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Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*
(Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022),
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Among Richard Bruce Nugent's papers in the Beinecke Library, there are multiple manuscripts of a story about a half-Japanese, half-American gender-fluid individual who works as a geisha, has a sexual relationship with their father (first accidentally and then by conscious choice), and travels around Europe and North America in pursuit of physical pleasure and beautiful objects to collect. 'Geisha Man' never saw the light of day during Nugent's lifetime. But the author's daring plan for this decadent story was to bring it out as an impossibly elaborate art book, in which each page should have been printed on paper of a different colour, with different-coloured ink. The intriguing 'Geisha Man' is emblematic of the decadent corpus that Kristin Mahoney brings to light in her fascinating new book, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*. It is a corpus that is, like Nugent's story, made of cosmopolitan connections and projections, attempts to fashion and unmake complex racial and gender identities, baffling hybrids of aestheticism and taboo.

Mahoney focuses on the intersection between queer identities and forms of familial kinship. In a series of deft readings, she shows how writers from the first half of the twentieth century looked back to the artistic and sexual radicalism of the 1890s, spectacularly encapsulated by Oscar Wilde, to create artistic and interpersonal networks where they could operate in the margins of society and, crucially, of the type of experimental Modernism that has become the canonical face of that period. The Wilde-Beardsley era was attractive to these writers because it seemed to embody a type of artistic iconoclasm and a simultaneously bold and fluid approach to sexual identity that they were hard-pressed to find in the more structured world of the new century. Looking back to the literature of the fin de siècle enabled them to pursue unconventional modes

of desire in their work (so, for instance, Mahoney interprets Nugent's handling of incest in 'Geisha Man' with reference to Wilde's *Salomé* (1891)). In some cases, this led them to attain pleasure and personal happiness. But they also had to contend with the burden of nostalgia and with the challenge of how to repurpose and, in a sense, curate decadence at a time in which the artistic reputation of the fin de siècle was at its lowest.

The book takes what Mahoney has earlier called 'post-Victorian Decadence' into new directions, shifting the focus on the construction of networks and communities.¹ The six archive-rich chapters are packed with stories and arresting findings. Fittingly, she starts with Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland, tracing his effort to reconnect with his father's circle, particularly Robert Ross and Christopher Sclater Millard – the man who compiled the first bibliography of Wilde's works. Mahoney argues that Holland's collaborations with these figures who were either personally close to his father or worked hard to rehabilitate his reputation should be seen as an attempt to create new familiar bonds, and that they should be understood in conjunction with Holland's work as a translator of decadent literature – something that again connected him emotionally and artistically with his father's generation and its legacy. From here, Mahoney goes on to analyse the life-long partnership between siblings Laurence and Clemence Housman, the unconventional marriage of Compton and Faith Mackenzie, Harold Acton's intimacies with students during his time in China, and finally Nugent and Eric Gill's use of incest – a real-life, abusive practice in the case of Gill.

All of these forms of attachment, Mahoney argues, are queer in that they enabled authors to extricate themselves from traditional family ties based on heteronormative expectations. They allowed them to forge unconventional life trajectories and fuelled their artistic imagination in ways that could be liberating and productive but also highly troubling at times. Indeed, one of the most impressive aspects of *Queer Kinship after Wilde* is just the amount of intelligent pressure that Mahoney puts on queerness as a category of resistance. She sensitively exploits the flexibility of queerness as an affective and social bond: the work of Holland and Gill – figures that are generally understood within a heterosexual prism – acquires new potentialities when we read it in relation

to queer networks; Acton's queer-inflected Aestheticism opens up to new meanings when we consider that the queer *woman* Vernon Lee, rather than Pater and Wilde, might have been its shaping influence. At the same time, however, Mahoney is quite clear that queerness should not be too easily associated with progressive politics. Transgressive and traditionalist structures of feeling are entangled more often than we think, as manifested for instance in a distinctive queer desire for domesticity that emerges in several of Mahoney's case studies and in a residual discourse of biologism that overshadows utopian ideas of queer family. And of course, homosexual attachments could also be exploitative and unethical. By emulating decadent radicalism, Mahoney's writers also often inherited Orientalist and 'Mediterraneanist' practices and the habit of fetishizing national and racial differences. The case of Gill is the most extreme instance of how queer decadence could even be refashioned into an abusive form of patriarchy.

Mahoney brings out the extraordinary complexity of queer forms of kinship in a series of nuanced readings grounded in extensive archival work. What her archive also shows is how often queer kinship was compounded with transnational links. The affective and social connections analysed here were frequently facilitated by travel, exile, migration, and other forms of physical uprooting. Such cosmopolitan connections resulted in important acts of transcultural mediation, such as Holland and Acton's literary translations. When dealing with cosmopolitanism, too, Mahoney fleshes out the complex legacy of decadence in aesthetic and ethical terms, highlighting the positive effects of cultural curiosity and her authors' critiques of nationalism. But she never overlooks the fact that cosmopolitan openness went hand in hand with her authors' privileged positions as citizens of wealthy nations such as Britain and the United States. A particularly powerful instance is her analysis of Compton and Faith Mackenzie's state as 'Decadent exiles' (p. 96) on the Italian island of Capri. Set apart from Italy by its tradition of high-end tourism that stretches all the way back to the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Capri provided a tolerant haven for sexual outcasts from Northern Europe, such as Norman Douglas and the controversial Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen. Here, the Mackenzies encountered a temporally deracinated version of the

queer decadence of the 1890s that had been preserved in the utopian island setting, and which informed the couple's affective relations and their autobiographical writings. But they (and their writings) also participated in forms of cultural exploitation and sex tourism.

Mahoney's reading of the Mackenzies relies partly on private photograph albums that record queer life on Capri. One of the fascinating suggestions of the book is that acts of queer intimacy very often took place through encounters between texts and visual material. The Housman siblings developed their shared political activism via a dialogue between writing and illustration. Nugent's obsession with drawing and redrawing *Salomé* enables Mahoney to uncover the complex racial politics that underlie 'Geisha Man'. And she traces the circulation of Gill's religious sculptures among figures linked to Aestheticism and decadence, including the Michael Fields, John Gray, and André Raffalovich, to uncover the persistence of fin-de-siècle queer Catholicism in Gill's modernist visual aesthetics. In all these instances visual culture provides a crucial medium to bring to light performances of intimacy and identity construction that are only half-articulated in printed texts.

Going back to 'Geisha Man', Mahoney labels Nugent's aborted experiment a work that 'seems to at once demand and exceed analysis' (p. 161). This is the interpretative line that she navigates so expertly in *Queer Kinship after Wilde*, an important book for students of the fin de siècle and of Modernism. Mahoney shows the rewards that come from unpacking marginalized and difficult material and from reactivating connections across national and period boundaries that are all too often lost in compartmentalized approaches.

¹ See Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).