

## GAY-RELATED THEMES IN THE FAIRY TALES OF OSCAR WILDE

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IT IS A CRITICAL COMMONPLACE that homosexuality — or, to use a more common term of the period, “male love” — appears as a theme in certain of Oscar Wilde’s works.<sup>1</sup> It is also a critical commonplace that many Victorian readers were aware of this fact.<sup>2</sup> Scant attention, however, has been given to homosexual themes in Wilde’s first book, his 1888 collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, which he supplemented in 1891 with a second collection, *A House of Pomegranates*. The lack of critical attention is surprising, considering that the fairy tales not only mark the beginning of Wilde’s “reputation as an author” (Ellmann 299), but were written in the wake of his first homosexual experience — with Robert Ross in 1886 — a coincidence which gives us grounds to expect, or at least suspect, the presence of homosexual themes.<sup>3</sup>

Any attempt to identify such themes, however, must first come to terms with yet another critical commonplace: the problematizing of the very notion of a “homosexual theme” by critics who take a constructionist, rather than essentialist, approach to homosexuality. The essentialist approach treats homosexuality as an ahistorical, transcultural phenomenon, as when historian John Boswell uses the term “gay” to refer to individuals living thousands of years before homosexuality had been “identified” by the medical establishment. Boswell’s assumption is that homosexuality existed as an objectively real condition even if there was not yet a name for it. By contrast, constructionists (such as Jeffrey Weeks, David Halperin, and Jonathan Katz) maintain that “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” are ideological constructions, deriving their meaning from the specific discourses that produce them, rather than from their (non-existent) metaphysical relationship to the objective realities they are supposed to name. Constructionists would consider Boswell’s application of the term “gay” anachronistic; it makes no sense to speak of “homosexuality” with regards to a time and place in which the discourses that employ, or rather construct, the concept of homosexuality have no currency.

If constructionism is to be a governing paradigm in literary studies (as it seems, in fact, to have become),<sup>4</sup> then we must reconsider what we are doing when we identify and analyze “homosexual themes” in works that predate the invention of homosexuality — a date usually set at 1892, when the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” made their English debut in a translation of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. To perform “gay readings” of texts by Shakespeare, or Marlowe, or Tennyson, or Wilde, usually means to

look for “gay characters” or for “celebrations of gay love.” Such readings may serve a useful political purpose, but proceed from essentialist assumptions and are therefore susceptible to accusations of anachronism. Constructionist readings, on the other hand, are interested in how the terms “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” came to be definitive categories for describing an individual’s sexual identity, and how people “whom we might perceive to be homosexual,” to use a phrase of Richard Dellamora’s (2), actually conceptualized their experiences and desires.

Though Wilde wrote during the period just before the homo-/heterosexual binary became definitive, he did not conceptualize his love for males on the basis of that binary, nor did Victorian society in general. Wilde did not go to prison for practicing “homosexuality”; he went to prison for practicing what the *fin de siècle* knew as “perversion” or “decadence,” categories which imply a quite different notion of sexual identity than that postulated by the homo-/heterosexual binary (Sedgwick 8–9). Still, the term “pervert” indicates an important shift towards the modern concept of homosexuality, in that it constructs Wilde not as a “temporary aberration” (to use Foucault’s famous description of the sodomite [43]), but as a different species of person. Furthermore, Wilde took part in an “efflorescence of culture, positive about male-male desire” at the end of the nineteenth century which included Pater’s aestheticism, the Uranian poets, Edward Carpenter’s public discourse on homogenic love, and quiet campaigns against the criminalization of sodomy by Carpenter, John Symonds, and Lord Alfred Douglas (Dellamora 209). All together, this cultural “efflorescence” constituted a reverse discourse which attempted to justify male-male desire in the face of mounting hostility, not just to sexual, but also to passionate, relationships between men — the latter formerly acceptable — as well as to certain personal styles, such as dandyism.<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick labels this late nineteenth-century hostility “homophobia” or “homosexual panic” (185); Dellamora, borrowing from Adrienne Rich, labels it “compulsory heterosexuality” (193). Neither of these critics is essentialist.

This is to say that while calling Wilde a “homosexual” or looking for “homosexual themes” in his writing is somewhat anachronistic, it is nevertheless true that Wilde writes in reaction to what we now term homophobia or heterosexism. His writing can therefore be usefully, if not precisely, labelled “pro-homosexual” or even “gay,” insofar as these terms connote resistance to compulsory heterosexuality (though I prefer “gay-related,” for the sake of critical distance). Even so, it must be understood that Wilde’s pro-homosexual discourse is likely to bear little resemblance to contemporary pro-homosexual discourses. As Richard Dellamora and Linda Dowling have both shown, the late Victorian period’s discourse *pro* male love came principally out of Oxford and thus constructed itself out of the conceptual vocabulary of Hellenism. (Not until the twentieth century would medical discourse about “homosexuality” become the dominant mode for thinking and talking about same-sex desire.) It is this Hellenist discourse — or rather, these discourses, for as Weeks reminds us, the reverse discourse was no more unitary than the dominant discourse (108) — that informed Wilde’s understanding of male-male desire. And it is the traces of these discourses within Wilde’s art that I am calling “homosexual” or “gay-related” themes.

A collection of fairy tales is not where one would immediately look for such themes; indeed, although they recognized homosexual allusions in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde’s Victorian readers seem to have found nothing untoward about the fairy tales. Hence the tales could

find their way into such unrepachable publications as *The Lady's Pictorial* and continue to be reprinted in children's readers to this day (which is how I first encountered "The Selfish Giant" at age five or six). Nevertheless, once one becomes familiar with the various ways in which Wilde and his contemporaries conceptualized male love, one can begin to see how those conceptualizations make their way into the fairy tales, which in turn opens up the possibility of reading the tales as meditations on Wilde's first homosexual experiences.

This is not to say that the fairy tales are merely meditations on homosexuality. On the contrary, one of the tales' most interesting characteristics — from the perspective of a postmodern critic — is their irreducibility. Wilde wrote to one reader:

I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale ["The Nightingale and the Rose"], for in writing it I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets and many answers. (*Letters* 218)

The fairy tales deliberately resist unitary readings, undercutting themselves at the moment they seem to arrive at a clear moral, and sprawling out in various thematic directions. Nevertheless, I have identified five fairly clear-cut gay-related themes in the tales — five "answers" to anti-homosexual Victorian discourses, five discursive strategies for constructing positive representations of desire between males.

### *Devoted Friendship*

A MAJOR STRAIN IN VICTORIAN DISCOURSE *pro* male love concurred with the mainstream in regarding sexual relations between men as repugnant, while idealizing devoted, passionate — even contemplatively erotic — male friendships. John Symonds, for example, described his erotic attraction for men as abnormal and his sexual relations with men as sinful. Simultaneously, however, he insisted that his homoerotic impulses, idealized into a Whitmanian love of comrades, opened up the possibility of "a strong democratic enthusiasm, a sense of the dignity and beauty and glory of simple healthy men," as well as "close and profitable sympathy with human beings" (in Grosskurth 189). In "A Problem in Greek Ethics," Symonds employed various terms for this "close and profitable sympathy" with other men, all intended to emphasize the nobility of the relationship: Achilleian friendship (168), heroic friendship (169), and Greek love (174). He was careful to distinguish this type of relationship from pederasty or man-boy love, which he regarded as a "vice" (171). There was nothing effeminate about male love as Symonds conceived it, nor does it seem (judging from Symonds's discussion of Achilles and Patroclus, his paragons of heroic friendship) to have involved sexual expression.

This interpretation of Hellenic male love resembles that of Symonds's Oxford mentor, Benjamin Jowett, who insisted in the preface to his translation of Plato that the same-sex relationships adulated in the *Symposium* must have been "altogether separated from the bodily appetites" (qtd. in Turner 426). Hence, E. M. Forster has *Maurice's* Clive Durham insist that "any relationship between men . . . remain purely platonic" (244; ch. 46). Durham's inspiration regarding male love comes from the *Symposium*, Jowett's translation of which would have been available to Forster (and, in the world of the novel, to Durham).

While it is easy to dismiss Jowett's approach as a typically Victorian unwillingness to accept that Plato meant what he said,<sup>6</sup> the situation is rather more complicated. As a Broad Churchman, Jowett sought to make Platonic philosophy the transcendental center of English ethics and society, believing that in the wake of the Higher Criticism, the Christian Bible could no longer serve this function (Dowling 69–70). But Jowett was still sufficiently traditional a Christian that he was unprepared to accept Plato's homosexual ethics. The devoted friendship model of male love thus results from a revisionist reading of texts like the *Symposium*, calculated to protect the texts' claim to transcendental status. However, once Jowett had made this move, he could not prevent the texts' being re-appropriated, with their aura of transcendent truth, by individuals seeking to support more radical views of male love (Dowling xiii). Thus, even though the devoted friendship model was born of an effort to preempt pro-homosexual readings of Plato, the model lent legitimacy, if not to proponents of homosexuality, at least to opponents of compulsory heterosexuality.

Because the "devoted friendship" model was non-sexual, proponents were able to represent this kind of male love as purer than heterosexual love. This discursive strategy was, ironically, an extension of Victorian puritanism, the tendency to conceive of purity and sexuality as binary opposites. As Richard Jenkyns notes (with obvious editorial bias), in a society where "heterosexual activity is either the violation of a goddess or an escapade with a whore . . . the invert who remained chaste and self-controlled might feel that his emotions were nobler than a normal man's because the disgusting side of love played no part in them" (284).<sup>7</sup> Hence we find Charles Kains-Jackson arguing in 1894 that since England has reached a point where population growth is no longer a concern, "real 'civilization' may consequently and finally flower under the 'new chivalry' of more spiritual, more intellectual male love" (Gagnier 41–42). In the same year, Edward Carpenter's *Homogenic Love* advanced the notion that "it may indeed be doubted whether the higher heroic and spiritual life of a nation is ever quite possible without the sanction of [Dorian love, Carpenter's term for what Symonds dubbed Greek love] in its institutions." Carpenter contrasts this higher, spiritual love with the "quite necessary but comparatively materialistic basis of matrimonial sex-intercourse and child-breeding" (qtd. in Gagnier 42). The term "Uranians," appropriated from Plato's contrast between Uranian or heavenly love and Dionian or earthly love, was meant to convey this sense that male love was superior to heterosexual love.

Naturally enough, proponents of devoted friendship latched onto the biblical description of the love of David and Jonathan, a love "passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1. 26). According to Jenkyns, this phrase was the Uranians' "favorite theme" (285). Dellamora identifies John 15.13 as another biblical passage which lent support to devoted friendship (150–51): "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Wilde resorted to the devoted friendship model of male love in his attempt to account for a love letter to Douglas which was read in court during the trials. Though the sentiments expressed in the letter were unmistakably erotic, Wilde tried to explain them as an expression of the "great affection of an elder for a younger man . . . that deep, spiritual [i.e., non-sexual] affection which is as pure as it is perfect" (qtd. in Summers 32). In a brief, impromptu, and much celebrated speech on the subject, Wilde attributed this type of devoted, spiritualized male love to David and Jonathan, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare. Despite its being received with applause, the speech did not finally save Wilde from the

charge of sodomy; indeed, Summers notes that as it was meant to relate to Wilde's affair with Douglas, the speech was essentially dishonest. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that Wilde was aware of the discourse idealizing (and sanitizing) male love as devoted friendship.

Devoted male friendship figures in most of the fairy tales. If, as Jenkyns claims, the love "passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1.26) is the Uranians' favorite theme, the love of a man who lays down his life for his friend (John 15.13) is Wilde's. In "The Happy Prince," the (male) Swallow develops such a powerful love for the Prince (actually a talking statue) that he abandons his migration to Egypt in order to remain with him and consequently dies of cold and hunger. Since this love is shared between a swallow and a statue, it is patently non-sexual. Yet it is spiritually transforming, redeeming the Swallow from the selfishness which initially characterizes him. The title character of "The Young King" is similarly redeemed from self-absorption and materialism when he proves willing to be killed at the hands of his nobles in order to spare the poor from suffering at the expense of his luxury. In an expression of democratic sentiment reminiscent of Symonds's praise of Whitmanian comradeship, the Young King refers to the poor as his "brothers" (232). Likewise, the Star-Child, in the tale of that name, grows from narcissism to self-sacrifice, from admiring his own reflection to choosing to sacrifice his life in order to help a begging (male) leper. Naturally, these self-sacrificing relationships of man for man are archetypally suggestive of Christ's self-sacrifice for all "men"; and indeed, in "The Selfish Giant," Christ himself appears as the devoted friend who lays down his life as the expression of his love for the Giant.<sup>8</sup>

The most explicit exposition of devoted friendship in the fairy tales occurs, naturally enough, in the tale titled "The Devoted Friend." As the tale opens, a thoroughly unlikeable male Water-rat insists,

I know nothing about the feelings of parents. . . . I am not a family man. In fact, I have never been married, and I never intend to be. Love is all very well in its way, but friendship is much higher. Indeed, I know of nothing in the world that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship. (301)

The Water-rat's unlikeability would seem to prejudice readers against his parody of devoted friendship discourse. However, the tale goes on to imply that the *ideal* of a devoted friendship is not to be rejected, only the Water-rat's self-centered apprehension of the ideal: "I should expect my devoted friend to be devoted to me, of course" (301).<sup>9</sup> In response to the Water-rat's remarks, a Linnet tells the story of the Miller and Little Hans. The Miller, claiming to be Hans's devoted friend, takes repeated advantage of Hans's kindness; Hans, the truly devoted friend (and a bachelor), makes sacrifices for the Miller he cannot really afford and finally drowns while fetching a doctor for the Miller's Wife during a storm. The moral of the story regarding the true nature of devoted friendship remains unstated by the Linnet and unappreciated by the Water-rat, yet clear enough to readers.

The Water-rat clearly echoes proponents of male love in his conviction that a devoted friendship surpasses a heterosexual relationship as the noblest in the world. So too, albeit less clearly, does the Nightingale, in the "Nightingale and the Rose." In order to create a magical rose with which the Student can win the heart of the Professor's daughter, the

Nightingale pierces her breast on a thorn, singing of love as she does so. The song ascends in three stages. First the Nightingale sings “of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl.” Second, she sings “of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid.” Finally, in her dying breath, she sings “of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb” (294–95). The first two stages of the song establish a symmetry based on heterosexual categories:

Stage 1: the *love* in the *heart* of a *boy* and a *girl*

Stage 2: the *passion* in the *soul* of a *man* and a *maid*

The song’s final stage — “the Love that is perfected by Death, . . . the Love that dies not in the tomb” — abandons these categories, and thus conspicuously omits heterosexuality from its conception of the final, or highest, Love. That is to say, while the song does not explicitly advocate the view of Kains-Jackson and Carpenter (that male love is the highest form of love), it certainly leaves the way open to their view. Indeed, when the heterosexual love portrayed in this tale — that between the Student and the Professor’s daughter — proves a farce, Wilde leaves plenty of room to argue that Kains-Jackson and Carpenter carry the day.

### *Non-reproductive Sex*

THE NON-REPRODUCTIVITY OF MALE LOVE preoccupied both its enemies and advocates. In fact, Victorian terminology treated the non-reproductivity of homosexual acts as their defining characteristic. As Weeks observes, the term “[s]odomy was a catch-all which marked the distinction between non-reproductive and reproductive sexuality” (107). For opponents of male love, this non-reproductivity made homosexual relations — or even chaste devoted friendships to the exclusion of heterosexual marriage — a threat to the continuance of the human race. Voltaire had argued, for instance, that homosexuality “would destroy mankind if it were general” (qtd. in Crompton 48).

That such arguments carried considerable weight in Victorian England is indicated by the fact that advocates of male love felt the need to tackle the problem of non-reproductivity themselves. Kains-Jackson, for example, maintained that male love was justified because the English population was sufficiently stable to render concerns about reproductivity moot. Edward Carpenter tried to flip the objection altogether by arguing that precisely because male love was non-reproductive, it surpassed heterosexual relations in purity and spirituality (Gagnier 41–42). Hellenists maintained that homosocial relationships such as those supposedly promoted by Plato led to a “procreancy . . . of the spirit,” producing knowledge, wisdom, and so on (Dowling 67).

Bound up in the question of homosexuality’s non-reproductivity was the perceived link between homosexuality and masturbation. Because it too was a non-reproductive sex act, masturbation fell with homosexuality into the category of “sodomy.” Hence, Weeks notes, “masturbation . . . was intimately linked to homosexuality” in the Victorian mind and, indeed, often confused with it (120). Public school administrators gave increased focus after the 1850s to curbing masturbation, the “solitary vice,” partly to curb also its “companion,” the “dual vice” (Cohen 44). Masturbation was believed to “waste” semen



(expend it for non-reproductive purposes), causing a decrease in reproductive capacities. This decrease was accompanied by a loss of virility, dubbed an “unmanning.” Masturbators became stupid, lazy, shy, timid, and frightened of women; that is to say, they became “the antithesis of the . . . ‘normal’ male” (Cohen 53) — in a word, homosexuals. Hence a description of the stereotypical homosexual by John Symonds is remarkably close to the description of the stereotypical masturbator: “lusts written on his face . . . pale, languid, scented, effeminate, oblique in expression” (qtd. in Weeks 111).<sup>10</sup>

In his fairy tales, Wilde, like other advocates of male love, betrays a preoccupation with non-reproductivity. In response to the charge that homosexuality is reprehensible because it is non-reproductive, Wilde’s fairy tales cast non-reproductive sex acts and non-reproductive love in a supremely positive light. “The Fisherman and his Soul,” for example, revolves around the Fisherman’s love for the Mermaid. At first appearance, this is a “normal” heterosexual relationship (the Fisherman is male, the Mermaid is female). If, however, a “normal” heterosexual relationship is defined by its reproductivity, then the Fisherman’s relationship with the Mermaid falls into the category of sodomy, since the relationship is non-reproductive. There is no indication that the Fisherman and the Mermaid intend to produce children, or even that they could, given that they belong to different species (a difference underscored by the fact that, unlike human beings, the Sea-folk have no souls). There is no indication that the Mermaid even has a vagina. Consequently, though the Fisherman clearly experiences sexual desire for the Mermaid — he longs to touch her, apparently does so long enough to determine that her breasts are cold, and speaks of her as his bride — the relationship admits no reproductive sex. Hence the Soul succeeds in tempting the Fisherman away from the Mermaid by reminding him “that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance” (265), unlike the dancing girl with the naked feet the Soul reports having seen in a nearby city. Given the eroticism implied in the Soul’s specifying that the dancing girl’s feet are naked (the Fisherman feels “a great desire [o]me over him” [265] in response to the Soul’s description), the Mermaid’s inability to dance comes to stand in as a signifier of her inability to engage in vaginal sex and thus of the sodomitical nature of the Fisherman’s love for her. The Priest’s belief that the Fisherman’s union with the Mermaid constitutes an abomination is consistent with this reading.

The tale, however, insists on the sanctity of the Fisherman and Mermaid’s non-reproductive love. In a highly dramatic but apparently serious narrative climax (271), the Fisherman elegizes his love for the Mermaid in biblical language: “Love is better than wisdom” (cf. 1 Cor. 13.1–2); “[t]he fires cannot destroy it, nor can the waters quench it” (cf. Song 8.7). He describes the Mermaid’s unwavering fidelity to him in terms that echo any of a number of biblical acclamations for Yahweh’s unwavering fidelity to his wayward people: “For evilly had I left thee, and to my own hurt had I wandered away. Yet ever did thy love abide with me, and ever was it strong, nor did aught prevail against it, though I have looked upon evil and looked upon good” (271). So strong is their love that the Fisherman follows the Mermaid into death, and the flowers that grow miraculously over their unmarked grave constrain the Priest to acknowledge that their non-reproductive love is not the abomination he had previously pronounced it. Indeed, given that the miraculous flowers are a *product* of the love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid, their love appears to be reproductive, in a sense, after all (recalling Hellenist rhetoric about “procreancy of the spirit”).

In “The Nightingale and the Rose,” an act of sexualized, but non-reproductive, penetration figures as the supreme gesture of self-sacrificing love: the Nightingale’s piercing her breast on a thorn in order to produce a magical rose with which the Student can woo the Professor’s daughter. Intriguingly, the sexualized nature of the penetration is most strongly suggested by the tale’s careful efforts to obscure that sexualization. As “The Fisherman and his Soul” presents a heterosexual, interspecies love in the relationship between the Fisherman and the Mermaid, so “The Nightingale and the Rose” presents a heterosexual, interspecies love in the “fond” feelings shared between the female Nightingale and the male Oak-tree. The heterosexualization of this relationship in the tale sets a precedent for sexualizing the penetration of the Nightingale by the Rose-tree; yet the Rose-tree, unlike the Oak-tree, is never assigned a gender. During the first half of the story, the Rose-tree is referred to as “it.” During the second half of the story (the penetration scene), the syntax is arranged such that no pronoun at all is used to refer to the Rose-tree. This results in the slightly awkward use of “the thorn” where “its thorn” (or “his thorn”) would be more natural, and in the somewhat monotonous repetition of “the Tree,” where “it” or “he” would serve. The tale thus seems calculated to avert a sexualized reading of the Rose-tree’s penetration of the Nightingale — and by that calculation calls attention to the possibility of such a reading.

The penetration itself is described in terms of orgasmic ecstasy and ejaculation:

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb. . . . Then she gave one last burst of music. . . . The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy . . . (295)

Read as a sex act, this penetration is non-reproductive, for the same reason that the Fisherman and the Mermaid’s relationship was non-reproductive: the participants belong to different species. Further, the penetration of the Nightingale’s heart produces death, not life. Not only is the act non-reproductive, it is, tragically, *unproductive*, since neither the Student nor the Professor’s daughter values the magical rose which the Nightingale has died to create.<sup>11</sup> Yet its non-productivity is precisely what ennobles the act: it is motivated by self-sacrificing love, not a desire for personal gain. In an age for which — to quote the Student’s quintessentially Victorian maxim — “to be practical is everything” (296), productivity and reproductivity are of the highest value. This tale, however, represents non-reproductivity (and thus, by extension, non-reproductive sex) as something yet higher.

The title character of “The Young King” is fairly obviously a masturbator and less obviously — though not surprisingly, given Victorian views on the subject — a homosexual. The story opens with a view of the King “flung . . . back . . . on the soft cushions of his embroidered couch, lying there wild-eyed and open-mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters” (224). His posture is unmanly and erotically charged. The Faun simile evokes classical myths about the homosexual passions of satyrs, and the snared animal simile even introduces bondage into the picture. Two or three pages later, the King finally rouses himself, “brushe[s] his brown curls back from his forehead, and taking up a lute, let[s] his fingers stray across the cords.



His heavy eyelids droo[p], and a strange languor [comes] over him (226).” This is a bold passage; not only does Wilde attribute to the King the *languor* of the stereotypical masturbator, he provides the image of the boy stroking his lute to leave no doubt as to his intentions. He even goes so far as to describe the “tall reeds of fluted ivory [bearing] up the velvet canopy [of the King’s bed], from which great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam” (226). With this groundwork laid, the King’s particular friendship with his “little page” — “a lad a year younger than himself” — is unavoidably suspect (231); the solitary vice, it is to be recalled, leads to the dual one. That the King is discovered “gazing, as one in a trance” at the figure of Adonis and “pressing his warm lips” to a statue of “the Bithynian slave” (Antinous) compounds suspicion (225).

Though the tale provides ample reason to suspect the King of indulging in non-reproductive sex acts, it offers no clear grounds for repudiating such acts. The King does repudiate indulgent luxury after a series of dreams in which he witnesses the human suffering occasioned by his wealth. And he initially seems to repudiate his “strange passion for beauty” (225) — which motivates his fascination for classical statues of male nudes — when he exchanges his robe, crown, and scepter for goat-skins, a circlet of briar, and a shepherd’s staff. The King could be read, that is to say, as turning from a masturbatory (self-indulgent, non-reproductive, unproductive) languor to a manly determination based on concern for the needs of others, clothed in the trappings of a masculine, outdoor occupation. Charles Kingsley would certainly approve of such a reading (more on Kingsley later).

However, while it may be true that the King abandons the self-indulgence of masturbation, he does not abandon his “strange passion” for male beauty: in the cathedral, the King worships the image of a male Christ as formerly he adored the images of Adonis and Antinous. Nor does he submit to a (Victorian middle-class) economy in which productivity is the measure of an act’s worth. His *imitatio Christi* — exchanging his crown and scepter for the circlet of briar and shepherd’s staff — is denounced by all, including the poor, as unproductive. Yet, much like the Nightingale, the King persists in his unproductive act at the risk of death. Unlike the Nightingale, the King does not actually die: before the nobles execute the King for the disgrace his *imitatio Christi* has brought them, God intervenes, crowning the King with glory. Thus God justifies the masturbator, not in spite of, but because of, his unproductive act of love.

### *Aestheticism*

IT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNIZED, though not always sympathetically so, that Victorian aestheticism is bound up with Victorian homosexuality. Jenkyns, for instance, argues at some length (and with characteristic acerbity) that the aestheticism promoted by Pater has its roots in Pater’s homosexuality: the reason Pater finds Greek sculpture exciting is that he finds young men exciting. Furthermore, Jenkyns argues, Pater himself is aware of the connection between his aestheticism and his homosexuality, and goes to some length to cover it up.<sup>12</sup> The cover-up was not entirely successful. It’s not difficult, for instance, to see a homosexual subtext in the conclusion to the first edition of *The Renaissance* — the conclusion Pater decided to cut from subsequent editions out of fear that impressionable young men might misunderstand.

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. . . . [W]e may well grasp at any exquisite passion . . . or any stirring of the senses, . . . the face of one's friend. . . . What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy. . . . The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. (*Renaissance* 189)

It is surely no accident that Oscar Wilde, the quintessential homosexual of Victorian England, called Pater's *Renaissance* "that book which had such a strange influence over my life," or that Edward Carpenter said nearly the same in *Homogenic Love* (Bartlett 101). Mainstream Victorians themselves drew a connection between aestheticism and homosexuality. Regenia Gagnier notes that the middle-class press took occasion of Wilde's trials to attack aestheticism as leading to corruption and immorality (29). Ed Cohen cites a *Telegraph* editorial from the period to the effect that aestheticism leads to the devaluing of the family and domesticity — which is to say, that it undermines Victorian heterosexuality. The London newspapers consistently represented Wilde as an aesthete dandy and Queensbury as a stalwart "gentleman," thus reinforcing the popular associations between the dandy and homosexuality on the one hand, and between the "gentlemen" and heterosexuality on the other (Cohen 137–45).

These popular associations were not unfounded: Gagnier argues that the aesthetes cultivated the figure of the languorous dandy as a self-conscious criticism of the middle-class construct of male gender represented by Kingsley's muscular Christianity and embodied in the figure of the gentleman (qtd. in Cohen 135–36).<sup>13</sup> Aesthetes' rejection of that construct did not immediately serve to associate them with homosexuality; for a time, in fact, it was argued that the dandy would be more attractive to women because he had common interests with them (Cohen 135). But by the time the 1892 translation of *Psychopathia Sexualis* brought the words "homosexual" and "heterosexual" into the English vocabulary, "normal" sexuality entailed not only attraction to the "opposite" sex, but also (for men) a "sense of virility" — of "masculine" attributes — such as Kingsley promoted (Cohen 9–10). The dandy thus became a publicly acknowledged signifier for homosexuality. Hence James Adams's rhetorical question, "What figure is more remote from Kingsley's muscular Christian [read: masculine heterosexual] than the Paterian aesthete?" (215). The fact that Pater's aestheticism was attacked by contemporaries as effeminate says it all (Adams 216).

"The Young King" is the fairy tale in which aestheticism most obviously figures. The King is not only a masturbator, but also a dandy. A "strange passion for beauty" is one of his defining attributes (225). In fact, that passion is said to be "destined to have so great an influence over his life" — almost precisely the words Wilde used to describe the impact of Pater's *Renaissance* on his own life. The King surrounds himself with perfume, jewelry, and fine furniture. His languorous poses — "flung . . . back . . . on the soft cushions of his embroidered couch, lying there wild-eyed and open-mouthed" (224) — are a far cry from Kingsley's muscular Christianity. We cannot imagine one of Kingsley's robust young heroes "brush[ing] his brown curls back from his forehead" with drooped eyelids, while breathing in the scent of jasmine through the open window (226). The King's preferred companions are effeminate by Kingsley's standards: "slim, fair-haired Court pages, with

their floating mantles, and gay fluttering ribands" (225). At this point, red flags should be fluttering as well, since, as Dellamora observes, "in the nineteenth century, 'effeminacy' . . . often connotes male-male desire, a threat of deviance that seems to haunt gentlemen should they become too gentle, refined, or glamorous" (199). Even to Wilde's contemporaries, a group of glamorous, effeminate young men ought to have raised suspicion. Indeed, within the world of the story, the "stout Burgomaster" (an image of the bourgeois gentleman) who catches the king "kneeling in real adoration" before what seems to be a painting of Greco-Roman deities (ergo, male nudes), finds his behavior "curious" (225).

Bartlett observes that some of the particular items with which the aesthete King surrounds himself were signifiers of the homosexual underworld in Wilde's London. The King's furnishings include "a laughing Narcissus in green bronze" (226); Bartlett finds evidence that Narcissus was a code word for attractive young men in gay circles of 1894 (56). The King surrounds himself with flowers (poppies, jasmine, roses); as early as 1889, male florists were suspect in London as homosexuals, and flowers show up frequently in gay literature of the time (Bartlett 44–45). Bartlett identifies as Antinous the statue of "the Bithynian slave of Hadrius" which the king is discovered kissing, and maintains that for readers in the know, this would have clearly identified the young king as homosexual (32). It is noteworthy, after all, that Wilde declines to refer to the Bithynian slave by name.

As in my reading of the young king as masturbator, the story might seem to conclude with a repudiation of the dandy, since the King finally rejects the trappings of his aestheticism and his effeminate companions in a gesture of masculine stalwartness. But the repudiation functions at only one level. At another level, the story reinforces the king's passion for beauty — and a passion for male beauty at that. When the king kneels before the image of Christ, he is, like Jenkyns's Pater, gazing adoringly at a male nude, albeit under the cover of "innocent" piety. Sedgwick has commented on the "scandal" produced in a homophobic Christian community by the central place of the crucified Jesus, of "images of the unclothed . . . male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored" (140). For the young king, Jesus has replaced Antinous as the object of male desire — a significant replacement, perhaps, in a reading which would see the King as a convert from paganism to Christianity, but not in a reading of the King as aesthete. The King's passion for beauty is likewise vindicated when God himself clothes the King in vestments even more beautiful than the bejeweled garments which had been fashioned for his coronation and which he had rejected for the circlet of briar and shepherd's robe:

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissue robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver[.] Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (233)

The stout Burgomaster is silenced, and the dandy marches home in triumph. It's the ending Wilde would doubtless have wished for the trials.

*Paidierastia*

ADVOCATES OF THE DEVOTED FRIENDSHIP MODEL of homosexuality were careful to distinguish their version of male love from pederasty (*paidierastia*). Hence Symonds makes a great deal of the fact that in Homer's account of the love between Patroclus and Achilles, there is (supposedly) no hint of pederasty (169). Pederasty, or "man-boy love," becomes Symonds's scapegoat, the admittedly vicious side of homosexuality with which his own model of "heroic [read: virtuous] friendship" must not be confused (171).

While an understanding of homosexuality as "devoted friendship" does appear in Wilde's fairy tales, an understanding of homosexuality as *paidierastia* appears as well. *Paidierastia* was, after all, the form of homosexuality adulated in the most commonly available Greek texts, Symonds's arguments to the contrary. Furthermore, Wilde's own homosexuality seems to have exclusively involved "pederastic" relationships, i.e., relationships with men much younger than himself. In the defense of male love which he delivered during his trial (to public applause), Wilde elegized the "great affection of an elder for a younger man . . . that deep, spiritual affection which is as pure as it is perfect" (qtd. in Summers 32).

Summers thinks this speech is "largely untrue and certainly misleading" to the degree that Wilde attempts to palm off his relationships with young men as non-sexual by referring to them as "spiritual" and "pure." Dowling offers a more nuanced reading. She argues that Wilde believed in the Platonic ideal, according to which "intercourse [should proceed] along the Platonic ladder of love, passing from pandemic physical delight to Uranian intellectual friendship" (143). Thus, while it might be true that Wilde was fudging on the stand by trying to represent his relationship with Douglas as non-sexual, the speech does convey Wilde's ideas about what the relationship *should* have been. This explains the reproach which Wilde heaps upon both his own head and Douglas's in *De Profundis*: Wilde faults Douglas for keeping their relationship at a lower, sensual level, and himself for allowing Douglas to keep it there when he, as the older lover, should have been nurturing Douglas's spiritual and intellectual development. *De Profundis* was meant "to restore the true relations between older lover and younger beloved, *erastes* and *eromenos*, which had been so inverted in their actual friendship" (Dowling 150).

If we accept Dowling's account, then our understanding of Wilde's attitudes toward "homosexuality" becomes rather complicated. Wilde's *paidierastia* does not constitute a "celebration of gay love" of the kind gay liberationists might like to see, since Wilde seeks to transcend sex. But Wilde's *paidierastia* does have homoromantic dimensions which his contemporaries found unacceptable. During the libel trial, for instance, the defense pressed Wilde on the question of whether "ador[ing] a man some 20 years younger than yourself" could be considered "natural" or "moral" — a question not of sexual activities, but of certain "feelings" and "sentiments" only (qtd. in Cohen 162–64).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Wilde's conception of *paidierastia* does not preclude the possibility of homoerotic expression; it merely marks such expression as an inferior or underdeveloped mode of relationship. This would seem to be a point of distinction between Wilde's *paidierastia* and Symonds's heroic friendship: in Symonds's model, homosexual interaction is not merely inferior, but altogether unacceptable. Yet even this distinction (pederasty: sexual :: heroic friendship: chaste) is not entirely clear. When Symonds insists that there is no hint of pederasty in his conception of heroic friendship, is he drawing a distinction between sexual

and non-sexual relationships, or between relationships involving lovers of unequal ages and those involving lovers of the same age? Once a pederastic relationship such as Wilde adulates reaches its higher, Platonic stage, it seems little different from a heroic friendship, except that Symonds seems to have in mind a relationship of equals. Edward Carson's insistence on specifying the difference in age between Wilde and Douglas when describing Wilde's alleged offense ("ador[ing] a man some 20 years younger than yourself") similarly opens up the possibility that what most offended Carson about Wilde's *paidierastia* was not the homoromantic sentiment *per se*, but Wilde's directing of that sentiment towards one so much younger.

At any rate, Wilde's courtroom speech shows that he was well aware of the Platonic ideal of *paidierastia* (the "great affection of an elder for a younger man"), and that he could present this ideal in such a way as to meet with public applause. He attempts the same kind of presentation in the fairy tales. Ellmann hints at the presence of *paidierastia* in the fairy tales when he observes that some of the tales revolve around relationships between an older or larger lover and a younger, diminutive beloved (268) — that is, between *erastes* and *eromenos*. Such relationships include the love between the Happy Prince and the Swallow, between the Young King and his page, and, ostensibly, between the Miller and Little Hans (emphasis on "Little"). The love between the Oak-tree and the Nightingale would also fit the category of large lover and diminutive beloved, though that love is ostensibly heterosexual (the tree is male, the Nightingale is female).

The most obvious case of pederastic love is that between the Giant and the little boy whom the Giant helps to climb the tree in his garden. Here we have a lover and beloved (both male) who are exaggeratedly separated both by size and by age. There is, certainly, no hint that their relationship is sexual; their most intimate act occurs when the little boy "stretche[s] out his two arms and [flings] them round the Giant's neck, and kisse[s] him" (299). Yet, as in other tales, heterosexual love is notably absent from this story, replaced by a form of male love, in this case, man/boy love. Indeed, the tale upholds man/boy love as the most exalted form of love: as the tale reaches its conclusion, the little boy reveals himself to be Christ, whose love redeems the Giant from his selfishness (a recurring theme in Wilde's fairy tales) and brings him into Paradise. The little boy's love for the Giant is capitalized — "these are the wounds of Love" (300) — suggesting that this is the same capitalized love which is exalted in the Nightingale's song, the Love which surpasses heterosexuality. It is, to quote Wilde's defense of *paidierastia* at the trial, a perfectly "spiritual" and "pure" love. There is not a single case of heterosexual love in Wilde's fairy tales to which those adjectives could be applied.

A preoccupation with ugliness in the tales may also reflect a pederastic concern: the older lover's fear that his younger beloved will find him unattractive. By associating sexual desirability with youth (according to the pederasts in Plato, a young man ceases to be desirable as soon as his beard starts to grow), an *erastes* casts a shadow on his own maturity. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wotton tells Dorian that "youth is the one thing worth having." When Dorian responds incredulously, Wotton warns him, "Some day, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with its hideous fires, you will feel it, you will feel it terribly" (31; ch. 2). This preoccupation with aging may motivate conflicts in the fairy tales involving ugly lovers and beautiful beloveds. In "The Birthday of the Infanta," for instance, the Dwarf falls in love with the beautiful (and much younger) princess, who mocks



him for his “horrible,” “grotesque appearance” (239). Though the tale is meant to leave us feeling that the Infanta, not the Dwarf, is the real monster in this story, the tale heaps considerable disgust on the Dwarf, who finally dies of his own self-loathing.<sup>15</sup>

The same conflict achieves a happier resolution in “The Star-Child.” This tale, too, evinces disgust for age and ugliness; like an *eromenos* whose beard has begun to sprout, the Star-Child feels that his happiness has come to an end when he looks into a well and discovers that he has “lost [his] comeliness” (278). The Star-Child is redeemed, however, and his comeliness restored, when he learns to love an older man who is also characterized as ugly, the begging leper. Much as in other tales we’ve seen (e.g., “The Happy Prince” or “The Young King”), the Star-Child’s love is measured by his willingness to sacrifice his life for the leper, recalling the catchphrase from John 15.13. That self-sacrificing love — enacted in the Star-Child’s giving the Magician’s red gold to the leper, knowing that the Magician will kill him for doing so — becomes the Star-Child’s saving grace much as the Young King’s self-sacrificing love wins him acceptance by God, and the Giant’s love for the little boy wins him entrance into Paradise. The pederastic nature of the Star-Child’s love for the leper is highlighted by the fact that the Star-Child is called “Child” (even though he is an adolescent, at least), and by the fact that the leper is old enough to be his father (the leper turns out, in fact, to be his father). A pederastic love, then — one which flowers in spite of the *erastes*’ physical unattractiveness — is the key to redemption and happiness.<sup>16</sup> At this point, it’s hard not to accuse Wilde of a little self-indulgent fantasy.

### *The Unblessed, Unnatural, Unnameable*

ENGLAND HAD ALWAYS BEEN OFFICIALLY HOSTILE towards sodomy, but anti-homosexual sentiment intensified during the nineteenth century, expressed in large part by religious institutions. Louis Crompton (57–59) attributes much of England’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century homophobia to the Society for the Reformation of Manners, which was founded in 1691 and operated for about 50 years. The Society maintained that England was a nation particularly favored of God, and that this favor brought with it the weighty responsibility of eliminating vice. Sodomy was second on the Society’s list of priorities (surpassed only by blasphemy). Before the Society’s activities, the death penalty for sodomy had been applied only rarely; during its years of activity, however, the Society was responsible for numerous arrests for sodomy, and three hangings in 1726 alone. After the Society expired, George III established a Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1787 to carry on its legacy. This new Society “pursued a vigorous course in [both] Georgian and Victorian England.” Hangings of sodomites increased yet further, becoming “more or less annual” (Crompton 62). Weeks reports that in 1806, “there were more executions for sodomy than for murder” and that buggery among the armed forces “was treated as seriously as desertion, mutiny or murder” (100).

The strong connection between Christian zeal and anti-homosexual sentiment forged by the Society for The Reformation of Manners, and perpetuated by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, remained part of mainstream English religiosity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “[I]nnumerable jurists” in Britain (as well as Continental Europe) cited scripture, Leviticus 20.13 especially, as justification for applying the death penalty to sodomy (Crompton 33). Blackstone, in his infamous defense of Henry VIII’s anti-sodomy statute, found a brief allusion to the Sodom story in Genesis 19



sufficient to carry his point. “English clergy in the eighteenth century,” Crompton says, “repeatedly whipped up animosity against the nation’s gay minority in essays, sermons, and scriptural commentaries” (34). By the late nineteenth century, religious condemnation of homosexuality was so thoroughly taken for granted that an 1870 account of the prosecution of transvestites Frederick (Fanny) Park and Ernest (Stella) Boulton could quite casually refer to their “[l]echerous leering and subtle fascinations” towards other men as “hellish proceedings” (qtd. in Bartlett 131). Even as late as the 1880s — after sodomy had been removed from the list of crimes carrying the death penalty — clergy continued to echo the pieties of the Society for the Reformation of Manners, as when one Rev. J. M. Wilson pronounced, “Rome fell; other nations have fallen; and if England falls it will be this sin [sodomy], and her unbelief in God, that will have been her ruin” (qtd. in Weeks 107).

In this discourse, then, homosexuality falls outside the pale of blessedness. The metaphor of “outsiderness” is particularly appropriate, given Crompton’s observation that English homophobia was bound up with English xenophobia (53–54). Anti-homosexual discourse from this period indicates that many English associated homosexuality with foreign countries, typically Italy and the Orient. In other words, they associated homosexuality with countries where Catholicism and Islam were the predominant religions. Homophobia was thus bound up with religious prejudice; associating homosexuality with the Whore of Rome and the heathen nations reflected on English Protestants’ conviction of their own unparalleled godliness. In the case of Islamic nations, the homosexual association also contributed to the English sense of the exotic. Bentham and Byron — neither of whom was interested in condemning homosexuality on religious grounds — were both fascinated by reports that homosexuality was common in Moslem countries (Crompton 51). As late as 1885, Richard Burton theorized the existence of a geographical Sotadic Zone as an explanation for homosexuality. In Burton’s theory, homosexuality is a product of climate, which explains why “the Vice is endemic and popular” in Moslem countries (qtd. in Bartlett 106).

Wilde himself seems to adopt anti-homosexual religious rhetoric in *De Profundis*, when he laments his descent into “perversity”:

Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensations. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. . . . I ceased to be Lord over myself. I was no longer the Captain of my Soul, and did not know it. I allowed you [Douglas] to dominate me, and your father to frighten me. I ended in horrible disgrace. (Qtd. in Nassaar 147)

Critics of a traditionalist bent — Nassaar, for instance — make much of this passage, since Wilde’s respectability can be salvaged if he can be shown to have conceded the error of his ways. Nassaar goes on to develop an elaborate reading of Wilde’s works as reflecting the author’s developing, ultimately salvific, relationship to the demonic. I remain skeptical that *De Profundis* should be read as an unqualified repudiation of male love on Wilde’s part, especially considering that Wilde resumed his partnership with Douglas upon his release from prison. *De Profundis* was written with the permission of Wilde’s warden, and Wilde clearly knew how to give his audience what they wanted. Linda Dowling’s reading

of *De Profundis* in light of the Platonic ideal, cited earlier, makes Nassaar's reading look all the more facile. I do, however, concur with Nassaar in reading instances of the demonic in Wilde's fairy tales as references to homosexuality. Considering how Wilde's milieu was pervaded by discourse associating homosexuality with the unblessed and demonic, it would be surprising for Wilde to make no attempt to engage that discourse. I would go so far as to suggest that, as a Victorian, Wilde retained a latent sense of — perhaps even a fascination for — homosexuality as the diabolical. His use of the demonic in "The Fisherman and his Soul" supports this suggestion.

The notion of unblessedness appears early on in the story, when the Fisherman goes to the Priest, "who was reading out of the Holy Book" (250), to learn how to be joined to the Mermaid. The Fisherman couches his desire in terms of a spiritual conflict. The pursuit of his desire, he says, is antithetical to the welfare of his soul: "Father, I am in love with one of the Sea-folk, and my Soul hindereth me from having my desire" (250). The Priest, "beat[ing] his breast," urges the Fisherman to cast this desire from his thoughts: "[T]hink not any more of this matter, for it is a sin that may not be forgiven. And as for the Sea-folk, they are lost, and they who would traffic with them are lost also" (250). When the Fisherman protests that the Fauns in the forest and the Mermen with their harps of red gold seem happy enough, the Priest goes on to describe their love as "vile," "evil," "accursed," and "perilous joys" — joys with which he himself, he admits, has been tempted. When the Fisherman refuses to relinquish his desire, the Priest drives him out of the house, "[giving] him no blessing" (251).

The similarity of the Priest's rhetoric to anti-homosexual religious rhetoric is, I trust, patent. As the Victorian mainstream banished homosexual desire outside the pale of blessedness, so the Priest banishes the Fisherman's desire, refusing to give it his blessing. We see this again near the end of the story, when the Priest goes to bless the sea after a storm and discovers the intertwined bodies of the Fisherman and the Mermaid. The Priest frowns, makes the sign of the Cross (ergo, we are unmistakably dealing with a representative of Christianity), and repeats his curse upon the Sea-folk and "all they who traffic with them." As for the Fisherman, "who for love's sake forsook God, and so lieth here with his leman slain by God's judgment," the Priest orders him buried with the Mermaid in an unmarked grave in the Field of Fullers, "[f]or accursed were they in their lives, and accursed shall they be in their deaths also" (271).<sup>17</sup>

The Fisherman's love for the Mermaid, then — and it is noteworthy that even the Priest dignifies it with the name "love" — is a forbidden, unblessed love. We could even go so far as to say that it is an "unnatural" love, given its interspecial nature. Again, I trust the connection to homosexual love is patent. In the tale's conclusion, however, this forbidden, unblessed, unnatural love is approved by God, much as the Young King is approved at the end of his tale. When the Priest enters the chapel to "speak to [the people] about the wrath of God," he finds the altar covered with flowers which have miraculously grown in the corner of the Fullers' Field where the Fisherman and the Mermaid are buried. The flowers have a "strange," "curious," "troubl[ing]" beauty, one outside the pale of the Priest's experience. Yet that beauty makes him feel "glad" for reasons he does not understand, and the flowers' odor prompts him to speak unexpectedly, "not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love." (How could Wilde's readers fail to see where this is going?) Following this miracle, the Priest returns to the beach to bless the sea, the Sea-folk, the Fauns — indeed, "[a]ll the things in God's world." The people, we are told,

are “filled with joy and wonder” by this gesture of universal acceptance (272). The previously forbidden love has been accepted into the pale of Christian blessedness.<sup>18</sup>

The witches’ sabbath, which the Fisherman attends in order to lose his soul so that he can be joined to the Mermaid, serves as another means by which this tale connects homosexuality to unblessedness — or rather, in this case, to the out-and-out demonic. When Satan makes his appearance at the sabbath, he is described in terms reminiscent of a dandy (indeed, reminiscent of the photograph of Wilde himself which appears on the cover of my edition of his complete works):

It was a man dressed in a suit of black velvet, cut in the Spanish fashion. His face was strangely pale, but his lips were like a proud red flower. He seemed weary, and was leaning back toying in a listless manner with the pommel of his dagger [a masturbation image, like those we saw in “The Young King”?]. On the grass beside him lay a plumed hat, and a pair of riding-gloves gauntleted with gilt lace, and sewn with seed-pearls wrought into a curious device. A short cloak lined with sables hung from his shoulder, and his delicate white hands were gemmed with rings. Heavy eyelids drooped over his eyes. (254)

In a twist on the legends in which Satan sexually desires the witches who serve him, Wilde’s Satan has eyes only for the Fisherman.

Suddenly a dog bayed in the wood, and the dancers [the witches, all female] stopped, and going up two by two, knelt down, and kissed the man’s hands. As they did so, a little smile touched his proud lips, as a bird’s wing touches the water and makes it laugh. But there was disdain in it. He kept looking at the young Fisherman. (254)

When the party scatters, after the Fisherman unintentionally makes the sign of the Cross, Satan “look[s] at the young Fisherman sadly” one last time before riding away (255).

Associating homosexual desire with Satan and a witches’ sabbath would seem to serve the ideological interests of the Victorian mainstream, not the creation of a reverse discourse *pro* homosexuality. But, ever the violator of expectations, Wilde humanizes the diabolical in his story so as to mitigate readers’ rejection of it. In particular, he associates the diabolical with a form of love that his readers will recognize as “genuine.” Wilde’s Witch is not the flat character one would expect from a fairy tale. Rather, she is presented to us as a rejected lover, who agrees to help the Fisherman exorcise his own soul, and thus enable him to join the Mermaid, even though she desires the Fisherman herself (253). When it comes time for her to deliver on her promise, her “eyes gr[o]w dim with tears,” and she begs the Fisherman to reconsider his decision (255); thus, strangely enough, she sides with the Priest on that matter. At this point, the Fisherman changes into an aggressive, violent, and unlikeable character, such that our sympathies shift to the Witch. She finally reveals the secret of how to exorcise the soul out of “terror,” immediately regrets having done so, and is roughly thrust away, “weeping,” by the Fisherman (255). In short, while this tale associates homosexual desire with the diabolical, it simultaneously tries to bring the diabolical into the pale of sympathy and acceptability by associating the diabolical with “genuine” love (the Witch’s spurned love for the Fisherman).

The central portion of this tale — in which the Fisherman’s now-disembodied Soul narrates its travels into the East and South — is noteworthy for its Oriental exoticism. As

I observed earlier, the Victorians associated the Orient with homosexuality, which raises the possibility that Wilde exploits that association in his tale. He does not do so explicitly. The only element of the Soul's narratives that could be construed as a reference to homosexuality is a pair of eunuchs, one of whom makes an "affected gesture" and casts an "evil smile" at the Soul (263). This connection, however, is tenuous at best. A more probable connection is to read the Orient in general as a signifier for homosexuality. This reading works on the grounds that 1) references to the Orient evoke the already established Victorian association with homosexuality, and 2) the Orient, like homosexuality, falls outside the pale of Christian blessedness. This, the Soul frequently reminds us, is the realm of the unwashed heathen: of Islam, of idolatry, of sun-worship. It is a violent, dangerous world. Yet at the same time, it is intensely beautiful and fascinating; some of Wilde's most elegant, exotic descriptions are found in this section of the tale. It is also a world containing unsurpassed wisdom and riches. The tale thus presents the realm outside the pale of Christian blessedness as beautiful and precious in its own right. Essentially, these portions of the tale convey the same message as the tale's conclusion: that which a traditional Christian sensibility would judge accursed (homosexuality) yields an unsurpassed and "curious beauty" which leaves the circle of Christian respectability looking provincial, bleak, and niggardly by comparison.

This tale engages Victorian anti-homosexual rhetoric yet further in its use of the unnameable. Since the Middle Ages at least, sodomy had been referred to as "the unmentionable vice." Blackstone's *Commentaries* referred to it as "peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum" — the sin unfit to be named among Christians. And the famous phrase, "the Love which dares not speak its name" was coined by none other than Lord Alfred Douglas. It is striking, therefore, that the unnameable is alluded to twice in this tale. The first allusion occurs after the Fisherman crosses himself and "call[s] upon the holy name" when he is on the verge of doing obeisance to Satan. As the witches' sabbath hastily disbands, the Witch tells the Fisherman that he has "named what should not be named" (255). The second allusion to the unnameable occurs while the Emperor leads the Soul to his treasure-chamber. At the end of a hidden corridor, the Emperor speaks "the word that may not be spoken," whereupon a door opens to reveal what the Soul describes to the Fisherman as "marvellous" treasure (264).

In both allusions, the unnameable is assigned a positive value: in the first allusion, the unnameable is the holy; in the second allusion, the unnameable opens the way to incredible wonder and wealth. This positive valuation of the unnameable subverts the rhetorical effect of referring to homosexual love as the unnameable, that effect being, of course, to indicate unspeakable heinousness. Obviously, this effect depends on the presupposition that unnameability is a negative quality. The positive allusions to the unnameable in "The Fisherman and his Soul" reverse that presupposition and thereby invite a new reading of the unnameability of homosexual love, a reading in which homosexual love can appear as something holy or unspeakably marvellous. We have returned full circle to the notion that male love is the most exalted form of love.

### *Conclusion*

IN LIGHT OF THESE GAY-RELATED READINGS, it is little wonder that Wilde advised one correspondent that the tales were written not only for children, but for a certain class of

adults as well: “those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness” (*Letters* 219). In fact, the first of the tales, “The Happy Prince,” was spun for the amusement of a group of Cambridge students, who responded so favorably that Wilde decided to produce a collection (Ellmann 268–69). One wonders if the students were aware of the tale’s homosexual subtext. For that matter, one wonders why Wilde would choose the genre of fairy tale for his “reverse discourse,” a genre destined, in the long run, to be relegated to children’s bookshelves. Wilde may insist all he like that the tales were written for “childlike” adults, as well as for children, but surely he knew that the vast majority of copies would finally end up in the hands of the latter.

Rather than assert a definitive answer to this question of genre choice, I prefer to make the more Wildean move of proposing “many answers” (*Letters* 218). Carol Tattersall has suggested that the fairy tales represent an “attempt to address their own marginal status as genre, and the notion of marginality in general” (128) — marginality, of course, serving as yet another gay-related theme. In a separate vein, Michael Moon speculates that “protoqueer” artists create by learning to revisit the “particular hunger” they experienced as children “to see represented . . . some of their own most compelling feelings, desires, fantasies, and fears” (5–6). Do the fairy tales represent such a “productive revisitation” on Wilde’s part — an attempt to create images that embody desires he experienced as a child, but for which he could find no written representation? Could the “childlike faculties” Wilde refers to in the *Letters* be the same as the “particular hunger” Moon imagines his queer artists experiencing — a hunger which defies, and thus demands alternatives to, compulsory heterosexuality? Perhaps Wilde intends “childlike faculties” to be understood in opposition to the Victorian middle-class ideal of the “gentleman” or “manly Christian,” in which case the “childlike” person would function, like the dandy, as yet another representation of the homosexual. The representation would be a clever one, since it places the homosexual in the camp of those who, in Jesus’s words, “become as little children,” and thus inherit the kingdom of heaven. Once again, Wilde has found a way to trump anti-homosexual religious rhetoric.

My readings of the fairy tales betoken a Wilde who is optimistic about the possibility of educating readers on the merits of male love. This is not the Wilde who squirms under Edward Carson’s cross-examination in the infamous libel-suit-turned-sodomy-trial. This is a Wilde just coming out, both as a homosexual and as a recognized author, and the choice of the fairy tale genre may serve as an emblem of Wilde’s metaphorical youth in both capacities. Or it may point to the metaphorical — i.e., moral — infancy of those whom Wilde proposes to educate.

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## NOTES

1. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* are standard subjects of gay-related thematic analysis; more recently, Craft has added *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the list.
2. Summers cites several contemporary reactions to *Dorian Gray* which show that readers were aware of the novel’s “homosexual ambiance” (43). *Dorian Gray* was, in fact, used during

Wilde's sodomy trial to convince the jury that Wilde was familiar with the "sodomitical" relations which the novel was alleged to represent (Cohen 128).

3. Ellmann suggests the presence of such themes when he notes that for the most part Wilde "subdued his desire to assault his readers with unfamiliar sensations, though there are references to the young King's kissing a statue of Antinous, and allusions to the beauty of boys" (299). But Ellmann declines to follow up this suggestion with a substantial thematic analysis. Bartlett likewise notes a few gay allusions in the tale "The Young King," which he calls "an image of Oscar and his boys slipped innocently into the Christmas issue of *The Lady's Pictorial*" (109); but, like Ellmann, Bartlett declines a detailed thematic analysis (his work being focused more on Wilde's life and milieu than on his literature *per se*). Tattersall notes the connection between Wilde's art and his homosexuality, and insists that the fairy tales deserve "close critical attention" (138), but she does not attempt a close gay-themed reading of the tales herself. The most thorough gay-related analysis undertaken to date has been Nassaar's reading of the fairy tales as "Wilde's attempt to assert the primacy of his family life and to reject the siren call of homosexuality . . . [The tales] are probably Wilde's attempt to remain within the charmed circle of his children, innocent and safe from evil" (35–36). Nassaar's analysis, however, is unsatisfactory in the extreme. Immersed in his own assumption that homosexuality is "evil," and convinced that Wilde must have assumed the same (xiii), Nassaar blinds himself to ways in which Wilde's fairy tales contribute to what Foucault calls Victorians' "reverse discourse" on homosexuality, a discourse "demand[ing] that [homosexuality's] legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged" (101).
4. It makes no sense to ask whether the constructionist approach is "correct," since constructivism demands that we reconsider what we mean when we call an idea "correct."
5. In *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Katz argues that from about 1820 to 1850, the "reigning sexual standard distinguished, not between different- and same-sex eroticism, but between true love and false love — [the latter being] a feeling not sufficiently deep, permanent, and serious enough to justify the usual sensual courtship practices" (44). In this environment, "passionate love" was defined in opposition to "sensual lust"; that is to say, the two terms demarcated separate realms. As a result, passionate same-sex relationships were not seen as sensual, ergo were not suspected of being sodomitical.
 

Why that perception shifted during the late Victorian period (i.e., why not just sodomy, but male love in a broader sense, came to be defined as pathological and immoral) remains a subject of discussion. The shift has been accounted for in various ways. Foucault represents it as part of a larger movement to propagate new discourses on sexual "deviance" for the purpose of expanding social control over the areas of human behavior which we have come to know as "sexuality" (110). Dellamora attributes the shift to "sensitivity to allegations of deviance" on the part of Liberals who had been producing pro-male love discourse as part of an effort to reimagine both men's and women's social roles, but who now embraced muscular Christianity and the ideal of the gentleman to bolster their political position (197–98). Sedgwick believes the shift was the means by which an unidentified "regime" has been able to make "homosexual panic . . . the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement," thus rendering men acutely manipulable and always potentially violent (185–86). For Dowling, the shift represented a forceful reaction against the use of Hellenism (which had been promoted as an alternative to the military ethos of classical republicanism) as the basis of a counterdiscourse in defense of homosexuality (Dowling xiii). However it is to be accounted for, this shift brought an end to the social acceptability of passionate same-sex attachments, and thus produced contemporary homophobia. (See Quinn for an account of the same shift in late nineteenth-century America.)
6. See Turner (424–26) for one example of a critic who makes this move.



7. I feel a need to apologize for Jenkyns's obviously biased vocabulary, which, even at the time he was writing, was outdated. Nevertheless, Jenkyns provides useful, even insightful, information about Victorian discourses on homosexuality.
8. See Willoughby for a detailed discussion of Christ imagery in the fairy tales.
9. So runs one reading of the tale, at least — a disclaimer which must accompany any attempt to identify a “message” or ideological effect in the fairy tales.
10. Dowling argues persuasively that the link between effeminacy and homosexuality does not hold true before the nineteenth century. The “molly” of the eighteenth century, for instance, was ridiculed for being effeminate, but not because his effeminacy was read as a sign of his preference for sodomy. Rather, the eighteenth century denounced effeminacy because classical republicanism upheld a military ethos in which the ideal man was willing to suffer privation for the sake of his country; the molly, by contrast, was the image of a man attached to luxury and therefore unprepared to sacrifice life and limb for England (5–10). In the excerpts from nineteenth-century medical discourse cited above, we see effeminacy reconceived as a symptom of sexual perversion. Interestingly, as we shall see in my analysis of “The Young King,” Wilde follows the republican line not only in associating effeminacy with luxury, but also in representing the repudiation of luxury as a noble, manly act. He deconstructs republicanism, though, by separating effeminacy and luxury at the last minute, so that his Young King clearly rejects the latter, but not necessarily the former.
11. Of course, the fact that the rose is *produced* by the Rose-tree's penetration of the Nightingale opens up the possibility of an ironic reading such as that which I have applied to the tale of the Fisherman and the Mermaid: the non-reproductive is nevertheless productive, and spectacularly so.
12. Jenkyns's argument can be summarized as follows: As a disciple of Winckelmann, Pater hints at his master's homosexuality when he says that Winckelmann's “affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, [but] that the subtler threads of temperament were inwoven in it, [as] . . . proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men” (qtd. in Jenkyns 150). Having gone this far — having “ventured to connect Winckelmann's worship of Greek sculpture with an admiration for the [male] human flesh it represents” (Jenkyns 150) — Pater immediately seeks to retreat and cover his tracks by insisting that these “romantic, fervent friendships” and “admiration for . . . human flesh” are innocent, pure — indeed, almost holy. He does this, however, not by elevating homosexual desire, but by denying it. Jenkyns notes that Pater places great emphasis on the statues' whiteness, thus enveloping them “in a halo of quasi-religious association” in order to imply “that emotions which his contemporaries reprehended could seem innocent in a Greek context. Naturally,” Jenkyns continues, “he does not say this aloud” (150).  
 Pater is adamant about reinforcing the Victorian notion that Platonic homosexuality was passionate but passionless — homosexual without the sex. “The beauty of the Greek statues,” he declares, “was a sexless beauty” (qtd. in Jenkyns 151). As Jenkyns sees it, the fact that Pater feels constrained to make this disclaimer indicates that he actually knew better. Jenkyns's final figure for Pater is that of “a middle-aged gentleman loitering wistfully at the edge of the playing fields,” an image Jenkyns finds “not altogether pleasing” (225). While I find Jenkyns's biases not altogether pleasing, his reading is insightful and useful for understanding the connection between aestheticism and homosexuality. Dellamora and Dowling offer more sympathetic readings of Pater in light of his homoromantic and homoerotic inclinations.
13. According to the history constructed by Dowling (in *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*), Kingsley's muscular Christianity was an explicit reaction to Tractarian efforts to promote a new model of masculinity based on intensely homosocial tutorial and pastoral relationships. After leading Tractarians like Newman “perverted” to Roman Catholicism,

- Kingsley denounced these homosocial relationships as “effeminate” — which, in light of the Tractarians’ exaltation of celibacy, carried a connotation of “non-heterosexual.” Muscular Christianity was touted as the healthy alternative (36–45).
14. Similarly, recent discoveries indicate that Pater was involved in a scandalous homoromantic relationship with a student at Oxford — scandalous not because Pater was alleged to have sodomized the young man (a suspicion his accusers explicitly denied), but because Pater’s *feelings* for the young man were considered inappropriate (see Dowling 100–01). The incident is an example of the shift that occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century, whereby same-sex passion, formerly within the pale of social acceptability, became synonymous with same-sex sensuality, which in turn was being redefined by medical discourse as symptomatic of a condition of ontological significance.
  15. The Dwarf’s grotesqueness may further mark him as a signifier for the homosexual, given the Victorian press’s custom of referring to homosexuals as “monster[s]” (Crompton 22). The scene in which the Dwarf discovers his monstrousness in a palace mirror is remarkably reminiscent of Dorian Gray’s discovery of his own monstrousness in the bewitched portrait — a plot device which Sedgwick argues is gay-themed (160–61).
  16. But not happiness ever after: Wilde defies convention by concluding his tale with a note that “so great had been [the Star-Child’s] suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, [that] after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly” (284).
  17. The Fuller’s Field is a place of no great consequence mentioned in 1 Kings 18.17 and Isa. 7.3. Perhaps Wilde confuses it with the Potter’s Field, or Field of Blood, where Judas Iscariot was buried; see Matt. 27.5–7 and Acts 1.18–19.
  18. In Wildean fashion, the happy ending is mitigated by a final observation that in spite of their having been accepted into the pale of Christian blessedness, the Sea-folk move to another part of the sea.

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