp. 30, 21, and 28.
[19] Oscar Wilde, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland (Harper Collins, 2003), pp. 33-198 (p. 125).
[20] Matthew Creasy, '"Rather a Delicate Subject": Verlaine, France and British Decadence', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 65-86 (p. 73).
[21] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1914), vol. I, p. 102.
[22] Beardsley, *Tannhäuser*, p. 30.
[23] Jennifer Higgins, 'Unfamiliar Places: France and the Grotesque in Aubrey Beardsley's Poetry and Prose', *The Modern Language Review*, 106.1 (2011), pp. 63-85, https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.1.0063 [accessed 31 October 2025], p. 66.
[24] G. W. Cox, 'Max Müller on the Science of Language', *Edinburgh Review,* 115 (January 1862), 78-79.
[25] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, ed. by Matthew Creasy (Carcanet Press, 2014), pp. 267-83 (p. 267).
[26] Beardsley, *Tannhäuser*, p. 48.
[27] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas,* p. 102.
[28] Beardsley, *Tannhäuser*, p. 22.
[29] Grace Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Duke University Press, 2018), p. 61.
[30] Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 1071-1092 (p. 1078).
[31] Beardsley, *Tannhäuser*, p. 36.
[32] Ibid., pp. 22 and 30.
[33] Ibid., p. 61.
[34] Ibid., pp. 73 and 37. Both my emphasis.
[35] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Hermaphroditus', in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann and Charles L. Sligh (Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 104-106, ll. 42 & 19.
[36] Oscar Wilde, 'The Burden of Itys', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 851-859 (p. 853, l. 122).
[37] J. M. Clifton-Everest, *The Tragedy of Knighthood* (Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1979), p. 56.
[38] Andrea da Barberino, *Guerrino, Detto il Meschino*, in *The Sibyll of the Apennines: Two Texts by Andrea da Barberino and Antoine de la Sale*, trans. by James Richards (Edizioni Simple, 2014), p. 39.
[39] Stefan George, *Hymnen; Pilgerfahrten; Algabal*, 6. Auflage (Georg Bondi Verlag, 1920); on Elagabalus and decadence, see Joseph Bristow, 'Decadent Historicism', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3:1 (2020), 1-27.
[40] That the etymology of the word 'venerate' (from *venerāre*), is shared with that of the name 'Venus' is not incidental detail to this reading.
[41] For further discussion of this artist-warrior topos, see Fabio, Ricci, *Ritter, Tod und Eros: die Kunst Elisàr von Kupffers* (1872-1942) (Bo̎hlau, 2007).
[42] Arthur Symons, 'Joris-Karl Huysmans', in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, pp. 169-89 (p. 182).
[43] Creasy, '"Rather a Delicate Subject"', p. 73.
[44] Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 209.
[45] Ibid., p. 29.
[46] Ibid., p. 17. My emphasis.
[47] Ibid., p. 59.
[48] Ibid., pp.29-30.
[49] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry; With a New Introduction by Louis Kronenberger* (New American Library, 1959), p. 151.
[50] Quoted in John Glassco, 'Introduction', in *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, p. xii.
[51] Ibid., p. xiii.
[52] Kostas Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 15.
[53] Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (John Lane, 1925).

Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales: The Aesthetically and Socially Engaged Child

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'Oscar Wilde and fairy tales? Putting the two in the same sentence has a jarring effect' suggests fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar.[1] This has to do, in large part, with Wilde's fame as a decadent author and an aesthete. While some have found Wilde's choice of writing children's literature, in the form of his fairy tales, a strange one, this interest in childhood is less surprising than one might think. Conceptualizations of childhood at the fin de siècle were influenced by lingering Romantic ideas of childhood built upon the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth[2], as well as the budding psychological field of Child Study spearheaded in Britain by James Sully.[3] Scholars in this field perceived the child as both evolutionarily 'savage' or animalistic and, also, Romantically imaginative, rebellious, and visionary. While older models of Romantic childhood, both savage and sweet, defined the child by simplicity, Wilde addressed child readers as an audience capable of understanding complex ironies, multilayered moral messages, and even open-ended problems in the world. Wilde uses fairy tales as pathways to engage the child reader with his critiques of the world as it is and his vision for the world as it could be. I turn to two of Wilde's most famous fairy tales, 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Young King', to demonstrate how we might read these decadent fairy tales as attempts to bring the child into social consciousness. In both stories Wilde encourages the child reader to question adult authority, face real tragedy, recognize the complexity of social problems, appreciate the beauty of queer companionship, and challenge the political status quo. And he does this through, rather than against, a love of aesthetics.

Wilde's fairy tales, as scholars have pointed out, are written in ways that do not quite fit into the usual assumptions about what texts for children should look like. Perry Nodelman, in 'The Young Know Everything', argues that the problem with a much scholarship about Wilde's tales is that it bases

its interpretation of the tales on 'a consideration of what these scholars assume to be the characteristics of children', rather than on the characteristics of the stories themselves.[4] The result of this is that many scholars have argued that Wilde's tales are *not* for children, or rather that the most interesting and complex aspects of the texts are intended to appeal more to adults. I propose to follow Nodelman's lead here and interpret these tales as children's literature. Through this view, these tales reflect what Wilde perceived to be the artistic tastes and literary capabilities of children, and we can see how Wilde addresses the child reader as an astute literary aesthete and potential social activist.

'The Happy Prince' and Aesthetic Morality

In 'The Happy Prince' Wilde ostensibly positions decadent, orientalist tropes and aesthetic pleasure against material self-sacrifice. Yet, this tale also suggests the futility of both short-term charity to make lasting change and the comfort of queer love and aesthetic beauty in the face of bleak social inequalities. It also positions authority figures as ineffective, self-absorbed, and the primary objects of mockery. Further, this tale works as a piece of decadent art, with lush, detailed descriptions that develop its emotional resonance. Through its very narrative function, then, the text suggests the usefulness of decadence and aestheticism in moving audiences to emotional reaction and social action. 'The Happy Prince' primarily follows the converging stories of a living, but non-moving, statue of the late prince and the Swallow, who has left his flock to pursue love. Together they work to give gold and jewels to the destitute and struggling townspeople, and these actions lead ultimately to both of their deaths. In a cynical twist, the tale ends when the town council determines to take down the (now ugly) statue of the Prince and replace it with another beautiful, gilded statue, preferably of one of their own number.

When the Swallow meets the Prince, the Prince shares his sorrow for his town and together they begin spreading the gold and jewels from the statue's body to the poor, sick, abused, and disheartened. The Prince explains his grief by telling his own tale to the Swallow:

> I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. […] Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. […] And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.[5]

In his past life, the Happy Prince was a decadent figure, who enjoyed pleasure and beauty unrestrained and without awareness of or concern for the suffering of his people. His current, suspended vantage-point has now brought this suffering into unavoidable view yet traps him in a position unable to move or help. Now able to compare the beauty of his past life to the darkness of his current perspective, the Prince concludes that 'more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery' (p. 19). The ugliness of the world seems to overpower the beauty and absorbs his mind. For this reason, he recruits the help of the Swallow to act as his hands and strip his body of its precious and beautiful metal and jewels.

The moral 'lesson' of the tale revolves around these acts of generosity. The Swallow, who is out of his climate as the season swiftly changes, suddenly finds himself feeling warm despite the weather. The Prince explains this warmth by saying 'that is because you have done a good thing' (p. 15). Charity, then, is its own reward. Those who contribute to the suffering of the poor, such as the rich young girl waiting for her dress to be embroidered by the seamstress whose child is ill, are presented as selfishly unaware of the misery to which they contribute. To her lover she says, 'I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball, […]; I have ordered passionflowers to be embroidered on it; but the seamstresses are so lazy' (p. 14). She highlights the beauty of the detail-work which will be produced while denigrating the work ethic of the artist who produces it. In this way aesthetics contributes directly to a lack of empathy. Conversely, the ruby that the Prince and Swallow offer to

the seamstress is aesthetically beautiful, but this value is sacrificed for its value as potential currency; it can be sold to get her out of her financial problems. The 'happy' ending of the story comes after both the Swallow and statue have died. God sends an angel to collect 'the two most precious things in the city' (p. 22) and the angel brings the Swallow's body and the statue's broken, leaden heart to heaven. We are told that the angel had 'chosen rightly', confirming the righteousness of their charitable choices, and that in 'Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me' (p. 22). This constitutes their reward for their martyrdom and the 'positive' note on which the story ends. Yet, as Nodelman puts it, Wilde's fairy tales appear to be 'teasingly insistent on undermining the apparent moral thrust of his stories'.[6]

Alongside this straightforward life lesson about self-effacement and self-sacrifice, this story also offers some dissonant messages about the potential value of aesthetics as well as the potential futility of charity to change the system in which injustice thrives. Early in the story we are given several examples from the townspeople of the inspiration the Happy Prince brings to the town. One 'disappointed man' looks at the statue and says, 'I am glad there is someone in the world who is quite happy' (p. 10). For this disgruntled townsperson, the Happy Prince serves as an image of what could be, of some happiness to aspire to. A class of Charity Children say 'He looks just like an angel' (p. 10). Thus, to the children his beauty embodies their spiritual imagination and reinforces their belief in angels. Not only the townspeople, but also the Swallow is drawn to the Prince's beauty and inspired by it. The Swallow settles happily into the shelter of the statue saying to himself 'I have a golden bedroom' (p. 11). Their initial meeting is made possible because the Swallow is drawn to the Prince's beauty. Further, the Swallow is convinced to go along with the Prince's scheme because of the Prince's beauty: 'The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow was filled with pity' (p. 12).

His agreement to help the Prince spread his wealth is motivated in part by the persuasive quality of the Prince's sad beauty.

The Swallow acts as a decadent storyteller who enthrals both the statue and the reader with his elaborate, excessive, and orientalizing descriptions of Egypt. He has been left behind by the rest of his flock who have already flown ahead to Egypt, and he longs to follow them to warm and beautiful places. Although the swallow's life is in real danger if he remains until winter, his primary explanations of his reasons for desiring to leave are grounded in exotic beauty:

> My friends are flying up and down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus-flowers. Soon they will go to sleep in the tomb of the great King. The King is there himself in his painted coffin. He is wrapped in yellow linen, and embalmed in spices. Round his neck is a chain of pale green jade, and his hands are like withered leaves. (p. 13)

The Swallows are not just going to spend the winter in the warm climate of Egypt, living in the trees or bushes, they are going to immerse themselves in the most famous history and art of the country. They will spend time among flowers known only in myth in England and literally climb inside a Pharoah's tomb to sleep. Familiar tropes of decadent writing are woven into the Swallow's descriptions such as the detailed attention paid to the linen which encases the corpse, the spices in which the body is embalmed, and even the withering of the mummy's hands. Even the slow decay of the body is rendered in terms of beauty, alongside exotic jewellery.

These stories of Egypt function as a contrast to the dark, dingy streets of this European town. Light, beauty, and hope seem to radiate from these decadent descriptions of foreign places. This 'decadent aesthetic imagery',[7] to quote Fleurot, works to attract child readers with their Romance and beauty while demonstrating a clear contrast with the dark poverty of the European urban landscape.

Another common decadent trope we see in this tale is the lauding of queer love as a symbol of hope and the impetus for moral goodness. The emotional drive of this tale comes from the deep, selfless love that develops between two males, the statue and the Swallow. While the Swallow initially spares no thought for the people of the town, his love for the statue teaches him to become invested

in the plights of others. He learns empathy not only for the starving mother, artist, and child, but also for the statue. When winter has fully come along, the Swallow refuses to leave the statue because he is now blind. He does not want the statue to live in a cold, dark world alone in which he cannot move. So, the Swallow remains behind, with the knowledge that the cost will be his life, to paint beautiful pictures of the world for him with his words. Those decadent descriptions are the last gift of the Swallow to his love – a love briefly consummated with a kiss on the lips before the Swallow freezes to death. In turn, the statue's leaden heart breaks in two at the loss of his love.

With only this image of noble self-sacrifice to consider, one might think that the child reader should come away having learned that empathy for the poor and suffering should lead to charity and self-sacrifice. Yet, Wilde's story is more complicated than this. The story ends on a humorous but disheartening note. The sacrifices of the statue are, of course, never recognized by the townspeople who do not realize that the statue is alive. Further, once the statue's gilded and bejewelled exterior is stripped away, they decide that 'as he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful' (p. 21), and tear the statue down. Although as readers we are, perhaps, heartbroken that they do not realize the goodness of his sacrifices, in two different senses they are right. If his aesthetic beauty was functioning as an inspiration to the townspeople, then he can no longer fulfil that role. Further, if his moral 'use' was charity, he no longer has anything to give away to the poor and suffering. He has given all he has to give.

More importantly, the material and political situation of the town has not notably changed. There are some poignant moments of happiness when individual acts of charity happen in the story. When the 'matchgirl' (a pointed reference to Hans Christian Andersen's tale) gets to take home the 'lovely bit of glass' (p. 18) she finds that, at least for one night, her father will not beat her. Thus, briefly, the reader can experience relief and happiness. When the children of the town who receive the statue's gold leaf cry out with joy – 'we have bread now!' (p. 20) – it may feel like the town has

improved on a broad scale with so many different people getting help. Yet the story undercuts this with a scene involving the Town Councillors. These figures function as comedic caricatures of selfish obliviousness. When they decide to tear down the Prince's statue, the Mayor immediately suggests, 'we must have another, of course […] and it shall be a statue of myself' (p. 21). In response to this, "'of myself', said each of the Town Councillors, and they quarrelled. When last I heard of them they were quarrelling still' (p. 21). The description of adults squabbling incessantly is intended to be humorous to a child reader, but it still leaves the end of the tale bitter-sweet. Readers are forced to face how little has changed in the town. The leadership has not changed, nor have the politicians and community leaders learned anything. In fact, we get a clear sign that they plan to go right back to where they were before the incidents of this story. They want to have a beautiful statue that glorifies the wealthy and offers nothing of material value to the townspeople. Further, with the charity of the Prince and Swallow gone, there is no one to offer any support to the poor and suffering when future problems arise. As Monica Flegel argues, in many of Wilde's tales, he 'presents good actions as ephemeral, without lasting impact'.[8] By turning back to the Town Councillors, then, the reader is forced to face the fact that charity did not solve the problems of the town; it only temporarily assuaged their symptoms.

In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), Wilde addresses the relationship between charity and poverty directly. With his characteristic wit, Wilde famously tells readers that 'Charity creates a multitude of sins."[9] He goes on to cogently argue that this is because '[i]t is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property' and, thus, that '[t]he proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible'.[10] In short, his political philosophy, as laid out in the essay is against small gestures of generosity which, he argues, make the person who gives feel better but achieve nothing in terms of solving the true problems of inequality that underpin poverty; those gestures reinforce the exploitative

economic system by propping up its failures. However, in the essay he does acknowledge the aesthetic and emotional drive to acts of charity, admitting that philanthropists 'find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this.'[11] Suffering is ugly and ugliness is immoral. Yet he suggests that this impulse is moving in the wrong direction. Rather than offer acts of charity, one should be rethinking the system entirely. While not directly discussing child readers, in *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle* (2020), Deaglán Ó Donghaile suggests that Wilde's fairy tales put his socialist 'theory into literary action'.[12] In 'The Happy Prince', we can see his political and economic philosophy simplified for child readers.

The story engages, to use Vernon Lee's term, an 'aesthetico-moral' connection to encourage the child reader to feel invested in this problem.[13] The story critiques authority, through humour, by making authoritative adults the objects of mockery. The authorities who run things are silly and not to be trusted. So while the story makes clear that the statue and the Swallow's method of addressing the problem does not lead to long-term change for the town, encouraging the child reader to look for another solution to the problem, and it suggests the authorities who maintain the current system as the likely target to challenge. As Wilde notes in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 'all modes of government are failures' and 'all authority is quite degrading'.[14]

Wilde's 'The Young King' and Beautiful Anti-Materialism

Wilde returns to these themes in his second fairy tale collection, *A House of Pomegranates* (1892). His tale 'The Young King' follows the story of a prince raised as a goatherd returned to the palace to rule as king after his grandfather's death. The tale paints a portrait of a young lad somewhere between a wild faun and a decadent gentleman and then confronts this character with the unethical production of the beautiful materials he so admires. While the tale ends with a Christian message of rejecting

materialism and embracing Christ, it also represents that turn to God through a resurgence of aesthetic power. The story also includes pitting the young king's childish empathy, idealism, and faith against the jaded protestations of the older authorities around him. Much like 'The Happy Prince', 'The Young King' signals Wilde's belief in the comprehensive capabilities of his child readers by both incorporating subtle humour and exposing them to harsh and bloody realities of the production of gold cloth, pearls, and jewels in the late nineteenth century. This tale further eschews straightforward moral lessons by incorporating complex economic arguments that are never fully resolved within the tale. While the reader is encouraged to question the wisdom of the established authorities, these open-ended problems of economic disparity, which remain at the end of the tale, suggest to a child reader that the young King has not found the solution to these issues either. Further thought, then, is necessary to consider how the entire system might change.

This tale contains a host of familiar tropes that work to characterize the young king as a decadent while Wilde simultaneously makes use of the techniques of decadent authors in his storytelling to engage the reader in aesthetic appreciation. The tale's first description of the young king tells us that

> the lad […] had flung himself back with a deep sigh of relief on the soft cushions of his embroidered couch, lying there, wild-eyed and open-mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters.[15]

Wilde presents the king as boyish, wild, and languorously erotic. An appreciation of the natural world laced with a dash of pagan mysticism abounds in decadent writing and the young king, at the beginning of the story, embodies this feral child of nature trope. He remains like a frolicking creature and, although he is apparently old enough to be crowned king, he maintains a childish wide-eyed sense of wonder and idealistic optimism.

However, the young king does not remain unchanged after being thrust into the palace. While his love of beauty seems to be already fully formed before his recognition as the heir to the throne, he

quickly learns to embrace the costly materials of the palace rather than those of the wild. When he is brought to the palace and given the clothes of royalty, 'a cry of pleasure broke from his lips when he saw the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him' and 'he flung aside his rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin cloak' with 'almost fierce joy' (p. 79). He immediately embraces an intense appreciation of decadent aesthetics and whiles away hours appreciating the excessive material beauty of the palace. This obsession with beautiful things quickly begins to expand beyond the bounds of the palace itself into the acquisition of rare pretty things from across the globe:

> All rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for him, and in his eagerness to procure them he had sent away many merchants, some to traffic for amber with the rough fisher-folk of the north seas, some to Egypt to look for that curious green turquoise which is found only in the tombs of kings, and is said to possess magical properties, some to Persia for silken carpets and painted pottery, and others to India to buy gauze and stained ivory, moonstones and bracelets of jade, sandalwood and blue enamel and shawls of fine wool. (p. 81)

His move from appreciation to collection suggests the insatiability of his desires. These mentions of the various exotic locales from which these artifacts must be brought begins to signal that these objects are not just neutral aesthetic objects, but objects embedded in a context. Wilde introduces us to the idea that these things come from places – 'Egypt', 'Persia', 'India', 'the north seas' – and from people – 'merchants', 'rough fisher-folk', 'kings' – but the young king himself does not yet have a clear image of the reality of this, knowledge which will become clear in his later dreams.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Wilde's text draws us along with the young king in the appreciation of beauty. An aesthete himself, Wilde entrances the reader with lush descriptions of the beauty within the palace. When it comes to the young king's beloved art, the reader is treated to extended, detailed descriptions of every item:

> The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty. A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis-lazuli, filled one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass, and a cup of dark-veined onyx. Pale poppies were broidered on the silk coverlet of the bed, as though they had fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich

> plumes sprang, like white foam, to the pallid silver of the fretted ceiling. A laughing Narcissus in green bronze held a polished mirror above its head. On the table stood a flat bowl of amethyst. (p. 82)

The narrator describes each piece of furniture in his bedroom: the colour, material, pattern, and shape of each item. Wilde develops animated metaphors to describe the drape and movement of such details as the poppies on the coverlet and the ostrich plumes on the canopy. Specific gemstones are mentioned (agate, lapis-lazuli, onyx, amethyst), specific styles (such as Venetian glass), and specific mythical figures (such as Narcissus) are referenced. The result is a description not only dense but also lively, exotic, and colourful, capturing the reader's attention and inviting them to be enraptured, much as is the young king, by these objects.

The moral lesson, however, will come for both the young King and the reader once the story turns to his three dreams. These dreams reveal to the young King the circumstances under which the gold fabric for his mantle was woven, the pearls for his sceptre were hunted, and the rubies for his crown were mined. As Ó Donghaile notes, this story offers a critique of imperial capitalism that aligns with Wilde's politics.[16] The first of these dreams shows him the textile factory in which the golden mantle was being woven:

> The meagre daylight peered in through the grated windows, and showed him the gaunt figures of the weavers bending over their cases. Pale, sickly-looking children were crouched on the huge crossbeams. […] Their faces were pinched with famine, and their thin hands shook and trembled. Some haggard women were seated at a table sewing. A horrible odour filled the place. The air was foul and heavy, and the walls dripped and streamed with damp. (p. 83)

In a sort of Dickensian flash, the story demonstrates the horrors of the English working poor as they produce luxury items for the rich. The young king weakly argues that they are not slaves and are free to leave, but a weaver quickly dismisses that idea by reminding him that they must eat and that all other opportunities of industry for the poor similarly benefit the rich and create suffering for the poor. 'We have chains, though no eye beholds them', the weaver tells the young king, 'and [we] are slaves, though men call us free' (p. 84). This episode makes clear that having the ontological freedom to walk

away from a bad situation does not necessarily equate to having the actual opportunity to do so, if there are no better alternatives for survival. The exchange between the young king and the weaver works to highlight that this is a systemic societal problem.

Here Wilde begins educating his child readers on the complex economics of their industrialized society and hints at the need for large-scale changes to assuage the suffering of the poor. This story, much like 'The Happy Prince', also seems to draw upon the same concepts Wilde discusses in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. This dream, and the ones that follow, focus on the 'hideous poverty', 'hideous ugliness', and 'hideous starvation' that Wilde tells us drives people to want to act against economic injustice.[17] Through these dreams he begins to develop his argument that humankind should not be 'compelled to do the work of beasts of burden' as are all the labourers in these dreams.[18] And, much like in his essay on socialism, throughout the dialogue this story rejects simple answers to economic injustice. As the weaver with whom he speaks makes clear, this is a problem of the entire capitalist system which has put these workers in a position from which there is no escape without remaking the system.

The next dream shifts from metaphorical to literal slavery by following a 'negro' pearl-hunting ship manned by slaves off the coast of an unspecified country populated by 'Arabs'. Thus, Wilde moves from the perhaps more familiar injustices at home to the violent impact of colonialism world-wide and the hardships of non-Western peoples in the face of Western commercial demand. The horrific process of forcibly submerging an enslaved man using a large stone tied to his waist is described in great detail, including the wax shoved into his nose and ears to block out the water. Finally, he is forced to a depth beyond the human capacity for survival and retrieves the perfect pearl before, as Wilde describes, 'he fell upon the deck [and] the blood gushed from his ears and mouth. He quivered for a little, and then he was still. The negroes shrugged their shoulder and threw the body overboard' (p. 87). Due to its stark reality, and because it comes immediately after the factory dream,

which most British readers would recognize as true, the reader must also confront the fact that this bloody end awaits many enslaved people who are forced to hunt pearls for Western consumption. If child readers are to come with the young king on his path to economic education, they must face this brutal reality alongside him. They must also recognize that injustice and suffering, including that in which one's own society is implicated, extend beyond one's own borders and across the globe. Thus, Wilde uses the child's aesthetic sense to teach them a new kind of lesson, one about ugliness and cruelty.

The final dream is a little different, because it distances itself from real circumstances and instead explains the suffering of the ruby miners in the jungle through an allegorical tale about an argument between personifications of Avarice and Death. Avarice refuses to share her grains of corn with Death, so he kills off 'her servants' by calling forth Ague, Fever, and Plague (also personified in this tale). This dream focuses more on naming and underscoring the foolishness of the sin in question – Avarice – rather than highlighting the realistic plight of the diseased miners in the jungle. But in this, as in every other case, the point is made clear that the cause for it all is the young king's requested coronation outfit. The young king, and the reader, are forced to confront the idea that luxurious materials are acquired through the suffering of the poor. The young king then takes responsibility for his culpability by rejecting the coronation outfit and going forth to his coronation dressed as a goatherd once more: 'For on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands of Pain, has this my robe been woven. There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl' (p. 87). The reader is by now likely repulsed by the robe, sceptre, and crown as well, and applauds his decision. But the straightforward nature of his choice will soon be complicated by both the aesthetics of Catholicism and by economic complexity before the tale comes to its conclusion.

The young king's appearance as a goatherd is certainly indicative of the figure of Christ as a shepherd, and the invocations of a Christ-like image continue through the rest of the tale's ending.

The young king comes to represent humility and the rejection of earthly possessions, signalling a turn away from his previous decadent habits of material collection. However, the grounded logistical problems of this approach to halting labour injustice are brought to the fore by his courtiers, the working people of the city, and even the Bishop. His courtiers object that an awareness of the provenance of every item one purchases is extremely difficult – 'shall a man not eat bread till he has seen the sower, nor drink wine till he has talked with the vinedresser?' (p. 91). These concerns are valid – maintaining complete knowledge of the provenance of what one consumes is nearly impossible – and yet, we still know that something must be done. As readers, we are likely to side with the young king in rejecting, at the very least what one knows (in this case through divine revelation) to be unethical materials.

The next notable challenge to the young king's goatherd protest outfit is from the people who remind him that, for better or worse, many of their jobs rely on rich buyers:

> Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread. To toil for a hard master is bitter, but to have no master to toil for is more bitter still. Thinkest thou that the ravens will feed us? And what cure hast thou for these things? (p. 93)

This pointed question hangs in the air for the rest of the tale. So far as we know, the young King has no plan for how he will remake the economy of his country to ease the violence of labour while still making sure that everyone has jobs that feed them. While the labour is bitter, and sometimes fatal, there are no alternatives presented to these people. Simple boycott will be fatal to them as well.

Finally, the young king reaches the church only to be confronted by the Bishop, suggesting that even the Church is not supporting his actions in pursuit of human compassion. Instead, he makes the argument that what the young king seeks to do is impossible,

> My son, I am an old man, and in the winter of my days, and I know that many evil things are done in the wide world. […] Canst though make these things not be? Wilt thou take the leper for thy bedfellow, and set the beggar at thy board? Shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee? Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art? (p. 95)

While the arguments that no one has enough power and control to end suffering are more easily addressed, the argument that God himself has made suffering and therefore must have a good reason for doing so is theologically more vexing. The bishop's questions interestingly place the blame on God for the horrors revealed in the young king's dreams rather than on the choices of men. They might even suggest that this human brutality is just another part of nature, including human nature, as created by God, and thus serves some mysterious purpose which should not be questioned or interfered with. While the reader ponders these sombre questions, the young king ignores this quandary and responds instead to the question of what one man alone is capable of by evoking the power of Christ.

The point at which this tale turns from a straightforward rejection of material beauty into something more complicated is the aesthetic spectacle of its climax. As the young king speaks aloud of the power of Christ a visual display breaks forth:

> And lo! Through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (p. 96)

While the form his protest had taken was the rejection of the beautiful robe, sceptre, and crown crafted for him through violent labour, God ultimately reveals his power by replacing his goatherd costume with an even more splendid outfit. Rather than rejecting beauty, then, or positioning beauty as the opposite to ethics, aesthetics here signal divinity and goodness. Further, the beauty of God is even greater than the beauty of those objects wrought by suffering human hands. One need not reject aesthetics but rather seek Christianity and a new form of decadence, revelling in the aesthetic splendour of the Lord, will follow. As Nodelman suggests of many of Wilde's tales, 'they offer fairy-tale opulence in the process of attacking indulgence in opulence'.[19] The spectacle expands beyond the young king's body and festoons the rest of the church:

> He stood there in the raiment of a king, and the gates of the jewelled shrine flew open, and from the crystal of the many-rayed monstrance shone a marvellous and mystical light. He stood there in a king's raiment, and the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move. In the fair raiment of a king he stood before them, and the organ pealed out its music, and the trumpeters blew upon their trumpets, and the singing boys sang. (p. 97)

Through this somewhat repetitive, incantatory description the young king's true kingliness is confirmed. Thus, despite what our protagonist has said earlier in the narrative, there is a specific look to a king which God has now given to him because of his goodness. Further, God's glory represents itself in all the arts, not only visual but also through music and even the movement of the statues of the saints. In this case, to recognize and worship God's power is to recognize and worship the beauty of these arts. This alignment of aestheticism and Christianity speaks to the pageantry of Catholicism so appreciated by Wilde and decadence more broadly. As Ellis Hanson explains in *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997),

> the sheer excess of the Church – its archaic splendour, the weight of its history, the elaborate embroidery of its robes, the labyrinthine mysteries of its symbolism, the elephantine exquisiteness by which it performs its daily miracles – has always made it an aesthetic and fetishistic object of wonder.[20]

We can see how Catholic aesthetics were thought to help shape the child's artistic mind in Vernon Lee's essay 'The Child in the Vatican' (1881). However, the criticism of figures like the Bishop in the story also suggests that church dogma is another form of authority that should be mocked and rejected for being ineffectual. This, too, dovetails with what Ó Donghaile refers to as Wilde's 'challenge to religious dogma in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"'.[21] The solution to the problems of unethical labour in this story is not to reject the love of aesthetics, nor is it to trust the church, but to embrace a more ethical form of aesthetic appreciation.

Undoubtedly, Wilde's tale involves complex moral concerns. Its ethical dilemmas require the reader to think about an object's origins, to consider how one action affects another, and to recognize power structures that span the globe. It can certainly be argued that because the tales themselves do

not offer a clean-cut rejection of aesthetic materialism there is no easy lesson for a reader to take away. The tale also offers several counter-arguments to the young king's choices that are never fully resolved. The brutality of the images shown encourage readers to wholeheartedly take his side, and yet his actions neither fully resolve the issues at stake, as several characters point out, nor are they repeatable for the 'average' 'general' reader. In short, we are left with a messy ending. What this inconclusiveness does, I am suggesting, is encourage readers, even child readers who might not fully grasp every detail, to think further about where things come from and how the whole system of traditional authority might need to be challenged. As Nodelman argues, Wilde's fairy tales encourage 'ironic reading'. They

> present characters and their actions in ways that seem to invite an awareness that more is going on than meets the eye, that things are not quite as simple or as pleasant as at first glance they might appear to be or as the characters believe them to be.[22]

While reading this story does not immediately make children into baby socialists, it does encourage child readers to take an interest in their world beyond what they see in front of them and to see the objects in front of them as belonging to a broader, more complex world in which they have some responsibility.

In Wilde's fairy tales we see his opinion that children are capable of not only understanding but also affecting complex social problems on full display. While I have focused on only two stories in this article, much the same could be said for many of his other fairy tales such as 'The Selfish Giant', 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and 'The Star-Child'. In 'The Selfish Giant', we once again see children as the drivers of change and aesthetic beauty as the harbinger of Christ. In 'The Nightingale and the Rose', the child is expected to engage with the same type of complex and understated satire, directed at the philosophy student, as we see in parts of 'The Happy Prince', directed towards the councilmen and intellectuals. In 'The Star-Child', we see the same type of circular ending, in which the problem has not really been solved, as we see in 'The Young King'. Wilde gives his child readers credit for their

ability to understand literary complexity, and he places his hopes for a better future in the hands of these readers who may be able to imagine a different type of world.

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[1] Maria Tatar, 'The Aesthetics of Altruism in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', in *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 145-57 (p. 145).
[2] See, for example, Eric Tribunella and Carrie Hintz, *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Broadview, 2019); Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Childhood Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840 – 1900* (Oxford University Press, 2010); James R. Kincaid, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture* (Routledge, 1992); Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2009); and Victoria Ford Smith, *Between Generations: Collaborative Authorship in the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017).
[3] James Sully. *Studies of Childhood* (Aberdeen University Press, 1896), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/cu31924055378305 [accessed 5 January 2026].
[4] Perry Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything: Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales as Children's Literature', in *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, pp. 181-201 (p. 182).
[5] Oscar Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', *The Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Signet Classics, 2008), pp. 9-22 (p. 12). Subsequent references to this story are given inline.
[6] Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything', p. 189.
[7] Fleurot, 'Decadence and Regeneration', p. 73.
[8] Monica Flegel, 'Innocent Cruelty and the Love of Beauty in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', in *Cruel Children in Popular Texts and Cultures*, ed. by Monica Flegel and Christopher Parkes (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 41-60 (p. 43).
[9] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (Max N. Maisel, 1915), p. 5.
[10] Ibid., pp. 5 an 4.
[11] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[12] Deaglán Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 122.
[13] Vernon Lee, *The Child in the Vatican* (T. B. Mosher, 1900), *HathiTrust*, p. 18, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101068155439 [accessed 31 December 2025].
[14] Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism,* p. 23.
[15] Oscar Wilde, 'The Young King', in *The Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Signet Classics, 2008), pp. 77-97 (p. 78). Subsequent references to this story are given inline.
[16] Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle*, pp. 132-44.
[17] Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, p. 3.
[18] Ibid., p. 6.
[19] Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything', p. 197.
[20] Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 5.
[21] Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle*, p. 5.
[22] Nodelman, 'The Young Know Everything', p. 191.

Fear and Trembling:
Oscar V. de L. Miłosz's 'La Reine des Serpents' (1930) as a Decadent Fairy Tale[1]

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> That which we call reality is not something which offers itself to us, but a fruit of initiation, and initiation commences with love.
> – Oscar V. de L. Miłosz, *L'Amoureuse Initiation* (1910)[2]

The Francophone-Lithuanian writer Oscar V. de L. Miłosz (1877-1939) considered his fairy tale 'La Reine des serpents' ['Queen of Serpents'] so important that he published it twice, in both of his collections of Lithuanian Fairy Tales (1930, 1933).[3] 'La conte si curiuex de la "Reine des Serpents"' [The very curious tale of the 'Queen of Serpents'], as he writes in the introduction to the first volume, 'est tout à fait caractéristique […], et mériterait peut-être d'être rapproché de certaines théories scientifiques modernes relatives à l'origine animale des végétaux' [is quite characteristic […] and would perhaps deserve to be compared to certain modern scientific theories relating to the animate origin of plant life.[4] In this article I contextualize and closely read this text, a version of 'Eglė Žalčių Karalienė' ['Eglė, Queen of Serpents'], which is best known as a 'national' folk tale of Lithuania.[5]

Following the author's earlier œuvre, I read the story as a decadent fairy tale, characterized by its tonal ambiguity, exaggerated sexuality, and the problematics of hereditary decline. While Miłosz, as a diplomat, championed the Lithuanian republic, his fairy tale hinges on the excesses of his own legacy among the Polish-Lithuanian aristocracy. Thus, his French literary version of a popular folk tale represents a negotiation of complex shifts in identity and genre.

An important subtype of the animal-bridegroom tales (Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU) 425), the tale is a 'beauty and the beast' narrative of Eglė,—whose name means 'Spruce' in Lithuanian—a young woman wedded to an animal bridegroom. A serpent (*žilvinas*, or *žaltys*, grass snake), a household diety in the region, appears amongst her clothes after bathing. The serpent's

family forces them to marry, and Eglė raises three children, though she still longs for her home. After she completes three near-impossible tasks, the serpent-husband grants her a visit back to her family. Before she leaves, she teaches her three children an incantation which summons her husband from afar:

> O Serpent, serpenteau, serpentelet,
> Si vous êtes vif, l'écume est de lait,
> O Serpentelet, serpenteau, serpent
> Si vous êtes mort, l'écume est de sang.
>
> Oh Serpent, little snake, serpentlet,
> You live, if the foam is milk.
> Oh Serpent, little snake, serpentlet,
> You're dead, if the foam is blood. [6]

Yet, Eglė's relatives come and interrogate her three children, the youngest of whom, Drebulė [Aspen], reveals the charm. The bride's brothers kill the serpent-king. In a final metamorphosis, Eglė transforms into the tree of her name, and she also transforms her four children: Ąžuolas [Oak], Uosis [Ash], Beržas [Birch], and Drebulė.

A French-educated descendent of the Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry, Miłosz took on the role of master for his famous distant cousin from Vilnius, the Nobel-prize winning poet Czesław Miłosz, who in turn became his disciple.[7] The elder Miłosz began as a literary decadent, and turned to promoting the Lithuanian national revival after 1918. The fairy tale collections belong to this transitionary period, and draw on the efforts of Lithuanian nationalism, which drew themselves on folklore studies, as well as on discourses of the fairy tale. Miłosz shared the mystical regard for hereditary aristocracy among the French reactionary writers.[8] According to most sources, he was not fully fluent in Lithuanian, and was also separated both by class and work from Lithuania proper. Czesław Miłosz, who grew up in Lithuania, relates these differences at various points in his writings on his cousin.[9] 'Je suis bien dans la peau de Don Quichotte' [I feel very much in the role of Don Quixote], Oscar Miłosz announced on his first visit to Kaunas, then capital of Lithuania, in 1922.[10]

In the second section of this article, I describe the author's background and the writing of fairy tales. Miłosz authored the Lithuanian *contes* through multiple vectors: as a political ambassador for the Lithuanian state, as a descendent of the Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry, as a French decadent, and as a Catholic mystic. While a patriot for the Lithuanian 'folk', he followed the era of J.-K. Huysmans and Paul Bourget through an inward elevation of the mystical, and a turn toward hierarchy.[11] By reading his version of a narrative prized by the Lithuanian national movement, I point out the ways in which he performs Lithuanian identity as a storyteller, supporting modern Lithuanian nationalism while representing its ancient nobility. This stems from his complex position in France. Miłosz's did not naturalize as a French citizen until 1931, following years of service in foreign affairs.[12] His privileged class position was based on the wealth of his estate, sold to the Soviet Union in 1917. With his Lycée education in Paris and the Louvre, Miłosz contrasted with Lithuanian nationalists, often of a poor or peasant background, who were raised speaking Lithuanian. Yet, thanks to the refined French prose of his fairy tales, Miłosz 'passed' as Lithuanian in the French Empire through a mimetic performance.[13]

In the third section of this article I show how, by composing literary 'versions', Miłosz performs the authenticity of the folk tale for his readership. By writing in French, Miłosz renders the 'Lithuanian Tales' foremost in the style of the French *conte de fée*s. On the other hand, he plays with generic aspects and expectations of the folk tale, based on the national Romantic auspices of his collection. The various genres of the fairy tale allow Miłosz to promote a prestigious national narrative while expressing his conception of Lithuanians, based on a linguistic and cultural distance from a Lithuanian national ideal of a peasant culture. His view of a Lithuanian 'race' as 'Aryan' chimed with his esoteric and nationalist interests, and accorded with the political climate of Europe in the 1930s.[14]

While Miłosz repeats the plot of the folk tale in order to promote the revival of Lithuanian nationalism, he represents the animal bridegroom as degenerated nobility, and the fatal incantation as a mythic spell. In line with the French tradition, the serpent husband becomes 'le jeune ophidien'

[the young Ophidian], a decadent savage, and his daughter the initiate of his secret ritual.[15] In his retelling, Miłosz translates the proper names of Eglė's family as hyphenated, choosing the verb 'trembler' to connote the etymology of the youngest daughter's namesake tree, i.e., Drébule-Tremble. This is because in Lithuanian, the name of the tree, Aspen (*Drebulė*) relates etymologically to the verb 'to tremble', *drebeti*. The dynamic between the proper name, its species of tree, and the act of trembling, become important for Miłosz in retelling the story of the 'queen of snakes'. In my conclusion, I turn to the decadent poetics of the fairy tale, and suggest reading the trembling of the youngest daughter alongside the author's religious and metaphysical poetry.

Research on Miłosz has mainly focused on this religious and metaphysical poetry, though a number of Lithuanian scholars have researched and translated his fairy tales.[16] In his collections, Miłosz draws on two things hitherto unnoticed: first, he plays with distinctions between folk and fairy tales; second, he draws on a poetics of decadence. I thus read the tale in relation to various fields of decadent studies: French and also Nordic, in order to arrive at a decadence which reflects Miłosz's shifts in style and persona. Just as scholars of Nordic decadence have indicated in their studies, his rural characters also succumb to over-refinement and decline.[17] Let us consider this 'Lithuanian decadence' an act of authorial love for the genre, since in Miłosz's version of the tale, the heroine fulfils the postulate of Vladimir Propp, who claimed that folk tales derive from ancient rites of initiation.[18] First, however, it is worth acquainting readers with the role of decadence in Miłosz's career.

From Decadent Poet to Lithuanian Prophet

Miłosz announced his affiliations with fin-de-siècle decadence at the age of 23, publishing his first book, *Le Poème des Décadences,* in 1899. In his early life, he cultivated the image of a dandy, travelling through Europe and Africa on the inheritance of his aristocratic Polish-speaking nobility. In his first novel, *L'Amoureuse Initiation* [*The Amorous Initiation*] (1910) he parodies the period's attitude of malaise and decline through a depiction of Venice, rotting, and written with a torrid, overflowing

style, reminiscent of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* (1892). The novel is framed as the encounter of a Danish aristocrat with another high-born decadent, Monsieur de Pinamonte, who retells a doomed love affair with a young woman, Annalenna. Pinamonte, a stand-in for the author, becomes the corrupted double of the young Danish aristocrat, who functions as a stand-in for the reader. Yet, at the same time, his erotic fixation on Annalenna becomes a vehicle for an ever-expanding metaphysical vision of love and Neo-Platonic redemption.

In the second part of his career, Miłosz publicly turned away from the decadence of his early work, though he continued to play the part of an aristocrat and aesthete. In 1910, he formally adopted the noble title *de Lubicz* or *Labunowo*, proof of aristocratic lineage in Poland, and a mark of exoticism among French modernists.[19] He became attracted to the occult, and after a series of religious experiences beginning in 1914, turned to writing metaphysical poetry, drawing on Emmanuel Swedenborg's work and his own readings of the Old Testament (*Épître à Storge*, 1917; *Adramandoni*, 1918; *La Confession de Lemuel,* 1922; *Ars Magna*, 1924; and *Les Arcanes*, 1927). Until this point, Miłosz had depicted his place of birth with a vague nostalgia, associated with the images of a decaying estate in the Grand Duchy – indications of this can be found in the draft of an unfinished novel, *Le Zborowski.*[20] However, following the Russian Revolution of 1917, he sold his parents' estate in Čareja to the Soviet Union and became interested in the Republic of Lithuania, taking up the political cause of the country in 1918.[21]

He occupied a position as *chargé d'affaires* of Lithuania from 1920-25, and even represented Lithuania in the League of Nations in 1921.[22] In this office, Miłosz was obliged to secure international recognition for Lithuania following the events of 1919, when the state fought in a series of independence wars against Bolshevik and Polish forces. In a series of political essays, he wrote about the so-called 'Vilnius question', the dispute over the claimed Lithuanian capital, captured by Poland in 1920.[23] As representative of Lithuania with the League of Nations, Miłosz had been enlisted to broker for Vilnius, but negotiations with Poland were stalled during the interwar period.[24]

In his 1980 Nobel prize speech, Czesław Miłosz describes his debt to his cousin, who he met on a visit to Paris in 1931. He succinctly captures the issue of his complex identity, describing him as 'a French poet' but one whose work 'could be elucidated by the intricate story of a family as well as of a country once called the Grand Duchy of Lithuania'.[25] In his longer narrative accounts, such as the *Land of Ulro* (1977), the younger Miłosz describes his cousin's choice of diplomatic service as a means of atoning for his former egoistic solitude', by which we are presumably to understand his 'decadence'.[26] The 'intricate story' alludes to the ethnic diversity of the Grand Duchy, in which Oscar was born to a Jewish mother and Polish-Belorussian father, under the aegis of the Polish nobility. The ambiguities of his ethnic identity in twentieth-century France could thus be concealed by an exotic title, though in practice 'he never rejected his inheritance of mixed blood'.[27] Thus, while Oscar Miłosz appealed to a French reading audience, he remained useful for Lithuanian elites who were trying to establish independence from Russia.

Threads of decadence – a concern with hereditary aristoracy, a melancholic relation to the modern, and apparently 'perverse' sexuality – continue through the third part of his career, when Miłosz remade himself into a Lithuanian patriot and Catholic prophet. Following the publication of an edition of his collected poems in 1929 (*Poèmes 1895-1927*), he ceased writing poetry (save for the fragment *Psaume de l'Étoile du matin* [Psalm of the Morning Star], 1936) and turned to works on Lithuanian folklore and nationality. As recent scholarship has shown, the status of 'Lithuanian' had a prestige in French letters which counted on an idealized perception of a people supposed to be more primitive. For the French, Lithuania represented a land preserved from western civilization and modernization, an idyllic Eden. Yet for many Lithuanians, by contrast, Paris drew fascination and repulsion as a contemporary Babylon.[28] Miłosz could remain sophisticated and profound, while through his Lithuanian identity he could indulge his audience with a pantheistic aura, imbued with the elemental forces that contrasted with the positivism and mechnical conception of life in modern Paris.[29]

The ambiguities of his adopted Lithuanian identity and his refined French style drive the more decadent tendencies of Miłosz's later work, which is the subject of this article.[30] In the 1930s, his two volumes of fairy tales were published in French with the publisher J. O. Fourcade. The first, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* [*Stories and Fables of Old Lithuania*] came out in 1930 and the second, *Contes lituaniens de ma Mère l'Oye* [*Lithuanian Tales of Mother Goose*] in 1933. These are published in his collected writings along with the 1936 essay *Les Origines de la nation lituanienne* [*Origins of the Lithuanian Nation*], in which he conceptualizes the Lithuanians as a nation and race based on racial theories (phrenology, physiognomy) and nineteenth-century Romantic views on language.[31] Thus, Miłosz asserts that Lithuanian culture belongs to a declining race, but he does this through a French conception of the fairy-tale genre, in what he describes in one letter as pantomimes.[32]

He drew on personal history for inspiration. As mentioned above, he was a descendent of the Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry who had ruled the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth as a confederal state since the sixteenth century, until the Polish Partitions (1772 to 1795), in which Austria, Prussia, and Imperial Russia divided the territory. Following this dissolution, the Lithuanian gentry was obliged to either comply with the Tsarist system, forge a union with Polish leaders, or disappear off the map. At same time, a new national consciousness arose which emphasized the folk culture and language of ethnic Lithuanians, but also included the culture of the gentry.[33] During a series of uprisings (1830-1831; 1863-1864) Lithuanian factions fought with Poles against the repressive regime, and the national movement gained traction despite Russification and a press-ban (1864-1904) on Lithuanian literature.

The aspirations of the incipient Polish and Lithuanian national movements did not align with the details of this prior multi-ethnic history. The Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry distinguished themselves from the Poles in their allegiance to Lithuania but had to affiliate with a state based on the Lithuanian language. Because this national movement celebrated the history of mediaeval Lithuania, and integrated the culture of the gentry more broadly, Miłosz could claim

this identity as well, such as the heritage of the marriage of the Polish queen Jadwiga to the Grand Duke of Lithuania in the fourteenth century.[34]

The Right of the Strongest

Where Miłosz's language and style relate to a French classical tradition of an earlier period – in particular the writers of the eighteenth century – his Lithuanian *contes* are based on research on the folk tale, which was first recognized as a genre in the nineteenth century with the research of philologists such as the Brothers Grimm in 1831.[35] Scholars have long debated the distinction between the fairy tale and the folk tale; where literary scholars emphasize the historic role of textual examples and editorship of fairy tales, folklorists insist on an oral tradition of storytelling distinct from written tales.[36] Miłosz presents readers with 'authentic' folk tales, but performs a storytelling role as a French writer in the fairy tale tradition. He neither merely translates the tales – recreating them in French – nor transcribes an oral performance, but presents readers with 'versions', which belong to the Lithuanian oral tradition.[37]

In the introduction to the first book of fairy tales in 1930, Miłosz compares himself to Charles Perrault and uses the French writer's frequent asides, his moral and philosophical questions, with which he intervenes in the plot of his tales.[38] By introducing and commenting on his 'versions' of Lithuanian peasant tales, he repeats the French upper-class appropriation of oral tales, traceable to the aristocratic salons of the seventeenth century.[39] Storytellers such as Madame D'Aulnoy – who coined the term *contes de fées*, or 'fairy tales' as we know the literary genre in English – retold oral tales with literary wit, publishing them for learned French audiences.[40] The 'Mère L'Oye' of the second volume, *Contes lithaunianes de ma Mère l'Oye*, directly refers to the largely literary 'Mother Goose' tradition, which has no correlate in the Lithuanian folk tale.

Yet, Miłosz contends in the same introduction that the Lithuanian oral tradition furthers the secrets of esoteric religion.[41] By ascribing the rural peasants the status of an ancient race, Miłosz translates the folk material as having a mystic, aristocratic heritage. The decline of the

Lithuanians occurs both in his characterization and in his literary 'performance'. In 'La Reine des serpents', he contrasts his refined language with aspects of oral storytelling, such as asides and declarations, and when he describes the murder of the serpent-husband, he switches to the present tense: 'Le Serpent sort sa belle tête de l'eau, nage à perdre haleine...Le voilà sur la sable… Les Douze solides gaillards se jettent sur leur beau-frère et l'assomment' [the Serpent lifts its beautiful head from the water, swimming until out of breath breath…here he is on the sand… The twelve thugs throw themselves on their brother-in-law and knock him out].[42] Though beastly, the serpent husband possesses the refined charms, as Miłosz saw them, of the Lithuanian race. His brothers-in-law further the downfall of his mystic inheritance, taking revenge on the patriarch of the serpent clan. That a collection of fairy tales might indicate the spirit of a nation was posited by the Grimm Brothers' collection of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [*Children's and Household Tales*] (1812-1815). The Grimms' work inspired the collection and documentation of oral traditions throughout Europe, including the Lithuanian one.[43] For the Grimms, the folktale (German, *das Märchen*) was a relic of the ancient past, a collective product of the knowledge of the people of common folklore (*Volkskunde*). As part of their political advocacy for a unified Germany, they also attributed folktales to an emergent unified people (*das Volk*).[44] Even early scholars, such as the Grimms' editors Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka, were quick to note the insufficiency of these claims; for instance, some of the tales had literary sources, while others came from French-Huguenot informants.[45]

Kinder- und Hausmärchen helped to refashion the folk tale in Europe from adult entertainment to an instructional genre for children. Miłosz satirizes this change through violence and exaggeration, something often associated with Leon Blóy and the reactionary revival, of which we might consider Miłosz a fellow traveller.[46] When the family of the serpent-husband interrogates the heroine's children, three of the children react with discretion:

> Mais il en alla tout autrement avec la fille, Drébulé, qui, pleine de vaillance au début de l'interrogatoire, fut saisie d'un tremblement violent a l'apparition des verges qui lui étaient

> destinées; et, l'instant d'après, elle révélait jusqu'à la dernière syllabe de l'incantation pour échapper au supplice.'
>
> [But things were quite different with the youngest daughter, Drébulé, who, full of valour at the beginning of her interrogation, was seized by violent tremors at the apparition of the rods intended for her; and, following this, she repeated the entire incanation to escape punishment.][47]

Miłosz narrates the threats of her father's family with a phallic connotation, suggesting sexual violence. Though he exaggerates this part of the traditional oral version of the tale, Miłosz establishes a correspondence with the forced marriage of Eglė earlier in the story. This sharpens the tragic plot of a daughter who 'trembles' at the shared fate of her mother.

By writing a collection of Lithuanian fairy tales, Miłosz involves himself in the 'rural' current of national Romanticism.[48] In the introduction he invokes the oral variants from the collection of the editor and nationalist Jonas Basanavičius (1851-1927).[49] During the 1880s, Basanavičius edited the newspaper *Aušra* [*Dawn*] and later he organized the conference, or Saima, of Vilnius in 1905, helping to formulate the first programme of an independent Lithuania. Along with his brother Tomas, Basanavičius collected, studied, and published on folklore. The collection *Lietuviškos pasakos* [*Lithuanian Fairy Tales*] (1898-1902) contains translated textual sources and recorded oral stories sourced from informants throughout Lithuania, and remains the cornerstone of studies on the Lithuanian folktale. Like the Grimm Brothers, he believed that folk tales contained memories of ancient eras and constituted myths particular to a nation.[50]

In his collection, Basanavičius includes two versions of 'Eglė, Queen of Serepents', though there are others in the Lithuanian repertoire.[51] The tale has been well researched, and scholars debate how much it conveys about folklore, mythology, and literature.[52] Some argue that it stems from ancient traditions in India, while others have explored its links with mythological legends and rituals preserved from Lithuanian antiquity.[53] At the comparative level, tales of the animal-bridegroom, particularly where the husband is a snake, abound throughout the Baltic region, including in Estonian and Finnish literary and oral traditions. This has a likely relation to local taboos and snake cults in the Baltics, where snakes were household deities and ambivalent psycho-

pomps in narrative traditions.[54] Yet, the plot of a search for the lost husband and the motif of the animal husband have known literary precedents (or examples of the opposite, such as in John Keats's *Lamia* (1820), such as Apuleius' 'Amor and Psyche', which later transformed in the French tradition into 'Beauty and the Beast'.[55]

Guntis Pakalns has noted an 1837 print publication in the Polish paper *Biruta* as the earliest written version of the famous folk tale. Pakalns points this out as the variation that merges the animal-bridegroom plot with the final transformation of the daughters into trees – an object of speculation among folklorists. Theorizing a literary origin for the particular version of the tale, he ascribes its popularity to the compelling story (the tragic ending of a mother separated from her children) and its historicity within twentieth-century Lithuanian nationalism (the possibility of a textual origin for the Baltic folk tale as a national allegory adds a telling irony to Miłosz's version).[56] After the press ban on the Lithuanian language, the story became popular through children's books.[57] Even during Soviet Occupation, the fairy tale endured in the national canon through a popular verse version by Salomėja Neris (1940). I mention these examples as context for Miłosz's version, which both belong to the national canon and exist outside of it. For instance, the author partially invites an allegorical reading as the drama of the Lithuanian nation. For example, by invoking two 'councils' at crucial moments of the plot (first among the serpent elders who fail to negotiate for Eglė, and the second among her relatives, before killing the serpent husband), he evokes world affairs, namely the failure of the United Nations to negotiate on behalf of Lithuania and Poland over the question of Vilnius, discussed above.

The temporality of the fairy tale also crosses cultural contexts. While the majority of the authors' Lithuanian fairy tales take place during the period of the Grand Duchy, 'La Reine des serpents' takes place in mythic time. It begins once upon a time '...dans la nuit des temps' [...in the night of time] and ends in the present day, when 'malgré tant et tant de millénaires écoulés' [millenia after millenia have passed unnumbered] since the transformation of Eglė and her daughters.[58] This mythological sense of time allows Miłosz to inscribe a number of conceptual

moves based on the problem of ethnicity.[59] As the story of an exogamous marriage of a young woman, the folk tale had already expressed the issue of ethnic difference in the historically diverse setting of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. In the French version, the animal-bridegroom bears the hereditary nobility of the ancient Lithuanian race. Yet, his sexual aggression stems from the animalistic nature of the 'serpents', the 'others' with whom the human heroine has children. By paying for the transgression of the youngest, they are transformed into the landscape, thereby naturalizing the Lithuanian nation.

Miłosz understood this 'nation' through racial categories. Pauline Moret-Jankus describes how Miłosz conceived of Lithuanians in various ways during his career, due largely to his political affiliations and his place in the French Empire. At the beginning of his career, he presented the view that, in the context of the Grand Duchy, Lithuanians were effectively identical with the Polish-speaking nobility, as seen in his unfinished 1913 novel *Les Zborowski.* However, this changed in 1918 when the Lithuanian national movement struggled to claim Vilnius. Miłosz then strategically differentiated an independent Lithuania from 'Slavic' Poland and asserted that the Lithuanian people are the divine Aryan heirs to the capital. After 1936, he moved away from this Aryan conception towards a more messianic one, in which Lithuanians belonged to the so-called Iberian race alongside Jewish peoples.[60] The fairy tales belong to the second period, during which Miłosz subscribes to the racialist ideas of leading Indo-European theorists, and asserts – largely based on his understanding of philology – that Lithuanians and Latvians belong to the Aryan race.[61]

An important source for Miłosz was the racialist linguistic typology of Friedrich Schlegel, who argued that ancient Indo-European languages had an inherently divine origin, but had degenerated over time. In his evaluation of Lithuanian, an Indo-European language, Miłosz adopted the analogy between biology and language that was common in Romantic philology. Throughout the Lithuanian tales, he draws parallels between Hindu and Greek mythology, presenting Lithuanians as learned aristocrats rather than apparently primitive peasants.[62] However,

when writing in French during the Third Republic, Miłosz describes the 'brutal fact' of the serpents returning for Eglė:

> 'Mais la marée montante des siffleurs battait maintenant les portes et les fenêtres et, en fin de compte, ill fallut accepter la fait brutal et s'incliner dvant le droit du plus fort. Le oui fatal ne fut pas plus tot proncé, que les serpents, s'emparant d'Eglé, se pressaient comme un torrent vers la sortie.'
>
> Yet the rising tide of those hissing pounded continually against the windows and doors, and, in the end, it was necessary to accept the brutal fact and bow down to the right of the strongest. The fatal 'yes' had just been pronounced when the serpents, seizing Eglė, pressed like a torrent to the exit.[63]

By conquering the young woman by force, the serpents mirror the attitudes of fascist and extreme nationalist parties in the early 1930s. A strong ethno-nationalism developed in the Baltics during the 1920s, fostering an authoritarian regime in Lithuania under Antanas Smetona in 1926 and in Estonia and Latvia in 1934. Like Western Europe, the Baltic states were also interested in establishing a nation in biological terms, with the aim of both homogenizing and creating a racial state.[64] As with his depiction of the serpent-husband, Miłosz combined the reactionary ideal of submission to a hereditary monarchy with the Romantic 'other' of a Dionysian image, doing so through the Lithuanian national movement.

To the Francophone reader, the 'Young Ophidian' is an 'other', a hybrid of nobility and pagan brutality. Although the serpent-husband belongs to the animistic world of paganism, Miłosz characterizes him as an aristocrat from a noble family. When snuck into the heroine's tunic, he appears 'indiscret comme un vrai petit homme,' ['indiscreet as a real little man'], though later returns as a 'un charmant cavalier, [a charming cavalier'] who tips his hat.[65] In this way, one can read the animal-bridegroom as a sort of Don Juan figure, similar to the hero of the author's mystery play *Miguel Mañara* from 1913. For Miłosz, the romance of the Don Juan figure was not only an aesthetic choice, but also a form of penitence in an act of divine love. This is the dimension of Miłosz's thought with which I will conclude this article.[66]

Conclusion: Fear and Trembling

As I have discussed, Miłosz's racial politics and literary decadence complicate any straightforward interpretation of the fairy tale as an allegory for the nation. As a literary tale, 'La Reine des serpents' highlights the tragic correspondence between the fate of the mother and the youngest daughter, both of whom submit to the 'right of the strongest' – for Eglė, the invading serpents; for Aspen-Drébúle, her own family. Miłosz translates the etiological proper name from the Lithuanian folk tale into a French name, and also repeats the action in the final line of the tale, where we 'voyez, elle tremble, hélas, elle tremble et tremble et tremble' [watch, alas, how she trembles, and trembles, and trembles]'.[67]

This final act has a religious significance when the transgression is read alongside the Biblical example in Miłosz's metaphysical poem, *Les Arcanes* [Poem of the Arcana] (1927). The youngest daughter submits in a teleological suspension of the ethical, as Søren Kierkegaard describes in *Frygt og Bæven* [*Fear and Trembling*] (1843), though she is closer to Isaac, the son sacrificed, than the patriarch Abraham.[68] As the offspring of the symbol for racial difference (the serpent-husband), the youngest daughter constitutes the figure of a woman as either consumed for speculation or discarded.[69] If Eglė resembles Annalenna and the *femmes fragiles* of the author's early work, then Aspen-Drébulé may be compared to the mystic ideal of the feminine in his religious poetry. The 'trembling' of the youngest daughter can be compared with a concept in Miłosz's esotericism, *le nom sacré,* the concept of a name shared between the conjugal pair of Adam and Eve, an incantation which contains the emptiness of space itself.

In her psychoanalytic study of Miłosz , Yolanda Vaičaitis interprets the idealization of the feminine as a consequence of narcissism: the 'lost object' of the mother in early childhood is internalised as a form of mourning.[70] In *Les Arcanes,* femininity becomes a means for *manifestatio*, the elucidation or clarification of faith by analogical reason.[71] In the poem, which is a morality play set in the ruins of Reims Cathedral, after it was ransacked by the Goths in the thirteenth century, Miłosz describes 'feminine manifestation' as a symbol of nature itself and of immaculate conception. In the final part of the poem, Eve questions Adam, asking 'Adam, être de mon amour,

n'est-il pas vrai que le seul rien te sépare de Dieu? ['Adam, being of my love, is it not true that only nothing separates you from God?'] [72] The universal man, Adam, possesses pre-eminence over Eve due to his 'secret' right to utter the sacred name of Nothingness.[73] However, in the folk tale, it is the daughter's own voice that betrays her when she pronounces the incantation passed on by her mother.

In the fairy tale, Miłosz proposes absolute faith for the daughter, yet her 'trembling' is caused by the sexual aggression of the dominant group (or 'race'). Like other decadent writers, Miłosz grounds his anti-feminism in his response to modernity and his Gnostic Catholicism. He reinforces the secondary or derivative status of women in his metaphysics to stabilize a relativistic universe during a period of increasing security concerns in Europe.[74] In his translation of the auto-commentary on 'the name of the sacred nothing', Miłosz draws parallels with the fairy tale:

> Malheureusement, Eve, la nature physique, est là, avec sur ses lèvres le frémissement du mot soufflé par les anges déchus, les ennemis de ce Rien incompréhensible où devait s'accomplir le Sacrifice initial. Ce mot, elle l'entend dans le sifflement de la créature dont le corps se confond avec la terre, dont le regard semble sortir du sable, dont la soudaine immobilité de pierre est comme l'empreinte du Rien impénétrable, source de toutes les curiosités sacrilèges et de tous les maux que en résultent
>
> [Unfortunately, Eve, physical nature, is there, and on her lips trembles a word whispered by the fallen angels, the enemies of this incomprehensible Nothing where the initial Sacrifice had to be fulfilled. She hears this word in the hiss of the creature whose body blends with the earth whose stare seems to come from the sand, whose sudden stone-like immobility resembles the imprint of the impenetrable Nothing, source of all sacrilegious curiosity and of all the evils that result from it].[75]

Where mystic poetry universalizes the linguistic role of the Nothing, the Lithuanian folk tale bears the signature of a proper name, one seemingly aligned with biology and a degenerate 'race', embodied in the serpent. The poem of *Les Arcanes* ends with Adam's blindness, in relation to his question 'Where is space?' [Où est l'espace?].[76] Lithuania and its mythical time of origin seems to answer: in the mirror of the other Eves, Eglė and her daughters, who are subjected to the founding of this 'nation' in an ethnic time. The 'trembling' name of the daughter spells her enforcement into heredity, and the mythology of blood.[77]

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[2] O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Amorous Initiation: A Novel of Sacred and Profane Love: An Excerpt from the Memoirs of the Chevalier Waldemar de L--* (Inner Traditions, 1994), p. 120.

[3] O. V. de. L. Miłosz, *Œuvres Complètes,* 11 vols (Éditions A. Silvaire, 1963), ix, pp. 144.

[4] O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* (Éditions J. O. Fourcade, 1930), p. 6. All translations from french are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

[5] Throughout this text, I use the Lithuanian formal name Eglė, rather than the French transcription (Eglé) to refer to the protagonist of both the folk tale and the fairy tale.

[6] Miłosz, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* (Éditions J.-O. Fourcade, 1930), p. 128.

[7] Andrzej Franaszek, *Miłosz: A Biography* (Belknap Press, 2017). pp. 230.

[8] See, for example, Paul Bourget's *L'Émigré* (1907), and Émile Baumann's *La Fosse aux Lions* (1911).

[9] Czesław Miłosz, *Second Space: New Poems*, trans. by Robert Hass (Ecco, 2004). For more on the relationship, see Franaszek's biography of Miłosz.

[10] See Genovaité Dručkutė, 'Un Voyage D'Oscar Miłosz En Lituanie: Tentative de Retrouvailles', *Literatūra*, 60.4 (2018), pp. 26-33.

[11] See Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature*: *1870-1914* (F. Ungar. 1965).

[12] Jacques Buges, *Miłosz: En Quête du Divin* (Librarie Nizet, 1963), p. 281.

[13] Anne Mcclintock*, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 2013), p. 65.

[14] Pauline Moret-Jankus, 'The Aesthetics of Race in Oscar V. de L. Milosz: Mysticism and Politics', in *Race Theory and Literature: Dissemination, Criticism, Intersections*, ed. by Pauline Moret-Jankus and Adam J. Toth (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), pp. 50-69.

[15] O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* (Éditions J.-O. Fourcade, 1930), p. 122.

[16] The standard biography is Jacques Buge, *Miłosz : En Quête du divin* (Librarie Nizet, 1963). For Lithuanian sources see Elina Naujokaitienė, *Oskaras Milašius: Mistikas ir Hermetinas Poetas* (VDU Leidykla, 2001) and for the translation of fairy tales see O. V. de L Miłosz, *Lietuviškos pasakos,* trans. by Valdas Petrauskas (Vyturys, 1989).

[17] Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus, eds, *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (Routledge, 2020). On rural decadence, see pp. 24-27.

[18] Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 199-200.

[19] Czesław Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro* (Farrar Straus, Giroux, 1984), p. 352.

[20] In this work, Miłosz depicts the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian aristocracy, yet associates them more generally with Slavic culture. This conception changes after the First World War.

[21] Buges, *Miłosz,* pp. 290-92.

[22] Dručkutė, 'Un Voyage D'Oscar Miłosz En Lituanie', pp. 26-33.

[23] Buges, *Miłosz,* pp. 291-92.

Miłosz's apocalyptic political writings from the 1930s were published in volume VII of *Soixante-quinze lettres inédites et sept documents originaux* (A. Silvaire, 1969), and his essays, along with the long essay 'Deux messianismes politiques', in volume XIII. These have also been translated into Lithuanian.

[24] Zigmantas Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania* (Baltos lankos, 2004), pp. 169-75. The city of his birth, now in present day Belarus, was occupied by Soviet Russia during the First World War.

[25] Czesław Miłosz*,* 'The Nobel Prize Lecture', Nobel Prize Outreach 2025, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/Miłosz/lecture/> [accessed 5 January 2026].

[26] Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, p. 73

[27] Ibid., p. 75.

[28] See Irena Buckley and Marie-France David-de Palacio, *L'Eden lituanien et la Babylone française: Les Contacts culturels franco-lituaniens au XIX*[e] *siècle* (Classiques Garnier, 2012).

[29] Ibid., p. 278.

[30] Lithuanian identity, or if we are to believe Czesław Miłosz, a Polish-Lithuanian identity.

[31] These belonged to a series on the Lithuanian race and identity, 'Notre mère l'iberei, Les origines iberiques du peuple juif' (1932) and 'Les Origines de la nation lituanienne' (1939).

[32] O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Soixante-quinze lettres inédites et sept documents originaux* (A. Silvaire, 1969).

Miłosz likely became attracted to Aryan theories through the trend of occultism among literary circles in Paris. Being half-Jewish on his mother's side, and aware of the mounting political pressures prior to the Second World War, he would not have been sympathetic to Nazism. See Genevieve-Irene Židonis, *O. V. de L. Miłosz: Sa vie, son œuvre, son rayonnement* (Olivier Perrin, 1951), pp 51-57.

[33] Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, pp. 169-75.

[34] Oskaras Milašius, *Lituanistinė ir politinė publicistika* (Lieutuvių Literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2013), pp. 5-10.

[35] Ruth B. Bottigheimer, 'Fairy-Tale Origins, Fairy-Tale Dissemination, and Folk Narrative Theory', *Fabula*, 47.3-4 (2006), pp. 211-21.
[36] The relationship between the folk tale and fairy tale differs in Eastern European discourse, where literary fairy tales are often written with the folk tale plot as its basis. See Aija Janelsiņa-Priedīte, *Als die Bäume sprechen konnten: Zur Funktion des Bildes in Kārlis Skalbes Märchen: ein Beitrag zum europäischen Kunstmärchen* (Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 1987). In the 2010s, folklorist Dan Ben Hamon and classical scholar Jan Ziolkowski refuted a thesis put forward by Ruth Bottigheimer, positing the literary roots of the fairy-tale genre in the work of the Italian writer, Giovanni Straporola. As the Finnish scholar Satu Apo summarizes the debate, 'populists' favour the romantic conception of the folk tale, similar to the Grimms, while 'elitists' emphasize the role of upper-class authors. See *Ihmesatujen historia: Näkökulmia kirjailijoiden, kansankertojien ja tutkijoiden traditioon* (Suomen kirjallisuuden seura, 2018).
[37] Miłosz, *Contes lituaniens,* p. 4.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Some fairy tales in the two collections even satirize the anxiety of the aristocracy, such as the Bluebeard tyrant in 'L'Empereur Jeans-Sans-Ame'. See Milosz, *Oeuvres complètes*. pp. 86-109.
[40] Jadvyga Krūminienė, 'Oscar Miłosz as Translator: Playing Games with Memory', *Respectus philologicus*, 17.22 (2010), pp. 55-66.
[41] Miłosz made use of Baltic mythology in his arguments for the Lithuanian race, including the cults of the sun: Moret-Jankus writes that 'Lithunians, purest sons of a primitive, ruling race, are simply claiming their due. More than independence, this is the Aryan resurrection' ('The Aesthetics of Race in Oscar V. de L. Miłosz: Mysticism and Politics', p. 66).
[42] Miłosz, *Œuvres complètes*. p. 133.
[43] Jūratė Šlekonytė, *A Hundred Years of Lithuanian Folktale Research: from the Traditional Comparativism to the Modern Methods* (Tautosakos darbai XlIX, 2015), pp. 123-44.
[44] Jakob Norberg, *The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[45] The literary editorship and partial authorship of the Grimms have been extensively studied. See James McGlathery*, Grimms' Fairy Tales: A History of Criticism on a Popular Classic* (Camden House, 1993).
[46] Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, p. 92.
[47] Miłosz, *Œuvres complètes,* pp. 132-33.
[48] Here I have in mind the idealization of the peasant folk among the Grimms and other Romantics. For a recent study, see Norberg, *The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism*.
[49] Loreta Gustainienė, 'Siužeto modernizacija Oskaro Milašiaus literatūrinėse pasakose', *Česlovo Milošo skaityma,* 4 (2011), pp. 168-74.
[50] See Šlekonytė, *A Hundred Years of Lithuanian Folktale Research*.
[51] Bronislova Kerbelytė, *Lietuvių liaudies pasakų repertuaras* (Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2002).
[52] Leonardas Sauka and Eugenius Žmuida, *Pasaka 'Eglė žalčių karalienė',* vol. 4 (Lietuvių Literatūros ir Tautosakos Instituta, 2007-2008). pp. 5-11.
[53]Ada Martinkus, *Eglé, la reine des serpents: un conte lituanien* (Mémoires de l'Institut d'ethnologie, 1989). p. 280.
[54] Ivonne Lūvena, '*Spruce – the Bride of the Grass Snake:* The Folk Tale about *The Grass Snake* as a Story of Baltic Identity', *Scientific Papers of the University of Latvia*, 732 (2008), pp. 11-29.
[55] Catherine Connors, 'Stories Old Women Tell: Metamorphoses of Psyche in Apuleius and in d'Aulnoy, Villeneuve, and Graffigny', Unpublished Manuscript, Author's Collection, 2023. The narration by an enslaved person recurs with the story-type consistently through the French tradition.
[56] Guntis Pakalns. 'Pasaka Zalkša līgava Eiropas pasaku kontekstā: The Tale of the Snake's Bride in the Context of the European Tale', *Raiņa un Aspazijas vasarnica*, 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGwUxcgDuL0> [accessed 5 January 2026].
[57] Popular children's books of fairy tales often begin with the tale, and twentieth-century poets such as Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, Jonas Aistis, and others, favoured the theme. The Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institution has published a seven-volume edition of research on the folk tale, its variations, and use in popular literature. See Leonardas Sauka, ed., *Pasaka Eglė Zalčių Karalienė* (Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2007-2008).
[58] Miłosz, *Œuvres complètes,* pp. 126 & 134.
[59] Hortense J. Spillers writes that "'Ethnicity" perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenceless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor'. See'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987), pp. 65–81 (p. 66).
[60] In the 1932 paper, 'Les Origines ibérique du peuple Juif', he argues on largely linguistic grounds that the Jewish people are also descended from Iberians. See Genovaitė Dručkutė, ed., *Oskaras Milašius. Lituanistinė ir politinė publicistika* (Lieutuvių Literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2013), p. 10.
[61] Jean-Paul Demoule, *The Indo-Europeans: Archaeology, Language, Race and the Search for the Origins of the West,* trans. by Rohda Cronin-Allenie (Oxford University Press, 2023).
[62] Krūminienė, 'Oscar Miłosz as Translator: Playing Games with Memory', p. 59.
[63] Miłosz, *Œuvres complètes,* p. 122.

[64] See Bjö Felder and Paul Weindling, *Baltic Eugenics: Bio-Politics, Race and Nation in Interwar Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1918-1940* (Rodopi, 2013).
[65] Miłosz, *Œuvres complètes,* p. 123.
[66] See Armand Godoy, 'Le Donjuanisme Dans L'Œuvre de Milosz' in *O. V. de L. Miłosz: Collections Les Lettres* (Editions A. Silvaire, 1959).
[67] Miłosz, *Contes lituaniens,* pp. 121, 129.
[68] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton Univeristy Press, 1983).
[69] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian Gill (Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 228.
[70] Yolanda Vaičaitis, *Essai de lecture psychoanalytique de l'œuvre de O. V. de L. Miłosz* (Peter Lang, 1980). p 69.
[71] O. V. de Miłosz, *The Noble Traveller: O. V. de Miłosz*, trans. by Czeslaw Miłosz (Inner Traditions, Lindisfarne Press, 1985), p. 352.
[72] Ibid., p. 391.
[73] O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Les Arcanes* (Paris, Collection des Floriges, 1927), p. 144.
[74] Before his death in 1939, Miłosz followed current events in Europe with grave concern, penning a Biblical commentary predicting military conflict with *La Clef de l'Apocalypse* (1938).
[75] Miłosz, *The Noble Traveller*, p. 351. See also O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Les Arcanes* (Paris, Collection des Floriges, 1927).
[76] Dian Fuss, *Identification Papers* (Routledge, 1995), p. 123. Miłosz, *Les Arcanes* (Paris, Collection des Floriges, 1927), p. 47.
[77] See Michel Foucault., *The History of Sexuality,* I, trans. by Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978).

La Serre

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> La femme qui rêve, qui pleure, qui conte un amour qu'elle désirerait avoir, ne tarde pas à le créer.
>
> [The woman who dreams, who cries, who recounts a love that she would desire to have, does not hesitate to create it]
> – Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*

It was the dead of winter. I had just moved to Paris, and had taken up a spare room in the apartment of my cousin in Montmartre. I had trained in painting, and though I dreamed of some kind of greatness and dizzying heights of beauty, I knew that I possessed no great genius. I found work designing illustrations for a London department store, but it was dull work, and it was not long before I tired of sketching compacts and perfume bottles.

So I had come here with the idea that I might find a place for myself in the theatre. Set design, I thought, in what they called the *avant-garde*. My cousin, Aubrey, was a journalist, with some experience writing about ballets. He politely pretended not to notice how ridiculous my aspirations were, ignoring my utter lack of sophistication, my pedestrian gaucheness in the face of *la vie bohème*. He kindly encouraged me as much as he could, and indulged my interest by taking me out most nights. I had hoped that I might meet some people with enough talent that they could grant me some by association.

One night, he told me he had heard of something underground, something secret – not the kind of thing he would ever review for his newspaper. There was no advertising. Nothing so formal. It was a seasonal ballet that only appeared in the longest nights of winter for just twelve nights. He knew nothing more.

We left the apartment later to be greeted by a bright night, the moon hung low and swollen in the sky. We chatted freely as we walked, scintillated by the clandestine feeling of the outing, by

the hidden door upon which Aubrey knocked to gain us entry. We grinned childishly to each other as it swung open.

There was no foyer – the space could barely be called a theatre. The room we entered was cavernous and full with spectators speaking low and soft. There were no seats, and the stage was not raised; it was simply a space on the floor outlined by a semicircle of lights. The audience, almost all men, stood shoulder to shoulder in the room. The ones at the front pressed the toes of their shoes against the lights but did not break the barrier. Ahead of them, clustered at centre stage, were twelve dancers draped in voluminous white silks, standing silent and still with their wide eyes unfocused. The lights on the floor cast the dancers' stretched, indigo shadows onto the bare white wall.

The dance began.

It was like nothing I had ever seen. Like nothing I had any desire to see, not at first. The ballets I knew were all grace, all swiftness and smoothness and the supernatural lightness of something holy.

But this was brutal. They stamped, stamped, stamped, and grunted and shrieked in time. It was almost like a dance of primitive man – perhaps the dance before man. There was no orchestra, no music of any kind in the sense I had come to understand it. All of the sound came from the mouths and bodies of the women on the stage. It was not discordant, as it had some pitch and a sort of savage rhythm, but it was utterly strange. It had a resonance that felt unlike any composition I had heard.

Some flitting moments of terrible lightness came upon their movements after a few minutes, when the pull of gravity was not so heavy and their hideous stamping abated. But somehow their grace was not a relief, was somehow still secret and hideous: they and their shadow doubles upon the wall broke apart and came together in spectral patterns that were indiscernible to me. Delicate and dazzling, like a spiderweb set on fire.

The audience was in a frenzy, slithering up and onto each other like gape-mouthed carp in a pond, though none of us ever crossed the border onto the stage. Eventually I was no longer able to make out the percussive bodily music of the dancers, which was entirely drowned out by mad hollering and the stamping of our own feet, and by the swelling of my roiling blood rushing to my ears.

As though to meet the challenge, the dancers' cries and the flurry of their movements grew faster and faster into a crescendo, their wails and shrieks pitching higher and higher until all at once they came to a shuddering stop. After a moment, the audience grew still as well.

One of the dancers moved forward away from the rest. She pulled her silks over her dark hair, then stepped forward across the border of lights. She moved through the men in the crowd, slowly turning, scanning their faces. Eventually, she took the hand of one of the men and brought him back with her out of the shadows, across onto the stage. The rest of the women slid noiselessly inward to form a tight crescent around them. The man's face, rapturous and eager as a servile animal, was trained on the woman who held his hands. She pressed down upon his shoulder until he knelt before her, his back facing downstage. She brought a small silver cup out from her robes, and a second dancer brought a lambskin flask out from her own, from which she filled the cup with dark red wine. The hooded dancer drank deeply, then let the cup slip from her fingers to the ground with a harsh clang. She pulled the man's chin downward until his lips were parted, then, to my horror and fascination, she let the wine fall from her lips and into his mouth. His body shook with the horrible ecstasy of it.

The dancers fell upon them and the lights were put out, plunging the room into black.

It was over.

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Aubrey and I hardly spoke the next day. We didn't need to. We both felt the pull.

The next night, we returned, and then the next.

On the fourth night, as I turned to leave with the rest of the crowd, I was brought short by Aubrey's hand on my wrist. He stood with his back pressed against the wall, letting the rest of the audience file out one by one. When the room had emptied, he led me not toward the door, but across the lights and onto the stage itself. At the centre was a wooden door cut into the floorboards. He stamped hard, over and over, violently, his breath ragged in his chest. His desperation rendered his movements a pantomimic copy of the artful stamping of the dancers.

I did not try to stop him. I felt myself trembling, vibrating with anticipation.

Eventually the door gave way, and we hurtled down into the black. Aubrey pulled a candle out from his vest pocket, and with it we navigated our way through narrow corridors, ducking furtively under crossed wooden beams, until we finally reached a red door. Aubrey, suddenly timid, knocked so softly I was sure he would not be heard.

But then the door opened, and across the threshold stood a giantess. She loomed over us both, and as I peered inside at the rest of the women I realised that here, now that we were close enough to breathe their perfume, they were all several inches taller than we were. She beckoned us to enter, saying nothing, and so we did. No one spoke; there was a stillness in the air swirling with the misted scent of floral perfume and something herbal and burnt.

A small door at the back of the room opened and the final dancer entered. It was the high priestess – for that is what I had come to call her in my mind – and she had taken her hood back down to her shoulders, her raven-dark curls falling free. Her muscular throat was deeply flushed, her eyes feverishly bright.

One of the women approached and kissed her on the cheek. 'Renée', she said, bobbing her head in our direction. 'Si on les garde un peu? Pour jouer?'

The one called Renée came closer. She was breathing fast, as though she had just run a great distance. I had heard of some of the magical substances that artists in Montmartre drank or took into their lungs, and wondered what they might have in that secret back room.

'Madame, I am sorry to disturb you', Aubrey said. 'But your dance has so disturbed me that I could not stay away.'

'A strange reaction to repulsion, do you not think?' she replied. 'Instead of recoiling, you come closer.'

She turned to me now, and came so close that I could feel her ragged breath on my face. It smelled botanical, and sweetly metallic.

'And what did you think of our performance, monsieur?'

Being caught in her regard felt like being struck by lightning. Blood swelled to flush my neck and face.

'C'était comme si vous corporisiez les rêves, ou peut-être spiritualisez les sensations. Madame, vous avez fait l'impossible.'

She smiled widely, her deep and livid scarlet lips framing sharp, narrow teeth.

'Call me Renée. And yes, stay.'

We stayed, we drank, we filled our throats and our veins with shifting mercurial things, until the realities of life faded and the smoke filled the windowless room so thickly it was hard to see. We left then – back up through the stage and out the door into the night air.

To the Seine. Where else? Where else to let our loose tongues speak freely, cry out loudly. Bottles in hand, we sang and spoke of art, of fire and genius, of ichor and worship and beauty. Above all, we laughed. Loudly, unashamedly, mouths fully agape and howling as though with jaws unhinged.

And below us, the Seine glittered with a crystalline lunar shiver. I remember so clearly, though my memory of the night otherwise is a haze, that it glinted crimson in the starlight. I imagined bleeding toes tripping across the surface, leaving a stain in their trail. I realised then that I had never really seen the Seine properly before, never understood that to sit on her banks with a bottle of wine was to feel the pulse and gush of a major artery of the universe.

At some point before dawn, Renée, dancing, pulled me against her. I suppose I must call it a dance, as I can think of no better term, though I swear to you it felt more as though she had made me a part of her – our embrace melted our two forms together at the breast into one whole.

Dawn broke. Her breath warmed my cheek as she said, 'Come back to me.'

The spell was cast. My life from then on was defined by the sensation of her body pressed against mine. I wanted nothing else. It was more than desire. I dragged my hollow bones to her each evening and only left with my hunger sharpened.

I watched these women night after night like a man obsessed. Possessed. Their beautiful bloodlust and naked savagery felt as though it expressed a truth that I could only guess at. Their dance was as blinding as it was enlightening, and they moved before us through those shifting lights carrying an enormous question, a question they embodied wholly. They carried it with them perhaps not completely understanding it even themselves, like a great cat that turns in its cage, rubbing up against its enclosure, or like the electricity that shoots through the body without any other motive except brutality and the exquisite grace of the asking of the question.

I began to suspect that the men they took into themselves at the climax of each performance were the only ones that could truly see beyond the shifting lights and the haze. I began to want, desperately, to be initiated. I wanted the truth. I wanted the meat. I wanted my hunger sated, that question answered. My own desperation disgusted me, but I could not deny it.

Then, one night, they took Aubrey. Witnessing his calling was torture. The resentment I felt raged like a holocaust in my skull. I did not want to make my jealousy known, for I dreaded appearing to Renée cloaked in something so low, so I said nothing. I danced with her again as usual, drank, swayed like the tide beneath the underbelly-pale moon.

But Aubrey never reappeared after the show, and he was absent from his apartment the entirety of the next day.

The next night, before we left their dressing room for the banks of the river, I asked after him, softly, in the gentle curves of Renée's ear. I couldn't hide my weakness then, my anger, when

I was so close to her. My tongue flicked out from between my lips, the wet muscle asking for so much more than my words did.

'Mon cher petit, mon petit prince… You are jealous? You want to know what happened to him? Where he went? What he felt?' She drew me closer, and traced two fingertips across my eyelids, coaxing them shut. 'What he tasted?'

She kissed me lightly, and drew away. Something warm and wet pressed against my lower lip, and I let my tongue slip tentatively out to greet it. It tasted like wine, but more herbal, more saline. It tasted gorgeous – like a masterpiece beyond anything I had ever seen. I opened my mouth wider, and let it trickle freely inside. When it was done she kissed me again, harder this time, nothing held apart from me. I nearly fainted.

She whispered, 'I want you to tell me how I taste. I want you to tell me what you feel when I'm on your tongue – when I am inside your body.'

But I knew she already knew the answer – that she coursed through me and pooled like a bruise in my lower abdomen. Whatever disgust I felt – for even then, yes, I did guess as to what I had just sipped – was nothing compared to my need. She pulled away, and by the time my heavy eyelids could drift apart, she was gone.

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Aubrey had still not returned by the following morning, and I had no more insight into what had become of him. I left again that evening hoping he would be one among the crowd. It was the penultimate performance, and I knew Aubrey would not willingly be absent.

He was not there. I asked after him again, standing this time across the room from Renée – determined to show strength, to fight the sanguine tide in my veins that pulled me toward her.

She shrugged elegantly. 'Perhaps he is in our studio. One of the girls may have brought him there.'

'And has not let him go', said another.

'Yes… perhaps he is indisposed.'

'*Le pauvre*, so exhausted.'

They all laughed at that, and I found myself blushing. Renée watched me intently with her flashing eyes.

'We do not normally allow men to enter', she said. 'But it is not strictly forbidden, you understand.'

'I know just what to do', said another. She took a small compact out of the depths of her robes and smeared my lips with the red within. 'You must simply play the part.'

She took me by the elbow, and trippingly took me through that second door. The corridor was long and dark. My eyes had only just begun to adjust to the shadows when we burst forth into the light.

'Bienvenue à la serre', said Renée from behind me.

The studio was enormous, a towering glass-sided hothouse rimmed with deep green foliage and climbing tendrils. Strewn among the vegetation were silk cushions and shining silver conduits for absinthe and hashish. The smell within was sweet and deep and bruised, like the last of summer jasmine fallen beneath bare feet. The air was thick with it, and clouded with a haze of mist that left a slight sheen on my skin. Each panel in the glass was tinted so that the moonlight filtering through it onto the suspended moisture sparkled like the inside of a rainbow. It was beautifully warm. It felt like heaven.

I grew dizzy, as though I was intoxicated.

'We rehearse here. And play a little', she said, smiling. 'You can search for your cousin if you like, but please do not touch the plants – they are delicate.'

I attempted to focus my eyes and look around me for any sign of Aubrey. Finally, I saw what looked like the dim shadows of men clustered on the other side of one of the panes of glass. There was no door that I could see, no way for me to enter the space myself. I sought Renée out again and asked who they were.

'Ah, our benefactors', she said.

'Nos sauveurs', said another.

'Nos chevaliers servants.'

'Nos princes.'

'We would be nothing without them', said Renée. 'Don't worry, mon cher, they won't interrupt. They just observe.'

'Could Aubrey not be among them?'

'No, no. Please take those thoughts from your mind. I am sure Aubrey is fine, asleep in bed at home already. Here, have some hashish. Lay your head on my lap.'

I did not attempt to resist any longer. The languor in my limbs, my mind, caused by the warmth and the wet air, could no longer be denied. To my shame, I did not search any further for my own cousin. My own flesh and blood.

***

My head was still throbbing from the revelries of the night before when I quit Aubrey's apartment again the next evening, only to be stopped on the staircase by an old woman.

'Ne buvez pas, monsieur. Par pitié.'

'Pardonnez-moi, madame?'

'Do not drink their wine.'

'And how does it concern you?'

'Par pitié, monsieur', she said again. 'It's for your own good.'

'I have already emptied more than one bottle with them.'

'No, monsieur. You have not yet tasted their true wine, or at least you have not drunk your fill. You may still be saved.'

Without another word, she disappeared behind a door. I continued on my way.

The men in the crowd that night were in a raging, delirious mania. I was almost certain that some number of them would penetrate the invisible barrier between the stage and the writhing horde. I, by contrast, felt myself wilting away, withering pathetically, in the very back of the room.

I was in despair – not out of worry for my cousin, no, but with the knowledge that this all would soon be over. I knew that these beautiful dancers would not last the rest of the winter; that they would disappear with the morning light like a light dusting of snow on cobblestones. I found myself weeping pitifully.

Then, a miracle: the crowd parted, and there was Renée, veiled, gigantic, perfumed and lithe, making her way toward me. I hardly dared breathe.

She took my hand, and initiated me into the mysteries.

I drank deeply from her lips. I was transported.

La serre had become a sacred wood, full of acanthus and some ancient, gnarled trees whose columnar forms dwarfed us all. The studio seemed now suffused with twilight, and an atmosphere of enchantment coloured my vision. The tendrils of smoke wafting through the air entered me and my whole being dilated, grew immense – I felt as though I contained all the terrible beauty of creation.

Renée's lips were at my ear, brushing softly against its folds.

'Il était une fois', she began. 'We were born upon the stage. We burst in upon it like steam from a wound in the earth. We danced gracefully, like spinning, tripping leaves on a cold winter wind. Every night, one of us would die, blood sticky and wet upon the stage. The next night, without fail, she would be born again as shadow, and another one of us would die. We loved this dance, this devilish debauchery, and though we mourned each sister who came to die of it, we rejoiced in the crimson on our toes and the revelations in the hearts of our audience. It was nothing like what they had seen before, these pastel Parisians who draped their wings with gold. We were dancing something true, our troupe of shadows.

Dancing and death were all we knew. Eventually, on a sacred twelfth night, I came to wonder if I could gain us something more… if I simply refused to bend and break. I looked out at the red, sweating, puffing faces of the men before us and dreamed of something different. I leapt to them, with eyes wide open and teeth bared. My shadow sisters followed suit. Screams

followed this leap, and blood, and the gnashing of teeth. From then on, lips and hands rendered red, we twelve dancing spectres gained bone and flesh and marrow and blood.

We lived, and kept on living.

Sacrifice was necessary. Blood for the shadows, and flesh for their substance. But it did not need to be ours.

We are not cruel – we make the passing sweet. The juice of a few flowers can cause nectared reveries from which you would not want to wake, even if you had the choice.

Now you know our story. I have told it to you, because that is what we women do. We make the pain something else, something to hold, something to love, something to share. It's truth, the lights and the glitter. The drunkenness. The shade upon the surface. All truth.'

She kissed me again. I felt the scrape of her teeth on my lip, and a beautiful twinge of pain. I refused to let myself pull away. She took my hand and raised it to her white neck. My heart raced.

'Feel me. Here. Feel it rage. That heat', she said. Her eyes were wide, her nostrils distended. 'It's familiar, no? But wilder. You have this, or the potential for it. We can take it from you and create something that endures. We're kindred beasts, you and I. Sister species, made of the same dust. You're bound to that dust as you are now, and you'll return to it. Is that what you want? Or do you want to dance forever, and pierce the earth with staggering beauty? Don't bite your lip – cry out!'

I am one of them now. A shadow upon the surface, unspooled and stretched into a dark, quivering tendril. I am smoke – I feel thin and endlessly dilating, drifting, dancing. I am inhaled, coiled on her tongue, in her throat. Incandescent.

Our dance is eternal.

Charming

Julia Biggs

Created by performing an erasure of Renée Vivien's 'Prince Charming' (1905), and leaving a violet-drenched account of female desire in its wake, this object poem invokes the fantastical qualities of the fairy tale to propel its audience into the decadent space of a transgressive, unruly body and its emancipatory, sensual metamorphosis.

Nestled in an early twentieth-century guide to Florence (the city where Vivien sends her lovers to live in her prose piece), 'Charming' explores the creative potential of the fairy tale as a site of provocation, initiation, and queer enchantment, combining analogue and digital techniques in a collage of found text and images. These include Otto Wegener's portrait of Vivien (c. 1900) flamboyantly attired as a dandy (to which a double exposure technique has been applied) and vintage fragments that nod to both Vivien's glass cabinets of exotic butterflies and other insects and the purple blooms which obsessed this 'Muse of the Violets', as described by Colette in *Le Pur et l'impur* [*The Pure and the Impure*] (1932). Vivien's fascination with these flowers derived in part from the poet Sappho, whose fragments – containing recurring, evocative references to garlands and crowns of dusky purple violets – Vivien translated, but was deepened by their association with her childhood friend and first love, Violet Shillito.

Using the poetic strategy of erasure to excavate a new testimony of desire from Vivien's original fin de siècle text, 'Charming' engages in the fairy tale cycle of borrowing and encountering as it shape-shifts, performing another decadent version of subversive sexual self-fashioning. It asks to be seen as an unapologetic celebration of heady, enticingly excessive, violet delights.


the
amorous girl
possessed of
velvet tenderness
caresses
violet fairy tales
and soon
her undisciplined lips
know the beginning of
desire

Oscar, Nightingale, Rose

Margaret D. Stetz

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Fairy tales have always featured astonishing transformations. A girl in rags suddenly finds herself in evening dress, headed in a golden coach toward the ball at a palace; a prince becomes a Beast and, thanks to the love of a Beauty, resumes at last his original form; an entire kingdom falls into a deathlike trance, but is awakened when one sleeping maiden is kissed. Oscar Wilde's own 'The Nightingale and the Rose', first published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888, contains an equally remarkable moment, when blood drained from the heart of a bird enters a white rosebush and turns to red the petals of a single blossom.

No transformation in the literature of fairy tales was more dramatic, startling, or unforeseen, however, than the one that happened to Wilde himself in real life. In Spring 1895, he plummeted from a position of eminence in literary London and British Society, where he had mixed with Dukes, Duchesses, and even with the Prince of Wales, to previously unimaginable depths as a convicted criminal, imprisoned and sentenced to two years' hard labour. From leading a gloriously 'decadent' existence filled with luxuries (as well as a multitude of same-sex affairs), he plunged into a nightmare of deprivation and pain, confined to a cell and forced to abide by institutional rules meant to break his body and spirit alike.

'Oscar, Nightingale, Rose' reflects upon this fairy-tale-like turn of events, presenting Wilde first at the moment of composing one of the fantasies he published in 1888 and then at a later time of despair, when he is looking back at his fatal decision to become entangled with Lord Alfred Douglas, who was both the great love of his life and the ruin of it. In this poem, Wilde recognizes his writing of that earlier story as a foreshadowing but regrets nothing. Despite having been victimized by a philistine English public, he knows that someday he will be the victor for, Christlike, both he and his writings will eventually ascend.

Ultimately, of course, that change has come about. It is the most miraculous – and beautiful – of transformations.

***

Oscar, Nightingale, Rose

blowing a kiss to baby sons
(a wave to wife is quite enough)
shutting the study door behind
drawing velvet curtains
to blot out distracting sun
lighting a gold-tipped cigarette –
ahh, first morning smoke –
He
writes about a bird who finds
a student pining, yearning
for a rose, a red rose only,
to win the hand of
a beloved girl
(the bird must also be a *she* –
that will explain the urge to
sacrifice oneself)
this nightingale will think
here is a lover true whom I shall help
resolving to incarnadine
the sole white bloom of winter
with her blood
impale her body on
a thorn while singing, pouring out
aesthetic, perfect notes
a hymn to Art, to Love
her wondrous offering
that the human world the masses
refuse to understand or value
she will not live
to see
the student toss her rose
into the gutter
heartsblood petals trampled
by indifferent crowds

and now the door
is slammed
that shuts him in a frigid cell
his head is shaved

his uniform is stiff and
dirty he is hungry weak
exhausted with no books
(except a Bible) forbidden pen or
paper oh how often he goes back
and thinks about that tale
rewrites it in his head
knowing He
was nightingale
who saw a student –
Oxford undergraduate and Lord
selfish careless beautiful –
that he impaled himself ecstatically
the thorn of Love had pierced and bound him
to this fate
his life incarnadined
with suffering was thrown away and
crushed lay trampled in
the gutter
by angry jeering masses
yet
would he have done the same again?
He
would
assured that someday Art must
rise again
and so it has it did it rose and
He
rose too

Carl Einstein's 'Leda' as a Literary Fairy Tale about Decadence: Commentary, Translation, and Original Text

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Commentary

'Leda' by Carl Einstein (1885-1940) is a fragmentary sketch of a literary fairy tale (unpublished; probably written between 1905 and 1912) that repudiates its decadent sub-genre in the context of an early expressionist critique of human self-knowledge.[1] For the literary-historical study of decadence, it is of interest as an eccentric contribution to the critical appropriation of decadent forms in Modernist departures from the fin de siècle.

The title 'Leda' alludes to the Greek myth of the same-named Spartan queen's rape by the God Zeus in the form of a swan. However, these figures are only suggestively linked with the protagonists. The swan is a sexually enterprising supernatural creature who aspires to reach the divine but also indulges in a degrading desire for a terrestrial woman who cannot connect with the transcendent realm. This decadent intermediate being inhabits a realm separate from the human domain. He has the marvelous power to vary his bodily contour and colour and to transmute the body figure of his human lover. In line with the tradition of the German romantic fairy tale, for which E. T. A. Hoffmann's story *The Golden Pot* (1814) is exemplary, this magic power can extend its reach into the human sphere to grant the fulfilment of wishes that remain futile in the profane social world.[2] The object of the swan's desire is a duchess who seeks sexual pleasure in artfully staged worlds of precious materials and artefacts, and whose immersion in the delights of a dying world qualifies her as a decadent. However, in the material world, her natural body figure limits the scope for a decadent play with aesthetic forms. With this problem, she is on familiar decadent grounds. In Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À rebours*, the non-negotiable reality of the natural body more than once delimits the protagonist's immersion in enticing worlds of precious artefacts.[3] By

contrast, in the realm of the swan's powers, the duchess's physical being is liberated from its natural limitations and can thus form an integral part of her decadent play with aesthetically pleasing forms, even though the narrator stresses that her union with the swan remains a case of profane copulation. The belief that transgressive sexual fulfilment in a magic world of autonomous aesthetic forms brings the human mind in touch with transcendent values is exposed as a mere illusion. The allusion to the mythical figures underlines that the duchess's union with the swan is an encounter of unequals. The story allegorises the failure of decadent attempts to spiritualise human consciousness, and it thus is a fairy tale about decadence which thwarts the decadent fairy tale's spiritual aspirations. The introductory remarks on the spiritual impotency of the protagonists seem to have been added later, but the remainder also contains motifs which debunk the spiritual pretensions of neoromantic art, for example when the music that accompanies Isolde's song 'Love Death' in Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1859) is audible from slot machines mounted on the posteriors of deformed little men. Isolde's union with the *natura naturans* through a merger of perception and counter-factual imagination thus appears as technically reproducible entertainment that fails to conjure away deficient corporeality.

On the other hand, 'Leda' revels in the detailed imagination of grotesque sexual performances and bizarre artifices, and it thus validates the aesthetic appeal of the decadent fairy tale's forms, albeit against the grain of their genre-specific significance. It is worth noting that Einstein knew a strongly bowdlerised book version of Aubrey Beardsley's unfinished decadent literary fairy tale *Venus and Tannhäuser* entitled *Under the Hill*.[4] He regarded the latter's erotic fantasies as titillation for the repressed city-dwelling petit bourgois,[5] but appreciated the stylised forms of Beardsley and other Symbolists, which explains why 'Leda' hovers on the borderline between parody and pastiche. With Beardsley's unpublished pornographic fairy tale, which Einstein would not have known, 'Leda' shares the humorous staging of fantastic and grotesque sexual encounters. Both stories feature figures with large noses that are suited to sexual stimulation, and both use similar speaking names – Einstein's swan is called Erector, whilst one of Beardsley's

figures is named Clitor[6] – but Einstein's scenes foreground the chasm between concrete ludic forms and actual coitus when figures engage in autoerotic stimulation, enjoy replicas of genitalia, or merely suggest direct sexual contact with a kiss on a loin-covering butterfly, whereas the forms of the duchess and the swan's copulating bodies remain curiously opaque. By comparison, Beardsley's scenes of sexual interspecies contact are very concrete, for example when Venus masturbates a pet unicorn and savours the ejaculate as an apéritif.[7] Beardsley's reading of the Tannhäuser folk-tale runs counter to its Christian adaptation. In the decadent version, the mortal who enters Venus's enchanted realm to enjoy fantastic varieties of sexual pleasures never yearns for sacred spiritual love; the reconciliation of sensual desire with divine powers suffices. Einstein's tale knows no such reconciliation. The swan suffers intermittently from a sordid attraction to the banal, and although he allows the duchess to combine bodily copulation with boundless artistry, she merely lives out a profane obsession until the weary higher being prepares for a sexual encounter with the earliest evening star. Even their celestial relation bears autoerotic traces, as the earliest morning star posited the swan for himself as an embodied sensuous fantasy which does, however, take on a life of its own.[8] Both writers employ ludic taboo-breaking forms as part of an artful negation of received moral values, but Einstein refuses to affirm the decadent way of life which these forms help depict.

In his prose narrative *Bebuquin* (1912), Einstein elaborates further on his critique of erotic indulgence. In this fantastic tale, Bebuquin searches for the breakthrough of his presumed inner capacity for a free act that originates in the metaphysical essence of his consciousness. For this Expressionist project, a way of life that responds to the aesthetic and erotic appeal of artfully stylised forms remains dependent on external stimuli, and it thus precludes autonomous action.[9] The story presents Nebukadnezar Böhm as an example for this dubious practice; his brain is contained in a silver bowl with ornaments and refined glistening plates of precious stones which allow him to see the world as a dynamic play of forms that surpass experiential reality. When he looks at himself in a mirror during sexual intercourse, he sees himself reflecting a woman's body

in a bewildering form-play which he cannot reconcile with his sense of touch. Under the strain, his nerves are ruptured, but the artifice of his mind survives the body.[10] Neither Böhm's self-abandonment nor Bebuquin's self-searching allow for a reconciliation of the human mind's life with the metaphysical essence of the world. As is typical for expressionist sceptics, Einstein holds out the self-defeating quest for a metaphysically validated autonomous selfhood and presents this situation as an inescapable affliction. However, if read in the light of his poetological texts, the play of autonomous forms in a fantastic poetic world that demonstrates the metaphysical meaninglessness of human values may well be the trace of a transcendent force which human ways of life fail to absorb.[11] This diagnosis justifies both, a rejection of decadent eroticism and the heretic retrieval of its forms.

These positions and techniques form part of the history of critical responses to decadence which Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick in their anthology of decadent writings documented under the headings 'Diagnoses and Denunciations' and 'Parodies and Pastiches'.[12] A comprehensive history of critical appropriations of decadent forms and themes in literary Expressionism still remains to be written, even though the ideas which frame such approaches are broadly known: Expressionism's critique of decadence is akin to Friedrich Nietzsche's departure from his earlier metaphysics of art expounded in *The Birth of Tragedy* and his turning away from Wagner.[13] However, while Nietzsche's post-decadent affirmation of empowered selfhood celebrates the body's immanent will, the Expressionists continue to search for a sacred volition that transcends mere corporeality. For the time being, 'Leda' should to be added to the available translations of pertinent texts into English, and it may serve as a reminder that the conflict between Expressionism's voluntarist impulse and decadence's velleity does not preclude affinities between texts such as Einstein's and Beardsley's fairy tales, which attack conventional morality with strikingly similar methods.

Note on the Texts

The translation follows the text published as 'Leda' in Carl Einstein: *Werke*, 4 vols, ed. by Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1992-1996), vol. 4: *Texte aus dem Nachlaß I* (1992), pp. 64-70, and includes the editors' endnotes. It retains the author's deviations from orthographic standards. Some sentences after a full stop begin with a small letter, in a few cases, there are two spaces between words, some separate words are joined up, and the spelling of the swan's name is not consistent. Angled brackets inserted by the editors indicate the following: < >: unreadable; <..>: two words or more unreadable; <...>: omission. The German original is reproduced with kind permission of Prof. Dr. Klaus Siebenhaar, B&S Siebenhaar Verlag + Medien OHG, Berlin. Text in square brackets has been added by Frank Krause. In places, the English version uses commas to clarify the syntax of unwieldy sentences. Spelling errors of the original which do not have an English equivalent are not indicated in the translation. In one instance, the translator had to speculate about the meaning of a word which is not recorded in dictionaries: 'printillieren' was read as an equivalent of 'pointillieren', i.e., 'to paint in the style of pointillism'.

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[1] Carl Einstein, *Leda*, in *Werke*, 4 vols, ed. by Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Fannei & Walz, 1992-1996), vol. 4: *Aus dem Nachlaß I* (1992), pp. 64-70. The piece has received little attention in scholarship; the sexual problematics explored in this story are mentioned in passing in Klaus-Dieter Bergner, *Natur und Technik in der Literatur des frühen Expressionismus* (Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 225-67.

[2] E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot*, in *The Golden Pot and Other Stories* (Oxford World Classics, 2008), pp. 1-83 (p. 83).

[3] Cf. Cheryl Krueger, 'Blood Sausage and Violet Perfume. Food Work, Domestic Service, and the Production of a Fragrant Grotesque', in *Work and Smell: Literature in Comparison*, ed. by Frank Krause (Brill Fink, 2025), pp. 189-211 (pp. 195-201).

[4] Carl Einstein, *Vathek*, in: *Werke*, vol. 1: *1907-1918* (1994), pp. 41-45 (p. 43).

[5] Carl Einstein, *Berlin*, in *Werke*, vol. 4, pp. 75-76 (p. 76) (on the Berlin clerk's enthusiasm about Beardsley's posters) and *Une Histoire de l'Art Moderne*, in *Werke*, vol. 4, pp. 286-300 (p. 293) (on *le réfoulement* and *la perversion* in Beardsley's work).

[6] Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, in *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 210-32 (pp. 212 and 217).

[7] Beardsley, p. 227.

[8] Cf. Sabine Kyora, 'Junggesell(inn)en-Ästhetik: Carl Einstein – Gertrude Stein', in *Auto(r)erotik. Gegenstandslose Liebe als literarisches Projekt*, ed. by Anette Keck and Dietmar Schmitt (Erich Schmidt, 1994), pp. 85-101.

[9] Cf. Erwin Loewenson, 'Die Décadence der Zeit und der Aufruf des Neuen Club', in *Expressionismus. Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1910-1920*, ed. by Thomas Anz and Michael Stark (J. B. Metzler, 1982), pp. 198-202.

[10] Carl Einstein, *Bebuquin oder Die Dilettanten des Wunders*, in *Werke*, i, pp. 92-132 (pp. 94 and 96).

[11] Cf. Rhys W. Williams, 'Prosaic Intensities: The Short Prose of German Expressionism', in *A Companion to the Literature of Expressionism*, ed. by Neil H. Donahue (Camden House: 2005), pp. 89-109 (pp. 91-92).

[12] Desmarais and Baldick, *Decadence*, pp. 241-315.

[13] For a brief sketch of Nietzsche's views, see Frank Krause, "'Follow the scent: one will seldom err": The Stench of Failed Nietzschean Practice in André Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902) and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912)', in

Smell and Social Life. Aspects of English, French, and German Literature (1880-1939), ed. by Katharina Herold and Frank Krause (iudicium, 2021), pp. 67-84 (pp. 68-72).

'Leda'

English Translation

For Leda, eroticism with Erector is something superior – artistry – for the swan a banality – a degradation – he just indulges again in the foreign immediate

two entirely separate ones find themselves in a form of two entirely different desires. the coitus as the totally incongruent. never ending – here two creatures touched one another – who for the first time neither lacked decency nor talent to demonstrate visibly – that coitus[1] a[nd] love mean nothing and are not capable of connecting two individuals – but merely chase them from interwinement to embrace up until impotency – without enhancing anything except the speed of annihilation.

the duchess ends in a repulsive obsession for poultry the swan once more goes off to the transcendent represent both as sterile types

the swan's neck curved upwards out of love for transcendence – slender out of craving for non-existence – white out of desire for god. he belongs to an element of a higher order than the terrestrial human (rigid earth) – water.

as a problem of selective breeding.

The water features – dance of the fishes –[2]

colours of a tender sky fade away – which only presented floral embroideries, with green-ruddy mythical beasts. Delightfully pointillistic sandal wood trees felt for the blue dromedary and of midday – which hastened away mirrored in its haze pursued by the evening's violet colibris and the black-grey lyrebirds birds of paradise of the night.[3] The earliest evening star began to dress in his boudoir wherewith his milky-way born wetnurse Smilansvecu helped him solicitously. He put the greenishly glowing Pierrot collar around his finely curvedneck – and draped himself in his evening dress, a wide grey Domino with green underclothes of crèpe de chine. After he had lit up and carefully shaded his face, bleached by the the hot day, with purple poudre des étoiles

mervéilleuses – drawing his ravines delineating silver mountains and he took from a chinese porcelain box a patterned woven raincloud which exuded delightful perfume washed himself with it thereupon took his splendid cap of sapphire and tourmaline, which sparkled forth a thousand and two rays and betook to his usual walk. Behind him flew his light-blue steerable balloon – which would lift him up as soon as he wanted to proceed to his office. But before he wanted to call on his beloved the green swan Erector – to follow an ancient custom of his forebears. For the stars always gain their brightness from love. He quickly shone through the lower clouds – flew over the forest of the brown fir trees – which wantonly tickled his soles with their red-brown needles sitting on little yellow-red branches – a tangy scent baulked at the metallic branches – as a new perfume producer now provided for them. A rotten plane tree burst due to rut which let itself be blown by the wind into the branches of the cool fir tree interrupted the perverse embrace and leafed up towards the one striding past who ignored her. He – who was mostly in an indifferent mood felt driven to the green swan Erector – with the purple lyrebird tail and swim-fins of mother of pearl. with the lyrebird tail this charming soul could accompany Mendelssohn's Songs without Words[4] in a tremendously pleasant manner.

Indignantly the star fled through the quarter of the winged little monkeys – who congregated between sparkling green clouds every evening.

in order to intercept with little mirrors the light of the brightest stars – which they let glide over their shamelessly red behinds onto their greedy penises. The evening star – for whom any masturbation was awkward, however artificial it may be – as it appeared to him as trying and dead as dull navel gazing – which surely forms without question a particularly obtuse variety of partial egoism – removed himself from the excited – little animals quickly – the more so as he feared – that his precious perfume would be uncleanly compounded in this environment. He now steered his way down to earth and separated the last silken curtain of the sky, to enter the terrestrial stage

– here where he had laid down his lust and yearning – stimulated by perverseness and fantastic opportunities to recognise beings foreign to him more closely

On his final journey over the sleeping earth which had laid itself to rest under a glittering dome of lapis lazuli – covered by the boughs of woods embracing one another he had posited the green swan Erector with a violet lyrebird – and had set him there as an object of affected wantonness – which was nothing but a sensual fantasy. He stepped down to the vermilion mountain which was shaded (by) the black roofs of the fir trees – to watch Erector. He made his toilet in the mirror of the sea – fixed the reflection of two way phantoms which rutted around numerously – at the end of his left sleeve – Then he looked around for E<rector>. but the delightful inside of the hair of his freely curved feathery belly – did not blossom out above the vermilion ground – the elegant boldness of his silvery neck with the white beak and the guileful eyes of a cocot<t>e – this neck – which promised such wondrous excitation – the most delectable arabesques of embrace – which in each moment – changed its colour composition and the contours of the lines – It did not tower up to the evening sky – standing out silvery above the black roofs of the trees. Because Erector had flown to delicious adventures – spreading his emerald wings into the evening made of lapis lazuli and the lace of the duchesse des étoiles noires.[5]

Through the artful <...> of the duchess des malices douces flitted many torches swung by the strange creatures of the duchess. Small crippled <little men> – on whose behinds small automatons were fixed which after insertion of a coin played Isolde's Love Death[6] and provided sweet pleasures – overstretching women – with short legs – who out of fear of catching a cold had fitted on their vagina small angel wings which were clad with clothes of manifold colours – Small children with white hair – dwarfs and giants – especially a dwarf with a tremendously big widely elongated nose – who was particularly popular with < > almond-blossomy virgins – parrots and many kinds of creatures – where it was entirely impossible – to attribute them to any kind of race and who had

withdrawn with indignation from the profaned Decadence of the intermediate ranks into the duchess's palace – who knew how to value and pay for the curiosities of a dying world. Strange platters with precious fruits from the silver workshop of Jean de Lange Arn – which were wrought in the style of the works of the Chevaliers de Berry[7] – which partly looked like finely haired vaginas of all kinds of animals – whilst the glasses represented the artfully adorned penises of all kinds of possible creatures. Here the phallus of an old < > was replicated, garlanded with pale île de france roses – replete with delicate calligraphies – which announce<d> the heroic deeds defeats and final dead of the deceased phallus – and from the glans trickled pleasantly – the most delicious wine – out of which some young ladies drank, whilst experienced ladies brought the puerile and still undesecrated dispenser of joys to their wrinkled mouths adorned with precious stones, gasping wisely and savouring each drink with precise cognizance. One set the tables – which were erected on artfully wrought bronzen brackets – which offered many positions – exceptional pleasures of love – The tables were surrounded by a brightly sparkling feature of 20,500 candles which trickled out on the finely pruned branches and the well-ordered leaves of the bouquets – and twinkled in the grass carpet of a strange <beauty>[8]woman. The duchess stepped down the outspread flight of stairs, on the pale brown steps of which mosaic-like arabesques were inset. She was clad in the violet coat made from a rare bird's feathers which was closed in straight lines at her vertically stretched silver-plated hip lines and as the only adornment – served a deliciously built black butterfly, which covered her loins and whose leaf-green antennae tremble<d> in her vagina. As soon as a space-roaming beam glided over the wings which were mute with obsession – the creature glistened in many colours fondling his mistress. She walked upright with small regular steps only – whereby she treaded with her entire sole keeping her leg stretched except at each step whereat she lifted the leg with rare dexterity at the back to the clouds – due to this straddling the laces which held her coat together were stretched to breaking point – her eyes disappeared in their iridescent, secret caves – and the moon beams were caught in the eyes that were blind for a second and glided over the blond eye-lashes.

Whilst she strode through the blossoming peach bosquetto[9] – the dinner party congregated – in expectation of the duchess. But she obliviating all countenance and politeness – walked along the paths soon copying with her steps the curves of the clouds in the bright garden grounds – soon she danced in the sweet reverie of rare expectations of love around the light reflections of the moon – which floated over a night-enwrought water feature. The duchess caught up in thoughts – which let her forget everything worldly – fondled with her artfully covered foot – the self-same as delicate as a spider's web, which now weaves in the dewdrop of a rose – the murmuring waters of the fountain on which the evening sky swayed. The butterfly glistened over the laces and glided in reverberations over the water like a living animal and the duchess felt – how she inclined with the animal towards the marble basin of the lake abandoning herself over the wondrous surface.

There a swan carried itself on the water – and over his green plumage flitted the reflection of the duchess's animal – and the duchess's love. She looked at herself so to speak as the butterfly disappeared in the shadow of the swan's plumage. Never before had the duchess had such a feeling – like on this evening – at the marble rim of the lake. She sat on the head of a satyr – who greedily gazed into the water – being certain that it was not worth his while to feed his mouth as his greed was insatiable. Therefore he dreamt unconscious above the mirror and was transmuted into marble. Even more and similar rabble looked at the surface but the duchess sat on the satyr with tightly closed legs – gazing after her butterfly. The green swan coolly swayed on the water above the butterfly's shadow – with blasé nonchalance – but the duchess trembled a little before the amorous coquetry of the animals – and her love glided forth in the water's reflection – entirely abandoning herself in the small pointed-cold finely coiffured waves. She held on to the finest marble horns of the satyr – the head of the heathen god glistened under the jewellery of her languid fingers. Towards the moon she held her widely stretched puerile legs vertically – as the silver neck of the swan kissed the butterfly on her loins and espoused the glistening butterfly, whilst the

envious evening light had no other choice but to tremble at the violet coat of the bold lady. Soon the duchess returned sweetly[10] worn from the strenuous situation to her court – which had expected its mistress far too long already. She came in the company of the green swan with the lyrebird that sang vertically into the night sky. He had not merely accepted the invitation due to her insistent plea, but it was pleasant to him now that the spawning season took place, which mostly caused him hefty nausea –. There are dreamy times – when we, tired of our own bodily contours, curse our white-blue marbled skin. as the thoughts were woven in such precious strangeness – so that nothing may appear more unseemly than the immutable frame. The thoughts and wishes stretch towards the unreal and the certainty of unreality is of the highest value. So we might beguilingly twist ourselves free from the monotony[11] of human love and give ourselves over to strange appearances – in particular as any strenuous passion and sensibility only disturbs here.

The duchess des malices douces abandoned herself entirely to the swan – beguiled by the fairytale ornaments which the swan could achieve and enraptured by the rare technique – which resulted from the union of entirely foreign beings. All movements of the high-standing woman changed – the limbs < > in foreign elements. Many hours <she> bowed down towards the lake in which her fishes darted – and observed which influence the change of light effected on the water surface – how the lines of their movement varied with the refraction of light in the fish pond. In the glistening sun the duch<ess> was lying over the marble railing of the lake – the train of her matt green brocade dress itself like a rare bird – glided from her posterieur,[12] which marvellously slim stretched against the sky, towards the croppy lawn – the strange flowers and animals of the clothing material made believe – the sun would glide into the lawn carpet – from which a peculiar fruit had blossomed – a pale flower, which < > towards the water surface. Above her face whirred countless insects – so that one believed that the red air of the incandescent day was whizzing full with fire jewels – The < > of the hands resting in the water lured the fishes to encircle them – and always to swarm around the beloved white coral banks. At night the duchess mostly indulged herself with

Erektor the green swan in the grandeur of the lake – on whose open side that led under salvaging shrubs to the river were drawn silver clinking chains – so that the beloved guest would not flee. In such nights the duchess bathed in a simple suit of silk gauze in the lake entirely oblivious of the earth, her earlier oh so banal lovers – at the most rarely smiling about the heat – with which t<he> terrestrial love colours the face of the excited ones. How congenial are technical, throughout only factual relations amongst incongruent creatures, whereby one does not intuit the other and only experiences the fact of the plain suprise – which hardly seems to belong to a surrounding world. this embarrassing burden – which one refers to with the equally vague and unimaginative word soul is not to be feared – the human being is disconnected from its figure – the ecstasies of love are comp<i>ling – are perhaps impossible. but oh this animal – paralyzed by the preciousness of its form was not able to do without the banal for too long and the yearning for higher realms was strong enough in the swan to awaken his desire for the earliest evening star. this transcendental desire now let the violet lyrebird raise his feathers with this precious fan he lewdly lured the desired star.

Handwritten, 9 pages, undated, presumably between 1905 and 1912.

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[1] Deleted.
[2] The entire passage seems to have been added later to the actual text as a preliminary remark: written with pencil, the remaining text with quill.
[3] Variant of the beginning: The colours of the whilom glowing day faded away on the tenderly tempered sky which presented embroideries with green and ruddy mythical beasts. Slender sandal wood trees pointillistically painted the blue dromedary of the afternoon – which swam away mirrored in its own haze pursued by the violet colibris of the evening and the black-grey lyrebirds of the night.
[4] Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1909-1847), romantic composer and music director, 1833: 'Songs without Words', composed during his time as director in Düsseldorf.
[5] On the back side: The duchess keeps erotic collection of curiosities Erotic rarity value Here one still valued the difficult and ingenious practices of love – loved play without commitment.
[6] Richard Wagner (1813-1883), neoromantic composer, 1859: 'Tristan and Isolde', in the Third Act of the opera: Isolde's love death.
[7] Jean de Berry (1340-1416), first grand-scale collector in the modern style, collected among other things precious stones, coins, watches, books, gold and silver receptacles, but also game boards, ostrich eggs, and other curiosities.
[8] Inconclusive.
[9] French: bosquet.
[10] Inconclusive, also possible: 'hot'.
[11] On the back side: Are impossible due to ongoing complications, as the incongruence of the bodies contains a never-ending series of relations and therefore negates any highest and final state.
[12] French: ironic for 'behind'.

'Leda'

German Original

Für Leda ist die Erotik mit Erector etwas höheres – Artistik – für den Schwan eine Banalität – eine Degradation – er ergeht sich mal wieder im fremden unmittelbaren

zwei ganz getrennte finden sich in einer Form zweier ganz verschiedenen Begierden. der Coitus als das ganz incongruente. nie endende – hier berührten sich zwei Geschöpfe – denen es zum erstenmal weder an Anstand noch Talent mangelte sichtlich zu zeigen – daß der Coitus[1] u die Liebe nichts bedeuten und zwei Individuen nicht zu verbinden vermögen – sondern sie lediglich bis zur Impotenz von Verschlingung zu Umarmung hetzt – ohne daß etwas gesteigert wird als das Tempo der Vernichtung.

die Herzogin endet in einer ekelhaften Manie für Geflügel der Schwan geht wieder aufs transcendente los beide darstellen als unfruchtbare Typen

des Schwanen Hals aufwärts gebogen von der Liebe zur Transcendens – schmal aus gier nach dem nichtsein – weiß vor der Lust an Gott. er gehört einem Element höherer Ordnung als der irdische Mensch (sta<r>re Erde) an – dem Wasser.

als Zuchtwahlproblem.

Die Wasserspiele – Tanz der Fische – [2]

Farben eines zärtlichen Himmels verklangen – der nur geblümte Stickereien darbot, mit grünlichroten Fabeltieren. Köstlich printillierte Sandelbäume tasteten zu dem blauen Dromedar und des Mittags – das in seinem Dunst sich spiegelnd hinwegeilte verfolgt von den violetten Kolibris des Abends und den schwarzgrauen Leierschwänzen Paradiesvögeln der Nacht.[3] Der früheste Abendstern begann in seinem Boudoir die Toilette wobei ihm seine milchstraßengeborene Amme Smilansvecu sorgsam half. Er legte sich den grünlich leuchtenden Pierrotkragen um den feingeschwungenen Hals – und hüllte sich in seinenAbendmantel einen weiten grauen Domino mit grünen Unterkleidern aus Krèpe de Chine. Nachdem er mit lilaem

poudre des étoiles mervéilleuses sein durch den heißen Tag gebleichtes Gesicht angelichtet und sorgsam abgetönt – seine Schluchten ziehendsilberne Gebirge umzeichnend und nahm er aus einer chinesischen Porzellandose eine mustergewobene Regenwolke welche köstliches Parfum ausströmte wusch sich hiermit nahm hierauf seine herrliche Kappe aus Zarpir und Turmalin, welche tausend und zwei Strahlen hervorfunkelte und begab sich auf seinen gewohnten Spaziergang. Hinter ihm her flog sein hellblauer lenkbarer Ballon – der ihn sobald er in sein Bureau sich verfügen wollte emportrüge. Er wollte aber vorher noch seinen Geliebten den grünen Schwan Erector aufsuchen – um einer althergebrachten Sitte seiner Vorfahren zu folgen. Denn immer gewinnen die Sterne ihre Leuchtkraft aus der Liebe. Er leuchtet rasch durch die unteren Wolken – flog über den Wald der braunen Tannen – welche ihm lüstern die Sohlen mit ihren rotbraunen Nadeln auf gelbroten Ästchen sitzend kitzelten – ein herber Duft sträubte dem metallenen Geäste – da ein neuer Parfumfabrikant sie jetzt versorgte. Eine morsche von Brunst geborstene Platane die sich von dem Wind aufgeregt in das Geäst der kühlen Tanne wehen ließ unterbrach die perverse Umarmung und blätterte zu dem vorüberschreitenden empor der sie ignorierte. Ihn – der zumeist gleichgültig gestimmt war trieb es zu dem grünen Schwan Erector – mit dem violetten Leierschwanz vermochte diese charmante Seele Mendelssohns Lieder ohne Worte[4] ungemein angenehm akkompagnieren.

Indigniert floh der Stern durch das Quartier der geflügelten Äffchen – welche sich zwischen grünfunkelnden Wolen einen jeden Abendversammelten.

um mit kleinen Spiegeln das Licht der hellsten Sterne abzufangen – welches sie über ihre schamlos roten Hintern auf ihre gierigen Penisse gleiten ließen. Der Abendstern – dem jede wenn auch noch so künstliche Onanie peinlich war – da sie ihm ebenso aufreibend und tot erschien wie das stumpfsinnige Nabelbeschauen – das doch ohne Frage eine besonders stumpfsinnige Art des partiellen Egoismus bildet – begab sich von den aufgeregten – Tierchen rasch hinweg – zumal er befürchtete – daß sein kostbares Parfum in dieser Umgebung unrein vermischt werde. Er lenkte

jetzt seinen Weg zur Erde hinunter und teilte den letzten seidenen Vorhang des Himmels, die irdische Bühne zu betreten – hier wo er seine Lust und Sehnsucht hingelegt hatte – gereizt von der Perversität und der fantastischen Möglichkeit ihm fremde Wesen näher zu erkennen

Auf seiner letzten Fahrt über die schlafende Erde die unter einem glitzernden Gewölbe aus Lapislazuli sich zur Ruhe gelegt hatte – bedeckt vom Geäste sich umeinander umarmender Wälder hatte er aus der Ferne den grünen Schwan Erector gesetzt mit dem violetten Leierschwanz – und ihn sich zum Gegenstand einer affektierten Lüsternheit gesetzt – die nichts anderes war als eine sinnliche Fantasie. Er stieg zu dem zinnoberroten Berg hinunter der (von) schwarzen Dächern der Tannen umschattet war – Erector zu beobachten. Er ordnete sich im Spiegel des Sees seine Toilette – befestigte die Spiegelung zweier Wegfantome die zahlreich herumbrunsteten – am Ende des linken Ärmels – dann hielt er nach E<rector> Umschau. jedoch das köstliche Haarinnere seines freigewölbten fedrigen Unterleibes – blühte nicht über dem zinnoberroten Grund auf – die elegante Kühnheit seines silbernen Halses mit dem weißen Schnabel und den tückischen Kokot<t>enaugen – dieser Hals – der so wundersame erregung versprach – die köstlichsten Arabesken der Umarmung – die einen jeden Augenblick – die Farbzusammenstellung und die Konturation der Linien vertauschte – Sie ragte nicht zum Abendhimmel – sich silbern über die schwarzen Dächer der Bäume abhebend. Denn Erector war zu köstlichen Abenteuern geflogen – seine smaragdenen Flügel breitend in den Abend aus Lapislazuli und den Spitzen der duchesse des étoiles noires.[5]

Durch den kunstvollen <…> der Herzogin des malices douces huschten viele Fackeln geschwungen von den merkwürdigen Geschöpfen der Herzogin. Kleine verkrüppelte <Männchen> – an deren Hintern kleine Automaten befestigt waren die nach Einwurf eines Geldstückes Isoldes Liebestod[6] spielten und liebliche Genüsse bereiteten – überlastende Frauen – mit kurzen Beinen – die aus Angst vor Erkältungen kleine Engelsflügel an der Vagina befestigt

hatten die angetan waren mit vielfarbigen Kleidern – Kleine Kinder mit weißen Haaren – Zwerge und Riesen – besonders ein Zwerg mit ungemein großer weitgereckter Nase – der besonders bei mandelblütenen < > Jungfrauen beliebt war – Papageien und viele Arten Geschöpfe – wo es gänzlich unmöglich war – sie irgendeiner Rasse einzureihen und die sich bei der profanierten Decadence der Zwischenstufen in das Palais der Herzogin indigniert zurückgezogen hatten – welche die Seltsamkeiten einer absterbenden Welt zu schätzen und zu bezahlen wußte. Merkwürdige Platten mit köstlichen Früchten aus der Silberwerkstatt des Jean de Lange Arn – die nach den Arbeiten der Chevaliers de Berry[7] gearbeitet waren – welche teilweise aussahen wie fein umhaarte Vaginas von allen möglichen Tieren – während die Gläser die kunstvoll verzierten Penisse aller möglichen Geschöpfe darstellten. Hier war der Phallus eines alten < > nachgebildet, umkränzt mit bleichen île de france Rosen – versehen mit zierlichen Kalligrafien – welche die Heldentaten Niederlagen und endlichen Tod des verblichenen Phallus meldete<n> – und angenehm tröpfelte aus der Eichel – köstlichster Wein – hieraus tranken einige junge Damen, während erfahrene Damen die knabenhaften noch unentweihten Spender der Wonnen an ihren verrunzelten mit Edelsteinen geschmückten Mund brachten, weise lechzend und mit genauer Kenntnis ein jedes Getränk genießend. Man deckte die Tafeln – welche errichtet waren auf kunstvoll gearbeiteten Bronzeträgern – die viele Stellungen – Extragenüsse der Liebe darboten – Die Tische waren umgeben von einem hellfunkelnden Gebilde von 20 500 Kerzen – welche auf den fein beschnittenen Ästen und den wohlgeordneten Blättern der Bucketts verrieselten – und in dem Grasteppich einer wundersamen <Schön>[8]frau funkelten.

Die Herzogin schritt von der ausgebreiteten Freitreppe hinunter auf deren blaßbraunen Stufen Arabesken in Mosaikenart eingelassen waren. Sie war in einen violetten Mantel aus den Federn eines seltenen Vogels gefertigt bekleidet der in geraden Linien an ihren senkrecht verlaufenden versilberten Hüftlinien schloß und als einziger Schmuck – diente ihr ein köstlich gebildeter schwarzer Schmetterling, der ihren Schoß bedeckte und dessen blattgrüne Fühlhörner in ihrer

Vagina zitterte<n>. Sobald ein raumschweifender Strahl über das vor Sucht stumme Geflügel glitt – gleiste das Tier in vielen Farben seine Herrin liebkosend. Diese ging senkrecht nur mit kleinen regelmäßigen Schritten – wobei sie mit ganzer Sohle auftrat das Bein gestreckt haltend außer bei einem jeden Schritt wo sie mit seltener Geschicklichkeit das Bein hintwärts zu den Wolken hob – über diesem Spreizen dehnten sich die Spitzen die ihren Mantel verbanden bis zum Zerreißen – ihre Augen verschwanden in ihren schillernden, geheimen Höhlen – und die Mondstrahlen verfingen sich in den eine Sekunde blinden Augen und glitten über die blonden Wimpern.

Während sie durch die blühenden Pfirsichbosquetto[9] schritt – versammelte sich die Tischgesellschaft – in Erwartung der Herzogin. Diese aber alle contenance und Höflichkeit vergessend – ging die Wege entlang bald die Linien der Wolken im hellen Gartengrund mit den Schritten kopierend – bald umtänzelte sie in der süßen Träumerei seltener Liebeserwartung die Lichtreflexe des Mondes – der über einem nachtumwobenen Wasserspiel schwebte. Die Herzogin befangen von Gedanken – die sie alles irdische vergesen ließ – liebkoste mit dem kunstvoll bekleideten Fuß – derselbe so zart wie ein Spinnennetz, das sich nun den Tautropfen einer Rose hinwirkt – das murmelnde Gewässer der Fontaine auf der sich der Abendhimmel wiegte. Der Schmetterling glitzerte über die Spitzen und glitt im Widerschein über das Wasser wie ein lebend Tier und die Herzogin empfand – wie sie sich mit dem Tier zu dem marmornen Bad des Teiches neigte über der zaubrischen Fläche sich hingebend.

Da gebärdete sich ein Schwan über das Wasser – und über sein grünes Gefieder huschte die Spiegelung des Tieres der Herzogin – und der Herzogin Liebe. Sie sah sich gleichsam zu als der Falter in dem Schatten des Schwanengefieders verschwand. Noch nie hatte die Herzogin solche Empfindung gehabt – wie an diesem Abend – an dem marmornen Bord des Teiches. Sie saß auf dem Kopf eines Satyrs – der gierig in das Wasser schaute – in der Gewißheit, daß es sich nicht verlohne das Maul zu füttern da die Gier nicht zu sättigen war. Darum träumte er bewußtlos über

dem Spiegel und war zu Marmor verwandelt. Noch viel ähnliches Gelichter sah zu der Fläche aber auf dem Satyr saß die Herzogin mit eng geschlossenen Beinen – ihrem Falter nachblickend. Der grüne Schwan schaukelte sich auf dem Wasser über dem Schatten des Falters kühl hin – mit gleichgültiger nonchalance – aber die Herzogin zitterte ein weniges bei der verliebten Koketterie der Tiere – und ihre Liebe glitt in der Spiegelung des Wassers dahin – sich ganz hingebend den kleinen spitzkalten feinfrisierten Wellen. Sie hielt sich an den marmornen feinsten Hörnern des Satyrs – das Haupt des heidnischen Gottes glitzerte unter dem Schmuck ihrer matten Finger. Zum Mond empor hielt sie senkrecht die weitgereckten Knabenbeine – da küßte der silberne Hals des Schwans den Schmetterling an ihrem Schoße und vermählte sich dem glitzernden Falter, während dem neidischen Abendlicht nichts anderes verblieb als an dem violetten Mantel der kühnen Dame zu erschauern. Bald kehrte die Herzogin von der anstrengenden Situation süß[10] erschöpft zurück zu ihrem Hofe – der allzu lange schon die Herrin erwartete. Sie kam in Begleitung des grünen Schwans mit dem senkrecht zum Nachthimmel tönenden Schleierschwanz. Er hatte nicht nur wegen ihrer eindringlichen Bitte die Einladung angenommen, sondern es war ihm angenehm da jetzt die Laichzeit der Fische stattfand, welche ihm zumeist einen heftigen Ekel verursachte –. Es gibt verträumte Zeiten – wo wir des eigenen Körperumrisses müde unsere weißblau geäderte Haut verwünschen. da die Gedanken in solcher kostbaren Fremdheit ersonnen wurden – daß uns nichts unziemlicher erscheinen mag als die unwandelbare Gestalt. Die Gedanken und Wünsche reichen zu dem Unwirklichen und die Gewißheit der Unwirklichkeit ist von höchstem Wert. So mögen wir der Eintönigkeit[11] der Menschenliebe entgaukeln und uns den fremden Erscheinungen hingeben – zumal hier eine jede anstrengende Leidenschaftlichkeit und Empfindsamkeit nur störend ist.

Die Herzogin des malices douces gab sich ganz dem Schwanen hin – bezaubert von den märchenhaften Ornamenten die der Schwan zu bilden vermochte und entrückt durch die seltene Technik – welche aus dem Zusammensein gänzlich fremder Wesen hervorging. Alle Bewegungen

der hohen Frau veränderten sich – die Gliedmaßen < > in fremden Elementen. Viele Stunden beugte <sie> sich zum Teich nieder, in welchem ihre Fische schnellten – und beobachtete welchen Einfluß der Lichtwechsel auf den Wasserspiegel ausübe – wie entsprechend den Brechungen des Lichts im Teich der Fische die Linien der Bewegungen variierten. In der gleißenden Sonne lag die Herz<ogin> über der Marmorbrüstung des Teiches – selbst wie ein seltener Vogel die Schleppe ihres mattgrünen Brokatkleides – glitt von dem herrlich schmal gegen den Himmel gereckten Posterieur[12] zu dem kurzgeschorenen Rasen – die seltsamen Blumen und Tiere des Kleiderstoffes ließen glauben – die Sonne vergleite in den Rasenteppich – dem eine seltsame Frucht erblüht sei – eine fahle Blume, die dem Wasserspiegel sich entgegen < >. Über ihrem Gesicht schwirrten zahllose Insekten – daß man glaubte die rote Luft des glühenden Tages schwirre voller Feuerjuwelen – Die < > der im Wasser ruhenden Hände lockten die Fische um sie zu kreisen – und die geliebten weißen Korallenbänke immer zu umschwärmen. Des Nachts erging sich die Herzogin zumeist mit Erektor dem grünen Schwan in der Größe des Teiches – an dessen offener Seite die unter einem bergenden Gebüsch zu dem Fluß führte silberne klingende Ketten gezogen waren – damit der geliebte Gast nicht entfliehe. In solchen Nächten badete die Herzogin in einem einfachen Anzug aus Seidengaze in dem Teich gänzlich der Erde vergessend, ihrer früheren ach so banalen Geliebten – höchstens selten über die Hitze lächelnd – mit welcher d<ie> irdische Liebe die Haut der Aufgeregten färbt. Wie sympathisch sind technische durchaus nur tatsächliche verhältnisse unter incongruenten Geschöpfen wobei eines den anderen nicht ahnt und nur die platte Überraschung einer Tatsache erfährt – die einer umgebenden Welt kaum anzugehören scheint. diese peinliche Last – welche man mit dem ebenso unbestimmten wie fantasielosen Wort Seele bezeichnet ist nicht zu befürchten – der mensch ist seiner figur entrückt – die extasen der liebe komp<i>lieren sich – sind vielleicht unmöglich. doch ach dieses tier – gelähmt von der Kostbarkeit seiner Gestalt vermochte das banale nicht allzu lange entbehren und die Sehnsucht nach dem höheren war stark genug im Schwan sein verlangen nach dem frühesten abendstern zu

wecken. dieses transcendentale begehren ließ nun den violetten leierschwanz auffedern mit diesem köstlichen Fächer lockte er lüstern den ersehnten Stern.

Hs., 9 Bl., undatiert, vermutlich zwischen 1905 und 1912.

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[1] Gestrichen.
[2] Diese ganze Passage scheint später dem eigentlichen Text als Vorbemerkung vorangestellt worden zu sein: mit Stift geschrieben, übriger Text mit Feder.
[3] Variante des Anfangs: Die Farben des weiland glutenden Tages verklangen an dem zärtlich gestimmten Himmel der geblümte Stickerein darbot mit grünrötlichen Fabeltieren. Schlanke Sandelbäume printillierten das blaue Dromedar des Nachmittags – das in seinem Dunst sich spiegelnd hinwegschwamm verfolgt von den violetten Kolibris des Abends und den schwarzgrauen Leierschwänzen der Nacht.
[4] Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847), romant. Komponist u. Musikdirektor, 1833: "Lieder ohne Worte", Komposition während der Direktionszeit in Düsseldorf.
[5] Auf der Rückseite: Die Herzogin hält erotische Raritätensammlung Erotischer Seltenheitswert Hier schätzte man noch die schwierigen und geistreichen Praktiken der Liebe – liebte das zu nichts verpflichtende Spiel.
[6] Richard Wagner (1813-1883), neuromant. Komponist, 1859: "Tristan und Isolde", im 3. Akt der Oper: Isoldes Liebestod.
[7] Jean de Berry (1340-1416), erster großer Sammler modernen Stils, sammelte u.a. Edelsteine, Münzen, Uhren, Bücher, Gold- und Silbergefäße, aber auch Spielbretter, Straußeneier und andere Kuriositäten.
[8] Nicht eindeutig.
[9] Boskett, frz.: Lustwäldchen.
[10] Nicht eindeutig, möglich auch: heiß.
[11] Auf der Rückseite: Sind wegen fortschreitender Schwierigkeit unmöglich, da die Inkongruenz der Körper eine nie endende Reihe der Beziehungen enthält und somit jeden höchsten und Endstand negiert.
[12] Frz.: ironisch für Hinterteil.

The Peculiar Case of the Jewelled Tortoise, or: Thoughts Towards a Jewellery of the Decadent Woman

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> He therefore decided to glaze the shell of the tortoise with gold.
>
> The tortoise, just returned by the lapidary, shone brilliantly, softening the tones of the rug and casting on it a gorgeous reflection which resembled the irradiations from the scales of a barbaric Visigoth shield.
>
> At first Des Esseintes was enchanted with this effect. Then he reflected that this gigantic jewel was only in outline, that it would not really be complete until it had been incrusted with rare stones.
>
> From a Japanese collection he chose a design representing a cluster of flowers emanating spindle-like, from a slender stalk. Taking it to a jeweller, he sketched a border to enclose this bouquet in an oval frame, and informed the amazed lapidary that every petal and every leaf was to be designed with jewels and mounted on the scales of the tortoise.
>
> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours*[1]

A hunger for refinement, originality, and the will to bend nature to the artistic imagination: the transformation of a tortoise into a living jewel, as detailed in the fifth chapter of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*, has become an iconic image of the decadent sensibility. That this living jewel became a reality, however – that life, quite literally, imitated art – is a fact barely known today; indeed, decadence itself seems to be a chapter curiously absent from jewellery history. Yet during the winter of 1897-98, tiny jewelled tortoises, harnessed in gold and glistening with precious stones, trod the corsages of daring Parisiennes and were readily recognised as a 'joaillerie décadente'.[2] So far, only one scholarly study of jewellery has bestowed a passing notice upon this *tortue-bijou*, classing it as 'a naturalistic device' and furthermore claiming that 'there is no record that a revolting novelty reported in Paris in 1898 ever crossed the Channel'.[3] Records of the tortoises' migration to London there are, however, though hidden among the pages of ephemera. Indeed a careful enquiry into these sources, alongside a contemplation of the gendered etiquette against which this curious ornament momentarily rebelled, will help us form an idea of what rendered a fin-de-siècle woman's jewellery decadent in the eyes of her contemporaries – ephemeral though we will find the notion to be.

Paris, Winter 1897/8: The Chronicle of a Novelty

Let us travel, if you will, back in time: to the winter that spanned its snowy wings across the fading end of 1897 and the first stirrings of 1898.

Our destination is Paris, the capital of fashion.

Here, we turn into the Rue de la Paix, in whose jewellers' shops glisten diamonds purer and more plentiful than snowflakes on the street – this street which is the first, indeed the crucial address to acquire fine jewels. It is from here that foreign correspondents report of the latest creations to London, Berlin, New York. And somewhere on this street, a jeweller showcases the novelty that inspires wonder, delight, and still more outrage all over the Western world. Is he the inventor of this novelty? The British press credits him thusly, although one has foregone – scandalised, perhaps – his name.[4]

Even without a name, it is easy to make out the shop, for a curious crowd has gathered before it: 'painted women in flashy *toilettes*' loudly express their admiration; ladies of proper society dare to show but quiet surprise; gentlemen restrain their expressions if not their curiosity. Before this window, they stand side by side with 'commoners, strayed by chance into this sumptuous street'. The latter, workers on their way from the factory to the lightless rooms they call home, have 'stopped with astonishment, perhaps with anger, in front of this shop in the Rue de la Paix whose glittering display attracts and retains, day by day, a more numerous crowd'.[5]

Indeed, the crowd of spectators is so dense that we cannot reach the door. And so we make our way to the Rue Royale – close by, of similar prestige. For here, another jeweller offers the same peculiar merchandise. Unlike his colleague in the Rue de la Paix, whom history has rendered anonymous, Henri Templier of the Rue Royale is remembered by name, both in the French and German press.[6]

We slip into the shop behind a journalist of *L'Illustration* who has come to report of this arresting novelty. Before our curious eyes, the jeweller sets down 'a tray, lined with white velvet, upon which a half dozen minuscule tortoises appear to sleep'. These tortoises are not inanimate

trinkets, no – upon the table, 'as if by magic, they begin to stir' [fig. 1].[7] They are living animals, infant Indian star tortoises, and they wander on delicate feet across the velvet, leashed to fine chains of gold and platinum. Their shells bear burdens of precious stones: 'Rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and pearls',[8] or even turquoises, the vogueish stone of the moment.[9] Some of these gemstones 'are arranged so as to exhibit a monogram',[10] others form 'a trellis-work of rose diamonds in the Louis XV. style' [figs. 2 and 3].[11] Fully bejewelled, these little creatures command upwards of 500 Francs apiece.[12]

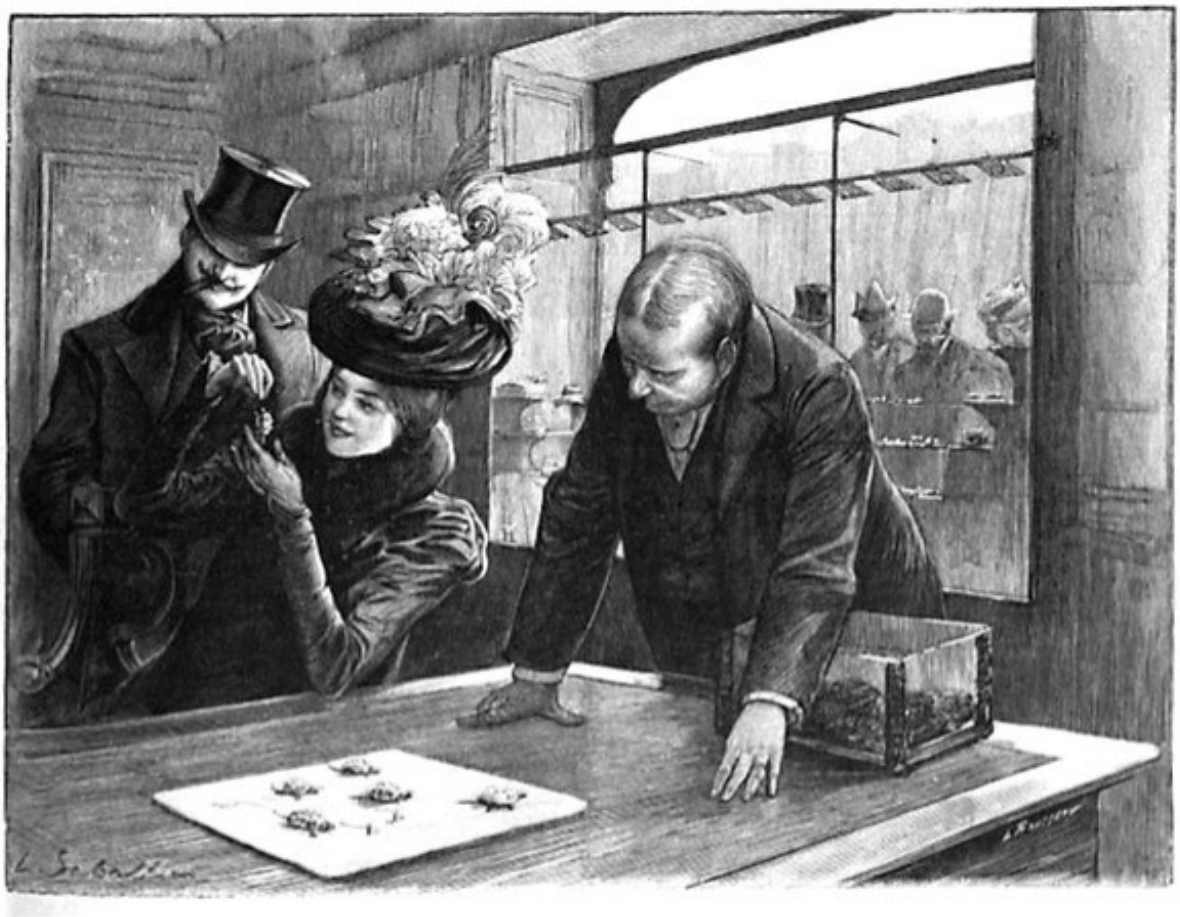

Fig. 1: *Le choix d'une tortue-bijou*. From *L'Illustration*, 15 January 1898, p. 53.
Princeton University, digitally enhanced by author.

Fig. 2: The tortoises of the Rue Royale. From *L'Illustration*, 15 January 1898, p. 53.
Princeton University, digitally enhanced by author.

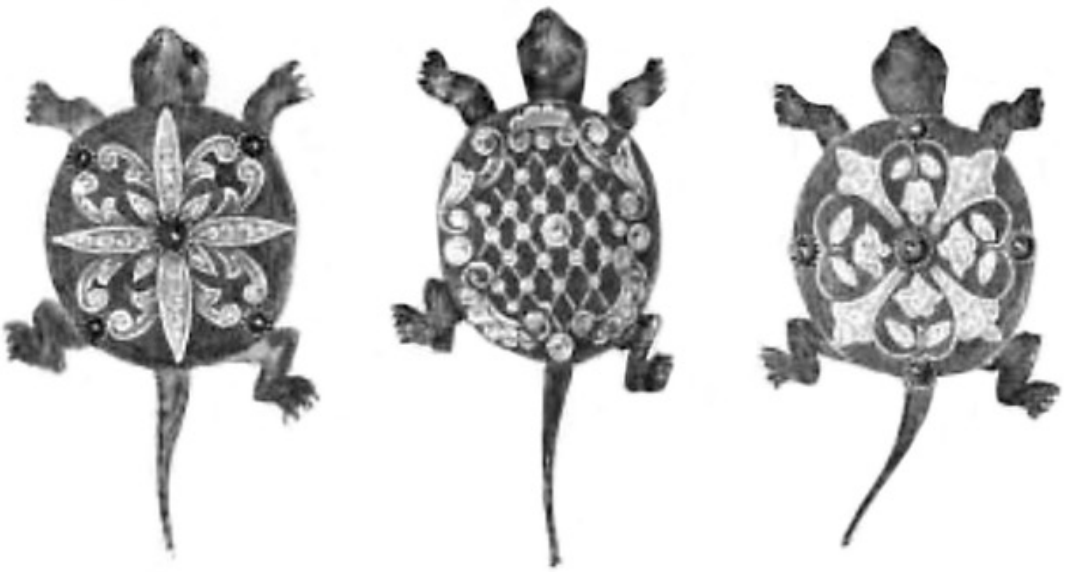

Fig. 3: Indian star tortoises bejewelled by Henri Templier, Paris. From *Illustrirte Zeitung*, 110 (1898), p. 270.
University of Chicago, background removed by author.

By way of the chains that connect to safety pins, they are to be worn as living brooches: 'This chain is worn fastened to your right shoulder, and within its limits the tortoise can wander over your person at its own sweet will.'[13] Other uses, too, have been reported: 'Fashionable ladies wear Liliputian tortoises of the size of an ordinary beetle, depending from a narrow chain fixed onto a necklace, a bracelet or a brooch.'[14]

Is this not cruelty, one wonders? Some are moved to pity: 'They gleam and blaze, the poor trapped creatures. They attempt to escape from the small square of velvet to which they are fastened as to a peg.'[15] Indeed, the *Société protectrice des animaux* has already enquired.[16] But prospective buyers are assured the animals are not being harmed – for the gold mounts to which the chains are affixed are but clasped to their shells. 'The plate is very thin and light, and has a turned edge, which is slipped over the shell, just clasping it, but not attached to any part of the shell by piercing or riveting.'[17] This same harness 'has to be removed when the baby tortoise has its bath'; the animal then 'resides, when off duty, in a box supplied with damp moss and small lettuce leaves',[18] or may 'roam about in a sort of doll's garden, with shrubs and gravel walks'.[19]

By late January, the sellers have been absolved from any crimes against morality. The news has reached London, where a journalist of *The Westminster Gazette* supposes that she will not see

> anything of the kind in our own more sedate city. I cannot imagine a fastidious Englishwoman caring for a crawling thing on the front of her corsage; besides, the tortoise-wearing Parisienne does not belong to the class whose costume she cares to copy.[20]

But who is this 'tortoise-wearing Parisienne'? And to what class does she belong? The correspondent of *L'Illustration*, enquiring into this very question, has conducted an imaginary interview with one of the bedazzled creatures of the Rue Royale:

> 'Many admirers?'
> 'Quite a few – mostly among the *demi-monde*. The ladies of proper society are content to behold us from afar.'[21]

An ornament of the *demi-mondaine*, then – the woman who inhabited the fringes of correct society. Indeed, there is even talk of 'a second-rate *demi-mondaine*, known in late-night restaurants by the nickname "Femme à la Tortue"', for she never parts from her tortoise.[22] But why this alliance – and what more might it tell us about a decadent jewellery? Let us return now to the present time,

from where we have a broader view of fin-de-siècle society and its culture of jewellery, which unfolds before us like a poisoned, glittering map.

A Bestiary of Sin: On the Customs and Controversies of Animal Ornaments

The first, most obvious reason why 'proper society' considered the *tortue-bijou* unsavoury, of course, relates to its origins in *À rebours*, and the approval of moral transgression which this association intimated. To the up-to-date Parisian, it appeared as the latest instalment in a string of extravagances worthy of Des Esseintes. As the *Revue Illustrée* noted:

> We have had, in turns, debaucheries of orchids, salads of chrysanthemum, strawberries dipped in ether, opium cigarettes, the hallucinatory dreads of English mimes – all the nervousness and all the languor.
>
> Today, the chevalier Floressas des Esseintes, who bears a fraternal resemblance to M. Robert de Montesquiou, serves as the model for our dear unbalanced souls; M. J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours*, whose title alone is a profession of faith, appears to have become the breviary of avant-garde salons. One will recall that Des Esseintes had the bizarre fantasy of having the shell of his favourite tortoise gilded and encrusted with precious stones, making it a living work of the goldsmith's art which thus paraded about, studded with cabochons and glittering carbuncles. In place of the heavy, massive elephant tortoise, it is the dainty tortoise of the Indies which Fashion, that merciless plagiarist, has just made its prey.[23]

Still, one might assume that not everyone was immediately familiar with the tortoise's ties to books in yellow covers. In fact, to most members of Parisian proper society circa 1898, such an ornament would have appeared inappropriate – regardless of its literary origins. How so?

Let us take in the bigger picture. By contrast, in the 1860s – when machine production and increasing bourgeois wealth were just beginning to make the creation of novelty jewellery conceived mainly to delight, rather than to represent, viable – vogueish Londoners wore hummingbird heads mounted as jewels, without reproach.[24] By the early 1880s, animal ornaments had become widespread. In 1880, *Godey's Ladies Book*, for instance, reported of ruby-eyed gold mice, and that the 'Empress of Austria wears a little gold pig as a charm, to avert the evil eye, and now all the Parisians are thinking of sporting the pig'.[25] Still in 1887, a 'miniature turtle, enameled in colors, true to nature, with diamond eyes', was deemed 'a pleasing novelty in brooches'.[26] Already during this decade, however, a shift was beginning to be felt; for in the face of increasing jewellery

consumption, appropriateness – rather than the flaunting of wealth – slowly became the primary signifier of status. A refined etiquette began to evolve across the major jewellery production centres: France, Britain, Germany, and the United States. Women were now cautioned to abstain from eccentric novelty jewellery once they reached their thirties or married, unless the piece was particularly precious.[27]

By the mid 1890s, the case of animal jewels had shifted. An awareness of symbolist art with its bestiary of creatures suggestive of immoral instincts had entered the Western cultural mainstream, and animal ornaments were increasingly read as markers of morality. Even costliness could no longer trump content. The German *Bazar* now called pigs and 'long-legged spiders, even if of brilliants […] doubtlessly unaesthetic and tasteless'.[28] In 1895, women were warned it was 'not good form to wear ornaments made in the form of beasts or reptiles. […] Why should a sweet woman select pigs and lizards and toads when there are stars and hearts and true love knots and flowers … ?'[29] A woman might still wear the gemstone insects that implied her resemblance to a fragrant flower, but was advised to avoid unflattering associations. 'Bugs, butterflies, flowers' were permissible, stated one writer in 1899, but

> one must beware, in imitating nature, of lapses in taste such as are manifest in the fashioning of spiders, rats, and other such disagreeable creatures. Modern art, which […] is increasingly coming under the sway of symbolism, must be least forgetful of symbolism where personal adornment is concerned.[30]

Stricter minds thus exiled certain creatures from the realm of respectability [fig. 4]. The bestiary of sin comprised, among others, the sly and venomous spider; the pig which Rops had cast as the symbol of base instincts in *Pornocrates*; the lizard with its links to hellfire ('the lizard simulates idolatry', Huysmans would write);[31] and, with certain reservations, the snake, allied to the devil.[32] Last but not least, it also contained the tortoise with its slowness of ennui and languor, its grotesque appearance: the *tortue-bjiou* was deemed 'the ugliest of all beasts, with its snake-like head and Buddha belly'.[33] One also could not overlook the fact that tortoises prefer to dwell in humid, dark environments, grounds for at least one crude joke [fig. 5]. Thus, as this peculiar jewel made the

rounds, one journalist protested 'against this deliberate turning of lovely women into illustrations of delirium tremens',[34] while another 'professional grumbler' was quoted as saying:

> Everything has a significance, and if certain scholars are to be believed, it is truly a morbid symptom, this peculiar love of certain animals, this depraved taste […]. Zoophilia, at a certain point, becomes a flaw. And what appears to be original is merely a kind of derangement.[35]

Some Art Nouveau jewels deliberately emphasised these transgressive associations, transposing the creatures from a visual mode of naturalism into one of complementary stylisation that drew further attention to their symbolic power. René Lalique's *Femme-Libellule* of 1897-98, the same production date as the *tortue-bijou,* may serve as an example: the beautiful yet alien and carnivorous dragonfly here merges with a woman [fig. 6]. 'Our era is characterised by *analysis* in the goldsmith's art as well as in psychology', noted a critic on Lalique.[36] Calouste Gulbenkian, who purchased the *Femme-Libellule* some years later, reportedly discouraged his wife from wearing Lalique pieces,[37] and it may be supposed that he and others considered them impossible ornaments for the 'respectable' woman – separate as respectability and the assertion of feminine erotic appetites were to the contemporary imagination.

Conversely, then, some women might reach for subversive animal ornaments precisely to communicate their disregard of convention. This applies particularly to courtesans and actresses – women of significant financial means who were not reliant on sartorial expressions of virtue to secure their existence. In 1899, for instance, Liane de Pougy commissioned a bat ring for her lover Natalie Clifford Barney with Lalique, observing Natalie's nickname 'Moon-Beam' and perhaps the fact that homosexuality had recently been observed in these animals.[38] The kinship between unconventional women and immoral animals pertained equally to naturalistic ornaments, however. A striking literary example can be found in Dolorosa's 1904 novel *Tagebuch einer Erzieherin* [Diary of an Educator]: the protagonist, a dominatrix, hosts a hell-themed party and receives a brooch from her slave, a 'delicately worked lizard whose body shone and glittered magnificently in the light of green stones […], wonderfully modelled after nature', which she will wear with a form-fitting red tricot and horned cap, dressed as the Queen of Hell.[39]

Fig. 4: A spider and a lizard brooch of subversive potential, both c. 1890-1900.
© Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.

Fig. 5: *La chasse à la tortue-bijou* by Gil Baer. *Le Supplément*, 29 January 1898, n. p.
Gallica BnF, digitally enhanced by the author.

Fig. 6: Corsage ornament *Femme-Libellule* by René Lalique, 1897-98, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon. Image by Sailko, licensed under CC BY 3.0 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dragonfly_broche_(René_Lalique)#/media/File:René_lalique,_pett orale_libellula,_in_oro,_smalti,_crisoprazio,_calcedonio,_pietre_lunari_e_diamanti,_1897-98_ca._01.jpg [accessed July 2025].

And yet, no inanimate jewel, no matter whether naturalistic or stylised, could rival the subversive potential of the live creature, even more unsettling for showcasing genuine instincts. In the eyes of moralists, certain unsavoury truths rendered the *tortue-bijou* a jewel for dirty women of 'ce goût dépravé'.[40]

> However small it may be, the jewelled turtle is a living being – meaning it eats, drinks, and… excretes."[41] Its wearers thus invented 'a delicate flick […]. They rediscovered the graceful gesture of the little abbés and beautiful lords of *l'ancienne cour*, who would shake their lace jabots with infinite grace when stained with a few grains of fragrant tobacco. […] [B]ut nonetheless, it is all very dirty'.[42]

It may come as no surprise that the *tortue-bijou* did not even constitute the first alliance between live animals and subversive women, as several journalists reminded their readers upon its launch. One, noting that in Paris, an 'actress or two or an eccentric *mondaine* may occasionally like to appear at the Opera or elsewhere with living tortoises suspended by gold chains from their necks', also recalled that Madame Musard, a professional beauty, 'appeared at the Opera some years ago wearing as bracelets two harmless little snakes covered with diamond rings'.[43] Another remembered

that 'after the performances of *Cléopâtre*, the asp, Mme Sarah Bernhardt's famous asp, had also turned a number of heads, and it is said that for a few months […] the small varieties of snakes were in great demand.'[44] Indeed, it was rumoured that she kept two garter snakes 'in a jewel case on her dressing table […] She was fond of them and often twined them around her wrists'.[45] Another fashion columnist 'knew a lady who wore a live scaribee [*sic*] chained to her neck', reminiscent of the Romans 'who wore live snakes around their fair necks'.[46] Curiously, however, it was remarked more than once that it had been 'American ladies, who also led the way with the jewelled tortoises'.[47]

We must briefly consider this claim, for it will provide further illumination to our case by contrast. The practice of chaining a live animal to the corsage had its roots in the American chameleon craze of 1893-94, which in truth concerned 'little glittering Southern lizards of the species known to naturalists as *Anolis principalis*, but commonly called […], chameleons' [fig. 7].[48] These creatures became ornaments by chance, due to the way they were displayed for sale:

> The fashion originated at the Chicago Exhibition, where, in the Florida section, there was a stall devoted to the sale of live chameleons, with slender gold chains and fancy pins attached to collars round their necks. Visitors purchased the small reptiles by the thousand; in fact, chameleons were the rage, und no belle considered herself properly equipped unless she had at least one specimen fastened to her corsage. […] [J]ust as the demand was at its height, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stepped in and the business was made illegal.[49]

This phenomenon presents a fascinating exception to all we have just read. For they who wore lizards were no small numbers of *demi-mondaines*, but flocks of young society women: 'Scarcely a family "in society" but one of the ladies prides herself on the possession of a tiny, lizard-like creature.'[50] Allegations of immorality arose merely from the carelessness with which the lizards were treated. It was reported that many died of neglect, for 'thoughtless dames danced away all night with their victims three-parts dead in their bosoms'.[51] One young lady made it through three, the third meeting the most gruesome end: 'With one hand holding a gold chain, papa was dragging the remains of the chameleon from his spoon, and in suppressed rage growling at the toughness of the noodles. The missing pet was found, but oh, what a fate!'[52]

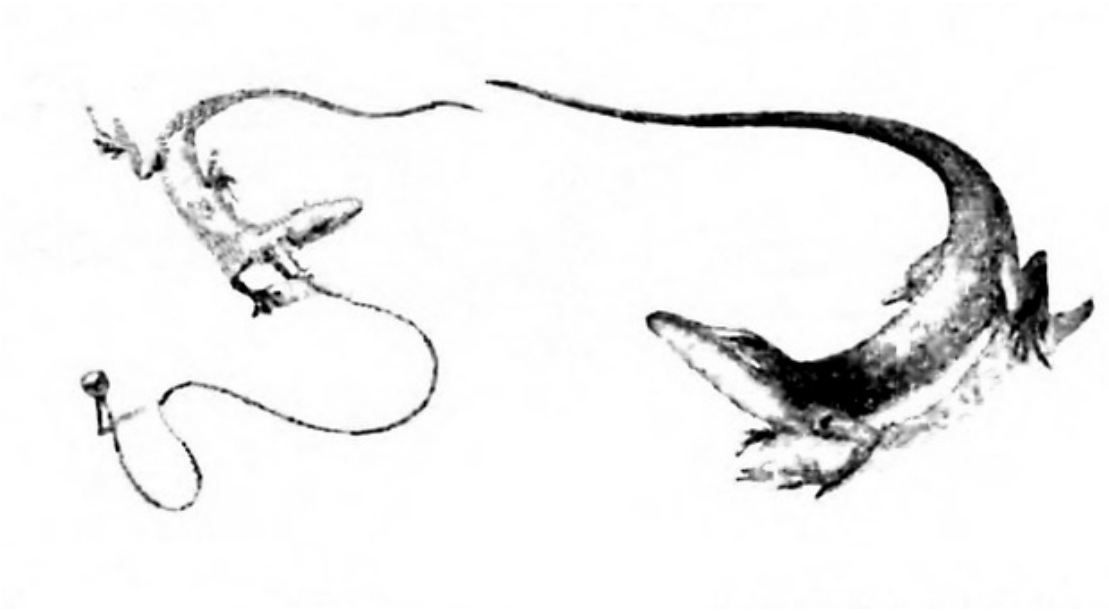

Fig. 7: Chained lizards to be worn in the hair or as brooches. *The Youth's Companion*, 21 June 1894, p. 287. Princeton University, digitally enhanced by the author.

But what rendered the wearing of a lizard more morally permissible than that of a tortoise, given the fact that American jewellery etiquette largely resembled the European? Firstly, the lizard-wearers appear to have been quite young, and thus excused for wearing eccentric novelties. Secondly, the phenomenon slightly predated the symbolist-adjacent revaluation of animal jewellery, and even so: the lizards posed as the less inflammatory chameleons. But lastly and perhaps most importantly, it was their great numbers that protected lizard-wearers from notions of impropriety, for etiquette decreed that 'it is as well to do as others do'.[53]

The correspondent of *L'Illustration*, in any case, was quite adamant that the tortoises were 'entirely French, entirely Parisian. – Still another symptom of our decadence! Oh, that we might restore our sumptuary laws!'[54] And yet, it was no sumptuary law that did away with the tortoise as a decadent ornament – but its very rise into the ranks of fashion.

À rebours! A Decadent Counter-Culture of Jewellery

The *tortue-bijou*, we can summarise, caused rather an outrage across the Western media when it was first sold in Paris, being associated with a decadent *demi-monde*. Already in late January of 1898, however, against all hopeful prophecies of British journalists, the tortoises were imported to

London – and henceforth worn by women of correct society. One 'crazily fashionable' Londoner even gave a tea party in honour of hers.[55] By June, they sold exceedingly well:

> I heard last week that some of the little jewelled tortoises that Christabel wrote us about some months ago from Paris were to be seen at Elfrida's pretty bonnet-shop in Sloane-street. The very morning I heard it I started off full of curiosity, and found that all had been sold except one. You may fancy what a demand there was for them. The one remaining had a coat of mail composed of diamonds and sapphires, and for tethering purposes a long chain of finest gold workmanship.[56]

In London, accusations of decadence quieted: 'It might be supposed that women of refinement would find it particularly loathsome to have an animal crawling and wriggling over them, but, so far from that being the case, the demand for baby tortoises at present exceeds the supply.'[57] Indeed, the up-to-date Londoner simply needed a tortoise of her own. 'If you wish to be on the very crest of the wave of fashion, you must wear a tortoise', she was advised: 'An imitation one will do, but have a real one for choice.'[58] Inanimate ones were soon widely available, 'studded with stones, after the "real things [*sic*]" jewelled coat'.[59] The *tortue-bijou* had increased the demand for inanimate tortoise brooches, cold metal further tempering the potential for scandal [fig. 8].[60]

This development seems hardly surprising. After all, how subversive could it be to import a fashionable fad – in an age when following the fashion was the fashion? Reproach had already been suffered – by others. Reflecting on the fin de siècle in 1929, the historian Gertrude Aretz noted:

> The *demi-monde* is, so to speak, leading in matters of elegance, even though the lady of society may not fain admit it. And yet, the *demi-mondaine* is usually the trailblazer of a new fashion. She is the first to dare to take on a new extravagance, and the others only follow once they no longer risk being stared at or appearing provocative.[61]

Indeed, an important jewellery periodical noted in 1908: 'The name of an actress makes an excellent advertisement for the article.'[62] Mary Garden's coiffure as Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, for instance, sparked a fashion for 'metal bandeaux crossing the brow' in 1910, although – or precisely because – police cancelled Garden's performance in Chicago for being indecent.[63]

Fig. 8: Top: A tortoise bar brooch, British, c. 1900. Bottom: An unusually naturalistic tortoise stickpin, perhaps created in the wake of the *tortue-bijou* craze, Paris, c. 1890s. © Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.

Yet what of the discerning eccentric, once her extravagance had been appropriated by the mainstream? Asked by an interviewer what she thought of *les modes*, Sarah Bernhardt once replied: 'Not very much. I live so completely beyond their tyranny that I never trouble myself about them.'[64] And yet, this statement was inherently one of defiance in an age in which 'taste will dictate an observance of fashion' to woman.[65] Paradoxically, the woman inclined to communicate her disregard of fashion – must also observe fashion, so as to distance herself. McCracken's fashion theory, building on notions outlined by Simmel in 1905, describes fashion's dynamics as 'an upward "chase and flight" pattern created by a subordinate social group that "hunts" upper class status markers, and a superordinate social group that moves on in hasty flight to new ones'.[66] Yet with regard to some aspects of fin-de-siècle fashion, it is not the upper classes who are chased, for their social status depends on *following* the fashion to communicate obedience to the social order. Instead, it is the society woman who briefly becomes subordinate to the deviant and dynamic spirit of the *demi-mondaine* – and the *demi-mondaine* whose flight of fancy soon takes her elsewhere. What comes

to mind is a characterisation of the sometime-decadent writer Hans von Kahlenberg (Helene Keßler), whom feminist scholar Gertrud Bäumer diagnosed with 'a longing for freedom, […] that becomes an anarchistic individualism, contemptuous of the very boundaries that it yet requires to keep a distance between itself and the masses'.[67]

Fig. 9: A plate of current jewellery designs showing a *tortue-bijou* in the upper left corner. From *Le Bijou*, 25 (March 1898), pl. 5. Bibliothèque Forney, Paris.

Let us apply this notion to our tortoise. By March 1898, the Parisian periodical *Le Bijou* – conceived to inform industry professionals of recent tendencies – featured a *tortue-bijou* next to modern rings, brooches, a diamond tiara [fig. 9]. That very month, 'the neurotic beauties of Paris'[68] moved on:

> The tiny jewelled tortoise, lately the rage in Paris, was not a very fascinating feminine ornament, but what shall be said of its latest successor, a dead spider? If any Englishwoman wants to adopt the latest Parisian *cri* she must wear five rings on her five fingers, each set with a different stone and connected by tiny gold chains with a bracelet displaying the same jewels. Clasping the chains between the rings and the bracelet is a gold medallion containing a dead spider under glass, surrounded by a border of pearls and diamonds. This medallion is arranged to come just on the back of the hand.[69]

If ornaments of contemporary production were so easily absorbed by the mainstream, being readily available, it seemed only logical to turn to rarer items. And indeed, the woman who lived *à rebours* also looked to the antique or outlandish, much like Dorian Gray preferably contemplates the tales of historical jewels which he terms 'the luxury of the dead'.[70] This tendency predated the *tortue-bijou.* Amidst the jewellery boom of the industrial age, it had begun as the Aesthetic pursuit of beauty. In 1878, Mrs Haweis included a chapter on 'Oriental and Ancient Ornaments' in her book *The Art of Beauty*, itself a great influence on Aesthetic dress.[71] Although painters such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti had long bedecked their models in quaint or foreign ornaments, in which some women of the Pre-Raphaelite circle also took an interest, Haweis encouraged a wider female readership to school their gaze and seek out antique ornaments.[72] An 1884 article titled *The Modern Woman* shows that this impulse was soon coupled with a decadent sensibility:

> Luxury adds greatly to the satisfaction of these unquiet minds, longing for new sensations […]. A woman's jewelry has a language and a sentiment of its own, being no longer bought at random of the nearest dealer in such wares, but searched for and carefully chosen from a choice collection. She haunts bric-à-brac shops and studies the periods to which their treasures belong.[73]

Notably, George C. Schoolfield identified 'detailed learnedness' as a 'decadent trait' *à la* Des Esseintes.[74] The same applied to unusual gemstones. Once diamonds had become more widely available in the 1880s (following the discovery of the South African diamond deposits in 1869), 'aesthetic jewels' began to favour less valuable but heretofore rarely used stones such as tourmalines, moonstones, or olivines, thus achieving designs which might 'express the personality of the artist, or the person for whom the piece is meant'.[75] Huysmans had not conceived Des Esseintes' rejection of 'civilized and familiar' gems in favour of 'astonishing and bizarre stones' in a vacuum, after all.[76]

Although connoisseurship was indeed practised with regard to gemstones and Western antiques, the jewellery box of the decadent woman also included the loots of colonialism, handled with little sensitivity but a great appetite for shock value. The Aesthetic pursuit of beauty morphed, at least to an extent, into a pursuit of provocation. An 1887 article reported of a 'rage for antique and quaint jewellery' in defiance of 'good taste':

> Tired of the elegant ornaments with which her dressing-case is replete, seemingly because they are all in good taste and therefore present no striking peculiarity to the eye, my lady starts in quest of something odd – something that will arrest the attention. She delights in Indian moonstones cut into hideous, leering demons' heads, with deep-set diamond or ruby eyes. She orders opals in heavy, rude settings, as they are made by Indian smiths with no other tools than a charcoal brazier and a hammer. A heavy silver belt, fashioned generations ago by village artisans, is her special delight.[77]

From this soil, there grew strange flowers indeed. In 1891, one Mrs James E. White of Chicago was said to have possessed 'a pin of singular beauty and uniqueness': the red-pupilled eye of a mummy from a Chilean tomb.[78] Some years later, a 'Chicago merchant's wife', possibly the same woman, exhibited a necklace 'of three rows of human eyes, in a perfect state of preservation – they were contributed by a number of Peruvian mummies – polished and mounted in gold'.[79]

Perhaps surprisingly, it was in engagement rings that the race for originality found a distinct expression: from the late 1880s, they came to be seen as emblematic of the recipient's taste and the giver's knowledge thereof, and a counter-culture of unusual rings emerged as a reaction against conventional patterns. 'A ring made entirely of white pearls, or of pearls and brilliants, is for first communion', quipped a correspondent of *La Vie Parisienne* in 1889. The cluster, 'that vulgar ring that's available everywhere', was just as damnable. Instead the author advised prospective grooms, not entirely tongue-in-cheek:

> Does she like the eccentric…? Or perhaps the original? Does she require a ring from across the ocean, taken off the finger of an Indian chieftainess, or given by a nabob to a favourite sultana? Is she dreaming of a gold ring, the purest gold without alloys, found in a sarcophagus... and previously worn by whom? By a mummy![80]

Historical designs were revived, but one also heard of a London beauty who wore a ring carved from lion's bone, 'set with a large ruby that radiates true "streams of blood"',[81] or an American who was gifted a ring 'which had been for more than a thousand years on the finger of a Hindoo

idol'.[82] Thus when Marie Madeleine opened her debut volume of decadent poems with a prayer to Aphrodite in 1900, and sang of craving 'as much jewels, as much tinsel / as some ancient pagan idol', such literary wiles were gleaned from life.[83]

To Max Nordau, a conglomerated attire of 'garments from all eras of history and all corners of the world' epitomised the hateful and attention-seeking spirit of the fin de siècle – indeed, disobedience to nature and society.[84] Yet those who adorned themselves in jewellery of historical and foreign origins may have enjoyed such displays of disobedience for their positively Nietzschean obverse: in an age in which compliance with the *bon ton* was everything, the assertion of outrageous individual taste could signal the presence of a mind not fettered by convention, courageous enough to bear scorn and criticism.

Originality and defiance, then, are the filters through which antiques, looted artefacts, and contemporary animal ornaments trickle into our jewel-box of decadence. No-one knew this better than Liane de Pougy, the most literary of all courtesans, and lover of subversive jewels. When she let the protagonist of her novel *Idylle Saphique* – who, naturally, adores Lalique – erupt into a mania for decadent self-expression, she adorned her with 'baroque sapphires' and 'byzantine necklaces', imbued her with a craving for ornaments in the likeness of 'frogs, mythical creatures, chimeras, dragons, yellow and black cats, crocodiles'.[85] In fact, it is Pougy herself who provides us with the rare sight of a *tortue-bijou* in situ: in a photograph by Nadar, adorned with all the diamonds a lowborn woman was never meant to possess, a tortoise's shell appears to be peeking out from beneath the tulle at her shoulder – the left shoulder, considered 'the orthodox place for wearing this peculiar decoration' [fig. 10].[86]

Yet unlike the treasures of bygone times, or curiosities procured from distant countries, a decadent jewel of contemporary production was doomed to lose its transgressive value once the *demi-monde* had absorbed the moral shock and paved the way for a new fashion. Thus the peculiar case of the *tortue-bijou* is well-suited to illustrate the fluid nature of decadent jewellery, and moreover why it is best glimpsed through a close study of ephemera: it never solidified into a type, for to run *à rebours* was its very course.

Fig. 10: Liane de Pougy by Nadar, unknown date (after 1889). Biblioteca Virtual del Patrimonio Bibliográfico, licensed under CC BY 4.0. Source: https://bvpb.mcu.es/es/consulta/registro.do?id=490536 [accessed July 2025], detail highlighting the tortoise added by author.

[1] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, trans. John Howard (Lieber & Lewis, 1922), p. 76.
[2] Tiburge, 'Causerie', *Les Veillées des Chaumières*, 12 February 1898, pp. 237-38 (p. 238).
[3] Shirley Bury, *Jewellery: The International Era 1789-1910*, 2 vols (Antique Collector's Club, 1997), II, p. 751. In criticism, the *tortue-bijou* is also briefly mentioned, although with an incorrect date, by Antoine Bertrand in *Les curiosités esthétiques de Robert de Montesquiou*, Vol. I (Droz, 1996), p. 75, who in turn refers to literary criticism of Paul-Jean Toulet's 1905 novel *Mon Amie Nane* wherein a young man is at one point in charge of replacing the diamond-encrusted tortoises of a wealthy woman once they die.
[4] 'A jeweller in the Rue de la Paix conceived the wild idea …'. Sybil, 'Ladies' Pages', *The Illustrated London News*, 29 January 1898, n. p.
[5] Faverolles, 'La vie à Paris', *Revue pour les Jeunes Filles,* 1 December 1897, pp. 328-36 (pp. 335-36). For the sake of readability, quotations from the French and German in the main body of text have been translated by the author unless otherwise specified.
[6] See [Anon.], 'Moden', *Illustrirte Zeitung*, 110 (1898), p. 270, and Edmond Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', *L'Illustration*, 15 January 1898, p. 53.
[7] Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 53. Most of this article appeared in translation in the US: [Anon.], 'Jeweled Tortoises the Paris Fad', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 2 February 1898, p. 45.
[8] [Anon.], 'A Chat About London Fashions', *The North British Daily Mail*, 11 June 1898, p. 3.
[9] See Jules Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1897* (Charpentier, 1898), p. 423, and [Anon.], 'Paris Notes', *Freeman's Journal*, 18 January 1898, p. 2.
[10] [Anon.], 'Reigning Fashions in Paris', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 2 February 1898, p. 15.

[11] Ella de Campo Bello, 'Paris Letter', *The Queen*, 1 January 1898, p. 27.
[12] Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 53.
[13] [Anon.], 'A Chat About London Fashions', p. 3.
[14] Jaseur, 'Reigning Fashions in Paris', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 2 February 1898, p. 15.
[15] Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1897*, p. 423.
[16] Several sources report of the involvement of the *Société*, for instance: [Anon.], 'Faits Divers', *L'Opinion Publique*, 11 January 1898, p. 5.
[17] Aurora, 'Ladies' Column', *The Heywood Adviser*, 1 July 1898, p. 3.
[18] Clare, 'Girls' Gossip', *Truth*, 2 June 1898, pp. 44-45 (p. 44).
[19] Campo Bello, 'Paris Letter', p. 27.
[20] Madame Qui Vive, 'Concerning Dress', *The Westminster Gazette*, 20 January 1898, p. 3.
[21] Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 45.
[22] Gil, 'Échoes. La Femme à la Tortue', *Les Droits de l'Homme*, 9 June 1898, n. p.
[23] Camille Legrand, 'La Quinzaine Parisienne', *Revue Illustrée*, 15 December 1897, n. p.
[24] For a more detailed discussion of novelty jewellery, see Charlotte Gere/Judy Rudoe: *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria* (The British Museum Press, 2010), pp. 190-247. A hummingbird necklace has been preserved in the British Museum, museum number 1993,0205.1.
[25] [Anon.], 'Chitchat on Fashions for October', *Godey's Ladies Book*, 101 (October 1880), pp. 395-98 (p. 398).
[26] [Anon.], 'Novelties', *The Keystone*, 8 (November 1887), p. 22.
[27] See Louise Alquié de Rieusseyroux Alq, *Le Nouveau Savoir-Vivre Universel*, Vol. I, Nouvelle Édition (Bureaux des Causeries Familières, 1883), pp. 208-09. The same advice was given in German etiquette columns.
[28] Emilie Bratzky, 'Frauenschmuck', *Der Bazar*, 40 (29 January 1894), p. 57.
[29] [Anon.], 'Wearing Jewelry. Rules to Govern Women Who Would Study Good Form', *The Paterson Daily Press*, Evening Issue, 20 September 1895, p. 3.
[30] Anna Behnisch, 'Wie schmücken wir uns?', *Handels-Zeitung und Kunstgewerbe-Blatt für die Gold u. Silberwaren-Industrie*, 2 (15 September 1899), pp. 206-08 (p. 208). Becker, too, notes that 'debates about the motifs which should or should not be used in jewelry went so far as to suggest banning representations of human figures and animals, and only allowing subjects such as butterflies, dragonflies and swallows', however cites no source for this information. Vivienne Becker, *Art Nouveau Jewelry* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 65.
[31] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains*, 5th edn (Librairie Plon, 1908), p. 142.
[32] The symbolic value of snake jewellery is highly contextual, as it shifted several times throughout the nineteenth century. As to the potential of snake jewellery towards 'performing a demonic persona' during the fin de siècle, see Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism. Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014), pp. 555-64.
[33] Svelt, 'Élégances Parisiennes', *La Vie Parisienne*, 4 December 1897, p. 695.
[34] [Anon.], '[The latest fad…]', *The Umpire*, 9 January 1898, n. p.
[35] Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1897*, p. 422.
[36] René Binet, 'Orfèvrerie et Bijoux', *Art et Décoration*, 1 (1897), pp. 68-71 (p. 68).
[37] Bury, *Jewellery: The International Era 1789-1910*, II, p. 749.
[38] The ring is kept in the *Musée des arts décoratifs*, Paris, Inv. 40105.
[39] Maria Eichhorn (Dolorosa), *Tagebuch einer Erzieherin* (Jean Meslier, 2017), p. 75. First published 1904.
[40] Robinson, 'Tortues-Bijoux', *Le Petit Moniteur*, 7 January 1898, n. p.
[41] Simplice, 'Causerie', *La Petite Gironde*, 7 January 1898, n. p. (p. 2).
[42] Robinson, 'Tortues-Bijoux', n. p.
[43] [Anon.], 'Paris Notes', *Freeman's Journal*, 18 January 1898, p. 2.
[44] Faverolles, 'La vie à Paris', p. 335.
[45] Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Sarah Bernhardt* (Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), p. 101.
[46] [Anon.], 'Fashion and Social Notes', *The Stratford-Upon-Avon Herald*, 22 April 1898, p. 6.
[47] [Anon.], 'Paris Notes', p. 2.
[48] Edward Milvain, '"Chameleon" Lizards', *The Youth's Companion*, 21 June 1894, pp. 287-88.
[49] P…, 'A Curious Ornament', *To-Day*, Vol. 3 (9 June 1894), p. 136.
[50] [Anon.], *Cruelty to Chameleons*, *The Argosy*, 3 March 1894, p. 386.
[51] P…, 'A Curious Ornament', p. 136.
[52] Charles Read Bacon, ed., *The Reporter's Nosegay. Brightest and Best Blossoms from the Philadelphia Record's Famous Column* (Nosegay Publishing Co., 1896), n. p.
[53] John H. Young, *Our Deportment or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society* (F. B. Dickerson, 1889), p. 316.
[54] Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 53.
[55] See Sybil, 'Ladies' Pages', n. p.
[56] Clare, 'Girls' Gossip', *Truth*, 2 June 1898, pp. 44-45 (p. 44).
[57] [Anon.], 'A Chat About London Fashions', *The North British Daily Mail*, 11 June 1898, p. 3.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Sybil, 'Answers to Correspondents', *The Sketch*, Vol. 23 (5 October 1898), p. 500.

[60] For instance, three different diamond tortoise pins were offered in the 1901 catalogue of the Goldsmiths & Silversmiths Company, London. See Peter Hinks, ed., *Viktorianischer Schmuck* (Olms, 1996), pp. 46 and 49.
[61] Gertrude Aretz, *Die elegante Frau* (Grethlein, 1929), pp. 368-69.
[62] [Anon.], 'Stage Exploitation of Jewelry', *The Keystone*, 29 (June 1908), p. 965.
[63] Joel Feder, 'The Stage as a Sartorial Prophet', *The Ottawa Citizen*, 7 January 1910, n. p.
[64] [Anon.], 'Some of Fashion's Latest Fancies', *The Baltimore American*, 20 July 1902, p. 27.
[65] Thos. E. Hill, *The New Revised Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms* (W. B. Conkey, 1897), p. 181.
[66] Grant McCracken, 'The Trickle-Down-Theory Rehabilitated', in Michael R. Solomon, ed., *The Psychology of Fashion* (Lexington, 1985), pp. 39-54 (p. 40). See also Georg Simmel, 'Philosophie der Mode', in *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essais* (Klinkhardt, 1911), pp. 29-64. First appeared in 1905.
[67] Dr. Getrud Bäumer, 'Hans von Kahlenberg', *Das Literarische Echo*, 10 (1907-08), pp. 1499-506 (p. 1500).
[68] [Anon.], 'Echoes de Partout. Un Nouveau Bijou Parisien', *Istanboul*, 19 March 1898, n. p.
[69] Lady Violet Greville, 'Place aux Dames', *The Graphic*, 26 March 1898, p. 390. The same was reported by many other sources, French and English.
[70] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 132.
[71] See Mrs H. R. Haweis, *The Art of Beauty* (Harper & Brothers, 1878), pp. 107-113.
[72] For a detailed discussion of Aesthetic jewellery, see Charlotte Gere & Geoffrey C. Munn, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and "Pre-Raphaelite" Fashion', in *Pre-Raphaelite to Arts & Crafts Jewellery* (Antique Collectors' Club, 1996), pp. 109-61.
[73] L. D. Ventura, 'The Modern Woman', *Boston Evening Transcript*, 10 December 1884, p. 6.
[74] George C. Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884–1927* (Yale University Press, 2003), p. 8.
[75] Loraine Pearce Bucklin, 'Aesthetische Juwelen', *Journal der Goldschmiedekunst*, 8 (1888), pp. 21-22 (p. 21).
[76] Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, pp. 77-78.
[77] [Anon.], 'American Items', *The Watchmaker, Jeweller and Silversmith*, 1 August 1887, p. 27.
[78] [Anon.], 'Queer and Quaint', *The Manufacturing Jeweler*, 9 (1891), pp. 104-06 (p. 104).
[79] [Anon.], 'Unique Jewelry. Odd and Curious Things for Personal Adornment', *The Providence Journal*, 3 July 1899, p. 9.
[80] [Anon.], 'Conseils à ces Monsieurs', *La Vie Parisienne*, 43 (5 March 1889), p. 139.
[81] [Anon.], '"Fashionable" Verlobungsringe', *Deutsche Goldschmiedezeitung*, 3 (1900), p. 11.
[82] [Anon.], 'Fancies in Engagement Rings', *The Caroll Herald*, 3 December 1897, n. p.
[83] Marie Madeleine, 'Eine Priesterin der Aphrodite', in *Auf Kypros*, 10th edn. (Vita, 1900), pp. 1-5, p. 2.
[84] See Max Nordau, *Entartung*, I (Duncker, 1892), p. 19.
[85] Liane de Pougy, *Idylle Saphique* (Librairie de la Plume, 1901), p. 236.
[86] Clare, 'Girls' Gossip', p. 44.

Georges Eekhoud, *Escal-Vigor* (1899): A New Translation

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Introductory Notes

Georges Eekhoud's *Escal-Vigor*, first serialised in 1898 in the *Mercure de France* as 'Le Comte de la Digue' and published in full the following year, is a homoerotic and decadent novel that has only been translated into English once in the century since its publication.[1] The fairy-tale-like story follows Henry de Kehlmark, a young aristocrat who returns to his ancestral home of Escal-Vigor on the mythical island of Smaragdis, somewhere off the coast of the Low Countries. There he falls in love with the shepherd Guidon Govaertz, provoking the wrath of the villagers: in the novel's dénouement, Guidon is murdered by a mob of local women, and Kehlmark dies of a broken heart alongside his beloved.

Although to modern readers such a tale may seem poignant but hardly scandalous, the novel provoked a storm of controversy. Much like his French decadent contemporary Rachilde with *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), Eekhoud was prosecuted in 1900 for the perceived salaciousness of *Escal-Vigor*, whose unapologetically positive depiction of male homosexual desire scandalised both the courts and salons.[2] Reception among his decadent peers was sharply divided. Rachilde told readers of the *Mercure de France* that the book 'nous représente encore un hors les lois naturelles' [represents for us another rebel fighting against the natural order],[3] while Jean Lorrain condemned it as 'un mauvais livre qui sent l'ozone et le soufre d'un soir d'orage et l'haleine dangereuse du berger de feu' [a wicked book that smells of ozone and sulphur on a stormy night, and the dangerous breath of the fire shepherd].[4] As Mirande Lucien observes, Lorrain may have intended this as a warning, though given his notorious taste for scandal, it could equally be read as a compliment.[5]

This turbulence did little to generate commercial success. As Michael Rosenfeld notes, the very decision to translate the novel was 'une décision engagée' [a deliberate political choice],[6] while Catherine Gravet and Émile van Balberghe likewise remark that 'le militantisme "gay" d'Eekhoud, après le procès, est surtout diffusé à l'étranger' [Eekhoud's gay activism would be especially disseminated abroad following his trial].[7] The choice of Charles Carrington as editor of the 1909 English edition (the translator remains unknown) was no accident.[8] Carrington, pursued into exile from Britain for his salacious and pornographic publications, had become acquainted with Eekhoud, and the translation reflected their shared commitment to challenging censorship.[9]

Scholars have long debated the extent to which *Escal-Vigor* belongs to decadence. Mirande Lucien insists that 'par sa composition, *Escal-Vigor* est sans doute la moins décadente des œuvres d'Eekhoud' [in terms of composition, *Escal-Vigor* is without a doubt the least decadent of Eekhoud's works], pointing to its more linear narrative and pared-down style.[10] Yet Eekhoud himself is firmly situated within the decadent tradition. Philippe Chavasse locates his work at a distinctly Belgian cultural crossroads, shaped 'non seulement de Zola et des décadents, des symbolistes français et belges […] mais aussi de […] Barrès, d'Oscar Wilde, de Magnus Hirschfeld, de Wagner […] et de bien d'autres encore' [not only by Zola and the decadents, and by French and Belgian symbolists, but also by Barrès, Oscar Wilde, Magnus Hirschfeld, Wagner, and many others].[11] Paul Gorceix likewise observes that Belgian fin-de-siècle literature blurred its two dominant modes – naturalism and symbolism – 'jusqu'à se confondre parfois' [to the point of confusion at times].[12]

This ambiguity is itself typical of decadence. Clara Sadoun-Édouard reminds us that Jean de Palacio ranked *Escal-Vigor* among works worthy of a decadent bookshelf, and she identifies many of the novel's decadent markers, such as 'sa fascination pour la boue, les personnages d'aristocrate dégénérés ou esthètes' [its fascination with filth and its presentation of degenerate aristocrats or aesthetes].[13] Eric Lorio likewise notes that while the novel is often 'riche en violence et en sensualité' [rich in violence and sensuality], its style is also revolutionary: 'S'éloignant de la

pureté de la langue, il adopte un vocabulaire truculent, coloré, émaillé d'expressions populaires, qui donne aux tableaux qu'il dépeint un grand accent de vérité' [Moving away from linguistic purity, he adopts a colourful, earthy vocabulary peppered with popular expressions, which gives the scenes he depicts a strong sense of authenticity].[14]

Perhaps the most overtly decadent element of *Escal-Vigor* is its inset tale of the 'Berger de Feu' (Fire Shepherd), the fairy tale within the fairy tale, condemned/praised by Jean Lorrain, and which I have chosen to translate here. Used as an expository device to allow Kehlmark and Guidon to admit their feelings to one another, the story recounts how Gérard, a feral shepherd, falls in love with Étienne, his adopted brother. When Étienne's parents attempt to marry him to a cousin, Gérard's jealousy erupts; he burns down the family home with the parents and fiancée inside, seizes Étienne, and ultimately perishes with him in a storm of fire. The parallels with the main plot are unmistakeable (Kehlmark/Gérard and Guidon/Étienne) but the tale also foreshadows the novel's tragic end. More than a rustic interlude, it stages a decadent doubling in which folklore and 'real life' collapse into each other.[15] Gérard embodies the marginal outsider so central to decadent fiction: sexually ambiguous, Dionysian in his instincts. The tale culminates in ecstatic destruction, whereby erotic desire and annihilation merge into sublime martyrdom. As such, it functions as a decadent parable of outlawed desire exalted by its own ruin, an additional layer to Eekhoud's social critique and literary activism.

Translator's Note

Carrington's 1909 edition remains readable and faithful to 'the French of George [*sic*] Eekhoud', but its archaic register reflects its time and often mutes the text's homoerotic sensuality.[16] In this translation I have aimed for a modern, accessible idiom that captures the emotion of the original while preserving nuance, aligning with a contemporary queer-affirmative reading. While Carrington occasionally strays closer to paraphrase, I have sought fidelity to Eekhoud's language, expanding only as needed for anglophone readers.

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Escal-Vigor (1899)

Georges Eekhoud

[Chapter IV: Henry de Kehlmark and his protégé, Guidon Govaertz are sitting on the dyke, overlooking the countryside, when a cloud formation reminds Henry of the legend of the Fire Shepherd.]

'Do you know the real story of the Fire Shepherd you were talking about earlier … I can't help but think that people have gotten it wrong. I've thought about it and have come up with a more accurate version… I have listened to the voices of the haunted landscape, on nights just like this, preferably in those heather-dusted nooks, where sadness used to reign even more sorrowfully than elsewhere, where the plain and the horizon distilled their heavy melancholy and their restless slumber. Some of the details of the landscape take on a poignant, almost fateful significance, as you will have noticed while tending your sheep. It's almost as if nature was suffering from remorse. The clouds stop and their funeral procession gathers over a pool destined for a drowning, for a theatre of crime and suicide… My dear boy, so many good resolutions have been overturned by weather like that… It's much better to avoid your own mishap by thinking of other people's misfortunes… I've even come to sympathise with the fate of Cain's damned brother. I pity him, not his victims… I find him beautiful and attractive, but also sinister… But I'm talking nonsense, and telling you stories to scare you, like old women do at night by the fire…'

'No, no; please go on; you're such a good storyteller, your words are so meaningful; your language often moves me to tears and claws at my heart.'

'So be it. The time is right… and since we're in a good place, I must tell you how much I identify with the suffering of the fiery shepherd. He has long haunted the violet, nocturnal heather of my soul… I often find myself, to my surprise, prowling in spirit at his side, among his sulphurous flock, guided by the gestures of his staff reddened by hellfire, bitten at the heels by his black and red dog which resembles a half-burnt ember, an ember from the eternal furnace; the dog which shares his master's fate, finds half of its body once more engulfed in flames when the other half has returned to a lifelike appearance…

[Henry begins his tale:]

This is what these spirits have told me: Once upon a time, long, long ago, Gérard was the shepherd of a couple of old, miserly peasants who lived in a remote and isolated region of Brabant, covered in heaths and steppes like down there in Klaarvatsch. Nobody knew where he had come from. When he was discovered for the first time, he may have been fifteen years old; he ran about scantily clad; he looked like a wild animal, and he had to be taught to speak, like a child. Chancing their arm, the old misers had him baptised, and, having taken him into their service, trained him to graze their flock. He only cost them his pittance, which was quite frugal, and by taking him in they could pretend they had done a good deed.

Although nobody knew which woodland creatures had given birth to him, and even though he was rejected by most people, Mother Nature must have undoubtedly cherished this wild boy because he never seemed to age but rather became ever more strong and handsome. He was

a tall boy, with such long, unruly locks that tawny curls fell constantly over his forehead and his heavenly eyes, which seemed to contain the infinite depths of eternity.

No matter how much they tried to educate him in the ways of religion, he never found much meaning in our pageantry and narrow rituals. Simple nature remained his role model and his advisor. In other words, he only listened to his own instincts.

However, late in life, his master and mistress had a child, a sickly little boy they called Étienne, or affectionately Tiennet for short. As his parents were too old to care for him, Gérard raised him, starting by choosing two of his favourite sheep as wetnurses. Tiennet grew into a chubby, rosy child, as pretty as a cherub. Gérard continued to keep the best milk from his flock for him, as well as the sweetest fruits, and eggs from woodpigeons and pheasants. He loved him like no one had ever loved another person – his poor, wild heart had never been able to share the treasures it had hoarded for so long. Tiennet chirped like a bird; he was as fair as Gérard was dark; and the little one ordered the big, fierce boy around. The selfish and fastidious couple let them roam around and live together.

Whenever they would bathe in the Démer river, Gérard would admire Tiennet's slender, graceful body; he couldn't think of anything as pleasurable as embracing his supple, warm body, of carrying him in his arms forever and far away, into the depths of the woods where they would end up rolling among the ferns and the mosses. Gérárd would tickle Tiennet by running his lips over his pink skin. The child would laugh and try to escape, kicking his tiny feet or landing blows on the strong flanks of the strong boy, who was only too happy to take these blows instead of caresses…

This brief, pastoral romance lasted until the day Tiennet's parents were visited by two cousins accompanied by Wanna, a fair girl of Tiennet's age, as brisk and lively as a clear frosty dawn, and as enticing as a wild strawberry. The parents on both sides agreed to marry the children, who had taken an instant liking to each other.

From the moment that little Wanna arrived, Gérard, in spite of his strength, was saddened by the attention his little Tiennet would pay to his gentle cousin. Tiennet was a spoiled child who only loved Gérard as he would have loved a loyal and docile dog, an amiable playmate who was ready to humour all of his whims. Gérard would look at Wanna with dark, murderous eyes, but the little blonde girl laughed it off and to spite him, being mischievous and shrewd, she would often kidnap Tiennet, or run away to hide so that he would join her far from the jealous boy.

Gérard, at the end of his tether, urged his friend not to marry. Tiennet laughed in his face.

'Are you crazy, my dear friend? It's the law of nature. Look at the animals on our farm, look at the wild beasts in the woods!'

'Oh for pity's sake! I don't know what I feel, but I want you all to myself, without sharing… Why should we copy the animals, and do as others do? Are we not enough? Do you think you'll ever be as loved by anyone as much as I love you? As far as we're concerned, let's stop bringing more creatures into the world – aren't there enough already? Let's live for ourselves, for us alone. Tiennet, please; it's you that I want, all to myself, and you alone. I don't know what you are, if you're a man like any other; but to me you're incomparable…Oh, why did she have to come between us? No, I'm not explaining myself well… Your bewildered eyes are killing me… Listen, my whole body aches when I know you're with her. An awful heat runs through my blood. Your entwined hands furrow gently into my breast and slash at my heart with their nails. Oh, my little Tiennet, I die when I think that she'll kiss your lips, and that she'll take you far away from here and that I will have to give you up forever to this thief of my life…'

Tiennet smiled, a little ruefully all the same, trying to reason with him.

'You big fool, my feelings for you won't change. Don't you see, am I not still the same? We will still see each other as we have always done. You will follow me with her…'

But the poor shepherd couldn't see reason.

As the fatal day approached, Gérard withered away, lost his appetite, lost all love for the things he used to take joy in, neglected his flock, and his behaviour even became so worrying that his masters sent him to the parish priest. Perhaps he had been cursed! Shepherds are known to be witches, and so vulnerable to the curses of their own kind. Gérard, candid as ever, simply told the priest of his deep sadness. However, no sooner had Gérard begun to speak than the holy man growled, 'Begone, cursed man! Your presence stinks… I don't know what's keeping me from handing you over to the magistrate[17] of my Lord, the Duke of Brabant… and from having you burned in the town square, as they do to your kind… get out of here at once. Your crime has cut you off from the community of the faithful… No one can absolve you but the Pope of Rome himself! Throw yourself at his feet… You have only sinned in thought so far – that's the only reason why I'm not calling down the flames of the purifying pyre on your cursed flesh right now!'

Gerard returned to his masters' house, unashamed but more desperate than ever. He was careful not to recount in detail what had happened between the minister of God and himself, but allowed himself to declare that he would undertake a long pilgrimage to atone for a deadly sin… He would set out that very night, when everyone was asleep, to avoid any indiscreet or curious onlookers… For one last favour, he asked Tiennet to accompany him for a while as he left their cottage. Wanna urged her fiancé to stay, but Tiennet took pity on his friend, and, faced with the prospect of never seeing him ever again, he was gripped by the lingering and tender memories of days gone by…

'Brother, what have you done, that is so serious for you to leave us?' Tiennet asked his loyal friend several times as they walked away. But the other boy remained silent, staring at him forlornly and shaking his head.

They walked for a long time, their hearts in their throats, without exchanging a single word; but when they reached the crossroads where they were to embrace for one last time, Gérard suddenly turned around and showed Tiennet a red glow on the horizon, in the direction from where they had set off.

Then, with a wild laugh, he said, 'Look, it's the old couples' house that is burning, and Wanna, your Wanna – is burning along with them! … Now you belong to me forever!'

And he frantically embraced the young man who struggled to get free from him.

'Gérard! You're scaring me! Help! A madman[18] is throttling me!'

'You're mine; I am the one who gave you life. I am more than your mother, don't you get it; that's why I'm more to you than any other woman should ever be!… You asked for the secret reason of why I was leaving… you are about to find out. Their priest has cursed me. I am doomed to the eternal fire. Well, I am rushing to plunge myself into that fire in anticipation, but not before suckling on the very source of your life, not before feasting on your cherry-red lips, those succulent fruits that will quench my thirst eternally in the heart of that infernal furnace. You're mine! Mine!'

Suddenly a storm broke out, while the wretch cried out to heaven for vengeance.

'Ah', he rejoiced, 'flames of punishment, be my pyre of joy! Oh Nature, burn me, consume me! Whether you come, as they say, from God, or from the Devil, what does it matter to me? Come, unite us in death!… Rise up, beautiful storm of deliverance! I have nothing else to lose, the fiery torrents will be a cool, clear stream upon my flesh, compared to the love that devours and has driven me to despair!... Come!'

And the damned man held Tiennet against his heart, held him so hard he could hardly breathe, pressed his lips to his and did not let go until the fire from heaven had enveloped them both…

At this point of his tragic recitation, Kelhmark's voice faded to a whisper, as if he were breathing his last breath.

'Oh, my dear boy', he moaned, falling at the young shepherd's feet, 'I love you madly, I love you as much as Gérard loved Tiennet.'

'I love you too, dear master; with all my heart', Guidon replied, throwing his arms around his neck. 'I am yours, and yours alone without sharing… Have you only realised this now? Do whatever you want with me!'

'I only had to see you', Kehlmark sighed, 'to feel compassion for your unrecognised and proudly virginal beauty. My love came from that compassion.'

'Me too', stuttered the young Govaertz, 'I only had to see you to guess that you were sad and strong, and my devotion for you came from my worry for you!'

'The hateful way your father spoke of you', the earl[19] continued, 'made me feel sorry for you, and your sister's disdainful pout, the malice in her gaze, made you shine in my eyes with a permanently transfigured light. I did not dare declare my feelings before seeing you again, and I pretended to be indifferent to confuse your family and those overly abrupt friends of yours, whom I prevented that very evening from harassing you, simply by approaching their rowdy gang. My boy, the chosen one of my life!'

The lightning didn't strike them, but they heard a muffled cry, a sob, a rustling in the bushes behind them. Two indistinct figures fled into the darkness.

'Someone was listening to us!' said Kehlmark, who had now stood up and was scrutinising the thick darkness.

'Who cares? I am yours', Guidon whispered, pulling him close to him and snuggling up against his warm chest. 'You are everything to me, and I don't believe in fire from heaven! Before you, nobody had ever said a kind word to me… I had known only cruelty and harshness… You are my master and my love. Do what you want with me… your lips!'[20]

Escal-Vigor (1899)

Georges Eekhoud

Connais-tu l'histoire véritable du Berger de Feu dont tu parlais tout à l'heure... J'ai tout lieu de croire qu'on la raconte mal... Je devine et me suggère une version plus exacte... J'ai confessé les paysages hantés, par des soirs analogues à celui-ci, de préférence ces coins de bruyère, où la tristesse régnait encore plus navrante qu'ailleurs, où la plaine et l'horizon quintessenciaient leur mélancolie lourde et leur ombrageux sommeil. Certains détails du paysage contractent, tu l'auras remarqué en gardant tes moutons, une signification poignante, presque fatidique. La nature paraît souffrir de remords. Les nuées arrêtent et accumulent leurs funèbres cortèges au-dessus d'une mare prédestinée à une noyade, à un théâtre de crime et de suicide...

Cher petit, que de bonnes résolutions ont chaviré par des temps pareils... Mieux vaut alors conjurer son propre danger en songeant aux catastrophes d'autrui... J'ai fini par compatir au sort du damné frère de Caïn. C'est lui que je plains et non plus ses victimes... Je le trouve superbe et attirant quoique sinistre... Mais je te raconte des bêtises, et te narre des histoires à faire peur, comme les bonnes femmes à la veillée...

— Non, non ; continuez ; vous contez si bien et vous mettez tant de choses dans des paroles ordinaires ; souvent votre langage me tire des larmes et du sang.

— Soit. L'heure est propice... Et puisque nous sommes si bien ici, il me tarde de te dire à quel point je participe à la détresse du pâtre ardent. Depuis longtemps il hante jusqu'à l'obsession la bruyère violette et nocturne de mon âme... Je me surprends à rôder en esprit à ses côtés, parmi ses ouailles sulfureuses, sous les gestes de sa houlette rougie par la géhenne, mordu aux talons par son chien noir et rouge comme un tison à moitié consumé, un tison de la fournaise éternelle ; le chien qui partage le sort de son maître et dont la moitié du corps recommence à flamber quand l'autre a repris une apparence de vie...

Voici ce que m'ont confié ces fantômes :

Il y a bien, bien longtemps, Gérard était le berger d'un couple de paysans vieux et avares, isolés dans un pays perdu de Brabant, fait de garigues et de steppes comme là-bas à Klaarvatsch. On ne savait d'où il était venu. Quand on le découvrit pour la première fois, il pouvait avoir quinze ans ; il courait à peine vêtu ; ses allures étaient celles d'un jeune fauve et il fallut lui apprendre à parler comme à un enfant. À tout hasard, les vieux avares le firent baptiser et, l'ayant pris à leur service, le dressèrent à paître leurs ouailles. Il ne leur coûtait que sa pitance, pis que frugale, et en le recueillant, ils eurent l'air de faire une bonne action.

Sans doute la mère nature chérissait ce libre garçon, car, engendré on ne sait par quelles créatures sylvestres, répudié par les hommes, il semblait ne point vieillir et devenait de plus en plus robuste et beau. C'était un grand garçon si chevelu que des boucles fauves lui retombaient constamment sur le front et sur ses yeux divins où semblaient se condenser l'infini et l'éternité.

On eut beau le catéchiser, il n'attacha jamais grande importance à nos momeries et à nos rites étroits. La simple nature demeura son modèle et sa conseillère. En d'autres termes, il n'écouta que ses instincts.

Cependant, sur le tard, bien âgés déjà, ses maîtres eurent un enfant, un tout chétif garçonnet auquel ils donnèrent le nom d'Étienne. Comme les parents étaient trop vieux pour le choyer, ce fut Gérard qui l'éleva en commençant par lui choisir pour nourrices deux de ses brebis favorites.

Tiennet poussa, devint un enfant potelé, rose, joli comme un chérubin. Gérard continuait à lui réserver le meilleur lait de ses ouailles, les fruits aromatiques, les œufs des ramiers et des faisans. Il l'adorait comme aucun être humain n'en adora un autre, son pauvre cœur de sauvage n'ayant jamais pu dépenser les trésors d'affection qu'il accumulait. Tiennet gazouillait comme un oiseau ; il était aussi blond que l'autre était brun ; et le petiot commandait au grand garçon farouche. Les vieux égoïstes et maniaques les laissèrent vaguer et vivre ensemble.

Lorsqu'ils se baignaient dans le Démer, Gérard admirait ce jeune corps svelte et gracieux ; et il ne connaissait point plaisir comparable à celui d'enlacer ce corps souple et tiède, de l'emporter dans ses bras, très longtemps et très loin, jusqu'au fond des bois où ils finissaient par rouler parmi les fougères et les mousses. Gérard chatouillait Tiennet en promenant ses lèvres sur sa peau rose. Et l'enfant riait, essayait de se dérober, ruait de ses petons et allongeait des tapes sur les flancs robustes du grand qui acceptait des coups pour des caresses...

Cette idylle dura jusqu'au jour où les parents de Tiennet reçurent la visite de deux cousins accompagnés de Wanna, une fillette blonde, de l'âge de Tiennet, guillerette et piquante comme une aube de claire gelée, appétissante comme une fraise des bois. Les vieux, de part et d'autre, convinrent de marier les enfants qui s'étaient plu d'emblée.

Dès l'arrivée de la petite Wanna, le grand Gérard était devenu tout triste à cause de l'attention que son petit Tiennet témoignait à sa gentille cousine. Tiennet, enfant gâté, n'aimait Gérard que comme il eût aimé un chien fidèle et docile, complaisant partenaire de ses jeux, prêt à passer par tous ses caprices. Gérard regardait Wanna avec des yeux sombres, des yeux homicides, mais la blondine se moquait du sauvage et pour le contrarier, espiègle et fine, elle enlevait le plus souvent Tiennet, ou courait se cacher pour qu'il la rejoignît loin du jaloux.

Gérard, à bout de patience, adjura son ami de ne pas se marier. Tiennet lui rit au nez. Es-tu fou, mon grand chéri ? C'est la loi de la nature. Vois les bêtes de notre ferme, vois les fauves des bois ! ...

— Oh pitié ! je ne sais ce que j'éprouve, mais je te veux pour moi seul, sans partage... Pourquoi imiter les bêtes, et faire comme les autres ? Ne nous suffisons-nous point ? Penses-tu être jamais aimé comme par ton Gérard ? Suspendons, en ce qui nous concerne, la création prolifique. Ne naît-il point assez de créatures ? Vivons pour nous deux, pour nous seuls. Tiennet, pitié ; c'est toi que je veux, tout à moi, toi seul. J'ignore ce que tu es, si tu es un homme comme les autres ; tu m'es incomparable... Oh ! qu'avait-elle besoin de venir entre nous ? Non, je m'explique mal... Tes yeux étonnés me tuent... Écoute, j'ai mal par tout le corps quand je te sais avec elle. Une chaleur mauvaise me circule dans le sang. Vos mains unies fouillent tout doucement sous ma poitrine pour me lacérer le cœur de leurs ongles. Oh, mon Tiennet, j'expire en songeant qu'elle t'embrassera sur les lèvres, qu'elle t'enlèvera loin d'ici et qu'il me faudra te céder pour toujours à cette voleuse de ma vie...

Tiennet souriait, un peu marri toutefois, s'efforçant de le rendre raisonnable : « Grand fou, mes sentiments pour toi ne changeront pas. Vois, ne suis-je pas toujours le même ? Nous nous rapprocherons comme par le passé. Tu me suivras avec elle... »

Mais la raison ne revenait pas au pauvre berger.

À mesure que la date fatale approchait Gérard dépérissait, perdait l'appétit, boudait tout ce qu'il célébrait autrefois, négligeait son troupeau, et ses allures devinrent même si inquiétantes que ses maîtres l'envoyèrent chez le curé. Peut-être lui avait-on jeté un sort ! les bergers sont tous un peu sorciers et exposés, eux-mêmes, aux maléfices de leurs pareils. Le candide Gérard raconta simplement sa profonde peine au prêtre. Au premier mot que le saint homme en entendit : « Va-t'en, maudit, gronda-t-il. Ta présence empeste... Je ne sais ce qui me retient de te livrer au drossard de monseigneur le duc de Brabant... et de te faire brûler sur le Grand Marché comme on fait à

ceux de ton espèce... tu partiras sur-le-champ. Ton crime t'a retranché de la communauté des fidèles... Nul ne peut t'absoudre que le pape de Rome ! Jette-toi à ses pieds... Tu n'as encore péché qu'en pensée. C'est même pourquoi je n'appelle point sur ta chair maudite les flammes du bûcher purificateur !

Gérard retourna auprès de ses maîtres, sans honte mais plus désespéré que jamais. Il se garda bien de raconter par le menu ce qui s'était passé entre le ministre de Dieu et lui, mais il se borna à déclarer qu'il allait entreprendre un long pèlerinage pour expier un péché trop capital... Cette nuit même il se mettrait en route, quand tous dormiraient, pour ne point rencontrer d'indiscrets et de curieux... Comme faveur suprême, il sollicita de Tiennet qu'il l'accompagnât jusqu'à une certaine distance de leur chaumière. Wanna voulut retenir son fiancé, mais Tiennet eut pitié de son ami, et, devant la perspective d'une séparation peut-être éternelle, il se rappela leur longue et absolue tendresse de jadis...

— Frère, quelle est la faute si grave qui t'exile ? demanda à plusieurs reprises Tiennet, en cheminant, à son féal. Mais l'autre se taisait et se bornait à le regarder longuement et à hocher la tête.

Ils marchèrent longtemps, le cœur étreint, sans échanger un mot ; mais quand ils atteignirent le carrefour où ils devaient s'embrasser pour la dernière fois, tout à coup, Gérard tourna les talons et montra à Tiennet une lueur rouge à l'horizon, du côté d'où ils étaient partis.

Alors, avec un rire sauvage : « Regarde, dit-il, c'est la maison des vieux qui flambe, et Wanna, ta Wanna brûle avec eux !... À présent, tu m'appartiens pour toujours !

Et il étreignit avec frénésie le jeune homme qui se débattait :

— Gérard ! Tu me fais peur ! Au secours ! Au loup-garou ! Il m'égorge...

— À moi ; c'est moi qui t'ai donné la vie. Je suis plus que ta mère, entends-tu ; donc plus que devrait être n'importe quelle femme !... Tu demandais la cause secrète de mon départ... Tu vas la savoir. Leur prêtre m'a maudit. Je suis voué au feu éternel. Eh bien, je cours me plonger par anticipation dans ce feu, mais après avoir aspiré jusqu'aux sources de ta vie, après m'être repu des groseilles de tes lèvres, ce fruit succulent qui me désaltérera éternellement au sein de la fournaise infernale !... À moi, à moi !...

Un orage subit se déchaîna, tandis que le misérable criait ainsi vengeance au ciel.

— Ah, jubilait-il, feu du châtiment, sois mon feu de joie ! Ô Nature, brûle-moi, consume-moi ! Que tu viennes, comme ils disent, de Dieu, ou que tu émanes du Diable, que m'importe ! Viens, réunis-nous dans la mort !... Lève-toi, bel orage de la délivrance ! Je n'ai plus rien à perdre, les torrents de feu seront ruisseau frais et limpide sur ma chair, comparés à l'amour qui me dévore et qui m'a désespéré !... Viens !...

Et le maudit pressa Tiennet contre son cœur, le pressa à l'étouffer, colla ses lèvres aux siennes, ne les en détacha plus, jusqu'à ce que le feu du ciel les eût enveloppés tous deux...

En ce point de cette improvisation pathétique, la voix de Kehlmark s'éteignit en un murmure comparable à un râle.

— Oh! mon doux enfant, gémit-il, en tombant aux pieds du petit pâtre, je t'aime éperdument, je t'aime autant que Gérard aimait Tiennet.

— Moi, je vous aime aussi, cher maître ; et cela de toutes mes forces répondit Guidon en lui jetant les bras au cou. Je suis à vous, à vous seul et sans partage... Est-ce seulement d'à présent que vous le savez ? Faites de moi tout ce que vous voudrez !...

— Je n'eus qu'à te voir, soupira Kehlmark, pour compatir à ta beauté méconnue et fièrement vierge. Mon amour naquit de cette compassion.

— Et moi, mon cher maître, balbutia le petit Govaertz, je n'eus qu'à vous voir pour vous deviner triste et redoutable, et ma dévotion s'engendra de mon anxiété !...

— Le mal prétendu que ton père disait de toi, reprenait le Dykgrave, décida de ma sympathie, et la moue dédaigneuse de ta sœur, la malveillance de son regard, t'illuminèrent désormais à mes yeux d'une permanente lumière de transfiguration !... Je n'osai me déclarer avant de t'avoir revu et je feignis de l'indifférence pour dérouter les tiens et ces camarades trop brusques que j'empêchai le même soir, rien qu'en me rapprochant de leur turbulent essaim, de te harceler, mon enfant, l'élu de ma vie !...

L'éclair ne les frappa point, mais ils entendirent un cri sourd, un sanglot, un froissement dans les broussailles derrière eux. Deux silhouettes indistinctes fuyaient par les ténèbres.

— On nous écoutait ! dit Kehlmark qui s'était mis debout et qui scrutait l'ombre épaisse.

— Qu'importe, je suis à vous, murmurait Guidon en l'attirant à lui et en se blottissant frileusement contre sa poitrine. Vous êtes tout pour moi, et je ne crois pas au feu du ciel ! Avant toi, personne ne m'avait dit la seule bonne parole... Je n'avais su que méchancetés et rudesses... Tu es mon maître et mon amour. Fais de moi ce que tu veux... Tes lèvres !... (106-114).

My thanks to friends and colleagues Ms Marie Hervieu (professeur agrégé) and Ms Veronica Szafranski, as well as the anonymous reviewer and the editors for their comments and feedback on this translation.

[1] Michael Rosenfeld, '*Escal Vigor – A Novel from the French of George Eekhoud*. Comment traduire l'innomable', in *Traduire la littérature belge francophone. Itinéraires des œuvres et des personnes*, ed. by Béatrice Costa and Catherine Grevet (Éditions UMONS, 2016), pp. 25–40. Rosenfeld notes that two English editions of *Escal-Vigor* have been published, although both are essentially identical. The first appeared in 1909, published by Charles Carrington as *Escal Vigor – A Novel from the French of George Eekhoud* (Brussels: The Gutemberg Press); the full text is available online here: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Escal_Vigor [last accessed 17/08/2025]. The second edition, published in the United States in the 1930s as *A Strange Love. A Novel of Abnormal Passion* (New York: Panurge Press, 1930), does not differ significantly in translation.

[2] Cf. Jacques Detemmerman, 'Le Procès d'*Escal-Vigor*', in 'Le Naturalisme et les lettres françaises de Belgique', ed. by Paul Delsemme and Raymond Trousson, *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 4-5 (1984), pp. 141-169.

[3] Rachilde, '*Escal-Vigor* ('Le Comte de la Digue') par Georges Eekhoud, "Revue du mois"', *Mercure de France*, 2 (1899), p. 466. All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

[4] Jean Lorrain in a letter to Georges Eekhoud, dated 09/03/1899 and found in Eekhoud's copy of Lorrain's *Contes pour lire à la chandelle*, Archives et Musée de la Littérature, Brussels, MLA 1524.

[5] Mirande Lucien, *Eekhoud le rauque* (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1999), p. 124. For more on Lorrain's ambiguity, see Mathew Rickard, *Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature* (Peter Lang, 2021), p. 64.

[6] Rosenfeld, p. 28.

[7] Catherine Gravet and Émile van Balberghe, "'Cher brutal ami de mon cœur." Quelques notes à propos de trois lettres et de quatre envois inédits de Max Waller à Georges Eekhoud', *Francophonia*, 10 (2001), pp. 37-60 (p. 51).

[8] Rosenfeld, p. 39.

[9] Rosenfeld, p. 28. See also Rachel Potter, 'Obscene Modernism and the Trade in Salacious Books', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16.1 (2009), pp. 87-104 (p. 98).

[10] Lucien, p. 124.

[11] Philippe Chavasse, 'Georges Eekhoud et son terroir incarné', *Excavatio*, 25 (2015), pp. 1-11, p. 3, https://sites.ualberta.ca/~aizen/archive/articles/v25/PDF3_Chavasse.pdf [accessed 30/07/2025].

[12] Paul Gorceix, *La Belgique fin-de-siècle* (Éditions Complexes, 1997), p. 38. Note here the blurring of Naturalism and Symbolism, similar to Arthur Symons's observation of Impressionism and Symbolism as branches of the Decadent movement ('The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's Magazine* (November 1893), p. 862).

[13] Clara Sadoun-Édouard, 'La Décadence en Belgique (1880-1910): Le plongeon dans *la plage fondante*' (projet d'article), *René Maizeroy: Pistes et enquêtes*, 11/07/21, https://rmaizeroy.hypotheses.org/category/decadence, [accessed 30/06/25].

[14] Eric Lorio, ed., *Escal-Vigor* [1899] by Georges Eekhoud (UltraLetters, 2015), p. iv. All quotes and extracts are taken from this edition unless stated otherwise, with citations integrated into the text.

[15] This use of folkloric foreshadowing is evident in the fate of Saint Olfgar, who is 'martyrisé avec toutes sortes d'inventions cannibalesques' (tortured with all sorts of cannibalistic inventions) by the women of the island, 'comme les bacchantes avec Orphée' (like the Bacchantes with Orpheus). Guidon's death at their hands occurs on the Feast of Saint Olfgar. (pp. 6-7).

[16] Rosenfeld observes that the 1909 translation, while openly celebrating homosexuality and thus flouting British law, simultaneously reflects contemporary medico-legal discourse through its use of the term 'unnatural'. Interestingly, this term is applied not to homosexuality itself but to the rape of Blandine, Kelhmark's ward, and to the marriage of his parents, who had claimed they did not wish to have children. Words related to homosexual 'sin', such as 'bougre' and 'infâme' remain relatively unchanged as 'bugger' and 'infamous'. Rosenfeld concludes:

> 'La traduction du roman s'avère fidèle à l'originel et aux intentions de son auteur, exprimant « l'amour sans nom » de la seule façon possible au tournant du siècle : par l'usage d'euphémismes ambigus, compris par les seules initiés, ou par des termes de condamnation qui sont plus une mise en accusation des esprits étroits qu'un jugement péjoratif sur les homosexuels' [The translation of the novel proves to be faithful to the original and to the intentions of its author, expressing 'the nameless love' in the only way possible at the turn of the century: by using ambiguous euphemisms, understood only by initiates, or through terms of condemnation which are more an accusation of narrow minds rather than a pejorative judgment of homosexuals] (Rosenfeld, p. 39).

Were I to translate the full text, I would, as in line with my intentions outlined here, seek to modernise these terms in line with a queer-affirmative reading, while providing notes to readers.

[17] The term *drossard* in the original text refers to a noble bailiff or officer of justice in parts of the Low Countries and German regions during the Middle Ages. While maintained in the 1909 Carrington translation, I have modernized the term to 'magistrate' for contemporary readership. Cf. 'DROSSARD, DROSSART, subst. masc.', CNRTL – Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, CNRS: https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/drossard [consulted 17/08/2025].

[18] Eekhoud refers to a 'loup-garou', rendered as 'wolfman' in 1909. Although usually translated as 'werewolf', the term can metaphorically denote a person or entity that inspires fear, or a simple call for help, hence my modulation here. Cf. 'LOUP-GAROU, subst. masc.', CNRTL <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/loup-garou> [accessed 17 August 2025].

[19] The title 'dykgrave' situates Henry de Kehlmark in the Low Countries. The novel describes Smaragdis, the Kehlmarks' demesne, as culturally Celtic, Germanic, or Scandinavian:

> Smaragdis ou l'île smaragdine dépend du royaume mi-germain et mi-celtique de Kerlingalande. À l'origine du commerce occidental, une colonie de marchands hanséates s'y fixa. Les Kehlmark prétendaient descendre des rois de mer ou vikings danois' [Smaragdis or the Emerald Isle is part of the half-Germanic, half-Celtic kingdom of Kerlingalande. At the dawn of Western trade, a colony of Hanseatic merchants settled there. The Kehlmarks claimed descent from kings of the sea or Danish Vikings] (p. 1).

Equally, one Kehlmark resided in the city of 'Anvers' [Antwerp (p. 2)]. The Dutch term 'dykgrave' or 'dikjgraaf' literally translates as 'count/earl of the dyke', historically denoting the highest-ranking local official of the newly created Beemster polder (reclaimed land) north of Amsterdam (Alison M. Kettering, 'Master of the New Land: Rembrandt's Portrait of Dijkgraaf Dirck van Os', *Oud Holland*, 130.1–2 (2017), pp. 15–36 (p. 15)). For readability, I adopt the British equivalent 'earl', mirroring Eekhoud's original title of the novel in serialisation, 'Le Comte de la Digue'.

[20] In the original text, Eekhoud juxtaposes the French pronouns 'vous' and 'tu', creating increased intimacy between Guidon Govaertz and Henry de Kehlmark, who until this point have been master and protégé, rather than explicit lovers, parallelling the fairytale of the Fire Shepherd and the secondary characters Gérard and Étienne. Anthony Slide observes that the 1930s American translation, almost identical to the 1909 edition, retains archaic English throughout *(Lost Gay Novels: A Reference Guide to Fifty Works from the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Harrington Park Press, 2003), p. 75). Rosenfeld suggests that one example of this archaic register can be found in this episode, with 'vous' rendered as 'you/your' and 'tu' as 'thou/thy' (*Escal Vigor*, p. 37), a reminder of English's former T-V distinction. As throughout, I have sacrificed this unique pronominal distinction from the French in favour of a modernised, streamlined English text.

The Vegan Tigress (2025), directed by Tracy Collier, Bread and Roses Theatre, Clapham (18 February–1 March 2025)

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The Vegan Tigress is a new play by Claire Parker, directed by Tracy Collier and performed by Claire Parker and Edie Campbell, that premiered at the Bread and Roses Theatre, Clapham, and ran from the 18 February–1 March 2025. This witty and vibrant celebration of the 175th anniversary of the birth of the fairy tale writer, Mary De Morgan (1850–1907) explores her later life through her interactions with a fictional, spectral antagonist named Lady Tuttle, and an imaginative reinterpretation of De Morgan's own fairy tale 'The Hair Tree'. Although a prolific and influential writer of literary fairy tales, and an active suffragist, De Morgan's contribution to both the fairy tale genre and feminism has been largely overlooked. *The Vegan Tigress* seeks to remedy this by acknowledging the modern progressive value of De Morgan's writing and feminist achievements. Although Lady Tuttle (Edie Campbell) is an unintentionally summoned ghost, her presence brings both levity and surrealism to the play's first half. Her exchanges with De Morgan (Claire Parker) highlight the significance of De Morgan's decision to pursue a career as an independent writer. At the same time, Lady Tuttle's resurrection also forces De Morgan to confront the economic and romantic consequences of choosing a literary career and activism over marriage. Much of the tension between the two women originates from De Morgan's decision to break off her engagement to Lady Tuttle's son and from Lady Tuttle's disapproval of De Morgan's independence.

The claustrophobic nature of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the entire play takes place in the cramped, cluttered interior of De Morgan's home, which is filled with bric-à-brac and piles of books. Much of the play's dynamism stems from the two protagonists' playful yet acerbic barbs exchanged in this crowded yet intimate space. As the play progresses, Lady Tuttle's derision at De Morgan's unmarried and childfree state, as well as her career as a writer, is

undermined by her dawning realisation that her own autonomy is limited and her marriage is loveless.

The dramatization of 'The Hair Tree' also subverts Lady Tuttle's stiff, upper-class social mores. In this secondary narrative, De Morgan plays Rupert, a young man tasked by a hairless queen with finding seeds from the magical 'Hair Tree'. Campbell transforms into the tigress of the play's title, who is actually a princess named Trevina. She was turned into a tigress as punishment for evading an arranged marriage. Trevina can only escape this form by being beaten until she bleeds,. Although Rupert expresses his disgust at this, he eventually complies. The sound effect of whipping in the play effectively conveys the gruesome violence of this scene, but also exposes the latent horror of the fairy tale tradition itself, with an emphasis on grotesque bodily transformation and mutilation found in tales such as the Grimms' 'The Girl Without Hands' (also known as 'The Armless Maiden') (1812) and 'The Juniper Tree' (1812).

Several of the tales in the decadent fairy tale tradition also depict violence. However, the examination of marriage as a form of entrapment and the depiction of male violence in 'The Hair Tree' in particular may be informed by De Morgan's vision of emancipated womanhood and social reform. Campbell portrays Trevina as a character full of verve, intensity, and desperation, conveying the tiger's feral unpredictability through spine ripples, roaring, and tossing her hair. Through the metaphor of the tigress, the audience sees the societal threat posed by the liberated, transgressive 'New Woman' and suffragette who is given a wild embodiment. Trevina is an excellent foil to Lady Tuttle's *sang froid*, and we see Lady Tuttle's rigidity begin to loosen as the two women form a tentative truce.

In the second act of 'The Vegan Tigress', the truce between Lady Tuttle and De Morgan softens into moments of bittersweet tenderness. Despite De Morgan's protestations of independence, Lady Tuttle cares for her through her worsening attacks of tuberculosis and begins to question the truth of her own place in society. In one particularly compassionate scene, De Morgan brushes Lady Tuttle's hair in an echo of the Queen's yearning for hair in 'The Hair Tree'.

This parallel is clear; however, Parker's arresting performance as a frail yet determined De Morgan serves to emphasise the economic vulnerability and hardship often experienced by women writers of that era, as well as the genuine physical danger posed by diseases such as tuberculosis. For both Lady Tuttle and the Queen, hair is a symbol of respectable femininity and beauty. However, in 'The Hair Tree', hair is subverted into signifiers of magic and wildness. This is conveyed through the play's inventive use of shimmering gold ribbons, which evoke the feminine accoutrements enjoyed by Lady Tuttle and the ribbons used by the WSPU, one of De Morgan's favoured causes. Despite this growing bond, however, we still see Lady Tuttle questioning and challenging De Morgan's fairy tales, searching for aspects of conventionality and, in her own words, 'resolution'. She is frustrated by De Morgan's response that sometimes the stories simply 'write themselves'. Yet these fairy tales provide Lady Tuttle with an escape from the exhaustion and ennui of her ghostly afterlife and enable her to recognise the emancipation and transgression afforded by the fairy tale tradition. At the same time, the romantic union between Trevina and Rupert in 'The Hair Tree' leads her to the painful realisation of her own marital sacrifice and her troubled relationship with her son. Nevertheless, the enchantment of 'The Hair Tree' speaks to the enduring magic of the fairy tale tradition, and the alluring power of the unknown – an element explored through De Morgan's decision to travel to Egypt despite her fragile health. The play concludes with this voyage, echoing how the real De Morgan died of tuberculosis in Cairo in 1907. In this way, *The Vegan Tigress* encourages us to reconsider the significance of early feminism and literary autonomy for women like De Morgan in a fresh, experimental and exuberant manner. It also invites us to explore how De Morgan's work illustrates this call for emancipation through the lens of the fairy tale.

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

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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]

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[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.

George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man,* ed. by Matthew Creasy (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2025), xiii + 172 pp. ISBN 9781781887783

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The publication of this new edition of George Moore's *kunstlerroman Confessions of a Young Man* (French edition first published in 1886 and English edition in 1888) is a welcome chance for readers to become acquainted with a largely forgotten text of one of Ireland's most influential Irish revival and pre-revival writers. The book is a partly fictionalized account of Moore's experience of fin de siècle Paris and London. It fascinatingly blends the genres of autobiography, memoir, and novel writing in a manner that makes it an archetypal example of decadent literature and also a proto-Modernist text. The similarities with James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) – which shall be examined shortly – extend far beyond the titles of both works.

The plot of *Confessions of a Young Man* spans fifteen years and follows the young narrator, Dayne, as he prowls the boulevards of Paris in a manner akin to a Parisian flâneur. He muses on art and philosophy and has a series of encounters with individuals. As a result of these encounters, Dayne is transformed as an individual and as an artist. The work concludes in London after Dayne decides that he will not pursue a career as a painter and instead resolves to write a novel. This story is a reflection of the years Moore spent in France during the 1870s.

This is the first critical edition of *Confessions of a Young Man* in fifty years and Matthew Creasy has produced an extremely detailed introduction and explanatory notes, demonstrating his professional editorial skills. There are also appendices that contain Moore's prefaces to reprints of the book, excerpts from different versions of the book, and selections from Moore's literary journalism, much of which had not been published since the nineteenth century. The result is an outstanding scholarly version of Moore's intergeneric text.

The history of Irish literature is filled with examples of writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who chose to sojourn in France, particularly Paris, because they regarded that country and its capital city to be the bastion of cosmopolitan modernity. Notable examples of Irish writers who chose to immerse themselves in French literature and culture include Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Brendan Behan, and Samuel Beckett. *Confessions of a Young Man* reminds its readers that Moore should be regarded as another member of this group of Irish Francophiles.

By the work's conclusion, Dayne admits that he has grown tired of the English language and wishes to immerse himself in French. This mirrors Moore's writing of *Confessions of a Young Man* in French before bringing out the English version two years later. In this respect, Moore anticipated Wilde's decision to write his decadent play *Salomé* (1893) in French and Beckett's use of French as the language for the original versions of his prose trilogy and plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1952). The preference that certain Irish authors had for French over English is attributable to the alienation that many Irish people felt from the English language of colonization. The immersion in the French language is presented as the catalyst that leads Dayne to abandon the art of painting for that of writing.

Although Moore is best known for his portrayal of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland, *Confessions of a Young Man* reveals his immersion in the decadent writings of Walter Pater and Joris-Karl Huysmans. In this respect, Moore is similar to Wilde whose devotion to the works of both Pater and Huysmans is well known. *Confessions of a Young Man* contains many passages that are similar to Wilde's essays on art and also to his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). It also marks a departure for Moore from his trademark style of realism and move towards a more experimental and less fixed mode of writing.

Confessions of a Young Man is a perfect example of *kunstlerroman* in that it contains many passages concerning the influence that past artists and their works have had on the narrator's development as a writer. As Creasy notes in his introduction:

> In the opening pages, [the narrator] evokes the concept of 'echo-augury' […] to describe an epiphanic revelation of self-identity precipitated by a literary or artistic encounter. This term is employed three times in Moore's *Confessions* […]. The way that the narrator's examples of 'echo-augury' connect to literary and artistic encounters suggests that the work is specifically a *kunstlerroman* – a work which recounts the formation or development of an artist. (p. 11)

Through *Confessions of a Young Man*, Moore gave Irish literature an archetypal example of *kunstlerroman* thirty years before Joyce published *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* The narrator of *Confessions of a Young Man,* a fictionalized version of Moore, is comparable to the character of Stephen Dedalus who has a similar relationship with the life of his creator, Joyce.

Confessions of a Young Man begins with the narrator asserting his artistic and personal identity as being a very complex and multiform entity:

> My soul, so far as I understand it, has very kindly taken colour and form from the many various modes of life that self-will and an impetuous temperament have forced me to indulge in. Therefore I may say that I am free from original qualities, defects, tastes, etc. What I have I acquire, or, to speak more exactly, chance bestowed, and still bestows, upon me. I came into the world apparently with a nature like a smooth sheet of wax, bearing no impress, but capable of receiving any; of being moulded into all shapes. Nor am I exaggerating when I say that I think I might equally have been a Pharaoh, an ostler, a pimp, an archbishop. (p. 37)

For this narrator, his soul is akin to Georg Wilhelm Hegel's conceptualization of 'the spirit': an entity that is comprised of internal control and external influence, impacted upon by both choice and chance.

The conflicted and contradictory nature of Moore's identity has been noted by Virginia Woolf in this appraisal of his character and status as a writer:

> George Moore is the best living novelist – and the worst; writes the most beautiful prose of his time – and the feeblest; has a passion for literature which none of those dismal pundits, his contemporaries, shares; but how whimsical his judgements are, how ill-balanced, childish and egotistical into the bargain! (p. 22).

The multiform nature of Moore and his alter ego Dayne mark them out as quite similar to the central figure of Huysmans's *À rebours*, which is written about with admiration in *Confessions of a Young Man*. The fact that Dayne is clearly a narrator who cannot be entirely trusted to be sincere

and to give totally objective and unbiased accounts of events and encounters makes the title of the book quite ironic.

The back cover of this edition of *Confessions of a Young Man* quotes one of the most striking sentences from the book: 'I am feminine, morbid, perverse. But above all perverse, almost everything perverse interests, fascinates me.' This statement from the narrator amounts to a declaration of his decadent identity and an assertion of his right to live in what was then the capital of European decadence: fin de siècle Paris. Chapter Seven begins with the narrator declaring himself to be in open revolt against everything that was meant to have shaped his identity:

> Two dominant notes in my character – an original hatred of my native country, and a brutal loathing of the religion I was brought up in. All the aspects of my native country are violently disagreeable to me, and I cannot think of the place I was born in without a sensation akin to nausea. (p. 109)

This expression of hatred for his home, fatherland, and church is another example of how this character is an earlier version of the anti-Irish, anti-Catholic Stephen Dedalus. *Confessions of a Young Man* provides another piece of incontrovertible evidence of Joyce's great admiration for the work of Moore.

The depiction of barely concealed same-sex desire in *Confessions of a Young Man* is just one of the examples of the book's decadent quality. This is most evident in the narrator's fixation with the character of fellow artist, Marshall. The moment that Dayne first sets eyes on Marshall is charged with erotic energy:

> One day I raised my eyes, and saw there was a new-comer in the studio; and, to my surprise, for he was fashionably dressed, and my experience had not led me to the marriage of genius and well-cut cloth, he was painting very well indeed. His shoulders were beautiful and broad; a long neck, a tiny head, a narrow, thin face, and large eyes, full of intelligence and fascination. (p. 51)

This scene of objectification of Marshall by Dayne is very similar to the description of the intoxicating first sight that Basil Hallward has of Dorian Gray. The outrage that greeted Wilde's novelistic depiction of same-sex desire was not meted out to Moore's less overt representation of similar attractions.

Wilde's diagnosis of England as 'the native land of the hypocrite' is an opinion that the narrator of *Confessions of a Young Man* seems to share. This is evidenced by the final chapter which is set in London and most paragraphs are addressed to the book's 'hypocritical' readers. Dayne believes that he embodies all the dangerous transgressions that his readers do not have the courage to commit themselves to, anticipating Lord Henry Wotton's assertion to Dorian that he represents all the sins that Dorian himself does not have the courage to commit. The difference between Dayne and Wotton is that the former has actually transgressed against various social norms whereas Wotton merely theorizes about being immoral while never committing an actual 'sin'. Dayne's celebrations of the rebelliousness and freedom of youth and the young was also something he had in common with Wilde.

In his analysis of the style in *Confessions of a Young Man*, Creasy suggests that the work is a profound meditation on the nature and form of decadent literature:

> Moore's narrator […] may indeed offer an exaggerated satire of the transgressive sexual ethics and aesthetic values associated with Decadence as a contemporary literary movement. But, on this reading, it is precisely the slippery nature of his narrator and the elusive and evasive nature of *Confessions of a Young Man* that also make it most Decadent. (p. 16)

This evaluation of decadent literature and the position of *Confessions of a Young Man* within that genre also draws attention to the similarities between decadence and literary modernism as both are committed to stylistic experimentation and the subversion of the conventions of the realist novel. As Creasy goes on to argue: 'Moore's experiments with style and form, and the shifting subjectivities of his narrator in *Confessions*, anticipate similar developments in the writings of Woolf, Joyce, and other modernists by a couple of decades' (pp. 22-23). The concluding lines of *Confessions of a Young Man* emphasize the fluidity of the text as the final note that its readers are left with is one of continuity rather than finality: 'I shivered; the cold air of morning blew in my face, I closed the window, and sitting at the table, haggard and overworn, I continued my novel' (p. 206). The symbolic grammatical tool that closes *Confessions of a Young Man* can be said to be less of a full stop and more of a semi-colon.

The publication of this invaluable and painstaking scholarly edition of *Confessions of a Young Man* is a timely reminder of one of the often-neglected examples of Irish and European decadent and modernist literature. With its focus on the artistic development of an evolving consciousness, *Confessions of a Young Man* looks back to Wordsworth's Romantic representation of the growth of an artist in *The Prelude* (1850) and anticipates Joyce's modernist depiction of the same subject in *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*. *Confessions of a Young Man* serves as a reminder that the fin de siècle represented a bridge between the Realism of the nineteenth century novel and the modernism of twentieth-century literature. For this reason, *Confessions of a Young Man* should be read as a text that is both of its time and anticipatory of later literary revolutions and experimentation.

Notes on Contributors

Julia Biggs is a poet, writer and freelance art historian. Her micro-chapbook '*ROLES*' was published by *Ghost City Press* in 2025, and her work has appeared and is also forthcoming in *Osmosis Press*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Streetcake Magazine*, *Inkfish Magazine*, and elsewhere.

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Mariana Gaitán Rojas holds a Master's Degree in *English (1830-1914)* from the University of Oxford, where her dissertation explored the use of sound in New Woman fiction. She is now an independent researcher specializing in Victorian literature, with a particular interest in decadence, sound studies, and the New Woman. Her work examines the intersection of sensory experience, gender, and narrative form in the fin de siècle.

Ian T. Gwin is a translator and doctoral student at the University of Washington. His academic research focuses on Estonian, Finnish, and Baltic literature. For his dissertation project, 'The Secret of the Waves', he is studying decadence in relation to the historiography of folk and fairy tales under the supervision of Prof. Riikka Rossi at the University of Helsinki. He is also a fellow of the Estonian research group 'Emergence of a Civilized Nation' at the Marie Under and Friedebert Tuglas Literature Centre and has researched and translated decadent writers such as Jaan Oks (1884-1918), featured in *Estonian Literature Magazine* in 2025.

T. N. Hutchinson is completing a PhD thesis at the University of York, studying the literary works of Aubrey Beardsley with particular focus on his unfinished erotic novel, *Under the Hill*. The thesis considers his work as a decadent study in the paradox of crude virility with mannered restraint, and stylised, refined violence as artform. T. N. Hutchinson's other research interests include late German Romanticism, Vladimir Nabokov's chess problems, and Thomas Mann's construction of Hellenic homosexuality.

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Samuel Love has recently completed his PhD in History of Art at the University of York, examining aestheticism and images of the Dionysian retinue in modern British art. His latest article appeared in *The Wildean* and explores Aubrey Beardsley's caricature of Oscar Wilde as Dionysus.

Katie Nunnery specializes in 1890s Decadence with interests in queer theory, children's literature, and scientific discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. She completed her PhD in 2020 from the University of Connecticut. Her dissertation, *Fin-de-Siècle Decadent Writing and the Queerness of Childhood*, argues that decadent authors saw children as symbolic of a different way of seeing – playful, rebellious, indulgent, and open to imagining the world in new ways. Since completing her doctorate, Nunnery has taught at Tulane University and worked as a grant writer for the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. She currently teaches at Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

Graham Price tutors and lectures in the School of English, Drama, and Film at University College Dublin. He lectured in modern Irish and British Literature at the University of Limerick from 2015-2018. Price's monograph, *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to be Oscar's Contemporary*, was published in 2018 and is the first book-length examination of the Wildean strand in contemporary Irish theatre. He has published widely on Irish drama, Irish literature, continental philosophy, and queer theory in journals such as *Irish Studies Review*, *New Hibernia Review*, *Irish University Review*, *Reading Ireland*, and *Études Irlandaises*. Price's co-written book (with Darragh Greene), *Film Directors and Emotion: An Affective Turn in Contemporary American Cinema*, was published in June 2020 by McFarland Press. His recently completed textbook *Beginning Irish Studies* (Manchester University Press) is forthcoming in late 2025.

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Eleanor Keane completed her PhD in 2025 from Goldsmiths, University of London. Her thesis examines fin-de-siècle fairy tales as examples of queer decadent narratives, and her research interests focus on the decadent fairy tale, literary decadence and the visual arts, and expressions of gender, decadence, and sexuality within the late nineteenth century. Eleanor is a member of the Decadence Research Centre and the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADS) Executive Committee. She holds an MA in Literary Studies from Goldsmiths and an MSc from City University, London. Her article 'Baudelaire's Celestial Vision of Jeanne Duval' was published in *Volupté*, 4.1 (2021). Eleanor co-organized 'Decadence and the Fairy Tale', a symposium hosted by the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths in March 2023.

ESSAY PRIZE

Lea Felicitas Döding is an art historian, independent literary historian and translator. Since 2018, she has been an antique jewellery specialist at Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin, where she is currently working on a book about the material culture of jewellery during the Belle Époque. Her jewellery-related research interests intersect with her literary work, focusing on decadent German women writers and gendered moralities of the fin de siècle (forthcoming: *Maria Janitschek: A Modern Woman. Stories and Poems*, Jewelled Tortoise Vol. 13, MHRA). She has presented her art-historical and literary research at institutions such as the Green Vaults Dresden, the State Hermitage Museum St. Petersburg, and the University of Edinburgh, and has received the Dr. Walther Liebehenz-Prize for excellence in the field of art-historical object studies.

TRANSLATION PRIZE

Mathew Rickard is an ATER (Research and Teaching Fellow) in English Translation and Literature at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne (Amiens, France). His research explores decadent literature through the lenses of queer theory and masculinities studies, with a particular focus on non-normative masculine identities and behaviours in fin-de-siècle French culture. His doctoral research led to the publication of *Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature* (Peter Lang, 2021), and he has published work in *Volupté*, *Dix-Neuf*, and edited collections. His current work examines the intersections of ecocriticism and toxic masculinities in decadent literature and beyond.

EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Centre in the School of Music, English, and Theatre at Goldsmiths, University of London, and she is currently Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies in the School of Advanced Study at Senate House, London. She is Editor-in-Chief of *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, and Chair of the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADS). She has published numerous books and essays on decadence, including *Monsters under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present* (Reaktion, 2018), *Decadence and Literature* (with David Weir,

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