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Conner Moore

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Hamlet and Decadent Reimagination

Conner Moore

Miami University

The decadents and Aesthetes of the *fin de siècle* exhibit a distinct penchant for incorporating diverse artistic works into their idiosyncratic aesthetic universe, including those which may appear alien to the decadent ethos. This process facilitates transformative and provocative new understandings of the original texts. Two exemplary cases of this practice can be observed in the treatment of the classical poet Sappho and of the biblical princess Salomé as they are rendered in decadent literary works. Nicole Albert credits Charles Baudelaire with sparking the nineteenth century rediscovery of Sappho with his references to the poet in *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), further popularized in English thereafter by his disciple, Algernon Charles Swinburne.¹ The decadent caricature of Sappho reduces her to a vessel of transgressive sexuality, effectively disregarding any notion of biographical fidelity to the poet or her extant literary legacy. Petra Dierkes-Thrun tracks the evolution of Salomé's representation in the same period, and a pattern becomes discernible in the decadent treatment of canonical figures. The early works of decadents and Symbolists transform the New Testament narrative 'into a lurid tale of dangerous female sexuality and cunning, physical passion, and pathological perversity',² setting the stage for the character's metamorphosis in Oscar Wilde's 1891 play. The obedient daughter of the biblical story becomes the apotheosis of the decadent *femme fatale*.

Enter William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1601), a play famously wrought with ambiguity and contested meanings, ripe for decadent reimagination. *Hamlet*, for its part, provides little resistance to the process of its assimilation into the realm of decadent aesthetics. No more so than the transformative recreations of Sappho or Salomé, for that matter, does *Hamlet* refute or preclude its decadent appropriation. This is because the practice I deem 'decadent reimagination' does not invent or misidentify elements of decadence in the texts it is enacted upon, but rather

identifies and amplifies the presence of decadent aesthetics and motifs as they already exist in variously latent states within the original texts themselves. *Hamlet* features several sites at which decadents can justifiably identify aesthetic and philosophical affinities between the play and their own literary tradition. As in decadent literature, prolific references to decay and disease in the play are aestheticized in highly poetic and morbid language. Hamlet's own fixations on death and perverse sexuality are also characteristic of decadence, as is the pervasive presence of philosophical pessimism, the perception of the world as decaying and ruined and of life itself as an unpleasant realm of meaningless suffering – by Hamlet's measure, both Denmark and the world are prisons.³ The representation of misogyny provides another link between Shakespeare and the decadents, as Hamlet expresses in his disgust for women a rejection of (a feminized) nature. This same conflation underlies decadent expressions of misogyny in accordance with their self-decreed position of being 'against nature', expressed concisely in Baudelaire's claim that '[w]oman is *natural*, that is to say abominable', that she 'should inspire horror'.⁴ These transhistorical commonalities fuel the practice of decadent reimagination, allowing for new ways of reading a text against the grain, of detecting generative ruptures in the prevailing critical discourses surrounding a work, and for positing both new interpretive potentialities and spaces for provocative adaptations.

This essay utilizes *Hamlet* as a model for the practice of decadent reimagination by demonstrating how a text from as far outside the bounds of the recognized nineteenth-century decadent canon as Shakespeare's early modern revenge tragedy could be productively reconceptualized within the imaginative framework of decadence. Understanding the ways in which decadent authors conceived of Shakespeare himself offers a useful context for examining how decadent reimagination has been exercised upon *Hamlet*. Shakespeare functions for the decadents as a model for the romanticized ideal of the artist, while they recognize and intensify what they perceive as transgressive and perverse qualities of Shakespeare's life and writings.⁵ Their construction of Shakespeare as a forbear of their contemporary Aesthete serves both to legitimize their own controversial artistic practices and to *épater le bourgeois* by situating within their own

maligned literary tradition the esteemed playwright who has arguably become synonymous with artistry itself. The first section of this essay identifies the decadent elements in the text of *Hamlet* which facilitate decadent reimagination, expanding upon the characteristics identified above and demonstrating their latent decadent potential by reading *Hamlet* through the prism of decadence, drawing comparisons between the play and key works of decadent literature. G. Wilson Knight's provocative essay 'The Embassy of Death' (1930) is foregrounded in this section, not only for its amplification of what I argue are decadent tropes and motifs in *Hamlet*, but to further illustrate the ways in which the practice of decadent reimagination might be implemented not only in artistic creation but in literary criticism. The second section examines the decadent illustrator John Austen's visual reinterpretations in *Hamlet* (1922) as a case study for the artistic practice of decadent reimagination. Austen exploits the latent decadent aesthetics and motifs in Shakespeare's play to produce a reconceptualization of *Hamlet* located firmly in the realm of the decadent artistic and literary tradition. The analysis of Austen's work is intended as an especially cogent demonstration of how decadent reimagination might be applied in artistic creation because Austen is working both outside the traditionally recognized temporal bounds of the decadent tradition and with a text that has not already been extensively reimagined by the canonical decadent authors, as would be the case were he deploying figures such as Sappho or Salomé. The selection of Knight's essay and Austen's illustrations as the core examples of decadent reimaginings speaks to the generic diversity and creative potential of the practice, while suggesting that it remains undertheorized as a staple of both decadent literature and critical studies of decadence.

Decadent Aesthetics and Motifs in *Hamlet*

In his insightful and generative reading of *Hamlet* in 'The Embassy of Death', Knight exhibits the critical practice of decadent reimagination by reading the character Hamlet against the grain of the established critical consensus and emphasizing the very same tropes, motifs, and philosophical underpinnings which, I will demonstrate, are shared with decadent literature. Knight

counterintuitively characterizes the eponymous prince not as the familiar noble and respectable Hamlet of the Victorians or the sensitive and conflicted but ultimately sympathetic figure popularized by the Romantics, but as a dark character so enmeshed in death, suffering, and pessimism that these things radiate from him and corrupt the world around him. From our first encounter with Hamlet, Knight writes, he is grimly contrasted with the rest of humanity: ‘alone in the gay glitter of the court, silhouetted against brilliance, robustness, health, and happiness, is the pale, black-robed Hamlet, mourning’.⁶ There is something alien about Hamlet throughout the play, and it is from him that the various conflicts and the spectre of death emerge: ‘Hamlet has set in contrast to him all the other persons: they are massed against him. [...] he is the only discordant element, the only hindrance to happiness, health, and prosperity: a living death in the midst of life’.⁷ Knight’s Hamlet is thus an implicitly decadent figure, one that contributes to the decay of all that surrounds him, one whose ‘mind is drawn to images in themselves repellent’,⁸ something emphasized by Max Nordau in his moralistic diagnosis of Baudelaire in *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] (1892; translated as *Degeneration*, 1895):

[Baudelaire] abhors nature, movement, and life [...] he loves disease, ugliness and crime; all his inclinations, in profound aberration, are opposed to those of sane beings [...] his mind is filled with somber ideas, the association of his ideas works exclusively with sad or loathsome images; the only thing which can distract or interest him is badness – murder, blood, lewdness and falsehood.⁹

The clear parallels between Nordau’s description of Baudelaire and Knight’s of Hamlet are indicative of more than the specific affinity between the poet and the prince as described above, for Nordau did not treat Baudelaire as a figure in isolation but as the forefather of the entire decadent literary tradition. The characteristics he ascribes to Baudelaire, which Knight also finds in Hamlet, can simultaneously be seen as connective tissue between *Hamlet* and the broader world of decadence beyond Baudelaire. The sense of political and social decadence in the play; the prominence of disease, decay, and other morbid imagery in Hamlet’s mind; the specifically antinature mode of misogyny articulated by Hamlet; the prominence of pessimistic philosophy in Hamlet’s thinking: each element is characteristic of decadent literature, demonstrating the ease

with which the decadent imaginary, whether critical or creative, can assimilate a text such as *Hamlet* into its aesthetic universe.

Harkening back to the ‘decadence’ of the Roman Empire, one of the most common and intuitive understandings of the term ‘decadence’, as noted by David Weir, is its political and social sense, used to refer to a political body which is in a state of ‘historical decline’, or the pervasive sense within a culture that it is experiencing ‘social decay’.¹⁰ In *Hamlet*, a political assassination has successfully supplanted the heir apparent, and the figure who now sits upon the throne is cast in Hamlet’s mind as a false monarch, grotesque and undeserving, an illegitimate usurper who has compromised the proper functioning of the Danish state. Claudius rules over a kingdom which is under threat from a vengeful adversary; his court is filled with death, secrecy, and madness; the very boundaries between the living and the dead have been destabilized with the appearance of the Ghost, all indicating a clear sense of political and social decline evident in Marcellus’ assessment that ‘[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark’.¹¹ Knight troubles the tendency to lay the blame for Denmark’s decline at Claudius’ feet, insisting that Hamlet himself is the source of Denmark’s decay: ‘the sickness of his soul [...] infects the state – his disintegration spreads out, disintegrating’.¹² His pursuit of revenge causes the instability and upheaval characterizing Claudius’ reign, making the prince yet again the single discordant element in an otherwise vibrant court. Hamlet corrupts Denmark, Knight argues, because he awakens to the reality of death and adopts philosophical pessimism.¹³ The decadents similarly expressed a pessimistic worldview and were also characterized by their detractors as the source of corruption in the late nineteenth-century literary world; they were primarily labelled as ‘decadent’ in the other sense described by Weir, of ‘aesthetic inferiority’,¹⁴ but they are further credited by figures such as Nordau with embodying a negative influence outside of literature which contributes to the decay of society itself.

Replete with references to death, disease, and decay, *Hamlet* could be labelled as decadent not simply because these motifs are present and prominent but due to the ways in which they seem to infect the text, and especially because they are presented in a distinctly aestheticizing fashion.

This finds its apex in Hamlet's exchange with Polonius in Act 2, Scene 2. Performing his 'antic disposition',¹⁵ Hamlet abruptly broaches the subject of a decaying animal's carcass with Polonius and proceeds to align the grotesque imagery with female sexuality, and Ophelia specifically, using vivid and poetic language: 'For if the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion – Have you a daughter?', '[l]et her not walk i'th' sun. Conception is a blessing. But not as your daughter may conceive'.¹⁶ A similar merging of morbid imagery and sexuality in Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne' ['A Carcass'] exemplifies the decadent tendency to aestheticize taboo and grotesque subjects as a method of critiquing social mores surrounding art and beauty.

Baudelaire's poem features a pair of lovers who go for a stroll and encounter 'a disgusting corpse on a bed of shingle, with its legs in the air like a lewd woman's, inflamed and oozing poisons and nonchalantly and cynically laying open its stinking belly'; emphasizing the supposed beauty of the grotesque scene, the speaker describes how the 'magnificent carcass [...] unfolded its petals like a flower'.¹⁷ The speaker proceeds to compare his lover to the decaying carrion, as smoothly as Hamlet connects the image of the maggots on the dog's carcass with the beautiful and vibrant Ophelia, connecting *Hamlet* and decadence in their respective tendencies toward transforming the morbid into the artistic and exhibiting an underlying disgust toward female sexuality. Janet Adelman, contributing to the ubiquitous psychoanalytic interpretations of *Hamlet*, describes female sexuality as a force that 'invades *Hamlet*' via Hamlet's mingled disgust and desire for his mother, invoking a sense of contamination which undermines his relationship with Ophelia.¹⁸ But as Knight observes, Hamlet's disgust towards life and the morbid obsession with death and decay emanate from himself rather than the invasive force of female sexuality, just as Elaine Showalter builds upon David Leverenz claim that 'Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity within himself is translated into violent revulsion against women'.¹⁹ The aesthetics of death and decay in *Hamlet* are not distinct from the antinature misogyny that the play shares with decadent literature, as the two elements are mutually constitutive.

Quite unlike the view of the Romantics, who perceived a kindred spirit in Hamlet and constructed perhaps the most durable conception of the character, Hamlet does not necessarily love or admire nature, and his sentiments could be interpreted to express an inverse perspective toward life and nature. This may be clearest in his Act 1, Scene 2 soliloquy, in which he ruminates on the union of his mother and Claudius and expresses his ennui, pessimism, sexual disgust, and misogyny in a poignant metaphor:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
[...] 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.²⁰

The natural workings of the nonhuman world are not romanticized in Hamlet's mind; they tend toward monstrosity and invoke disgust. The garden/world is not as ordered and beautiful as it ought to be, and it threatens social stability as it becomes more 'natural' and unkempt. The 'unweeded garden' metaphor indicates that to Hamlet, life, nature, and sexuality are all meaningless and distasteful, just as the decadents positioned themselves firmly 'against nature', a phrase frequently translated as the title of Joris-Karl Huysmans's seminal novel *À rebours* (1884) [*Against Nature*]. Huysmans's protagonist similarly articulates an antinature misogyny and a preference for the artificial over the natural: 'artifice was considered by Des Esseintes to be the distinctive mark of human genius. Nature, he used to say, has had her day'.²¹ Adelman examines Hamlet's figure of the 'unweeded garden' as an evocation of the Garden of Eden and the fall of man, an allusion that reinforces Hamlet's misogyny by casting woman as responsible for man's fall from grace.²² Furthermore, this rhetorical move attempts to justify the Aesthete's disgust with woman and nature alike, which become indistinguishable from one another in the antinature misogynistic imaginary.

Huysmans cogently illustrates this notion in a memorable episode of *À rebours* in which Des Esseintes dreams that he and a woman are fleeing from the anthropomorphized embodiment of Syphilis. Characterized as stupid and inept, the woman slows him down and makes noise while

they are trying to hide, suggesting that women are ineffective allies in man's battle with the natural world and its various maladies. As the figure of Syphilis approaches the trapped and helpless man, it transforms into the semblance of an eroticized woman. Her sexuality and her destructive capacity become indistinguishable from Des Esseintes' disgust for nature – the supposed naturalness of woman, centred around her body, her sexuality, and particularly her reproductivity, become a threat that finds its most obvious symbolization in this description of her genitals as floral weapons.²³ Jane Desmarais considers the prominent role of flowers and gardens in decadent literature, positing that the decadents 'created instead an image of the garden as a corrupt and corrupting space, a toxic landscape that reminds us of our frailty and inevitable degeneration. This garden is an inversion of the garden paradise'.²⁴ Similarly in Hamlet's 'unweeded garden' nature is both corrupted and corrupting, the space in which his father died, Eden fell, and his mother's incestuous and thus disgusting sexuality flourishes uncontained. For Baudelaire and Swinburne, Desmarais notes, 'the fertile garden is transformed into a space revealing natural beauty and nature's evil',²⁵ much like the imaginative garden space for Hamlet exposes nature, and his mother's sexuality – misogynistically conflated with nature – as repulsive and destructive.

Hamlet's antinature misogyny leads him to the same place as it does the later nineteenth-century writers, to a rejection of female sexuality and to an embrace of antinatalism, the pessimistic rejection of procreation on the grounds that it is immoral to reproduce human life which will only suffer if brought into existence. This is the logical conclusion to which Hamlet's misogyny, detestation of nature, and consistent scepticism toward the value of existence lead, and he expresses the idea most cogently in his infamous and ambiguous imperative toward Ophelia. 'Get thee to a nunnery!', he counsels her, and proceeds to question the value of reproducing human life when all beings will inevitably sin, suffer, and die:

Why, wouldst thou be a
breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet
I could accuse myself of such things that it were better my
mother had not borne me.²⁶

While we can find the antinatalist notion of preferring nonexistence to existence in the biblical books of Job and Ecclesiastes, it was the pessimist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who transferred this idea to the nineteenth-century decadents, arguing in ‘Nachträge zur Lehre vom Leiden der Welt’ [‘On the Suffering of the World’] (1851) for his ‘conception of the world as the product of our own sins and therefore as something that had better not have been’.²⁷ Such invocations of antinatalism appear within a wide array of decadent literature, as when Des Esseintes observes the suffering of children in the world and concludes: ‘What madness it was to beget children’.²⁸ He calls for the widespread embrace of antinatalist beliefs and practices: ‘If in the name of pity the futile business of procreation was ever to be abolished, the time had surely come to do it’.²⁹ In Baudelaire’s novella *Fanfarlo* (1847), the protagonist ‘considered reproduction as a vice of love, pregnancy a spider’s disease’.³⁰ Antinatalism is further discernible throughout the works of the French decadent novelist Rachilde, as in *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), where an omniscient narrator expresses the desire for mankind to ‘[f]orget natural law, tear up the procreative pact’.³¹ Hamlet does not make these arguments explicitly, yet the end of procreation is the logical conclusion of his questioning of the value of reproducing human beings who will be sinners (as all beings are according to Christian ideology), and his declaration, ‘I say we will have no more marriages’.³² Marriage is understood in his cultural context as a prerequisite for procreation, hence his appeal to end the one includes the other.

John Austen’s Illustrated *Hamlet* as Decadent Reimagination

Having considered the features of *Hamlet* which could be interpreted as decadent, we turn toward a creative instance of just such a reimagination in the work of John Austen.³³ Published in 1922, John Austen’s illustrations of *Hamlet* have garnered extremely sparse critical attention despite their nuance and ingenuity.³⁴ While Austen’s work emerges decades after the peak of the British decadent tradition in the 1890s, he clearly exhibits decadent aesthetics and his work is replete with motifs found in the works of the nineteenth-century writers. Luisa Moore notes the particular

influence of Aubrey Beardsley upon Austen and the stylistic similarity between the two, referring to him as Austen's favourite artist at the time he was working on the *Hamlet* illustrations.³⁵ Austen's decadent reimagination of *Hamlet* simultaneously manages to reimagine decadence itself, as he employs Beardsley's style in a distinctive fashion. Moore argues that while Beardsley provides illustrations of a text, 'Austen "steals" and repurposes (or perhaps adapts) Beardsley's style',³⁶ a practice evocative of decadent reimagination.

Austen sees in the world of *Hamlet* a mystical realm of death and decay, a hidden domain of decadence which has been obscured in prevailing conceptions and understandings of the text. Austen's key interventions all acknowledge, contribute to, or otherwise complicate many of the contested discourses surrounding the play: for example, he invents the presence of an entity Moore identifies as the Greek goddess Nemesis, a puppet-master unrecognized in the shadows who is behind both the presence of the Ghost and Hamlet's subsequent pursuit of revenge. A major site of identifiably decadent aesthetics in Austen's depictions is the prominence of decadent *femmes fatales* in the play, including not only the female characters but, through a transgressive display of reimagination, dangerous and feminized depictions of Hamlet himself, the Ghost, and Claudius (see fig. 1). Austen unambiguously depicts the Ghost as evil and possessing Hamlet, whose madness is genuine, and posits that he not only was once earnestly in love with Ophelia, but also had a sexual relationship with her, illustrated through interlude images depicting the two nude figures in idyllic scenes set before the play opens.



Fig. 1: John Austen, illustration for *Hamlet*.
Source: The Folger Shakespeare Library, Creative Commons.

Indeed, the most compelling site of Austen's reimagination is the representation of Ophelia and his subtle invention of a narrative arc through his illustrations, which suggests that Ophelia attains revenge against Hamlet for his mistreatment and neglect of her. This provocative intervention disrupts established understandings of the play, making it a prime example of the creative practice of decadent reimagination. Ophelia embodies many of the qualities which the decadents could admire in a female character: sexually dissident, eccentric, and eventually insane, enveloped in tragedy; her beauty is even emphasized in death as any male Aesthete would be sure to appreciate.³⁷ A passing glance at Austen's depictions of Ophelia might suggest that they are little more than imitations of Beardsley, saturated with misogyny and objectification, bordering on the pornographic with their unnecessarily exposed nipples (see fig. 2). These representations of Ophelia, however, crucially reveal the workings of Austen's reimagination of *Hamlet* in its entirety,

as they make it most obvious that they are all being filtered through Hamlet's own decadent and misogynistic mind. John Austen's decadent *Hamlet* is rather the decadent Hamlet's *Hamlet*, as conveyed by John Austen. As Moore emphasizes,

Ophelia's highly sexualised, objectified appearance derives from nothing in the text except Hamlet's accusations, and so reflects his misogynistic perception of women, although it is intensified by Austen's chosen aesthetic (a decadent and sometimes tawdry style in the manner of Beardsley).

The tantalizing images of Ophelia are thus nothing more than 'a grotesque projection of Hamlet's diseased imagination'.³⁸



Fig. 2: John Austen, illustration for *Hamlet*.
Source: The Folger Shakespeare Library, Creative Commons.

This tactic reveals the ways in which Austen's decadent illustrations of *Hamlet* may also be interpreted as a critique of the decadence existing both within the text of *Hamlet* as espoused by

the eponymous character and within the literary and artistic world of decadence itself. Moore convincingly argues that Austen provides Ophelia with a unique and virtually unprecedented form of autonomy in his reimagined narrative, one which actually reshapes the contours of the recognizable *Hamlet* into a new story about a mistreated young woman's revenge against her neglectful and traitorous lover. While there are traces of this hidden narrative scattered throughout Austen's illustrated edition of *Hamlet*, the key image revealing this subtle revenge arc is the 'Dramatis Personae' (see fig. 3). Here, the giant looming figure of the goddess Nemesis looks down over the cast of *Hamlet* while a contemplative and scheming Hamlet ignores the desperate and pleading Ophelia kneeling beside him. As Moore contends, the 'Dramatis Personae' illustration 'implies that Ophelia desires vengeance for Hamlet's mistreating her. Although she might not explicitly vocalise this in the play, her problem is precisely that she is unable to'. Her position is evocative of prayer, as 'Ophelia's body creates a diagonal meeting Nemesis' face. While she tilts her head sideways, as if gazing at Hamlet, she also appears to look up at Nemesis. Kneeling with arms upraised, Ophelia seems to implore the deity for vengeance'.³⁹ The goddess of revenge would presumably be present at Elsinore if summoned by Hamlet's revenge against his murderous uncle, but the alternative interpretation of Austen's narrative indicated by Moore would suggest instead that it is Ophelia's need for revenge which Nemesis is meeting in Denmark.

Creating a sense of continuity between Austen's and Knight's respective works of decadent reimagination is the presentation of Hamlet as the discordant element in an otherwise stable environment. Austen's illustrations include several scenes of Nemesis appearing to judge Hamlet's actions rather than those of Claudius whom she is ostensibly present to cast judgment on, as evinced when she looks aghast at Hamlet dragging away the corpse of Claudius or concerned by Hamlet's invasion of Ophelia's private space in the 'closet scene' and the manipulation of her emotions which takes place therein (see fig. 4). But most poignantly, Nemesis looks down forlornly at the drowned body of Ophelia while Hamlet kneels in grief before them both, a scene pre-

empting the concluding massacre and perhaps Hamlet's final straw, leading Nemesis to pull some cosmic strings ensuring his death as deserved recompense for his abuse of Ophelia.



Fig. 3: John Austen, 'Dramatis Personae'.
Source: The Folger Shakespeare Library, Creative Commons.



Fig. 4: John Austen, illustration for *Hamlet*.
Source: The Folger Shakespeare Library, Creative Commons.

Within this reimagined narrative stemming from Ophelia's prayer to Nemesis for revenge, her death is also interpretable not only as a suicide but a sort of sacrifice to the goddess, offering her own life in exchange for Nemesis enacting divine judgment upon Hamlet. This reimagination bestows upon Ophelia a degree of agency and narrative importance which one hardly expects to find in a work related to a literary and artistic tradition as thoroughly infected with misogyny as decadence. Ophelia is transformed into something like another Salomé, a *femme fatale* in her own right who may be destroyed but is victorious in destroying the man by whom she is desired and scorned. In other words, Austen could be said to recognize and critique decadent misogyny through his reimagination of an autonomous and vengeful Ophelia: she might represent the kinds of objectified and resentful decadent women we find in Vernon Lee's works, who combat the misogynistic discourses of the dandy-Aesthete.⁴⁰

Decadent reimagination as enacted in Austen's *Hamlet* illustrations does not merely depict traditional decadent aesthetics as they variously exist or are imposed upon the world of *Hamlet* (for instance transforming characters into *femmes fatales*, or adopting a Beardsleyesque style). Rather, Austen's acts of creation and intervention most cogently demonstrate the promise of decadent reimagination in rendering his illustrated world through the prism of Hamlet's misogyny as a method of cunning critique, and in the wholesale invention of Ophelia's revenge arc delivered through the introduction of Nemesis to the narrative and the new meaning ascribed to Ophelia's demise. Austen's *Hamlet* mirrors Knight's essay not only in the similarity of their interpretations of the decadence in the same text, but in the very practice of decadent reimagination, be it enacted in art or criticism. Just as the decadents' interventions in the literary legacy of Sappho or their transgressive depictions of Salomé successfully identified and exploited latent traces of decadence in unexpected sources, Austen's decadent reimagination of *Hamlet* demonstrates the capacities for the practice to develop new ways of understanding or engaging with literary works, expanding the possibilities for decadent artistic practices of adaptation, while Knight's essay exhibits the same potential for a decadent literary criticism.

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- ¹ Nicole G. Albert, *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France*, trans. by Nancy Erber and William A. Peniston (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016), p. 22.
- ² Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 15.
- ³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), II. 2. 242-44.
- ⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. by Christopher Isherwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1983), p. 65.
- ⁵ Illustrative examples might be found in Oscar Wilde's 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (1889) and Rosette Lamont's essay 'The Hamlet Myth'. In Wilde's short story, the characters project upon Shakespeare the qualities of the nineteenth-century queer aesthete and the distinction between Wilde's characters, Wilde himself, and Shakespeare effectively collapse over the course of the narrative. Lamont examines Hamlet as an unacknowledged archetypal figure in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and suggests that parallels between the lives of Baudelaire and Shakespeare's account of the Danish prince fostered for Baudelaire a profound affinity with the character and explains Hamlet's subtle but pervasive presence in his works. See Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by J. B. Foreman (London: HarperPerennial, 1989), pp. 1150-1201; Rosette Lamont, 'The Hamlet Myth', *Yale French Studies*, 33 (1964), 80-91.
- ⁶ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 17.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. by George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 294.
- ¹⁰ David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 1.
- ¹¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I. 4. 65.
- ¹² Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 21.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 42. 'He is a [Nietzschean] superman among men. And he is a superman because he has walked and held converse with death, and his consciousness works in terms of death and the negation of cynicism. He has seen the truth, not alone of Denmark, but of humanity, of the universe: and the truth is evil. Thus Hamlet is an element of evil in the state of Denmark.'
- ¹⁴ Weir, *Decadence*, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I. 5. 179.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II. 2. 181-85.
- ¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *The Complete Verse*, trans. by Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press, 2012), p. 102. Scarfe elects to translate Baudelaire's verse into prose poems in order to retain as much of the character of the writing as possible, rather than the form of the original work.
- ¹⁸ Janet Adelman, "'The Man and Wife is One Flesh": *Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body', in *Hamlet: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Susanne L. Wofford (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 256-79 (p. 257).
- ¹⁹ Elaine Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism', in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 79.
- ²⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I. 2. 133-37.
- ²¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 22.
- ²² Adelman, 'Man and Wife', p. 260.
- ²³ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 92. Huysmans describes 'the savage Nidularium blossoming between her uplifted thighs, with its swordblades gaping open to expose the bloody depths. His body almost touching the hideous flesh-wound of this plant, he felt life ebbing away from him'.
- ²⁴ Jane Desmarais, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion, 2018), p. 133.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- ²⁶ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III. 1. 122-25.
- ²⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 49.
- ²⁸ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 155.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- ³⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Fanfarlo*, trans. by Edward K. Kaplan (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2012), p. 53.
- ³¹ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénius: A Materialist Novel*, trans. by Melanie Hawthorne, ed. by Liz Constable (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004), p. 91.
- ³² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III. 1. 148.
- ³³ John Austen and William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (New York: Calla Editions, 2010).

³⁴ The lone oasis in this scholarly desert would be Luisa Moore's 2021 dissertation focused on Austen's *Hamlet*, to which much of my analysis of the text is indebted.

³⁵ Luisa Moore, *Textual Critique Through the Artist's Eye: John Austen's Illustrated Hamlet*, PhD thesis, Australia National University, 2021, p. vii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

³⁷ See Martha C. Ronk, 'Representations of Ophelia', *Criticism*, 36.1 (1994), 21-43. Ronk describes Gertrude's aestheticization of Ophelia's death, a decidedly decadent practice fitting the tendency of nineteenth-century Aestheticism to value beauty in even the most unlikely, morbid, or transgressive sites at which it might appear, including the tragic death of a young woman.

³⁸ Moore, *Textual Critique*, pp. 135-36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁰ See Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 43.