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Hanging out with ‘Archival AI’: Decadent Community in Neo-Victorian Comics¹

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Recent scholarship has explored the various social aspects of decadence, debunking older models which conceived of it in terms of alienated individuals, working on highly stylized texts in isolation. Criticism by Matthew Potolsky, Dennis Denisoff, and, most recently, Joseph Thorne has, instead, explored the value of community to decadence in different forms, from networks of writers and publishers to allusive interconnections between texts, objects, and artworks.² In this article, I shall use this to unlock the decadent aesthetics of Neo-Victorian comics produced by Alan Moore, working with Kevin O’Neill and others. Central to Potolsky’s exploration of decadent communities is a recognition that they can be problematic in various ways, from the loose and fractured nature of the connections between members of a group to the complex political and aesthetic tensions between individuals and the collective. Focusing on the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series, I shall draw parallels between these central developments in decadence studies and Moore’s depiction of a complex imagined and imaginary community within decadence and the fin de siècle.

Imagined Communities

Always a slippery term, decadence and its meanings have broadened considerably since Paul Bourget’s observation in the nineteenth century:

A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase is decomposed to give place to the independence of the word.³

Whilst matters of form and ‘style’ remain central, critics such as Potolsky have sought to move in recent decades beyond thinking about decadence in terms of ‘a familiar set of themes, images and stylistic traits’. For Potolsky, it is instead ‘a stance that writers take in relationship to their culture

and to the cosmopolitan traditions that influence them'.⁴ Parallel with Charles Bernheimer's description of decadence as a 'dynamics of paradox and ambivalence', emphasis has started to shift to what decadent writers and artists do, as well as how they do it. The result is a considerable expansion of the community of writers and artists discussed under the aegis of decadence to include figures who would not have recognized the term, indeed even rejected it.⁵ In the process, the historical parameters have widened to take in 'post-Victorian Decadence';⁶ as Alex Murray points out, the canon has also begun to recognize the contribution of neglected women writers;⁷ and, in the recent turn towards 'global decadence', critics have begun to embrace to a more diverse array of writers and artists in terms of race.⁸

The question of who or what counts as 'decadent' is central to my argument, which starts from Potolsky's exploration of these questions in *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (2012). Where Bourget saw disintegration and decomposition, Potolsky discerns a set of common purposes and interests across writers and artists of the late nineteenth century, which he construes as a form of 'imagined community' – a term popularized by the historian Benedict Anderson. Discussing the rise of nationalist movements, Anderson draws attention to the way in which various media enabled the development of common ideas and shared intellectual resources. Members of such imagined communities, Anderson notes, 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.⁹ Applied to decadence, we might surmise that if writers and artists did not always play nicely together, they nevertheless had much in common.

As an example of the mechanisms by which this decadent imagined community was formed, Potolsky observes the importance of the 'epideictic mode' to late nineteenth-century writers and artists. This figure from rhetoric describes 'the oratory of praise and blame' and corresponds to the frequency with which decadent writers point to the other writers of which they approve.¹⁰ The extensive catalogues of books and artworks admired by the character of Floressas des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884) provide an obvious paradigm here.

Chapter Three itemizes his taste for the kind of decadent Latin literature to which Bourget alluded in his description of Baudelaire's decadent style. Chapter Fourteen catalogues Des Esseintes' tastes in more recent writers, from Stéphane Mallarmé to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Paul Verlaine. Hence Arthur Symons's famous reference to Huysmans's novel as a 'breviary of the decadence', comparing it to a collection of religious texts.¹¹ 'Each decadent writer', Potolsky argues, 'forges his or her own language of appreciation' and he draws attention to work by Walter Pater, George Moore, Michael Field, and Oscar Wilde, amongst others, which also assembles sets of favoured writers, texts, and artists.¹²

Despite the broadening parameters of decadence studies, it may seem unclear how Alan Moore and his comics fit into this. Moore made his name at the forefront of the 'British Invasion' wave of comics writers and artists in the 1980s, establishing a reputation for introducing narrative and psychological complexity into the superhero story through *Watchmen* (1987).¹³ During the 1990s, however, his fascination with Victorian history and culture emerged within works such as *From Hell* (1989-1998), *Lost Girls* (1991-2006), and the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series (1999-2019). My argument rests largely upon identifying an analogous epideictic effect in the latter, which draws extensively upon texts from the fin de siècle. Set in a fictional version of 1898, the comics feature a team of agents recruited by the British secret services, consisting of Allan Quartermain from the novels of H. Rider Haggard, the invisible man from H. G. Wells, Mina Murray from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the double figure of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde from Robert Louis Stevenson, and Captain Nemo from the novels of Jules Verne. The plot of the first volume has them thwarting an attempt to obtain mastery of the air by Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu using 'cavorite', from Wells's *The First Men on the Moon* (1901). The second volume reworks another of Wells's novels, *The War of Worlds* (1898), by pitting the same characters against a Martian invasion. The creation of an imaginary community of characters lifted from Victorian literature, I suggest, forges an imagined community with decadence.

Two obvious initial objections arise: firstly, Moore's tangled creative evocation of this

source material might seem at odds with the aesthetics of cataloguing and itemisation that constitute epideixis. But there is precedent within Potolsky's account: as well as explicit, critical works of praise, such as the art writings of Pater, his imagined decadent community is fashioned through more indirect or allusive forms such as John Gray's assemblage of translations from Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Arthur Rimbaud in *Silverpoints* (1893). It is also expressed in works such as Michael Field's poem 'Watteau's *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*', which is more diffusely evocative of poetry by Verlaine and Baudelaire, as well as the visual art of Antoine Watteau.¹⁴ Moore's complex Neo-Victorian practice of dense overlapping allusion, I propose, can be compared to such nineteenth-century decadent allusive practice.

The other objection to this approach relates to a potential weakness within Potolsky's account. The 'epideictic' effects that he describes are not exclusive to decadence. Most, if not all, literary movements invest energy in articulating the topics, writers, and texts that best exemplify their values. Here it is important to recognize that Potolsky's resort to 'imagined community' is premised upon the apparently dissipated relations between the decadent writers and artists he explores. Hence his appeal to models such as Michael Warren's 'counterpublic' and Jean-Luc Nancy's 'inoperative community' to justify his core claim that the decadent imagined community served as a site of resistance to reactionary political forces.¹⁵

My reading of Moore seeks another parallel here in the problematic nature of the community depicted in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* volumes. Recruited by the mysterious figure of Captain Bond, Mina must first drag Quartermain from his drug-induced stupor in an opium den, then extract Jekyll from the Parisian slums, where his alter-ego Hyde is wreaking havoc upon the local population of prostitutes. With Captain Nemo, they then forcibly remove Hawley Griffin from a girl's boarding school, where he has been exploiting his invisibility to take sexual advantage of the pupils. As Alison Halsall points out, the very title 'League of Extraordinary Gentlemen' is problematic, since the group is led by a woman and none of the members behave in a fashion that corresponds to Victorian notions of the 'gentleman'.¹⁶ I am hopeful that the doubtful,

poorly cohesive character of this ‘league’ strengthens the parallel with Potolsky’s conception of a problematic imagined decadent community, since it is central to Moore’s Neo-Victorian negotiation with nineteenth-century values.

Decadent World-Building

Moore’s penchant for combining multiple points of reference extends across his varied career. Jackson Ayres cites Moore’s own itemisation of around twenty sources that fed into his depiction of a fascist alternative history in *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985). This ranges from literary texts by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, to visual source material such as ‘Max Ernst’s painting “Europe after the Rains”’ and more diffuse influences, such as ‘The atmosphere of British Second World War films’.¹⁷ As Annalisa Di Liddo observes:

Most of Moore’s comics start from an intertextual assumption: a quotation, or an allusion to an existing character, a distinctive genre, or a particular work. They are built on a proper web of references that are not only mentioned or suggested but challenged and recontextualized in order to convey new meanings. Thus transcended, intertextuality is stripped of the status of mere formal device to become a proper narrative motif.¹⁸

The League of Extraordinary Gentleman multiplies this: it overlaps settings, plot lines and characters in dense collocation. Consider the scene between Mina and her spymaster, upon her return to London in first issue of the first volume [fig. 1].

The dialogue in this scene alludes in rapid succession to Sherlock Holmes (‘the great detective’); to Anthony Trollope’s Palliser novels (‘Prime Minister Plantagenet Palliser’) and *The Warden* (‘the Reverend Septimus Harding’); to works by Jules Verne, including *Robur le Conquérant* (1886; *Robur the Conqueror*) and *Maître du monde* (1904; *Master of the World*); as well as to less-well known figures from popular Victorian culture, such as ‘Inspector Donovan’. Moore himself glosses the latter reference in his script for the artist Kevin O’Neill:

This is Inspector Dick Donovan, a Victorian police detective created by Joyce Emmerson Preston Muddock and the hero of over 200 short stories between 1888 and 1899 – Archival A1 (L1 II.2.8)¹⁹



Fig 1: Alan Moore, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen – Volume One*, issue 2 ‘Ghosts and Miracles’, pp. 8-9.

As well as explaining this point of reference, Moore’s self-description as ‘Archival AI’ jokingly acknowledges the way that *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* serves as a creative archival repository for a large range of material, much of which has slipped from general awareness.

Moore’s gloss for O’Neill also reflects the way in which that these allusions are woven into the fabric of dialogue between the characters about other matters. They are not overtly identified or signalled as references and may require such commentary to clarify their provenance. In their visual presentation, these allusions play out in the dialogue positioned in white text bubbles lettered by William Oakley. As such, they stand out against the muted palette employed by Benedict Dimagmaliw to colour O’Neill’s line art depicting character and setting. A complex counterpoint emerges between the dialogue, the visual unfolding of the physical world of the comic, and the gradual exposition of plot points.

This rapid sequence of allusions acquires a world-building effect which is comparable to

O'Neill's visual depiction of the docklands in which Moore's characters are situated. Whilst the dilapidated warehouses, cranes and hoists can be attributed to the localized setting of this scene in Wapping, they also contribute to the broader vision of Britain in 1898 within *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. The very first pages of the first volume open with a depiction of an incomplete bridge across the Channel between France and England. As Halsall observes, this alternative vision of the fin de siècle is characterized by a continuous state of construction and decay.²⁰ In other words, the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* offer a decadent version of Victorian Britain as a corrupted imperial power.

Moore's use of literary and fantastical elements means that these comics are often classified as 'steampunk'; indeed, he also refers to himself in his scripts as 'Alternative Worlds AI' (L2 II, n.p.). Such details of setting and background, however, also evoke the kind of real-world historical tensions between expansion and decline in the nineteenth century that have been explored by literary scholars of decadence and degeneration, such as Vincent Sherry and Stephen Arata.²¹ Whilst the frame of reference in these comics is broad, the decadent character of this vision is reinforced by the prevalence of fin-de-siècle and decadent source material amidst the array of allusions to the nineteenth century. In addition to texts such as *Dracula* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1884), there are passing references to works by Émile Zola, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arthur Machen. The material in the end papers to the first volume reimagines Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as a child's colouring-in exercise: readers invited to complete 'Basil Hallward's Painting by Numbers' are presented with the outline image of a suave and youthful Dorian Gray, only to find that the final, coloured painting shows him in the aged and corrupted version that features in Wilde's novel.

The latter example indicates how closely allusions to decadent works are woven into the fabric of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. There are clear echoes in the frontispiece to the first volume of the visual style and the distinctive aesthetics of the front covers of the *Yellow Book* designed by Aubrey Beardsley in 1894 [fig. 2]. O'Neill's use of silhouette also recalls Beardsley's

'Night Piece', which appeared opposite Arthur Symons's 'Stella Maris' in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*. Jess Nevins suggests that a knife in Mina Harker's hand recalls Beardsley's 'Oriental Dancer' (1898) – although O'Neill has denied this was a conscious influence.²² Scrutinising the representation of dress in this image, Rebecca Mitchell discerns multiple points of allusive visual reference: 'Mina's style', she observes, 'is expressly not Aesthetic – others in the comic take that role, with Hawley Griffin adorning his invisible body in quilted-lapel smoking robes that denote Oscar Wilde's Sarony photographs or [...] Du Maurier's Aesthetic parodies.'²³ O'Neill's artwork in the frontispiece and across the volumes, then, compresses a range of allusive reference to nineteenth-century culture comparable to Moore's dialogue and plotting. The decadent imagined community in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is thoroughly embedded in form and content.



Fig. 2: Frontispiece to the first volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

If Moore's depiction of an imaginary community of figures from nineteenth-century literature and art entails an imagined community, it is important to note here the workings of a

more literal community, intrinsic to comics. The distinctive mix of verbal and visual allusion in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* arises from Moore's collaborative relationships with the artist, O'Neill, as well as his colourist, Dimagmaliw, and the letterer, Oakley. A practical example of such creative community emerges from the reference in dialogue quoted previously to the 'so-called miracles at Miss Cootes' school in Edmonton'. The characters are sent to a boarding school run by one 'Rosa Cootes' to investigate why the girls at her school keep mysteriously becoming pregnant. It turns out that the invisible man has been hiding out at the school and having sex with them. But the atmosphere at the school is already hypersexualized. For Rosa Cootes is a character from various pornographic stories published in *The Pearl*.²⁴ Moore relishes this clash of literary registers: the names of pupils in the school draw upon a variety of texts including Olive Chancellor from Henry James' *The Bostonians*, Katy from the novels of Susan Coolidge, and Pollyanna from Eleanor Porter's novels. Moore's script encourages O'Neill to keep proliferating this juxtaposition of sexual material in design elements of the scene:

Page 13 – Panel 1 as before, if you want to replace any of the musty framed prints on the walls with Beardsley or Von Bayros drawings then go ahead. Maybe banister ends and stuff like that could be carved into priapic satyrs, just to give the school a bit of 19th century licentious detail. (*L1* II.2.13)

O'Neill's artwork in the published version of scenes follows Moore's suggestions closely. In one scene, a statue placed in the foreground recalls pagan and erotic (interestingly androgynous) elements from Beardsley's work on Wilde's *Salomé*, while a painting in the background of the panel is reminiscent of visual elements from Franz von Bayros' pornographic *Erzählungen am Toilette-tisch* (1911) series of images and tales [fig. 3].

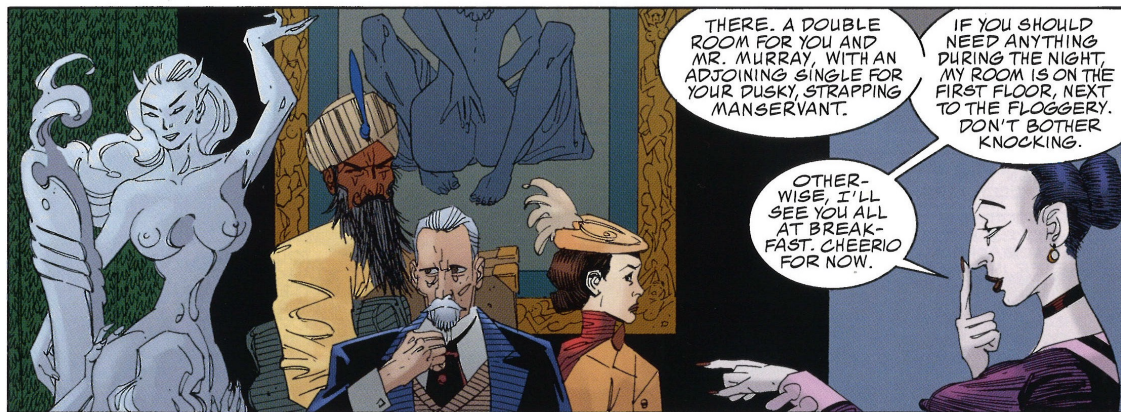


Fig. 3: *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen – Volume One*, issue 3 ‘Ghosts and Miracles’, p. 14 (panel 2.)

Lara Rutherford connects this interdisciplinary community between visual and verbal elements to a self-conscious approach to the material form of the book: ‘Moore’s “borrowing” from Victorian culture extends well beyond the appropriation of plots and characters to include allusions to the visual and material properties of Victorian print forms’.²⁵ Scholars sensitive to decadence might compare Moore’s collaborative relationships here with the fin-de-siècle fascination with the materialities of art and with book design – especially given the references to Beardsley and his work for *The Yellow Book* discussed previously. Rutherford, however, draws attention to specific visual connections between *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* volumes and ‘juvenile’ texts from the nineteenth century. So, for example, a prose narrative entitled ‘Allan and the Sundered Veil’, which is presented at the end of the first volume, directly imitates layout and design elements from *The Boy’s Own Adventure*. Rutherford concludes:

In juxtaposing characters from children’s novels and erotic magazines Moore makes the point that Victorian literature is not limited to the canonical triple-decker realist novel. Rather, the whole range of Victorian print culture – spanning novels, magazines, newspapers, and penny fiction – functions as an archive of the Victorians’ competing and often contradictory desires.²⁶

This chimes with Moore’s joking self-identification as ‘archival AP’, suggesting that his allusive practice is motivated by a desire to correct canonical accounts of the nineteenth century which do not consider ‘the whole range of Victorian print culture’.

Adopting a similar approach, Jeff Thoss argues that Moore’s interests are more reflexive.

The combination of allusions to different cultural registers in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, he suggests, is a response to the questionable cultural status of comics, which have been dismissed in the past as a 'low' popular genre. 'As good Neo-Victorians', Thoss notes, 'Moore and O'Neill reinterpret the past mainly to negotiate the present'.²⁷ There is, however, greater dialogue between Moore's work and his Victorian source material than this might suggest, since the distinction between 'high' art and 'low' popular culture stems from the work of Victorian critics such as Matthew Arnold.²⁸ The presentation of Mr Hyde in the second volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* illustrates clearly how Moore's allusive practice manages to draw past and present concerns into a complex relationship. Questioned about the relationship between his two identities, Hyde describes his alter ego as 'a finching little Presbyterian spinster frightened by his own erection' and reflects on Jekyll's motives for separating the two halves of his personality:

Panel 2

Should I tell you what they were, eh? These EVILS he was so desperate to get rid of.
Well he'd once stolen a BOOK.

Panel 3

More borrowed and never returned, but STILL...
Oh, and he played with himself, sometimes while he thought about other men.
That's about it.

Panel 4

Anyway, what the silly bastard DID, he thought if he quarantined all these BAD parts, what was LEFT would be a ****ing ANGEL.
Hub- bub. (L2 I.5.21-22)

These dismissive observations are rooted in Stevenson's text, since they make fun of the paucity of explanation in Jekyll's supposedly 'Full Statement of the Case'. Describing 'a profound duplicity of life', the original character records:

And indeed the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public.²⁹

In contrast, Moore's creation unpacks the euphemism, innuendo and evasion in this paragraph ('a certain gaiety of disposition'). Di Liddo, however, quotes an interview which indicates that this is more than smug hindsight, for Moore describes Jekyll as 'a metaphor for the whole of a Victorian

society': 'where virtue was never lauded so loudly in public nor vice practised so excessively in private. You can almost see in that novel the exact point where the mass Victorian mind became uneasily aware of its own shadow'.³⁰

The uneasy awareness described here suggests that Moore believes that nineteenth-century readers would have recognized Jekyll's evasions too. The effect is comparable to Wilde's famous observation regarding the ambiguous and unspecified nature of some of Dorian Gray's transgressions: 'Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray.'³¹ Such Victorian writings resonate with 'the mass Victorian mind' because they evoke an implicit private community of knowledge that readers bring to the text about matters which cannot be uttered in public discourse. Decadence precisely sought to test those limits.

Moore's transgression of historical conventions for a modern audience incorporates implicit commentary on Hyde's relationship with 'Victorian society' in the visual presentation of this scene. The conversation derives from a dinner on the eve of a confrontation with the Martian invaders. Hyde is dressed formally, but this contrasts with his hulking physical depiction. This is established in a broad opening horizontal panel across the page. As O'Neill remarks about his own design, 'Hyde's face has visible muscle tissue and very pronounced veins as if the shifting from Jekyll to Hyde over the years has torn away all trace of humanity' (*L1 I*, n.p.). The dialogue that follows is split across a series of vertical panels in rows of three. As well as breaking up Hyde's speech, this division underscores a visual counterpoint: during his conversation, panels show increasing spots of blood on Hyde's white shirt front. Unbeknownst to his fellow diners, Hyde has raped and murdered Hawley Griffin, the invisible man, for defecting to the Martians and assaulting Mina Harker in the process. With Griffin's death, his powers of invisibility fade – hence the appearance of his blood, a revelation which horrifies, disgusts and enrages the other characters present.

This is presented in another broad horizontal panel at the end of the sequence. In his script for O'Neill, Moore describes the intended effect: 'This looks like a brutish parody, a deliberate

mockery of civilized discourse. His eyebrows are raised questioningly as if he was fucking Noel Coward or somebody' (*L2* II,174). The result is a visual analogue for Moore's understanding of Hyde as the ugly truth repressed by Victorian society.

As Di Liddo observes, there is a strong correlation between Moore's presentation of Hyde and contemporary psychoanalytic theories of the gothic,³² but Hyde's passing reference to masturbation and homosexual desire suggests a slightly larger acquaintance with the field of critical writing. If, for example, Moore was working from the Penguin Classics edition of Stevenson, he might have encountered Robert Mighall's introduction, which summarizes critical work connecting Jekyll and Hyde to cases of homosexual blackmail, contemporary theories of evolution, race and degeneration and nineteenth-century accounts of 'masturbatic insanity'.³³

Moore's theorising about the broader cultural implications of the Jekyll and Hyde story, however, does not derive exclusively from Stevenson's scholarly reception. Sent to delay the Martian invasion whilst the British forces prepare to unleash a chemical weapon, Hyde is depicted sauntering towards the tripods singing 'You Should See Me Dance the Polka'. In an interview with Nevins, Moore confirms that this detail was inspired by the 1941 cinematic adaptation of Stevenson's story, directed by Victor Fleming and featuring Spencer Tracy as both Jekyll and Hyde:

Oh, it's really, it's the scene I remember. There are these sort of semi-naked – you probably can't see a nipple, but it was pretty racy for the time – these semi-naked girls harnessed to a coach with Mr. Hyde whipping them on, while 'You Should See Me Dance the Polka' plays deliriously in the background. One of my favourite film sequences.³⁴

This refers to surreal hallucinatory montages deployed in the film when Jekyll consumes the mixture which transforms him into Hyde. In this (heteronormative) version of Stevenson's story, Jekyll is caught between his desire for two women: his fiancée Beatrice, played by Lana Turner, and a barmaid called Ivy, played by Ingrid Bergman. On the occasion of his first transformation, he is imagined as whipping on horses which metamorphose into the two women. In a subsequent montage, the heads of these women are shown as corks being removed from wine bottles.

In both cases, these scenes of hallucination manifest desires Jekyll must repress in his everyday life: the uncorking of the bottles is hardly subtly about this. Notably, the logic of this

popular cultural adaptation of Stevenson corresponds with the ‘gothic’ reading of Hyde as ‘the shadow’ for the sexual feelings repressed by conservative Victorian society. During the first of these montages, there is a brief snatch of the melody from George Grossmith’s popular song ‘You Should See Me Dance the Polka’. This recalls a first encounter where Ivy sang lines of the song to Jekyll, but also anticipates Hyde’s visit to a music hall, where performance of this song becomes the soundtrack to a bar-room brawl that he initiates. Within *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, then, a gesture of defiance in the face of death by Moore’s version of the character is connected with his reading of the text as a paradigm of the forces repressed by public Victorian discourse and the re-mediation of Stevenson’s work in popular culture.³⁵

Neo-Victorian Decadence

The imagined community in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* with Victorian literature is shaped by and responds to a broader community of readers and readings too. As Sebastian Domsch observes, ‘Moore lets us perceive the late Victorian period filtered through the collective prism of its literary imagination, while highlighting the necessary constructedness of such a vision, and thereby providing a genuine neo-Victorian perspective’.³⁶ Domsch and Thoss share an understanding of what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘genuine neo-Victorian perspective’ with Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, who claim “The “neo-Victorian” is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of neo-Victorianism [...] texts [...] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*’.³⁷

On this reading, works such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* which take liberties with historical detail could be said to qualify as more emphatically neo-Victorian than novels such as A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and Moore’s own work, *From Hell*, which tend to observe the limits of historical knowledge. Indeed, speculative works such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are commonly classified as ‘steampunk’ precisely because of the way that they combine the nineteenth century with fantastic elements or

technologies associated with science fiction. They belong to another community of transformative '(re)visions' of the nineteenth century, such as Bruce Sterling and William Gibson's *The Difference Engine* (1990) or Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995).

Despite the implicit gatekeeping by Thoss, Domsch, Heilman, and Lewellyn regarding what can be considered 'good' or 'genuine' neo-Victorian writing, imagined communities amongst creative practitioners overlap here considerably. Through their visual or imaginative transformations of the nineteenth century, steampunk neo-Victorian texts tend to write large a significant anxiety that underlies most (if not all) neo-Victorian work regarding the political implications of representing the nineteenth century. This can be traced back to the earliest usages of the term 'neo-Victorian', which the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1916. Citing work by Arnold Bennet, *OED* suggests the term 'originally' referred to 'a person living in the latter or most recent part of the Victorian period', but it also quotes Robert Graves' *The Long Weekend* (1940) as evidence of shift in the meaning of the term to 'resembling, reviving, or reminiscent of, the Victorian era'. By contrast, contemporary usage of the term is premised (as Heilmann and Lewellyn indicate) upon a concern to avoid simple revival and a desire to criticize aspects of the nineteenth century which no longer seem palatable, particularly regarding attitudes towards key issues such as gender, popular culture, race, and imperialism.

As Simon Joyce and others have pointed out, an important motivation here is the way that subsequent right-wing conservative ideologues sought to co-opt the nineteenth century for their own purposes.³⁸ Perhaps most famously, Margaret Thatcher publicly espoused 'Victorian values' in the 1980s, writing to fellow MP, John Evans in May 1985:

When I speak of Victorian values, I mean respect for the individual, thrift, initiative, a sense of personal responsibility, respect for others and their property and all the other values that characterized the best of the Victorian era.³⁹

Moore's distaste for Thatcher is widely reported: his biographer even describes her as 'Moore's archnemesis'.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the 'gothic' revision of Jekyll and Hyde in the *League* can be seen to redress the kind of selective approach to the nineteenth century witnessed here by Thatcher's

reference to ‘the best of the Victorian era’, by pointing to the fissures, contradictions and ruptures within its public sphere. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* thus recalls the general opposition to contemporary conservatism found in Moore’s works such as *V for Vendetta*, *Skizze* (1983), and *Brought to Light* (1988).⁴¹ In contrast with Thatcher’s emphasis on ‘thrift’ and ‘personal responsibility’, Moore offers a vision of decadent Victorian society where the comically hypersexualized desires of Rosa Cootes and her pupils jostle with fallen heroes of empire and incomplete grand projects. In this version of the nineteenth century the official British secret service turns out to be run by Victorian arch-villain, Professor Moriarty, and the government resorts to indiscriminating chemical warfare to bring the war against the Martians to an end: ‘Officially, the Martians died of the COMMON COLD. Any HUMANS died of MARTIANS’ (L2 I.6.23).

Decadent Uncertainties

This is hardly a ground-breaking conclusion. Moore’s Neo-Victorian credentials are well-established. Claire Nally draws on Linda Hutcheon to argue that his steampunk combination of historical detail and the fantastic serves to resist the pressure of ‘nostalgia’ for the Victorian period.⁴² Where Thoss and Rutherford focus upon the literary politics of his treatment of sources from popular culture, Elizabeth Ho and Domsch have explored the value and importance of Moore’s representation of empire, and Halsall and Nally have probed his depictions of gender and sexuality.⁴³ Approaching these issues in terms of a decadent imagined community has the benefit of emphasising the strength of the presence of the fin-de-siècle within Moore’s wider allusive practice, connecting it to his alternative decadent historiography. It also suggests two further considerations.

Firstly, the imagined community of direct allusion to decadence in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* recognizes the historical roots of the modern horror and fantasy tradition that emerged during the twentieth century out of responses to the work of H. P. Lovecraft.⁴⁴

Allusions to Poe, Wilde, Machen and others in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* acknowledge significant precursors to Lovecraft in decadent and weird fiction from the late nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The presence of fin-de-siècle elements in comics by Moore's contemporaries suggests that this recognition is shared more broadly: Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell's *Sebastian O* (1993) pits a central character moulded on Wilde and the witty dandies in his writings against a totalitarian society manipulated by a megalomaniac artificial intelligence modelled on Queen Victoria and Thatcher; Bryan Talbot's *Grandville* series (2009-2017) crosses Sherlock Holmes with elements from Tintin and the distinctive anthropomorphic illustrations of J. J. Grandville, to depict a Badger detective, Archie LeBrock and his rat sidekick, Roderick Ratz; *Aetheric Mechanics* by Warren Ellis and Gianluca Pagliarani crosses Sherlock Holmes with Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) and stories from the Sexton Blake library; and *The New Deadwardians* (2012) by Dan Abnett and I. N. J. Culbard merges historical details of early twentieth-century conflict with vampires and zombies. Like a zombie bite, Moore's decadent imagined community is infectious, drawing on and inspiring others.

Secondly, decadent elements within *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* help draw out the sense of dialogue and negotiation with the nineteenth century outlined by Halsall: '[Moore's] neo-Victorian pastiches bespeak a fascination with the paradoxes of this past historical time that link, as opposed to separate, the Victorian period with our present cultural moment.'⁴⁶ Moore's relationship to the historical and literary past is double. On the one hand, his depictions of a decadent steampunk society offer a critique of British Imperialism and outdated attitudes towards sex and gender ('a waspish tongue', etc.). On the other hand, his evocation of historical decadent material from the nineteenth century serves as a corrective to conservative ideologues who offer only a partial account of the period.

This is shown starkly by *Lost Girls*, a work conceived by Moore with Melissa Gebbie before *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, but not fully published until 2004. Deploying similar narrative strategies, *Lost Girls* re-imagines characters from Lewis Carroll's Alice books, L. Frank Baum's *The*

Wizard of Oz (1900), and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) in various pornographic scenarios. The central plot has the female protagonists of these works meeting up at a hotel in the Austrian alps shortly before the First World War, where they share their sexual histories and enter into new relationships. Whilst this may seem like a deliberate subversion of revered children's texts, Moore's pornographic imagination is rooted once again in historical material. The hotel's proprietor 'Monsieur Rougueur' leaves copies of a 'white book' for his guests which contains stories and images derived from Beardsley, Félicien Rops, and Franz von Bayros, amongst others. As Halsall and others have observed, Moore offers his own pastiche of nineteenth century writings, but deliberately bases this in authentic historical material. The first images of the 'white book' clearly reproduce Beardsley's frontispiece to 'Under the Hill', a version of the Tannhauser myth that was first published within the *Savoy* and then re-issued in an unexpurgated, sexually explicit form by Leonard Smithers in 1906, after Beardsley's death. In this way, as Halsall points out, Moore's re-working of the nineteenth century recalls the work of historians such as Ronald Pearsall and Steven Marcus by drawing attention to a thriving Victorian subculture of pornography that contradicts pofaced conservative accounts of sexual probity in the period.

Halsall attributes this aspect of Moore's writing to the influence of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, but I would argue that it strengthens my comparison between his work and the imagined decadent community described by Potolsky, which is also conceived as a counterculture of resistance to reactionary ideologies from within the nineteenth century. Conjoining Moore to this community, however loosely, reveals that the decadent roots of contemporary fantasy offer a potential continuity of resistance.

It is nevertheless important to recognize that this is not without its risks. The anxieties about 'nostalgia' described by Nally which underlie Neo-Victorianism still pertain and the density of allusion in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* does not always disambiguate clearly where Moore evokes the nineteenth century to make fun of it or draws upon its power of critique. For example, the monstrous size and ape-like features of Mr Hyde in his earliest appearances may be

intended to evoke the kind of nineteenth century ideologies regarding evolution, race and degeneration that Daniel Pick and others have discussed in relation to Stevenson's original story, but a passing remark by O'Neill sheds doubt on this.⁴⁷ Discussing how this physical appearance developed through collaborative efforts with Moore and others, he notes 'as an aside':

Hyde is coloured darker than Jekyll, which I've always assumed was colourist Ben Digmagliw's misreading of one of my rather odd colour notes - but it looks great so why tamper with it?! (*L1* I, n.p.)

Where Hyde's skin colouring in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* might bring implied racial overtones that confirm a critique of Victorian biological essentialism, O'Neill's flippant disavowal ('it looks great') makes this seem less clearly intended. There is a risk that the comic slips into the racist ideologies it might otherwise be thought to explore critically. As several critics have observed, similar issues arise around Moore's depiction, for example, of stereotypically villainous Arab characters in the opium den where Allan Quartermain is discovered in the opening issue, or Hyde's free use of racial slurs (he calls the Martian invaders 'sky wogs').⁴⁸

From one perspective, it is these uncertainties that most closely align Moore with decadence. Bernheimer's description of the 'dynamics of paradox and ambivalence' that characterizes nineteenth-century decadence captures the way in which nineteenth-century writers and artists sought to transvalue the received aesthetics and ideologies they found in the culture around them. While this refusal to leave conventional values in their place is the source of the decadent power of critique which appeals to Moore, 'paradox' remains open to misinterpretation. It may not be clear where the representation of race indicts or replicates racism, but such uncertainty aligns with the profound ability of decadence to disconcert. Indeed, such ambiguities connect *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* to the problematic character of decadent imagined community as described by Potolsky. The positioning of Hyde is, like the cohesion of the 'League' itself, deliberately questionable. Moore has continued to probe the problematic nature of literary history in subsequent volumes in the series, which explore more recent periods, from Modernism to the 1960s. Central to these works is a transtemporal, cross-dimensional space known as 'the

blazing world’ in which counter-cultural figures from across the centuries jostle in a loose coalition of resistance to repressive and reactionary forces. Importantly, Moore first sketched the blazing world in ‘The New Traveller’s Almanac’ – a short story appended to the second volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, described by Nevins as ‘a deliberate recreation of the style of *fin-de-siècle*, Yellow Nineties Decadent writers [...], as if one of them had written a boys’ magazine story’.⁴⁹ Even as the series began to move away from the nineteenth century, then, it is imbricated in a Neo-Victorian imagined decadent community.

¹ I’m grateful to Alan Moore for permission to use images from his work in this article and would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to his artistic collaborator Kevin O’Neill, who passed away while I was working on this project.

² See Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Joseph Thorne, *Decadent Sociability and Material Culture at the Fin de Siècle: ‘A genius for friendship’* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 2019, <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/11254/1/2019thornephd.pdf> [accessed 4 November 2023]).

³ Paul Bourget, ‘Essai de psychologie contemporaine: Charles Baudelaire’ (1881), translated in Havelock Ellis, ‘A Note on Paul Bourget’ (1887), in *View and Reviews: First Series, 1884-1932* (London: Harmsworth, 1932), p. 51.

⁴ Potolsky, *Decadent Republic*, p. 1.

⁵ Stefano Evangelista, for example, points out in a recent essay that Lafcadio Hearn condemned decadence as ‘totally false’. See Stefano Evangelista ‘“Clothed with Poetry”: Lafcadio Hearn’s Decadent Aesthetics of Translation’, *Modern Philology*, 121.1 (2023), pp. 104-23.

⁶ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 5. Also see Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷ Alex Murray, ‘Introduction: Decadent Histories’, in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 10-11.

⁸ See, for example, *French Decadence in a Global Context: Colonialism and Exoticism*, ed. by Julia Hartley, Wanrug Suwanwattana, and Jennifer Yee (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022); and Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

¹⁰ Matthew Potolsky, ‘In Praise of Decadence: The Epideictic Mode from Baudelaire to Wilde’, in *Decadent Poetics*, ed. by Jason Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 100.

¹¹ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, ed. by Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Fyfield, 2014), p. 73.

¹² Potolsky, ‘The Epideictic Mode’, p. 103.

¹³ Jackson Ayres, *Alan Moore: A Critical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 25-54.

¹⁴ I’m indebted here to a presentation by Anne Jamison, ‘Michael Field and Verlaine’, at *Decadence and Translation*, University of Oxford, 2 November 2018.

¹⁵ Potolsky, *Decadent Republic*, pp. 133; 146.

¹⁶ Alison Halsall, ‘“A Parade of Curiosities”: Alan Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Lost Girls* as Neo-Victorian Pastiches’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 48.2 (2015), pp. 257-58.

¹⁷ Ayres, p. 46.

¹⁸ Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p. 27.

¹⁹ Quotations from the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are taken from the ‘Absolute’ editions, published by Knockabout Comics, which reproduce the comics and Moore’s scripts in two separate volumes: Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume One: The Absolute Edition* (La

Jolla: America's Best Comics, 2003); Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume Two: The Absolute Edition* (La Jolla: America's Best Comics, 2005). References are given in the text using the abbreviations L1 and L2 followed by volume, issue and page numbers.

²⁰ For an extended discussion of this, see Halsall, pp. 253-55.

²¹ See Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²² Jess Nevins, *Heroes and Monsters: The Unofficial Companion to The League of Extraordinary Adventures* (London: Titan, 2003), pp. 21-22.

²³ Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Before and After: *Punch*, Steampunk, and Victorian Graphic Narrativity', in *Drawing on Victorians. The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. by Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017), pp. 257-58.

²⁴ Nevins, pp. 55-57.

²⁵ Lara Rutherford, 'Victorian Genres at Play: Juvenile Fiction and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 5.1 (2012), p. 130.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jeff Thoss, 'From Penny Dreadful to Graphic Novel: Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's Genealogy of Comics in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', *Belphegor*, 13.1 (2 June 2015), p. 2, <http://belphegor.revues.org/624> [accessed 4 October 2016]

²⁸ See, for example, John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 5th edn. (Harlow: Pearson, 2009), pp. 18-22.

²⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. by Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 55.

³⁰ Di Liddo, p. 107.

³¹ Oscar Wilde 'To the editor of the *Scots Observer*, 9 July 1890', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Michael Patrick Gillespie (London: Horton, 2007), p. 373.

³² Di Liddo, p. 107.

³³ See Robert Mighall, 'Introduction', in Stevenson, pp. ix-xxxviii.

³⁴ Jess Nevins, 'Alan Moore: Interview' (2004), in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. by Eric Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), p. 147.

³⁵ Jason B. Jones points out Neo-Victorian versions of Sherlock Holmes are frequently as indebted to cinematic adaptations of Conan Doyle's stories as the original material in 'Betrayed by Time: Steampunk & the Neo-Victorian in Alan Moore's *Lost Girls* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3.1 (2010), pp. 101-2.

³⁶ Sebastian Domsch, 'Monsters against Empire: The Politics and Poetics of Neo-Victorian Metafiction in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', in *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), p. 99.

³⁷ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4. Italics in original.

³⁸ See Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007) and John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³⁹ Margaret Thatcher to John Evans, M.P. (5 May 1983), *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/132330> [accessed 15 September 2023].

⁴⁰ Quoted in Ayres, p. 15

⁴¹ See Ayres, pp. 14-18, 27-32.

⁴² Claire Nally, *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture and the Neo-Victorian* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 173-80.

⁴³ See Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁴⁴ Lovecraft's debts to the nineteenth century are now more widely recognized, as in *The Age of Lovecraft*, ed. by Jeffrey Weinstock and Carl Sederholm (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

⁴⁵ Contributors to Matthew Green's edited collection *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) frame this historical awareness in similar terms across his *oeuvre*.

⁴⁶ Halsall, p. 266.

⁴⁷ See Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴⁸ Ayres discusses more recent controversy regarding Moore's exploration of the figure of the Golliwog in subsequent volumes of the series (pp. 176-80).

⁴⁹ Quoted in Thoss, p. 8.