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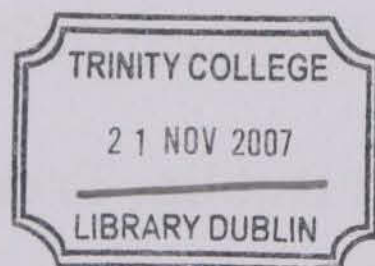
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Folklore and the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde

PhD by research 2007

University of Dublin, Trinity College

Anne Markey



THESIS
8290

Declaration

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Summary

'Folklore and the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde' assesses Wilde's two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), in light of his claim that 'the folk-tale is the father of all fiction'. In particular, it evaluates the suggestion made by critics that the stories contained in these collections draw on the Irish folk narrative tradition.

To this end, the thesis explores the concept of folklore, both as a body of traditional material and as an academic discipline, drawing on varied materials that include, besides secondary sources relating to folklore in both the English and Irish languages, the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore in UCD, and notes taken from personal conversations with Irish folklorists. As Wilde's stories are examples of the literary fairy tale, the thesis moves on to consider the development of that genre, through an examination of primary and secondary sources, in English and French.

The explorations and findings are divided into five main sections.

An 'Introduction' outlining existing criticism of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales shows that this tends to be brief and used to validate individual critics' particular approaches to Wilde's life or work, whether these concern his nationality, sexuality, or spirituality.

'Chapter One: Irish Folklore' explores how folklore has been defined since the word was coined in 1846. This is followed by a critical consideration of the Irish context, with special emphasis on the work of nineteenth-century collectors of Irish folklore and on their attitudes towards the material they present. In particular, William and Jane Wilde are shown to have shared a Romantic approach to their

material, later endorsed by their son, Oscar. The chapter concludes by assessing the extent of Oscar Wilde's familiarity with the Irish folk narrative tradition.

'Chapter Two: The Literary Fairy Tale' examines the development of the genre of the literary fairy tale from sixteenth-century Italy up to its identification with the Victorian nursery, arguing that the literary fairy tale, while drawing on oral folk narratives, has always been a hybrid genre. While contemporary critics compared Wilde to Hans Andersen, the findings in this chapter show that the author's elaborate style can be related to French salon tales, his exoticism to oriental tales, and his pessimism to German Romantic tales.

'Chapter Three: Wilde's Fairy Tales' focuses on Wilde's two collections, beginning with an examination of the circumstances surrounding the initial publication of both volumes, and arguing that the differences between the two collections reflect a refinement of aesthetic purpose, with the second volume being more clearly addressed to an adult audience. The nine stories contained in the two collections are then analysed and discussed, with particular focus on their varied source material. The chapter argues that Wilde's recourse to the Irish folk narrative tradition indicates a Romantic approach to that tradition, as reflected in his engagement with the moral values conveyed by Irish religious folktales and legends. Importantly, his fairy tales are also shown to draw on European traditions, including that of the literary fairy tale.

The 'Conclusion' argues that Wilde's fairy tales are a cultural nexus composed of literary and non-literary narrative traditions, both Irish and European. The result is a group of original, innovative stories, which may engage children but were written to challenge adults.

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde's two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), are the Cinderella of his oeuvre as they have, in comparison with the rest of his work, attracted little critical attention.¹ This is at least partly explicable by a more general dearth of critical focus on children's literature in the early part of the twentieth century.² It is also due to the endemic unease inspired by the name of Oscar Wilde during much of the same period.³ However, since the 1980s, the rise in the academic study of children's literature and the increased interest in Oscar Wilde, encouraged by Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography, have led to a greater critical focus on the stories. This study aims to develop and augment existing criticism by examining the extent and nature of Wilde's recourse to Irish folklore in the fairy tales and by exploring the ways in which they also engage with the norms and conventions associated with the genre of the literary fairy tale.

Oscar Wilde is a cosmopolitan figure, more associated with classical scholarship, aestheticism, French decadence and English society comedies than with Irish folklore. However, recent scholarship has addressed the contribution made by Wilde's Irishness to the style and content of his work.⁴ Increasingly, a link has been posited between Irish folklore and Wilde's two collections of fairy

¹ This lack of critical attention is identified by Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 10.

² See Peter Hunt, ed., *Literature for Children* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6-7.

³ See Alan Sinfield, "'I see it is my name that terrifies': Wilde in the twentieth century', in *The Wilde Legacy*, ed. by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 136-152, (p. 137) and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued* (Greenboro: ELT Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁴ See Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of being Irish* (Dublin: Townhouse, 1994); Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995); Jerusha McCormack, ed., *Wilde the Irishman* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Ní Chuilleanáin, ed., *The Wilde Legacy*.

tales.⁵ There has been little attempt to analyse his engagement with Irish folklore or to develop Richard Pine's suggestion that it is reflected in the fairy tales.⁶ This is due, in part, to the paucity of critical focus on Wilde's short fiction. It is also due to a lack of a clear consensus on what constitutes Irish folklore and what differentiates it from literature.⁷ This, in turn, is partly a result of academic specialisation and a persistent tendency to theorise Irish folklore and Anglo-Irish literature in ways that occlude the relationship between them.⁸ My research aims to establish the extent to which Wilde was familiar with strands of Irish folklore and to explore the ways in which his fairy tales refract that familiarity.

While recent scholarship has justly established the importance of Wilde's Irish background as a context for the consideration of his work, it is equally important to remember that Wilde described himself as 'a most recalcitrant patriot'.⁹ As well as being Irish, he was also European. Born in Dublin in 1854, this cosmopolitan Irishman lived most of his adult life in England, preached his gospel of aesthetics on both sides of the Atlantic and died in Paris in 1900. Since his death, his life and work have increasingly become the focus of international criticism and analysis, while his plays have proved enduringly popular. Wilde, in

⁵ See, for example, Sally Brown, *Oscar Wilde 1854-1900* (London: British Library, 2000), pp. 22-23, and John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 79-80.

⁶ Pine, pp. 177-183.

⁷ David A. Upchurch, *Wilde's Use of Celtic Elements in The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 23-24, refers to Irish Celtic folklore contained in P. W. Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879), but as Joyce's collection consists of translations from old manuscripts, it belongs to a literary tradition.

⁸ Vivian Mercier's pioneering study *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) reverses this tendency. However, as he argues (p. 79) that Wilde belongs essentially to the English literary tradition, he excludes him from an exploration of the continuity between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish traditions. Declan Kiberd, who continues Mercier's alignment of the two traditions, discusses Wilde in *Inventing Ireland* (London: Cape, 1995), *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), and *Idir Dhá Chultúr* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2003) but does not focus on the fairy tales.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 371; hereafter this volume will be referred to as *Complete Letters*.

effect, is a cultural hybrid whose continuing appeal transcends the divide between popular icon and academic object of enquiry.

The roots of Wilde's cultural hybridity lie in his Irish background. Most of Oscar's youth was spent in fashionable Merrion Square, where he came into contact with luminaries of social and intellectual life from Ireland and elsewhere.¹⁰ Young Oscar had access to his father's large library which included volumes on Irish history, antiquities and topology and volumes of European literature.¹¹ His parents' shared interest in Irish history and popular traditions alerted their son to the wealth of Ireland's cultural heritage. Oscar spent long periods on family property in the west of Ireland where he came in contact with local servants who enriched his knowledge of Irish popular culture and folklore. His formal education in Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, at Trinity College Dublin and Magdalen College Oxford gave him access to English, continental and classical literature. From childhood, then, Oscar was exposed to a variety of cultural influences that shaped his developing artistic credo and which resurface in his later work.

This study will explore the ways in which his fairy tales reflect this cultural hybridity and how they engage with various literary traditions, particularly that of the literary fairy tale, a genre which draws heavily on oral folktales. I will show that only some of Wilde's fairy tales directly reflect his knowledge of the Irish folk narrative tradition but that they all engage with various forms and conventions of the literary fairy tale. My thesis is that Wilde's fairy tales are cultural hybrids that echo elements of Irish, English and European traditions in a

¹⁰ Guests at the Wilde household included Sir William Rowan Hamilton, Whitley Stokes, John Butler Yeats, James Clarence Mangan, Dion Boucicault and Thomas Carlyle; see Coakley, *The Importance of being Irish*, pp. 30, 37 and Davis Coakley, 'Oscar Wilde and the Wildes of Merrion Square', in Ní Chuilleanáin ed., pp. 35-50, (pp. 38, 41).

¹¹ See 'Catalogue of the library of the late Rev. Tho. Hamblyn Porter and of the late Sir William Wilde, 1879', held in Trinity College Dublin Library; hereafter this document will be referred to as 'Catalogue of William Wilde'.

distinctive Wildean way. The hybridity of his fairy tales adds to their aesthetic complexity, rendering definitive interpretation difficult, if not impossible, and thereby challenging readers of all ages to engage with the issues that they raise.

The first chapter will examine the concept of folklore and show how its definition has developed since the term was coined in 1846. This will lead to an examination of how the discovery of Irish folklore fitted into the complex socio-cultural landscape of the nineteenth-century Ireland into which Wilde was born. An exploration of the evolution of folklore scholarship will show that it became difficult to align Oscar Wilde's fairy tales with a body of material mainly collected, and primarily studied, through the medium of the Irish language, and traditionally associated with the rural poor. Finally, the nature and extent of Wilde's familiarity with Irish folklore will be assessed.

The second chapter will explore the rise of the literary fairy tale in order to expand the contextual framework set out in the first chapter. This will involve tracing the development of the literary fairy tale in continental Europe and Victorian England to show that Wilde's stories display stylistic and thematic continuities with this established, but continually developing, genre.

The third chapter will explore the circumstances surrounding the publication of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888 and *A House of Pomegranates* in 1891. Initial critical reaction to both volumes will be evaluated, with particular emphasis on the issues of intended readership and identification of sources. This will lead to a detailed individual analysis of the fairy tales in the order in which they appeared in the two collections, identifying the sources to which Wilde alludes and considering their effect on the themes he examines. The analysis will also explore how the treatment of these major themes, including the

value of suffering and the function of art, prefigures or echoes treatment of similar issues in some of Wilde's other writings.

Finally, the conclusion will draw these analyses together and address the stylistic and thematic differences and resemblances between the two volumes. I will demonstrate that while the stories contained in these volumes are heavily indebted to the genre of the European literary fairy tale, they also display a distinctive and pervasive, albeit selective, engagement with strands of the Irish folk narrative tradition.

Critics have already identified a link between Wilde's fairy tales and his Irish background. Because reference will be made to criticism of individual stories in detail in Chapter Three, I will concentrate here on providing a general overview of criticism relevant to this study's exploration of Wilde's recourse to Irish folklore and to other narrative traditions, including that of the literary fairy tale. Criticism relevant to the issue of intended readership will also be outlined.

W. B. Yeats first posited the link between Wilde's fairy tales and his Irish heritage in 1923 by claiming that Wilde's conversational genius reflected their shared Irish background. Yeats argued that while this genius carried through in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* 'because he told its stories', it was missing from *A House of Pomegranates*, 'because he wrote its stories'.¹² Yeats saw *The Happy Prince* as being more successful because the stories it contained were simpler, more conversational in tone and less contrived than those in *A House of Pomegranates*. Yeats's recognition of the importance of Wilde's Irish background for an appreciation of his fairy tales and his identification of stylistic differences

¹² W. B. Yeats, 'Introduction to Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* (1923)', in *Prefaces and Introductions: Uncollected Prefaces and Introductions by Yeats to Works by Other Authors, and to Anthologies ed. by Yeats*, ed. by William H. O'Donnell (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 147-151, (p. 148).

from the pure springs of native folklore'.¹⁵ The lack of any detailed consideration of Wilde's fairy stories, native folklore, or Anglo-Irish fiction undermines McCormack's alignments of Wilde's tales with both oral Gaelic narratives and Irish writing in English. In addition, as I will show in discussing sources reflected in Irish folk narratives in Chapter One, the very concept of 'pure springs of native folklore' is problematical. My research will analyse the fairy tales in detail to assess the validity of McCormack's claim that they draw on the Irish folk tradition.

Richard Pine suggests that Wilde's recourse to the supernatural in the fairy tales reflects his familiarity with the Irish folk narrative tradition.¹⁶ However, Pine's brief analysis of how the fairy tales reflect traditional narratives is marred by a lack of familiarity with Irish folklore scholarship. I will discuss this lack in some depth in relation to Pine's identification of a possible Irish folk narrative source for Wilde's 'The Fisherman and his Soul' in Chapter One, and engage with his readings of other stories in Chapter Three.

Neil Sammells claims that the fairy tales bear a self-conscious relationship to the anti-mimetic aesthetic theories expounded in Wilde's critical essay, 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist'.¹⁷ He notes that Declan Kiberd associates this rejection of realism with Wilde's republican and anti-imperialist theories and points out that one strategy of imperialism is to project childishness onto the colonised.¹⁸ By adopting the fairy tale form, Wilde could be accused of internalising the childlike qualities projected onto the Irish not only by the English but also by the Celticism of cultural nationalists. However, Sammells refutes this accusation: 'Wilde does not internalise childhood and childishness, he stylises

¹⁵ Jerusha McCormack, 'Wilde's fiction(s)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 96-117, (pp. 102, 103).

¹⁶ Pine, pp. 177-183.

¹⁷ Sammells, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11; see also Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, pp. 33-50.

them'. He describes the fairy tales as cultural hybrids in which 'Irish and non-Irish elements are transformed, as borders and boundaries blur and collapse'.¹⁹

Sammells's description of Wilde's fairy tales as cultural hybrids provides a useful starting point for my exploration of how they refract elements of the Irish and other folkloric and literary traditions.

Jarlath Killeen combines a consideration of Wilde's Irishness with an exploration of the spiritual and moral significance of his fairy tales. He argues that they are subversive because they undercut the morality of late Victorian England but are simultaneously conservative because they aim to legitimise the moral claims of Catholicism.²⁰ He draws on postcolonial theory to argue that Wilde's use of Christian imagery in 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Young King' can be constructed as a criticism of colonial exploitation. In a later work, Killeen expands his analysis of all Wilde's fairy tales to argue that they provide a crucial site for the investigation of Wilde's nationality and conflicted theological leanings.²¹ In his most recent work, Killeen discusses the roots of Wilde's lifelong attraction to Irish folk-Catholicism and explores how that attraction is reflected in works other than the fairy tales.²² I will develop Killeen's analysis by assessing the extent of Wilde's knowledge of Irish folklore and of his recourse to Irish folkloric traditions in his fairy tales in Chapters One and Three.

Various critics have approached Wilde's fairy tales from the related perspectives of form and structure. Norbert Kohl claims: 'In form and structure,

¹⁹ Sammells, pp. 12-13, 17.

²⁰ Jarlath Killeen, 'Diaspora, Empire, and the Religious Geography of Victorian Social Relations in Wilde's Fairy Tales', in *New Voices in Irish Criticism*, ed. by P.J. Mathews (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 183-189, (p. 184).

²¹ Jarlath Killeen, 'Religion, the Nation, and Oscar Wilde' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College Dublin, 2001).

²² Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Wilde's fairy tales are very much in the tradition of European folk-tales'.²³ Erica Balog, who applies Propp's morphology to Wilde's fairy tales, disagrees, as she finds that they are more structurally complex than the folktale. Her analysis focuses on 'The Happy Prince', but she concludes that the structural complexity of all Wilde's stories means that 'the usual rules of the fairy tale are not valid'.²⁴ In Chapter Three, I will show that Wilde's fairy tales, despite their frequent evocation of the generic, timeless world of the folktale and their employment of triadic repetition, are characterised by digressions, elaborate descriptions, and stylised use of language. This means that their structure evokes but departs from that of the folktale.

Simon Dentith's exploration of form centres on the realisation that modern, literary fairy tales contain generic traces of the pre-modern world of oral folktales. He points to the example of Perrault, who added ironic moral tags to traditional narratives, to argue that this persistence creates a dissonance or disjunction 'between story and moral, or traditional narrative and adduced significance'.²⁵ In relation to Wilde, Dentith argues that the 'possibilities for disjunction are variably acted upon in his stories'. The stories in *A House of Pomegranates* draw less heavily on a folkloric tradition than those in *The Happy Prince* so the morals to be drawn from stories in the second collection 'remain matters of inference rather than explicit assertion'.²⁶ Dentith argues that the variety of generic sources for all Wilde's fairy tales enriches their implicit criticism of

²³ Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 55.

²⁴ Erica Balog, 'The Adaptability of Propp's Method for the Morphological Analysis of Oscar Wilde's Tales', *Studia Russica*, 16 (1997), 293-319, (p. 315).

²⁵ Simon Dentith, "'A Story with a Moral": Varieties of Narrative and Significance in Wilde's Fairy Stories', in *The Importance of being Misunderstood: Homage to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Giovanna Franci and Giovanna Silvani, (Bologna: Biblioteca del Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere Moderne dell'Università di Bologna, 2003), pp. 269-283, (p. 274).

²⁶ Dentith, pp. 275, 278.

contemporary greed and materialism.²⁷ He concludes that this generic inheritance imbues Wilde's fairy tales with an oppositional dynamic: 'The dissonance of the stories – by which I mean the divergent historical realities that their generic provenance suggests – strikes a note that is finally irreconcilable to the complacencies of late nineteenth-century modernity'.²⁸

Since their original publication, critics of Wilde's fairy stories have found in them echoes of other texts.²⁹ Dentith's originality lies in his exploration of how these echoes affect the form, and complicate the interpretation, of Wilde's stories. He indicates that these stories are narrative hybrids whose form facilitates Wilde's varying exploitation of congruence between narrative conventions and adduced moral significance. His general discussion of the effects of generic traces of earlier texts on Wilde's fairy tales does not refer to the Irish folk tradition. Nevertheless, it provides one possible context for an exploration of how these tales adapt the Irish narrative folk tradition to the cultural context of late-Victorian England. It also suggests that this exploration can only be enriched by identifying and considering other texts to which Wilde alludes in the fairy tales. Exploring Wilde's recourse to Irish folklore and to other narrative traditions will enhance my discussion of how his adaptation of the fairy tale form differs from, and resembles, the approach of other late Victorian writers.

Robert Dunbar sets his discussion of Wilde's decision to use the fairy tale form against the general context of Victorian writing for the young.³⁰

Acknowledging the difficulty of identifying the intended readership of Wilde's

²⁷ This view is shared by Rachel Cameron, 'Oscar Wilde's "The Young King": The Fairy Tale as Counter-memory', *Australian Folklore*, 17 (2002), 53-67.

²⁸ Dentith, p. 283.

²⁹ See examples of early criticism in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1970), pp. 59-62, 113-116.

³⁰ Robert Dunbar, 'Eternal loss and sadness: the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde', in Ní Chuilleanáin ed., pp. 85-94.

two collections of fairy tales, Dunbar argues that they have affinities not only with the translated work of Hans Christian Andersen, but also with stories written by other Victorians, including John Ruskin, William Makepeace Thackeray, Frances Browne, and George MacDonald. I will engage with, and develop, Dunbar's alignment of Wilde's fairy tales with those written by his contemporaries and predecessors in Chapters Two and Three of this study.

Josephine Guy and Ian Small examine the issue of intended readership, mentioned by Dunbar, in their exploration of the circumstances surrounding the initial publication of Wilde's two collections of fairy tales. They argue that the first collection was primarily intended for children while the second was aimed at a connoisseur adult readership.³¹ This issue will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three but it is worth noting here that their discussion of the fairy tales does not include any critical analysis. The lack of textual analysis supports the general thrust of their argument that Wilde was an opportunistic writer whose main motivation for writing fairy tales was financial. This argument undermines Wilde's own stated distaste for public opinion and championship of individualism. It also runs contrary to dominant late twentieth century critical approaches which position Wilde as a marginal, dissident writer whose career was driven by oppositional sexual or nationalist politics and whose work constitutes a transgressive assault on Victorian complacency. As Guy and Small acknowledge, creativity is a complex phenomenon.³² Wilde's writing practices may well have been driven by financial considerations but that does not preclude the possibility that his texts contain subversive messages. In Chapter Three, I will argue that Wilde's choice of genre is more complicated than Guy and Small suggest as he treated the fairy tale as a

³¹ Josephine Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 81.

³² Guy and Small, p. 9.

familiar but enigmatic form whose conventions could be manipulated and subverted for unusual aesthetic ends.

Critics have commented on the complex, ambiguous relationship between Wilde's aesthetic fascination with beautiful objects and his engagement with Christian values in the stories.³³ Christopher S. Nassaar suggests that Wilde's two collections of fairy tales reveal the influence of Walter Pater's two works, *Marius the Epicurean* and *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. He argues that Wilde blends Christianity and aestheticism in the manner of Marius but rejects the advice of the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* by showing that the private enjoyment of art is as 'an inadequate initial stage in the soul's spiritual development'.³⁴ G. P. Kelley investigates how Wilde's work embodies a dynamic tension between a Christian aesthetic, based on the experience of suffering, and a decadent aesthetic which advocates a process of self-development based on pleasure. Kelley argues that the stories in *The Happy Prince* affirm the Christian aesthetic as 'Wilde invites the reader to accept selfless self-development as the authentic mode of individualism'. He sees *A House of Pomegranates* as complicating this invitation as this volume 'openly displays the fault-lines in both the decadent and Christian metaphysics of the self'.³⁵ My research will explore the stylistic differences between the two volumes to suggest that Wilde's increased aesthetic recourse to the imagery and language of the King James Bible in the second collection complicates his endorsement of the moral values encoded in religious tales from the Irish folk tradition.

³³ See, for example, G. Wilson Knight, 'Christ and Wilde', in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection Of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall International, 1969), pp.138-149, (pp 140-143).

³⁴ Christopher S. Nassaar, 'Wilde's *The Happy Prince and other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*', *Explicator*, 60:3 (2002), 142-145, (p. 145).

³⁵ G. P. Kelley, 'The "Christian Aesthetic" of Oscar Wilde' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford, 1988), pp. 88, 121.

Philip Cohen identifies a tension between Wilde's choice of the fairy tale form and his apparent espousal of Christian values. He identifies a parental interest in Irish folklore as an important influence on Wilde's fairy tales and argues that predisposition towards fantasy is 'a distinctly Irish trait'.³⁶ Cohen notes that Wilde often departs from generic conventions in ways that subvert the ostensible moral of the stories and concludes that the fairy tales, taken as a whole, 'challenge the Christian ethic'.³⁷ In Chapter Two, the evidence of a predisposition towards fantasy in European literary fairy tales will be discussed, while in Chapter Three, I will argue that Wilde's aesthetic fairy tales endorse a radical Christian ethic.

Elizabeth Goodenough places Wilde's fairy tales within the context of widespread Victorian speculation about the nature and divinity of Christ. She notes that this speculation, which was fanned by the publication of lengthy, scholarly, German lives of Jesus, 'spawned competing, though sometimes overlapping, meanings of atonement: repentance as change of life or the work of penance'.³⁸ However, she does not explore the implications of these differing approaches to atonement or investigate the ways in which translations of German works facilitated an increasing perception of Jesus less as a divine redeemer than as a preacher. She goes on to compare Wilde's stories to Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' and George MacDonald's 'The Light Princess'. In her view, Rossetti and MacDonald show that self-sacrifice leads to salvation and redemption of a loved one whereas in Wilde's stories, feeling another's pain is the first step on a penitential path that leads to self-realisation. She concludes that Rossetti and MacDonald uphold the ideal of atonement as a miraculous change of life while

³⁶ Philip Cohen, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (London : Associated University Presses, 1978), p. 75.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 95.

³⁸ Elizabeth Goodenough, 'Oscar Wilde, Victorian Fairy Tales, and the Meanings of Atonement', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 23:3 (1999), 336-354, (p. 337).

Wilde is closer to the penance tradition.³⁹ This identification of Wilde's distinctive approach to suffering and redemption suggests that his championship of individualism set his fairy tales apart from the works of his contemporaries. However, as Goodenough does not refer to *The Princess and the Goblins* or *The Princess and Curdie*, or to other fairy stories by MacDonald, her investigation is less comprehensive than it might have been. In Chapters Two and Three, I will argue that Wilde and MacDonald had more in common than Goodenough suggests, particularly in their emphasis on the desirability of a childlike vision.

Various critics have looked at the relationship between adults and children in the stories, exploring issues as varied as pederasty, parenthood and education. These issues indirectly raise the question of intended audience that I will address in Chapter Three. Naomi Wood, who claims that Wilde addressed his fairy tales to children, relates them to Paterian aesthetics and to the homosexual subculture of Victorian Oxford.⁴⁰ She acknowledges that they do not explicitly refer to pederastic practice but claims that they are deliberate pederastic attempts to introduce young readers to the pleasures of 'an artificial, idealistic sensuality'. As she does not distinguish clearly between idealistic and actual sensuality and pederasty, it is difficult to accept her claim that the fairy tales encode the vision of an idealistic pederast. Nevertheless, her argument that they express an appreciation of the sensual child is provocative because it raises questions about the issue of Wilde's intended audience. Did Wilde see the child, or the childlike adult, to whom he addressed his stories primarily as a male sensual being whose sexuality

³⁹ Goodenough, p. 344.

⁴⁰ Naomi Wood, 'Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', *Marvels and Tales*, 16: 2 (2002), 156-170; the quotations in this paragraph are taken from an online version of this article, http://goliath.ecnext.com/free-scripts/document_view_v3.pl?item_id=0199-2225636&format_id=XML [accessed 19 January 2006].

could be awakened through the fairy tale? Alternatively, did he view childhood as a non-gender specific, lifelong mode of perception, poised between innocence and experience, which could be enriched, or even rekindled, through the fairy tale? I will address these questions in my discussion of intended audience in Chapter Three to argue that Wilde's fairy tales frequently invite the adult to learn from the child.

Mary Shine Thompson argues that 'Wilde's ambivalence as to whether or not his fairy tales were intended for a child audience may be interpreted on one level as a resistance to available templates of childhood'.⁴¹ Noting that elsewhere in his work, Wilde expresses dissatisfaction with the English education system, Thompson argues that his fairy tales constitute an alternative, radical form of education that seeks to cultivate the critical instinct.⁴² Thompson's suggestion that Wilde regarded children as capable of critical thought has implications for the perceived differences in the intended readership for Wilde's two collections of fairy tales. It seems to be accepted that *The Happy Prince* was intended primarily for children while *A House of Pomegranates* was intended primarily for adults.⁴³ However, if Wilde believed children were capable of critical thought, the differences between the two volumes may reflect a refinement of purpose rather than signal a change in intended readership.

In a wide-ranging discussion of Wilde's fairy tales, Ian Small initially describes them as 'stories written for parents to tell to their children' and argues that their unusual vindication of the child's point of view 'derived from his

⁴¹ Mary Shine Thompson, 'The importance of not being earnest: children and Oscar Wilde's fairy tales', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 7 (2001), 191-204, (p. 193).

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 202.

⁴³ See, for example, Michelle Ruggaber, 'Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and *A House of Pomegranates*: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups', *English Language in Transition*, 46:2 (2003), 141-154, (p. 142).

[Wilde's] own experience as a son and a father'.⁴⁴ Small goes on to suggest that 'in choosing to try his hand at fairy tales', Wilde was attempting to establish a literary career 'attuned to the twin imperatives of creative and commercial success'.⁴⁵ Small argues that Wilde's stories parody traditional fairy tales in ways that highlight the vulgar self-interest of the British middle class and aristocracy. He concludes that although 'accessible to a very wide audience', the covert discussion of male-male desire in the fairy tales works in 'a coded way' that can 'be recognised only by a coterie audience'.⁴⁶

Thompson and Small differ on how Wilde's approach to childhood is reflected and expressed in his fairy tales. Small argues that they are presented from a child's point of view while Thompson argues that they 'neither empathise with children nor privilege them as characters'.⁴⁷ They also differ on the degree to which the fairy tales engage with contemporary social realities; Small argues that they consistently criticise the Victorian aristocracy and upper middle classes while Thompson argues that they are consistently alienated from contemporary reality. Their differences of opinion highlight the complexity of Wilde's approach to childhood and the nature of his engagement with contemporary debates, issues that I will explore in my discussion of the stories. Small moves from the consideration of the importance of Wilde's Irish childhood for an appreciation of his fairy tales towards an unsubstantiated claim that they contain a homosexual subtext. My analysis of the stories will focus more on Wilde's Irish heritage than on his sexual proclivities. It is worth noting here that, with the rise of queer theory in the 1980s,

⁴⁴ Ian Small, 'Introduction', in *Oscar Wilde: Complete Short Fiction* (London: Penguin, 2003) pp. x-xxx, (pp. xv, xvi).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. xix.

⁴⁶ Small, 'Introduction', p. xxx.

⁴⁷ Small, 'Introduction', p. xvi; Mary Thompson 'The importance of not being earnest', p. 191.

the fairy stories have provided rich seams for critics interested in Wilde's sexuality, an issue related to the question of intended readership,

Gary Schmidgall suggests that Wilde circulated *The Happy Prince* among 'members of his rapidly growing gay circle as his small contribution to a slowly progressing cause'.⁴⁸ However, as we shall see, Wilde circulated the volume amongst such an eclectic group of friends and acquaintances that the known facts undermine this suggestion. Observing that the fairy tales resist unitary readings and are not 'merely meditations on homosexuality', John Charles Duffy identifies five discursive strategies employed by Wilde in the stories to construct positive representations of desire between males: the paradigm of devoted friendship between men; a preoccupation with non-reproductive sex; a perceived link between aestheticism and homosexuality; an exploration of *paederastia*, and covert allusions to religious discourses in which homosexuality features as the unnameable sin.⁴⁹ Duffy's close attention to contemporary discourses and texts dealing with male-male desire, and his detailed textual analysis of Wilde's fairy tales, support the thesis that they present positive representations of desire between men. Nevertheless, some of his arguments and conclusions are debatable, as I will show in my discussion of the individual stories in Chapter Three.

Angela Kingston draws attention to how homoerotic interpretations of Wilde's fairy tales, which tend to equate homosexuality with paedophilia, acquire an insidious implication when applied to tales featuring child protagonists. Kingston argues that the stories 'reveal that far from sexually desiring children, Wilde saw children and childish pleasures as a means of *escape* from the complex

⁴⁸ Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde* (London: Abacus, 1994), p. 154

⁴⁹ John Charles Duffy, 'Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29:2 (2001), 327-349.

issues of adult life'.⁵⁰ The distinction that Kingston outlines between homosexuality and paedophilia is valuable. Wilde was attracted to young men, but not to children, and criticism that sexualises Wilde's child protagonists in an attempt to elucidate a homoerotic subtext in his stories is invidious.⁵¹

The foregoing overview of critical reaction to Wilde's fairy tales shows that they have attracted increasing attention in recent years. Nevertheless, critical focus on the fairy tales has been limited, largely because it tends to be confined to short journal articles or to form part of a full-length investigation of Wilde's life and/or work. It has also been limited by its tendency to approach the fairy tales from one main critical perspective, for example, Wilde's nationality, sexuality or relationship to market forces. Despite these limitations, recent criticism shows that Wilde's fairy tales can be approached from a variety of perspectives and be interpreted in very different ways. While the studies undertaken to date offer interesting insights, their general brevity and single-minded approach highlights the lack of a comprehensive textual assessment of Wilde's fairy tales. My project will remedy that lack.

Recent scholarship has gone a long way towards rescuing Wilde's fairy tales from the nursery, to which, like the portrait of Dorian Gray, they had been ignominiously banished during the early years of the twentieth century. Like that portrait, they are lovingly produced, finely crafted works of art that contain surprising powers of revelation. This study will examine the context of the initial publication of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and the stories it contains to suggest that Wilde wrote it for a dual audience of adults and children whom he encouraged to question

⁵⁰ Angela Kingston, 'Homoeroticism and the Child in Wilde's Fairy Tales', *The Wildean: The Journal of the Oscar Wilde Society*, 19 (2001), 43-53, (p. 46).

⁵¹ For a discussion of how Wilde's relationships with working-class young men connected with discourses of Victorian philanthropy, see Lucy McDiarmid, 'Oscar Wilde's speech from the dock', in Ní Chuilleanáin, ed., pp. 113-135, (pp. 126- 130).

dominant ideologies. The stories in *A House of Pomegranates*, by contrast, were written for an adult audience. I will show that in both collections, it is left to Wilde's reader, child or adult, to consider the issues raised in his fairy tales and that each reader is allowed to draw his or her own conclusions.

Existing criticism also indicates that Wilde's fairy tales contain a metaphysical aspect, and that their focus on suffering and self-sacrifice imbues them with a spiritual dimension. This study will argue that this spiritual dimension is strongest in those stories which allude to the Irish folk tradition as Wilde engages with the values promulgated by Irish religious folktales. The influence of Irish folklore on the stories has already been proposed by a number of critics but it has not been investigated or explored in any depth. I will show that not all of Wilde's nine fairy tales engage with the Irish folk tradition so that this influence is not as pervasive as has been suggested. I will demonstrate, in Chapter Two, that the idea of a spiritual quest was a feature of the late Victorian fairy tale, so that Wilde's recourse to that theme is multi-determined rather than simply attributable to his Irish background. By showing that Wilde's fairy tales contain a wide variety of literary and narrative echoes, this study will show that they re-channel a multiplicity of influences in ways that enhance their aesthetic complexity, moral ambiguity and interpretative potential.

Chapter One: Irish Folklore

This chapter begins by exploring the concept of folklore and showing how its definition changed and developed over time. An exploration then follows of how the discovery of Irish folklore fitted into the complex socio-cultural landscape of the nineteenth-century Ireland into which Wilde was born. This leads to an examination of the evolution of folklore scholarship in Ireland and elsewhere, with particular focus on narrative. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the extent of Oscar Wilde's familiarity with Irish folk traditions.

The Concept of Folklore

Although the concept was familiar to antiquaries interested in popular traditions, and to an English-speaking reading public who had been introduced to *German Popular Stories*, Edgar Taylor's 1823 translation of Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [Children's and Household Tales], the term 'folklore' was not coined until 1846. An English antiquary, William John Thoms, using the pseudonym Ambrose Merton, created it in a letter published in the English periodical, the *Athenaeum*, on 22 August 1846. In an attempt to align English scholarship with the work of the brothers Grimm in Germany, he proposed 'a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore – the Lore of the People' to denote 'the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c of the olden time'. Lamenting the loss of a good deal of such material, Thoms sought the editor's aid

‘in garnering the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop’.¹

The letter raises issues that influenced the subsequent development of folklore scholarship. The word ‘folklore’ is a relatively modern label, coined to describe a body of material at a time when it seemed threatened with extinction.² Folklore is linked to agrarian tradition and conceptualised as the vestigial antithesis to urban modernity. Furthermore, the designation of the term folklore as a good Saxon compound introduces an element of nascent nationalism which persisted in the subsequent development of folkloric discourse. The ideological weight of the term folklore becomes apparent when the compound is broken into its constituent elements. Who exactly are the ‘folk’ and of what value is their ‘lore’?

Caoimhín Ó Danachair describes how the term ‘folklore’ has ‘Victorian connotations of intellectual slumming among the lower classes and lesser breeds, with “lore” inferior to learning and “folk” less than people’.³ Andrew Lang’s 1884 comments illuminate the conception of folklore that governed its early study in England during the period when Wilde wrote his fairy tales:

Folklore [...] collects and compares [...] the surviving superstitions and stories, the ideas which are in our time but not of it. Properly speaking, folklore is only concerned with the legends, customs, beliefs, of the Folk, of the people, of the classes which have been least altered by education, which have shared least in progress [...] The student of folklore is thus led to examine the usages, myths, and ideas of savages, which are still retained, in rude enough shape, by the European peasantry.⁴

¹ The letter is reproduced in Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 4-5.

² Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), p. 8, points out: “‘Folklore’ appeared as it was disappearing, it was discovered as it was being lost, it was recovered as it ceased to be’.

³ Caoimhín Ó Danachair, ‘Oral Tradition and the Printed Word’, in *Anglo-Irish Literature and its Contexts*, ed. by Maurice Harmon (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1979), pp. 31-41, (p. 31).

⁴ Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth* (London: Longman & Co., 1884), p. 11.

From the outset, then, folklore was equated with the popular culture of disadvantaged, rural groups who were part of a larger, literate, modern society. The Irish term, *béaloideas*, meaning ‘oral instruction’ or ‘oral wisdom’, dates back at least as far as the seventeenth century but its use as a translation for the term folklore only dates from 1927.⁵ The Irish term emphasises the centrality of orality to the concept of folklore.

More recent commentators, in Ireland and elsewhere, have proposed alternative approaches to defining folklore. John Wilson Foster calls for a new approach based on the demonstration of a generic relationship between diverse materials on which folkloric research is based. This new approach should fully account for the central concepts of transmission and variation between different groups.⁶ Alan Dundes rejects the ‘narrow nineteenth century definition of *folk* as “European peasant”’ in favour of the more liberal recognition that the term ‘can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor’.⁷ Dan Ben Amos’s definition of folklore as ‘artistic communication in small groups’ deflects attention from tradition and allows for continuity through creativity.⁸ With the growth of print and electronic media, osmosis occurs between modes of transmission, so orality is no longer a defining criterion for folklore.⁹ There is now a tendency to favour more radical definitions which stress the subversive potential of folklore. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin proposes: ‘Folklore, then, can be understood as

⁵ See Daithí Ó hÓgáin, ‘Béaloideas: Notes on the History of a Word’, *Béaloideas*, 70 (2002), 83-98, (pp. 84-85).

⁶ John Wilson Foster, ‘The Plight of Current Folklore Theory’, *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 32:3 (1968), 237-248.

⁷ Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 4, 6.

⁸ Dan Ben Amos, ‘Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (1971), pp. 3-15, (p. 13).

⁹ See Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 2; Angela Bourke, ‘Oral Traditions’, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, 5 vols, ed. by Seamus Deane (Cork: Cork University Press, 1991-2002), iv, ed. by Angela Bourke (2002), pp. 1191-1197, (p. 1192).

representing a world-view alternative to the official conception of the world'.¹⁰

The ongoing debate on the nature of folklore indicates that while it is an accepted phenomenon, both as subject matter and as academic discipline, it is still an area of debatable denotation and contradictory connotation which forms the focus of contested definition.

These liberal approaches to folklore definition invite and facilitate a re-evaluation of cultural osmosis between groups and genres. It can be argued that the reworking of oral traditions by writers, who did not belong to the social grouping in which these traditions originated, does not have to be regarded as a dilution of authentic material or as an elitist form of cultural appropriation. This transformation of traditional material can be regarded as a form of adaptation which ensured its survival by means of a new form of transmission. I will argue that the Wilde family viewed their engagement with Irish folklore in this light. Nevertheless, the early folklorist was concerned with the collection and study of a predominantly oral, traditional form of culture which survived only amongst non-urban groups largely untouched by the forces of modernity. Modernity, variously dated from the Renaissance and the Reformation, from the discovery of the new world, or from the Enlightenment, had, as David Gross points out, profound implications for traditional values and customs.¹¹ Modernity, characterised by an orientation towards the future rather than the past, could see tradition, exemplified in popular culture, as a dead weight, which prevented societies from achieving progress. Peter Burke argues that the withdrawal of elite support for popular traditions throughout Europe in the period between 1500 and 1800 led to their

¹⁰ Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'An Béaloideas agus an Stát', *Béaloideas*, 57 (1989), 151-163 (p. 163).

¹¹ David Gross, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 20-33.

devaluation as they became associated with the non-progressive, uneducated strata of society.¹²

At the same time, the concept of the noble savage, proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788), provided a yardstick against which the effects of modernity could be measured and found lacking.¹³ James MacPherson (1736-1796) published *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland and translated from the Gaelic or Erse language* in 1760. Despite queries over their authenticity, MacPherson's Ossianic poems tapped into a contemporary belief that primitivism was not necessarily synonymous with barbarity.¹⁴ Translated into several languages, they exerted an enormous influence in contemporary Europe and fed into the formulation of what has been called Celticism.¹⁵ In 1765, the English bishop Thomas Percy (1729-1811), later bishop of Dromore and founder member of the Royal Irish Academy, published *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. By the second half of the eighteenth century, traditional literature was seen to provide alternative models to those endorsed by Neo-classicists.

In Germany, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) regarded each human group, or *Volk*, as the product of climate, geography, physical and biological needs, and as possessing its own distinctive culture, consisting of shared traditions, memories and, above all, language.¹⁶ *Das Volk* connoted both common

¹² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, rev. edn (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), pp. 270-271.

¹³ Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les homes*, which questioned the relationship between nature and culture, was published in 1755.

¹⁴ See Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), p. 84; Ó'Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, p. 19; Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 40.

¹⁵ Burke, *Popular Culture*, p. 10; Claire O'Halloran, 'Irish Re-creations of the Gaelic Past: The Challenge of MacPherson's Ossian', *Past and Present*, 124 (1989), 69-95; Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 121.

¹⁶ Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, p. 23.

people and nation, but did not include the urban poor.¹⁷ Herder saw, within the traditions of each rural group, evidence of historical depth and of cultural specificity which could be used to justify the restoration of ancient rights if they seemed endangered by foreign political domination or cultural infiltration. By collecting and studying this material, the *volksgeist*, the soul or genius of a nation, could be identified, preserved or revived.

The work of Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm, particularly the publication in 1812 of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*, a collection of traditional German tales, encouraged the development of folklore scholarship throughout Europe. Although folktales supposedly provided evidence of national distinctiveness, the international nature of much of Grimms' material became increasingly evident. Wilhelm Grimm advanced two related theories to account for this apparent contradiction in the preface to the 1856 edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*.¹⁸ He proposed that international tales were part of a common Indo-European inheritance and that they were degenerated fragments of ancient myths.¹⁹ This approach has been termed the 'devolutionary premise' by Alan Dundes.²⁰ From the middle of the nineteenth century, as a result of the theories advanced by Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), scholarly thinking was obsessed by questions of origin and relative place on the evolutionary scale. Tylor adapted Darwin's evolutionary theories to propose that cultures develop from savagery through barbarism to civilisation, and

¹⁷ Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 40.

¹⁸ An 1884 translation is given in Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York and London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1946), pp. 368-370.

¹⁹ These theories were developed and disputed by others, including Max Müller, Andrew Lang, and Theodore Benfey; see Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, pp. 370-382.

²⁰ Alan Dundes, 'The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 6 (1969), 5-19.

that advanced societies contain 'survivals', that is, traces of earlier customs.

Tylor's proposals contributed to an evolutionary theory of folklore, which regarded traditional practices and beliefs as relics of an earlier stage of cultural development.²¹

The choice between the devolutionary or evolutionary approach to folklore has broad-ranging social and political implications. If folklore is a survival from an earlier stage of cultural development, it can be regarded as a valuable historical source, not without a certain aesthetic charm, but it represents arrested development. If, on the other hand, folklore represents the vestigial remains of ancient civilisation, it can be regarded as a source for cultural regeneration and be used to highlight the inadequacy of what passes for contemporary civilisation. In England, evolutionism became the guiding paradigm for folklore study, as is evident in the approach of the Folk-Lore Society, founded in London in 1878 by a group of private scholars. In 1890, the society produced a comprehensive guide to its activities in which it set out its main objective as 'the comparison and identification of the survivals of archaic beliefs, customs, and traditions in modern ages'. The collector is advised to transcribe traditional narratives exactly as given, and the necessity of adopting a system of classification is also noted.²² The guidelines reflect the Society's evolutionist approach to folklore and signal the emergence of a standardised, scientific approach to folklore collection. It is difficult to align Oscar Wilde with either of these approaches to folklore, because, as we shall see, he endorsed an alternative, romantic approach which regarded folklore as the repository of timeless spiritual values. In order to

²¹ Ellen J. Stekert, 'Tylor's Theory of Survivals', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 32: 3 (1968), 215-236.

²² *The Handbook of Folklore*, ed. by George Laurence Gomme (London: The Folk-Lore Society, 1890), pp. 5-6, 110-111.

appreciate how he came to this conclusion, it will be necessary to chart the discovery of Irish folklore by speakers and readers of the English language from the early decades of the nineteenth century.

The Irish Context

As we have seen, folklore, from the beginning, was equated with a traditional popular culture under threat from the forces of modernity. In Ireland, during the nineteenth century, attitudes towards popular culture were complicated by the country's colonial status and by the co-existence of both native Gaelic and Anglo-Irish traditions. Aligning Oscar Wilde with Irish folklore is problematical because of the tenacity of the view of the split between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish civilisation, articulated in 1924 by Daniel Corkery.²³ Corkery's view of a unified Gaelic tradition, and of the complete polarisation between it and the Anglo-Irish tradition, has been challenged by more recent scholarship.²⁴ By tracing shifting attitudes towards popular culture within and between the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish traditions, it is hoped to establish a space within which Oscar Wilde's exposure to Irish folklore can be properly evaluated.

In general, elite culture is transmitted through the written word while popular culture, of which folklore is a part, is transmitted orally, or by processes of repetition not reliant on the written word. The relationship between manuscript literature and oral narratives within the Gaelic tradition has attracted considerable critical attention over the last fifty years. Until the 1970s, the general consensus was that the early Irish sagas recorded in medieval manuscripts had their roots in

²³ Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: a Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century*, new edn (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1967), for example p. 65.

²⁴ See L. M. Cullen, 'The Hidden Ireland: Re-Assessment of a Concept', *Studia Hibernica*, 9 (1969) 7-47; see also Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* and Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland and Irish Classics*.

ancient oral tradition.²⁵ However, dissenting voices have argued that monastic scribes shaped their materials and that their texts are thus literary and highly conventionalised products of an elite learned class rather than transcriptions of popular oral materials.²⁶

Elite Gaelic civilisation survived the Norman and Tudor conquests under a system of patronage, by noble families, of house poets whose main function was to praise the lord and his lineage. During the seventeenth century, wide-scale land confiscation and subsequent plantation led to a collapse of the earlier social order. Deprived of a more distinguished audience, poets had to bring their art closer to more popular models by adopting simpler language and using less intricate rules of syllable counting.²⁷ Nevertheless, a disdain for the culture of the uneducated within the Gaelic tradition was evident throughout the eighteenth century.²⁸ Kevin Whelan suggests that this disdain was increased by the emergence of a new class of Catholic landowners at the end of the eighteenth century, which progressively distanced itself from the excesses associated with popular customs, like wakes and fair amusements.²⁹

In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, popular culture, particularly oral narratives, reflected external influences. Translations of international tales, sold in shops and by travelling peddlers, were popular in

²⁵ See Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland from Earliest Time to the Present Day*, new edn (London: Benn, 1967) p. 297; Myles Dillon, *The Cycle of the Kings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 2-3; Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), p. xiv.

²⁶ See, for example, James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), pp. 321-322.

²⁷ Zimmermann, p. 54.

²⁸ Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, 'Folklore and Literature: 1700-1850', in *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development 1700-1920*, ed. by Mary Daly and David Dickson (Dublin: Dept. of Modern History TCD, Dept. of Modern Irish History UCD, 1990) pp. 1-14, (p. 1); Mercier, p. 155.

²⁹ Kevin Whelan, 'An Underground Gentry? Catholic Middlemen in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', in *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850*, ed. by James Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), pp. 118-172, (pp. 159-160).

Ireland, even finding their way into hedge schools.³⁰ Other printed material, including pamphlets, newspaper articles, broadsheets and religious tracts, influenced the popular portrayal of political figures. In addition, some Gaelic manuscript material, including the hero tales of the Fianna cycle, elements of the Ulster Cycle and some late romances, worked its way into the oral narrative tradition. Most of the saint lore in oral tradition derives from literary lives of the saints.³¹ During this period, popular culture thrived within the Gaelic tradition, often absorbing and adapting elements of the diminishing learned culture.

As elite Gaelic culture declined during the eighteenth century, it became the focus of Anglo-Irish antiquarians who felt that a unique character and history differentiated Ireland from Britain and that this Irish heritage belonged to them too. Joep Leerssen identifies 1760 as the beginning of a period 'in which Ireland's social elite, originally English in ethnic background, cultural outlook and political allegiance, redefined its self-image and began to place itself under Gaelic auspices'.³² Charles Vallancey (1721-1812), a military engineer posted to Ireland in 1765, contributed greatly to a revalorisation of the Irish past. He is relevant to a discussion of the relationship between Oscar Wilde's fairy stories and Irish folklore because his romantic approach to Irish origins influenced William Wilde, father of Oscar. This influence is reflected in Oscar Wilde's approach to his Irish cultural heritage.

Vallancey, who worked within a monogenist paradigm wherein the Old Testament provided the central model of cultural antiquity, championed the view

³⁰ Patrick J. Dowling, *The Hedge Schools in Ireland* (Dublin: Talbot, 1935), pp. 79-82, refers to a report of the reading material provided for the instruction of scholars in Co. Clare that included accounts of smugglers, pirates and prostitutes, *History of Witches and Apparitions*, *Ovid's Art of Love*, *The Devil and Dr Faustus* and Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders* to which the report adds the observation 'highly edifying, no doubt!'.
³¹ Ó hÓgáin, 'Folklore and Literature', pp. 4-6.
³² Leerssen, p. 11.

that the ancient Irish were descendents of Noah's son Japhet, who had travelled through Phoenicia, Egypt and Spain. Therefore, the ancient Irish possessed a native culture of high civility which later invaders tried to destroy.³³ Native scholars supported the Phoenician model because it fitted well with the version of settlement proposed in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* [The Book of Invasions of Ireland]. Other antiquarians, including Edward Ledwich (1738-1823), challenged the Phoenician model by proposing that the Irish were descendents of the barbarous Scythians and that all traces of culture found in Ireland were introduced by outside influences.³⁴

A combination of political and scholarly developments during the closing decades of the eighteenth century served to undermine the Phoenician model. On a political level, the rising of 1798 could, as Joep Leerssen suggests, be seen as providing conclusive proof of Irish barbarity.³⁵ On a scholarly level, international developments in comparative philology, based on the study of grammatical and structural analogies between languages, pointed to the existence of an original Indo-European language from which most European and many Asian languages derived. There was general acceptance by the 1820s that the Indo-European family included the Romance and Germanic languages as well as Greek and Sanskrit, but excluded Hebrew and its cognates. The publication of Zeuss' *Grammatica Celtica* in 1854 demonstrated links between Celtic and Indo-European languages and excluded the possibility of Hebrew, Phoenician or Semitic origins for the Irish language. The tenacious persistence of Phoenicianism amongst Irish antiquaries,

³³ Leerssen, pp. 71-74, 89; R. B. McDowell, 'The Main Narrative', in *The Royal Irish Academy: A Bicentennial History 1785-1985*, ed. by T Ó Raifeartaigh (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1985), pp. 1-92, (pp. 4-6).

³⁴ The negative view of the Irish as descendants of barbarous Scythians goes back at least as far as 1596; see Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. by R. Morris (London: Macmillan, 1929), p. 625.

³⁵ Leerssen, p. 73.

including William Wilde, father of Oscar, in the latter half of the nineteenth century indicates the conservatism, but also the patriotism, of some Irish scholarship.

Nevertheless, the interest of Anglo-Irish scholars in Gaelic culture undermines Corkery's view of the sharply differentiated cultural relationship between the two traditions. As we shall see, figures including Thomas Crofton Croker, William Wilde and Douglas Hyde did much to foster interest in Irish popular culture during the course of the nineteenth century. The Royal Irish Academy, founded in 1785, continued to foster study of elite Gaelic culture during the same period, enjoying a period of intense activity that became known as its Golden Age between the years 1830 and 1871.³⁶ William Wilde, despite a sometimes rocky relationship with the Academy, made his own significant contribution to its development and to a more general renaissance of intellectual activity in Ireland.³⁷ The foundation of a number of other societies, devoted to the study of Irish antiquities, history, and language, whose membership belonged to the Ascendancy, further shows that Anglo-Irish patronage of Gaelic culture was widespread during the nineteenth century.³⁸ These developments suggest that interest in Gaelic civilisation during the course of that century transcended religious and political divides.

The Ordnance Survey project, founded in Britain in 1791, came to Ireland in 1824 and led to the scrutiny of popular culture. From 1828 onwards, Thomas Larcom expanded the project from a straightforward map-making exercise into an ambitious scheme designed to gather additional information on antiquities,

³⁶ McDowell, pp. 32, 39.

³⁷ See McDowell, p. p. 40-42; Michael Ryan, 'Sir William Wilde and Irish Antiquities', in Ní Chuilleanáin, ed., pp. 69-81, (pp. 80-81).

³⁸ These societies included the Gaelic Society (1806), the Ibero-Celtic Society (1818), the Irish Archeological Society (1840) and the Ossianic Society (1854).

industry, geology, social customs, housing conditions, migration and remarkable events. Data on local amusements, customs and traditions was collected both by professional surveyors attached to the army ordnance service and later by a team of civilians including John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry, noted Irish scholars of the day.³⁹ Although the project foundered in 1840, it put popular culture on a new footing as it treated it as a subject worthy of objective, scientific enquiry.

Popular culture also attracted less scholarly and scientific attention during the early years of the nineteenth century as the fiction of Samuel Lover, Charles Lever and Lady Morgan drew attention to the existence of an exotic, different life-style on England's doorstep. Visitors who came to Ireland from England, bolstered by the conviction of their own cultural superiority, could be tempted to look for evidence of the supposed distinctive features of the Irish character – irrationality, unpredictability, indolence and inconsistency. Others, following the lead of Arthur Young in his *Tour of Ireland* (1780), were more sympathetic to the life and character of the Irish peasantry and empathetic towards their grievances. Several testify to the popularity of traditional legends and songs, allude to the prevalence of patterns, wakes and faction fighting among the Irish peasantry and note a widespread, continuing belief in the existence of supernatural powers.⁴⁰

This interest in Irish popular culture emerged against a background of debate on the cultural significance of what was coming to be recognised as folklore. The emergence of a new elite in the form of land-owning Catholics has already been noted. As this class progressively dissociated itself from popular

³⁹ Alan Gailey, 'Folk-life Study and the Ordnance Survey Memoirs', in *Gold under the Furze*, ed. by Alan Gailey and Daithí ó hÓgáin (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1982), pp. 150-164, (pp. 150-151); Leerssen, pp. 101-102; Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁰ See Constantia Maxwell *The Stranger in Ireland: From the reign of Elizabeth to the Great Famine* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), pp. 196-198, 293-296; Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *A Seat behind the Coachman: Travellers in Ireland 1800-1900* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), pp. 41, 45, 178.

culture during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, traditional practices and beliefs inevitably became increasingly marginalized. The Famine, 1845-1848, devastated the huge population of poor, illiterate, mostly Irish-speaking agricultural labourers who adhered to traditional practices and beliefs.⁴¹ During the latter half of the nineteenth century, an increase in orthodox Catholic practice, the decline of the Irish language, and increasing literacy, all influenced popular culture.

Changes in Popular Culture

Until the 1840s, orthodox Catholic doctrine and ritual coexisted with a range of popular beliefs and practices which were only superficially christianised, and many Irish Catholics attended only a canonical minimum of church services.⁴² The years following 1845 witnessed a tightening of discipline in the Catholic Church, a huge rise in the ratio of priests to people, and an increase in orthodox Catholic practice.⁴³ This more disciplined type of Catholicism, mainly transmitted through sermons and catechisms in the English language, was modern, literate and essentially middle-class.⁴⁴ One anonymous nineteenth-century catechism, with parallel English and Irish texts, condemned 'lucht pisreog' [superstitious people], judgementally translated as 'enchanters'.⁴⁵ The Irish Catholic Church's condemnation of unorthodox practices and beliefs appealed to urban and

⁴¹ Angela Bourke, 'The Baby and the Bathwater', in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Tadhg Foley and Seán Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 79-92, (p. 79).

⁴² Raymond Gillespie, 'Popular and Unpopular Religion: A View from Early Modern Ireland', in Donnelly and Miller, eds., pp. 30-49, (pp. 30-32); S.J. Connolly, *Priests and People in pre-famine Ireland 1780-1845*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp.102-107.

⁴³ See Sean Connolly, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1985), p. 54; Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), p. 43.

⁴⁴ Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'Printed Popular Literature in Irish 1750-1850: Presence and Absence', in Daly and Dickson, eds., pp. 45-57, (pp 53-54).

⁴⁵ *An teagasg Criostaighe, The Christian doctrine, compiled according to the resolution of the Archbishop of Tuam* (Dublin: C. M. Warren, 1881), p. 39.

prosperous Catholics, who wished to dissociate themselves from what they perceived to be backward superstition, but was less attractive to the rural poor, particularly those in Irish-speaking areas.⁴⁶

It has been suggested that the increase in orthodox religious practice constituted a devotional revolution, which, in the wake of the Famine, ousted a traditional belief in superstition and unorthodox supernatural agency.⁴⁷ However, this view is questionable as tensions between popular and orthodox religion persisted after the Famine and were reflected in oral narratives, which often reflected hostility towards the Catholic clergy's condemnation of supernatural beliefs and practices.⁴⁸ This suggests that folklore is an interface between the orthodox and the unorthodox, the conventional and the subversive, and provides a useful perspective from which to approach the relationship between Oscar Wilde's fairy stories and Irish folklore.

Desmond J. Keenan argues that during the early years of the nineteenth century, new devotional practices, including devotion to the Sacred Heart (1809), the Rosary (1814), and Benediction (1820), which met the emotional as well as spiritual needs of the people, were introduced.⁴⁹ Keenan's argument suggests that these practices provided an alternative to the traditional practices through which Irish Catholics had previously expressed the mystical, emotional aspects of their spirituality. However, it might be more accurate to say that old and new practices provided complementary methods of meeting spiritual and emotional needs.

⁴⁶ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 9-10; Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland', in *The Good People: New Folklore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narvaez (New York: Garland, 1991), pp.199-214, (pp. 205-207).

⁴⁷ See Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875', *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), 625-652.

⁴⁸ Pádraig Ó Héalaí, 'Priest versus Healer', *Béaloideas* 62-63 (1994-1995), 171-188, (p. 186).

⁴⁹ Desmond J. Keenan, *The Catholic Church in Nineteenth Century Ireland: A Sociological Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), pp. 20, 148-152.

Official religion and traditional lore could work together to help Irish Catholics make sense of their situation and to feel that they could exert some influence over their lives. If the orthodox approach failed, they could revert to the unorthodox or vice-versa. A similar approach to orthodox medicine and traditional healing can be seen in the experience of William Wilde's poorer patients. William Butler Yeats reports that these grateful patients, at the physician's own request, often paid for his services by tendering 'a farrago of spells, cures, fairy tales and proverbs'.⁵⁰ Presumably, if they fully believed in the efficacy of their own traditional cures, they would not have consulted an orthodox doctor. For his part, Wilde's interest in this traditional lore signals a rejection of scientific orthodoxy as life's sole guiding principle. The interest of Anglo-Irish figures, like William Wilde, in Irish folklore, at a time when it was a source of discomfort to the propertied Catholic middle classes, suggests that the identification of Irish folklore with the native Catholic tradition is an over-simplification. This Anglo-Irish interest represents a subversive alignment with an alternative system opposed to Victorian orthodoxies.

Anglo-Irish interest in Irish folklore raises the issue of the effects of language change and literacy on material that was traditionally transmitted orally through the medium of the Irish language. By the end of the nineteenth century, English had replaced Irish as the first spoken language of Ireland. As a result, literacy meant literacy in English, a prerequisite for those who aspired to emigrate or advance within Irish society.⁵¹ Schooling, literacy and English were seen as synonymous with modernisation and advancement.⁵² Parents who equated the

⁵⁰ W. B. Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. by Robert Welch (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1993), p. 55.

⁵¹ Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland 1750-1850* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 27-31.

⁵² L. M. Cullen, 'Patrons, Teachers and Literacy in English: 1750-1850', in Daly and Dickson, eds., pp. 15-44, (p. 33); Mary Daly, 'Literacy and Language Change in the Late Nineteenth and Early

acquisition of English with social and economic advancement eagerly supported the exclusion of Irish from the programme of the National Schools.⁵³ The decline of the Irish language during the nineteenth century was largely a consequence of Ireland's colonial status, as the population recognised the economic and social benefits which accrued to proficiency in English, the language of the metropolis.

Paradoxically, while the Irish language was in decline during the nineteenth century, it was also coming to be seen as a marker of national identity. Language was central to the romantic nationalism of the Young Irelanders, a group of mainly middle-class graduates of Trinity College, Dublin from Protestant and Ascendancy backgrounds. The closing years of the nineteenth century witnessed moves to promote and preserve the Irish language.⁵⁴ L. M Cullen argues that the promotion of the Irish language during the nineteenth century by Anglo-Irish Protestants was a symptom of their desire to create an artificial symbol of national identity in which they could share.⁵⁵ It must be acknowledged that not all Anglo-Irish Protestants supported the efforts to preserve and promote the language in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The Wildes, despite their interest in other aspects of Irish culture, never aligned themselves with efforts to revive the language. Their interest in Irish folklore was not hampered by their ignorance of the Irish language as they came into contact with traditional tales through the medium of English.

Twentieth Centuries', in Daly and Dickson, eds., pp. 153-166, (p. 154); Maureen Wall, 'The Decline of the Irish Language' in *A View of the Irish Language*, ed. by Brian Ó Cuív (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1969), pp. 81-90, (p. 86).

⁵³ See the 1856 report of the head inspector of schools, P. J. Keenan, cited in Colmán Ó Huallacháin, *The Irish and Irish* (Dublin: Assisi Press, 1994), pp. 25-26.

⁵⁴ The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language was founded in 1876 and the Gaelic Union was founded in 1880: see Ó Huallacháin, pp. 39-42.

⁵⁵ L. M. Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland 1600-1900* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), pp. 135-139, 255.

New Horizons for Irish Folklore in the Nineteenth Century

Increased literacy in English led to an increased demand for cheap, printed material in that language. The appearance of sketches recording the peculiarities of the Irish peasant, the appearance of fiction in English written by Irish authors, and the rise of the periodical press, were contemporaneous with a developing interest in Irish folklore during the nineteenth century.

From the 1820s, a series of memoirs and sketches relating to folklore and rural life in Ireland began to appear. In addition to Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), which will be discussed in detail later, these included Gerald Griffin's *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827); *Tales of the O'Hara Family* by the Banim brothers (1827); Caesar Otway's *Sketches in Ireland* (1827) and Mrs. A. H. Hall's *Sketches in Ireland* (1829). Seamus Deane suggests that these volumes were indistinguishable from Irish fiction, both in purpose and quality.⁵⁶ Samuel Lover's *Legends and Stories of Ireland* (1831) and *Popular Tales and Legends of the Irish Peasantry* (1834) followed Croker's lead in providing entertaining versions of traditional narratives for middle-class English and Irish readers. As narrator, Lover features in the stories he presents and his urbane sophistication contrasts with the credulity of his characters. In 'Paddy the Sport', he questions 'a professed story-teller and a notorious liar' about the existence of fairies:

"But you never absolutely saw any fairies?"

"Why, indeed, sir, to say that I seen thim, that is with my own eyes, wouldn't be throe, barrin' wanst, as I said before, and that's many a long day ago, whin I was a boy, and I and another chap was watchin' turf in a bog; and whin the noight was fallin' and we wor goin' home."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 94-5.

⁵⁷ Samuel Lover, *Legends and Stories of Ireland* (London: Richard Edward King, n.d.), pp. 129, 130.

His use of onomatopoeic misspellings to communicate the accents of his characters conveys an impression of indulgent condescension towards the people whose traditions and way of life furnished the material for his collections.

Writers who came from Catholic backgrounds used their more intimate knowledge of Irish folk beliefs and traditions to produce works of fiction that aimed to provide authentic, non-condescending insights into Irish rural life. Foremost among these was William Carleton (1794-1869), in whose work folklore fruitfully combined with fiction. *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830-1833) contributed significantly to the developing genre of the short story. In it, Carleton draws on his own familiarity with 'the pastimes, festivals, feasts, and feuds' of the Irish peasantry 'to exhibit them as they really are'.⁵⁸ As this observation indicates, Carleton drew more on folk custom than on narrative. In stories such as 'Shane Fadh's Wedding', 'Larry McFarland's Wake' and 'The Battle of the Factions', he blends folklore with fiction, in a highly original and creative way, to illuminate aspects of the Irish psyche which neither on its own could elucidate. It is reported that when somebody remarked that his pictures of Irish life were more accurate than those of Mrs. Hall, he replied: 'Did she ever live with the people as I did? Did she ever dance and fight with them as I did? Did she ever get drunk with them as I did?'⁵⁹ For Carleton, personal experience of Irish folk customs facilitated an accurate and honest depiction of Irish rural life so that fiction could combine with folklore to produce authenticity.

⁵⁸ William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 2 vols (Dublin: William Curry, 1830) i, pp. vii, ix.

⁵⁹ William Carleton, *The Life of William Carleton: Being His Autobiography and Letters; and an Account of his Life and Writings, from the point at which the Autobiography breaks off*, by David J. Donoghue, 2 vols (London: Downey, 1896), facsimile of original edn (New York, London: Garland, 1979), ii, p. 182n.

Periodical articles contributed to, and reflected, a burgeoning interest in Irish folklore. W. B. Yeats found material for *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) in periodicals including the *Dublin and London Magazine*, the *Dublin University Magazine*, *Duffy's Hibernian Sixpenny Magazine*, *The Folk-Lore Journal*, the *Newry Magazine*, *of Literary and Political Register*, the *Dublin Penny Journal* and the *Irish Penny Journal*.⁶⁰ The range of periodicals involved indicates not only the popularity of Irish folklore but also the extent to which interest in indigenous culture transcended religious and political affiliations.

The *Dublin University Magazine* (1833-1877), from which Yeats included five tales, was founded by a group of young members of Trinity College Dublin. Never intended to be purely a university magazine, its subjects included fiction, poetry, biography, folklore, book reviews, history, economics and archaeology in addition to university notices and reports from learned societies.⁶¹ It made no secret of its Conservative political affiliations or its Protestant ethos and was intended for an educated readership. William Wilde, whose library included nineteen volumes of the magazine dating from 1839 to 1850, was typical of the well-educated reader to whom it appealed.⁶² It looked to Europe as well as to Ireland for its subjects so that its cosmopolitan quality prevented it from being merely provincial.⁶³ The magazine underwent significant changes during its lifetime, partly as a result of the differing agenda of its numerous editors. Most of William Wilde's contributions, including articles written for the 'Irish Rivers'

⁶⁰ Mary Helen Thuente, 'A List of Sources', in W. B. Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1977), pp. xvii-xxi.

⁶¹ See John Stanley North, *The Waterloo Directory of Irish Newspapers and Periodicals 1800-1900 Phase 2* (Waterloo, Ontario: Waterloo University Press, 1986), p. 186.

⁶² 'Catalogue of William Wilde'.

⁶³ See Barbara Hayley, 'A Reading and Thinking nation: Periodicals as the Voice of Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in *300 Years of Irish Periodicals*, ed. by Barbara Hayley and Enda McKay (Mullingar: Association of Learned Journals, 1987), pp. 29-47, (p. 35).

series (1847) and the 'Irish Popular Superstitions' series (May 1849-May 1850), were made during the ten-year editorship (1845-1855) of John Francis Waller. Although the *Dublin University Magazine's* treatment of the Famine was a curious mix of insensitivity and sympathy, during this period Waller consciously sustained and developed the Irish character of the periodical.⁶⁴

The success of a parallel stream of penny magazines indicates a growing appetite for entertainment and enlightenment amongst a less-educated, general readership. The *Dublin Penny Journal* (1831-1837) achieved a circulation of 40,000 in contrast with the *Dublin University Magazine's* top figure of 4,000. It published articles on antiquarian subjects, Irish proverbs, language and characters, topography and archaeology as well as original verse and prose. The *Irish Penny Magazine* (1833) was edited, illustrated and mainly written by Samuel Lover. It included peasant tales and sketches similar to those published in his two series of *Legends and Stories of Ireland*. The *Irish Penny Journal* (1840-1841) insisted on the necessity of providing specifically Irish material for Irish readers and tried to avoid subjects which might be divisive on political or religious grounds.⁶⁵ Its inclusion of Carleton's early fiction and articles on Irish music and literature indicates that folklore was not regarded as a divisive topic or as the index of political and cultural affiliation which it would become later in the nineteenth century.

The *Nation*, launched in 1842 as the organ of the Young Ireland movement, was a weekly newspaper. It did not publish folklore, but featured original poetry and ballads in an effort to foster the development of a new national literature. It achieved a circulation of over 10,000 by 1843 and a readership

⁶⁴ Wayne E. Hall, *Dialogues in the Margin* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2000), pp. 143, 161-164.

⁶⁵ Hayley, p. 38.

estimated at over a quarter of a million.⁶⁶ Contributors to both the *Nation* and the *Dublin University Magazine* included James Clarence Mangan and Jane Francesca Elgee, future mother of Oscar Wilde, originally writing for the *Nation* under the pseudonyms of John Fanshawe Ellis and Speranza. Tom Dunne argues that an overlap in contributors, combined with the common social background of the founders of the two magazines, suggests that they existed within a relatively narrow cultural spectrum.⁶⁷

The contribution made by Irish periodicals, both popular and scholarly, to the promulgation of Irish folklore indicates the extent to which it had become a *lingua franca*, negotiating the cultural and political barriers which separated the rural poor and educated city dwellers during the nineteenth century. Traditional narratives, translated into English, could reach far beyond the traditional audience of illiterate listeners gathered around a rural fireside. Guides could tell local legends to appreciative tourists, servants could tell them to the children of the big houses where they worked, tales could be passed on to enthusiastic collectors who could publish them and bring them to the attention of literate city dwellers in Ireland, Great Britain and the United States of America. The tales still existed in their original form as oral narratives in Irish speaking areas but also entered into a larger socio-cultural domain as variants translated into English were transmitted orally and through print. Adults with varying social backgrounds who had no knowledge of the Irish language could claim, with some justification, that these narratives were part of their cultural heritage. Once printed in English, they no longer exclusively represented the oral, anonymous, collective fictions of a

⁶⁶ D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 159.

⁶⁷ Tom Dunne, 'Haunted by History: Irish Romantic Writing', in *Romanticism in National Context*, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 68-91, (p. 73).

particular social group but became identified with a putative Irish nation that included the Anglo-Irish ascendancy to which the Wilde family belonged.

Nineteenth-Century Collectors

During the course of the nineteenth century, amateur antiquarians and proto-folklorists published volumes and collections which brought Irish folk traditions to the attention of a wide readership, in Ireland and beyond. Foremost amongst these were Thomas Crofton Croker, Patrick Kennedy, William and Jane Wilde, W. B. Yeats and Douglas Hyde. By outlining the attitude of each of these figures to their material, it will become apparent that the approach changed from one of tolerant condescension towards popular superstitions through romantic valorisation of the spirituality of Irish folklore to one of advocacy of accurate transcription of Irish language material. This exploration will show that Jane Wilde and W. B. Yeats shared a late romantic, creative approach to folklore which was endorsed by Oscar Wilde.

Thomas Crofton Croker (1798-1854)

Thomas Crofton Croker, amateur antiquarian and artist, brought Irish popular culture and traditional tales to the attention of the English speaking public.⁶⁸ *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, published anonymously in London in 1825, met with great acclaim, including praise from the brothers Grimm who

⁶⁸ Croker's first book, *Researches in the South of Ireland: Illustrative of the Scenery, Architectural Remains and Manners and Superstitions of the Peasantry, with an appendix containing a private narrative of the rebellion of 1798*, was first published in 1824. As the title suggests, it is an eclectic mix of travelogue, topographical description, local history, cultural observation and personal experience.

translated it into German.⁶⁹ The collection included a selection of apparently authentic legends, accompanied by commentaries glossing Irish language expressions and giving analogues in classical and medieval sources. It is asserted that Croker was unwilling to claim authorship because, in preparing the manuscript for publication, he had drawn on the assistance of a group of friends:

The reason why the "Fairy legends" had been published anonymously, when both the names of the author and the publisher were not unfavourably before the public, was the loss of Mr Crofton Croker's original manuscript, and the necessity of immediately replacing it. To effect this, the late Dr Maginn, Mr (now the Right Hon.) David R. Pigot, "Friend Humphreys" and Mr Keightley tendered their friendly assistance and re-wrote some of the tales.⁷⁰

The tales that appeared in this first series were filtered through the literary lens of a group of educated Irishmen, whose privileged social background set them apart from the group amongst whom these stories traditionally circulated in oral form. A second series of *Fairy Legends*, bearing Croker's name, appeared in 1828.

In both the first and second series, Croker draws on material which highlights supernatural agency to produce a collection of legends in the style of the brothers Grimm, designed for the popular market. Croker attaches no credence to the superstition that, in his view, underpins 'the twilight tales of the peasantry' and that serves 'to retard the progress of their civilisation'.⁷¹ His tales are filled with entertaining dialogue, scenic descriptions and sketches of amusing characters, precursors of the Irish rogue, popularised later in the century by Dion Boucicault in his Irish melodramas. The portrait of Irish national character that emerges from the tales contained in the first two series, as Jennifer Schacker suggests, 'reinforces English stereotypes about the Irish, and feeds English fantasies of cultural

⁶⁹ See Thomas Francis Dillon, 'Memoir of the Author', in Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (London: William Tegg, 1862), pp. vii-xxii, (p. x).

⁷⁰ Anon., 'Our Portrait Gallery', *Dublin University Magazine*, August 1849, 202-216, (pp. 206-207): this is an anonymous tribute to Croker.

⁷¹ Thomas Crofton Croker, 'Author's Preface', *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, part 2 (London: John Murray, 1828), pp. v-x, (p. vii).

superiority'.⁷² A third series, dedicated to the brothers Grimm, also appeared in 1828.

The connection with the Grimms highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between genuine folklore and 'fakelore', a term coined by Richard Dorson to describe 'a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification'.⁷³ The second series of Croker's *Fairy Legends* (1828) contains a story called 'The Soul Cages' in which a merrow, a creature half human and half fish, becomes friendly with Jack Dogherty, a Co. Clare fisherman. The merrow shows Dogherty a collection of lobster pots in which he keeps the souls of dead fishermen. These soul cages trouble the fisherman who eventually succeeds in opening them. A short note following the story highlights the striking resemblance it bears to a story, which Croker does not name, in the Grimms' *Deutsche Sagen*. The Grimm story is then 'accurately translated for the sake of comparison', and it is clear that the two stories closely resemble each other.⁷⁴ In 1834, a compendium of the first and second series of *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland* appeared, but six stories which had appeared in the first volume, and four from the second, including 'The Soul Cages', were omitted.⁷⁵ One of Croker's collaborators, Thomas Keightley (1789-1872), seems to have played an elaborate trick on Croker, Grimm and subsequent commentators on 'The Soul Cages'.

In his own compendium, *The Fairy Mythology* (1828), a collection of British and European folktales arranged by country, Keightley claims to have

⁷² Jennifer Schacker, *National Dreams: The Remaking of Fairy Tales in Nineteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 68.

⁷³ Richard Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 5.

⁷⁴ Croker, *Fairy Legends*, part 2, p. 52. The Grimm tale tells of a peasant who becomes friendly with a waterman, visits him below the sea and is surprised to learn that his friend keeps the souls of drowned fishermen under new pots in a small chamber in his stately palace. The peasant is so worried by this disclosure that he returns later on and frees the souls.

⁷⁵ This publication history is compiled from an examination of various editions held in the National Library of Ireland.

contributed a number of tales to Croker's *Fairy Legends*. Signalling his intention not to duplicate that material in the present volume, he alleges that contributors to Croker's collection 'were, in many cases, more anxious to produce amusing tales than to transmit legends faithfully'.⁷⁶ Neither the Grimm tale mentioned by Croker nor 'The Soul Cages' is reproduced in the compendium. However, in a later, expanded and revised edition of *The Fairy Mythology* (1850), Keightley includes a translation of Grimm's tale, 'The Peasant and the Waterman'.⁷⁷ The translation differs from that of the Grimm tale translated in Croker's second volume but it is obviously the same story. Keightley notes that 'The Soul Cages', contained in an appendix along with other stories he contributed to *Fairy Legends*, is the only Irish legend to contain the adventures of a merman.⁷⁸ Significantly, Keightley was aware that it was possible to fool editors and readers; he draws attention to false dealing on the part of a Scottish collector, Allan Cunningham, who tried to 'palm' his own work as traditional material.⁷⁹ He also suspects that a French collector may have transplanted material from Brittany to Normandy.⁸⁰ In a later (1878) edition, Keightley again includes 'The Soul Cages' in an appendix containing some of the tales he claimed to have contributed to Croker's volumes. In a note which follows, he makes the following admission:

We must here make an honest confession. This story had no foundation but the German legend in page 259 ['The Peasant and The Waterman']. All that is not to be found there is our own pure invention. Yet we afterwards found that it was well known on the coast.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 2 vols (London: W.H. Ainsworth, 1828), ii, p. 177.

⁷⁷ Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1850), pp. 259-260.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 370n.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 350n: 'There was we believe, some false dealing on the part of Allan Cunningham towards this gentleman [Robert H. Cromek, a collector of lowland folksongs] such as palming on him his own verses as traditionary ones'.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 472: 'What follows is so exactly like what we have seen above of the Korrigan of the adjacent Brittany, that we hope she has been careful not to transfer any of their traits to her fées'.

⁸¹ Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878) p. 536.

Perhaps because it was buried at the back of a re-issue, Keightley's confession did not achieve wide currency and 'The Soul Cages' came to be regarded in literary circles as an authentic Irish folk tale.

When W. B. Yeats anthologised the story ten years later in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, he did not doubt its authenticity, suggesting belief in grotesque male merrows was a 'local Munster tradition'.⁸² Some years later, Thomas J. Westropp, a noted authority on British folklore and an active member of the Folklore Society, noted that belief in mer-folk in Co. Clare had declined since 1879, the year after Keightley's confession. Westropp regarded Croker's story of the drunken, stupid Coomara as genuine, noting that it was not affected by twentieth-century manipulation of traditional material with an eye to the tourist market.⁸³ However, when one of his readers drew his attention to the probability that Thomas Keightley had invented the story, Westropp admitted that this could well have been the case. Notwithstanding his earlier advocacy of the story's authenticity, Westropp stated that he had always suspected duplicity but that his querying comments had been dropped from the earlier article.⁸⁴ Neither Yeats nor Westropp negate Keightley's claim that his creation had in time become a local legend. A story, recorded by the brothers Grimm, then transposed to an Irish landscape by Thomas Keightley who added Hiberno-English dialogue and adapted it for an educated readership, may well have passed back into oral tradition. The chequered history of 'The Soul Cages', a story that confounds easy categorisation, highlights the fluid lines of demarcation separating literary fairy stories and authentic folklore in the nineteenth century and after.

⁸² Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 384.

⁸³ Thomas J. Westropp, 'A Folklore Survey of Co. Clare', *Folklore*, 21 (1910), 338-349, (p. 342).

⁸⁴ Thomas J. Westropp, 'A Folklore Survey of Co. Clare (cont)', *Folklore*, 22 (1911), 449-456, (p. 450).

The story's more recent critical reception highlights the dangers inherent in the twentieth-century academic practice of studying Irish folklore and Irish writing in English independently of each other. In 1991, Brian Earls, in an extensive examination of the use of folk legends in the development of a distinctive Irish literature in English, drew attention to the problematic provenance of this story.⁸⁵ Four years later, Richard Pine, arguing that Oscar Wilde was influenced by the Irish folk narrative tradition, proposed that 'The Soul Cages' was a possible model for Wilde's fairy tale, 'The Fisherman and his Soul'.⁸⁶ Pine does not refer to the long controversy surrounding the authenticity of the story and seems unaware of the insights into the provenance of the tale supplied by Earls - perhaps because they were published in a journal devoted to the study of Irish folklore. The dubious origins of 'The Soul Cages' from the folklorist's point of view do not invalidate Pine's observation that it may have served as a model for Wilde's story. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that academic specialisation may lie behind the paucity of informed critical analysis of the relationship between the Irish folk narrative tradition and the literary output of Irish writers in English, among them Oscar Wilde.

In the wake of the Great Famine, which drastically affected the lives of the Irish rural population during the late 1840s, a new approach to Irish folklore emerged. This approach, shared by collectors from both Catholic and Anglo-Irish backgrounds, was characterised by a belief that folklore is a valuable resource, threatened by the spread of literacy and changing material conditions.

⁸⁵ Brian Earls, 'Supernatural Legends in Nineteenth Century Irish Writing', *Béaloides*, 60-61 (1992-3), 93-144, (pp. 101-102).

⁸⁶ Pine, p. 182.

Patrick Kennedy (1801-1873)

Patrick Kennedy, a Catholic born in Co. Wexford who became a bookseller in Dublin, firmly associated traditional customs and narratives with the rural landscape of his youth. He made great efforts to bring these narratives and customs to the attention of an urban readership. Kennedy was a regular contributor to the *Dublin University Magazine*, with most of his more than two hundred contributions appearing during the period of Joseph Sheridan LeFanu's editorship between 1861 and 1869.⁸⁷ He also published various collections of Irish tales and legends, some of which follow Croker's lead in presenting traditional tales in a whimsical way.⁸⁸ However, Kennedy's approach to his material was less condescending than that of his predecessor. He cites his primary source for *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (1866) as tales heard during his Wexford boyhood but also acknowledges his recourse to unnamed bardic histories and medieval manuscripts.⁸⁹ Kennedy is an important figure in Irish folktale collection because his contributions span the divide between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, oral and literary, traditions.

Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts is divided into five sections in which tales are classified by subject matter and source. Kennedy's commentaries often give precise details about the sources of his material and contain detailed comparisons with tales from other sources. His approach to annotation of sources and comparison with tales from other countries is more systematic than that of his

⁸⁷ See *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals 1824-1900*, ed. by Walter E. Houghton, 5 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972-1989), iv, pp. 657-659.

⁸⁸ Kennedy's collections include *Legends of Mount Leinster* (1855); *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (1866); *The Banks of the Boro* (1867); *Evenings in the Duffrey* (1869); *Fireside Stories of Ireland* (1870). See Mary Helen Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), p. 56, for Croker's influence on *The Banks of the Boro* (1867) and *Evenings in the Duffrey* (1869).

⁸⁹ Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1866), facsimile of original edn (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), pp. viii-ix.

predecessors, Croker and Keightley. This acknowledgement of sources and the categorisation of tales into distinct genres mark the beginning of a scientific approach to folklore collection in Ireland. As we shall see, Douglas Hyde's championship of this approach influenced the direction of twentieth-century Irish folklore scholarship, but it is worth noting that *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* paved the way for these developments.

In the preface, Kennedy acknowledges the role of the *Dublin University Magazine* in 'the preservation of a portion of our light literature which would otherwise be probably lost'. For Kennedy, as for other writers of periodical articles on folklore, the transmission of a tale through English and in print represented a continuation rather than a dilution of the Irish folklore tradition. The tales contained in *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* convey a sense that Irish popular belief in the supernatural co-exists with orthodox Christian belief. With Kennedy, however, moral didacticism becomes the guiding force underpinning the literary presentation of Irish oral tales. He hopes the collection will appeal to young readers whose minds are 'as yet unvitiated by the exciting and demoralising pictures of unmitigated wickedness abounding in modern fiction'.⁹⁰ Several stories have concluding morals which assert the necessity for orthodox Catholic religious observance. In 'The Tobinstown Sheeogue', for example, Katty Clark's misfortunes begin 'when she happened to sleep too long in the morning, and, consequently, had not time to say her prayers'. This sin of omission is compounded by her subsequent failure to sprinkle holy water on her little son or to make the sign of the cross on his forehead. The child is spirited away by the fairies but is eventually restored through the intervention of neighbours who recite an

⁹⁰ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions*, p. viii.

incantation to the fairies. Kennedy is reluctant to end the story at a point where pagan superstition might seem more effective than orthodox belief. The concluding paragraph redresses the balance and copper-fastens the moral of the tale by asserting the primacy of orthodox Catholic practice:

Whatever hurry Katty might be in of a morning after that, she never left her bedside till she had finished, as devoutly as she could, her five Paters and five Aves, and her Apostles' Creed and her Confiteor.⁹¹

Kennedy's work marks the beginnings of the identification of Irish folklore with a conservative, Catholic mindset. His presentation of traditional narratives shows that folklore is not intrinsically subversive as it can be used to reinforce social norms. The approach of the presenter and the context of presentation determine the extent to which the material appears conservative or subversive.

Sir William Wilde (1815-1876)

William Wilde was familiar with popular traditions and practices from childhood in the west of Ireland. In an article published shortly after Wilde was knighted in 1864, the anonymous author stresses the importance of these early years in stimulating his later passion for antiquarianism and folklore: 'all that legendary lore, that thorough knowledge of the peasantry in thought, feeling and expression which he afterwards embodied in his "Irish Popular Superstition"'.⁹² William Wilde left the west of Ireland for Dublin in 1832 to pursue a medical career. On completion of his studies, he travelled to the Holy Land, and, in a published account of the journey, he endorsed the Phoenician theory of Irish origins championed by Vallancey.⁹³ On his return, Wilde went on to establish a successful

⁹¹ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions*, pp. 94, 97.

⁹² 'Sir William Wilde', *Duffy's Hibernian Magazine*, March 1864, 201-203, (p. 202).

⁹³ See William Wilde, *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Tenerife, and along the Shores of the Mediterranean*, 2 vols (Dublin: William Curry, 1840), ii, p. 112.

medical practice while pursuing an interest in the study of Irish antiquities, which resulted in his election to the Royal Irish Academy in 1839.⁹⁴ In 1841, he was appointed medical adviser for the Irish Census Commission. Peter Froggatt notes that although he was a pioneer of the method known as the 'double trawl' (a supplementary census designed to augment the findings of the main one), Wilde's interpretation of Census data was not always objective, nor did it always reflect current medical scholarship. Froggatt argues that Wilde was guided by 'his exuberant enthusiasms rather than by dispassionate objectivity'.⁹⁵ Wilde, it seems, was a pioneering scientist and a reckless romantic. From his work on the censuses of 1841, 1851, 1861 and 1871, he gained a thorough, accurate knowledge of the material conditions under which the majority of the population lived.

In tandem with a flourishing professional career, Wilde continued to explore the Irish countryside, observing, recording and collecting its antiquities. *The Beauties of the Boyne and its Tributary the Blackwater*, a travel account describing the topography and antiquities of the Boyne region and based on articles which had previously appeared in the Irish Rivers series in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1847, was published in 1849. The chapter on the ethnology of the Irish race demonstrates Wilde's familiarity with European, particularly Scandinavian, advances in philology and archaeology. The numerous references within the text itself, as well as the copious footnotes, demonstrate Wilde's familiarity with scholarly research on Irish mythology and history. His decision to follow the accounts of legendary Irish origins contained in recently translated manuscripts undercuts his disavowal of 'the nonsensical fancies of Vallancey and

⁹⁴ See T. G. Wilson, *Victorian Doctor: Being the Life of Sir William Wilde* (London: EP Publishing, 1974), p. 79

⁹⁵ Peter Froggatt, 'Sir William Wilde, 1815-1876: demographer and Irish medical historian', in Ní Chuilleanáin, ed., pp. 51-68, (pp. 55, 60, 56).

his school of imaginary antiquaries'.⁹⁶ Being 'quite willing to bow to those antiquaries who endeavour to show an early connexion between Ireland and the Tyrian people', he endorses Vallancey's belief that the Irish are descended from the Phoenicians.⁹⁷ His continued championship of the Phoenician paradigm is another example of the triumph of exuberant enthusiasm over scientific exactitude.

Irish Popular Superstitions, first published in 1852 and based on material previously published in the *Dublin University Magazine* (1849-1850), demonstrates William Wilde's extensive knowledge of Irish popular culture and of translations of manuscript sources.⁹⁸ In it, he combines the two to produce a rambling commentary on Irish history and the threatened disappearance of the Irish language and popular traditions. His view of Irish country life and lore is tinged with the nostalgic recollection of a carefree boyhood, spent in idyllic surroundings. The whimsy of his description of characters like Darby Doolin and Paddy Welsh is offset, however, by the acuity with which he identifies the causes of the poverty and misery which characterise the lives of the majority of the Irish population. These include famine, emigration, inadequate poor laws and complacent landowners.⁹⁹ The result is a mixture of compassion and indignation arising from detailed observation of material conditions. For William Wilde, the persistence of superstition is not to be lamented as it was for Croker. Wilde sees old legends and traditions as emblems of a shared past and uncertain future. Through his account of the varying fortunes of the Welsh family, Wilde uses folklore to appeal to a basic, humanitarian desire for social justice.

⁹⁶ William R. Wilde, *The Beauties of the Boyne and its Tributary the Blackwater* (Dublin: McGlashan, 1849), p. xii.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 222.

⁹⁸ William R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (Dublin: James McGlashan, 1852), facsimile of original edn (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), p. vi.

⁹⁹ William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, pp. 9-10.

William Wilde argues that traditional customs are part of his cultural heritage and laments their passing:

The faction fights, the hurlings, and the mains of cocks that used to be fought at Shrovetide and Easter, with such other innocent amusements, are past and gone these twenty years, and the mummers and May-boys left off when we were a gossoon no bigger than a pitcher.¹⁰⁰

He rejects the notion that superstitions and mystic beliefs are confined to ‘what is termed the true Celtic population alone’ – that is, Irish-speaking peasants in the west – noting the existence of ‘fortune tellers within the Circular-road of Dublin! And fairy doctors, of repute, living but a few miles from the metropolis’.¹⁰¹ He extends the range of people who can claim that the popular traditions generally associated with the rural poor are part of their culture to include erudite professionals like himself in addition to less well-educated city-dwellers.

The narrative mode of *Irish Popular Superstitions* is discursive and anecdotal. Wilde departs regularly from the subject matter of the title into digressions about the ravages of the Famine and the rise of fierce gangs who play on the fears of the peasants and strike at local landowners. Underlying these digressions is a savage indignation that valuable traditions are being allowed to vanish unrecorded and unlamented. His romantic, subjective interest in Irish folk traditions reflects dissatisfaction with the drab complacencies of what he describes in the preface as ‘this utilitarian age’.¹⁰² His contribution to Irish folklore collection reflects his first-hand knowledge of both Irish popular traditions and the material conditions that threatened their survival in the wake of the Great Famine.

¹⁰⁰ William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, p. 15.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰² William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, p. v.

Lady Jane Wilde

Jane Wilde's contribution to Irish folklore postdates her husband's death in 1876 and her relocation from Dublin to London in 1879.¹⁰³ Already an established author, she published two collections of Irish folklore, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887) and *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland* (1890).¹⁰⁴ It has been suggested that Lady Wilde's two collections are based on material collected by her husband.¹⁰⁵ However, her approach to popular superstitions and local legends varies considerably from that of her husband, and reflects her fascination with the supernatural, and her personal engagement with traditional material. William Wilde included references to contemporaneous figures and to specific events in an identifiable recent past in *Irish Popular Superstitions*. Lady Wilde does not include any such references in her collections. In the preface to *Ancient Legends*, she explains that her object is to cast light on 'the mystic relation between the material and spiritual world'. She selects material which foregrounds the links between the mystic Irish past and the contemporary 'Irish peasant', with his 'instinctive belief in the existence of certain unseen agencies that influence all human life'.¹⁰⁶ This material exemplifies a once universal mytho-poetic faculty that she laments 'only exists now, naturally, in children, poets and the childlike races, like the Irish'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Joy Melville, *Mother of Oscar: The Life of Jane Francesca Wilde* (London: John Murray, 1994), pp. 131-168, gives a detailed account of Lady Wilde's tribulations, financial and otherwise, following the death of her husband.

¹⁰⁴ Her previous publications include various contributions to the *Dublin University Magazine* and the *Nation*, as well as English translations of William Meinhold's *Sidonia the Sorceress* (1849), Alphonse de Lamartine's *Pictures of the First French Revolution* (1850), *The Wanderer and His Home* (1851), and Wilhelmine Canz's *The First Temptation or 'Eritis Sicut Deus'* (1863).

¹⁰⁵ Terence de Vere White, *The Parents of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), pp. 242-243; *W. B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁶ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms & Superstitions of Ireland with Sketches of the Irish Past*, 2 vols (London: Ward & Downey, 1887) i, p. vi.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 11.

Lady Wilde perceives an intimate connection between folklore and national identity: 'the legends have a peculiar and special value as coming direct from the national heart'. Ireland becomes for her the site of mystic communion between the visible and the invisible, a place where the imaginative, figurative and spiritual take precedence over the merely factual, literal and material. Her engagement with folklore, tinged with national pride, is intuitive and emotional. The preface ends with her claim to be an extension of that transcendent, national heart:

These studies of the Irish past are simply the expression of my love for the beautiful island that gave me my first inspiration, my quickest intellectual impulses, and the strongest and best sympathies with genius and country possible to a woman's nature.¹⁰⁸

This collection is Lady Wilde's vindication of the inestimable importance of Irish folklore, both to the Irish psyche and to her own. The authorial observations that introduce several legends do not observe the later convention that folklorists should present their material without comment. However, these observations enable her to weave herself into the fabric of Irish folklore and reinforce the strength of her identification with the national heart.

A glance at the table of contents clarifies Lady Wilde's individual, idiosyncratic approach to folklore selection and presentation. The wide range of topics enables the collection to be viewed as a celebration of the depth and variety of Irish traditions. The introduction leads directly into a series of legends for which the geographical source is not given. These are followed by legends of the dead from the western islands. These in turn lead into the presentation of various superstitions concerning the dead. Various legends, festivals, beliefs and superstitions are then presented and discussed.¹⁰⁹ The collection closes with a

¹⁰⁸ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. vii.

¹⁰⁹ These include legends from Rathlin Island, accounts of the May Day, Candlemas, Whitsun and November Eve festivals, legends of animals and saints, herbal lore, medical superstitions, accounts of holy wells and popular notions concerning the fairies.

series of sketches of the Irish past, written by Lady Wilde, followed by an essay by Sir William Wilde on 'The Ancient races of Ireland'.¹¹⁰ At times, similar material is included in different sections: changeling lore is presented under the separate headings of 'Ancient Legends' and 'Mysteries of Fairy Power', while the origins of the fairies are discussed as part of 'Ancient Legends', 'Popular Notions Concerning the Sidhe Race', 'Sketches of the Irish Past', as well as in William Wilde's concluding essay. The material is not arranged on the basis of its inherent consistency or its adaptability to the type of classification model used by collectors like Patrick Kennedy but seems, instead, to reflect Lady Wilde's thought processes and preoccupations. The collection therefore reflects a personal engagement with Irish folklore. She claims that the legends she includes 'were taken down by competent persons skilled in both languages [Irish and English], and as far as possible in the very words of the narrator'.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, in their published form, their vocabulary and syntax do not reflect the speech patterns of uneducated narrators and so are best regarded as her own individual versions of traditional stories.

Her personal engagement with traditional material is reflected in her individual rendition of the legend of 'The Horned Women', which opens the collection. Áine O'Neill points out that variants of this legend, which recounts how a group of witches invade and are banished from a country house, are always rooted in the everyday world, and feature a main character who is an ordinary woman, generally occupied with spinning. O'Neill argues that it serves a variety of functions: it provides excitement, escape, and the satisfaction of hearing that supernatural beings can be outwitted; it highlights the dire implications of being

¹¹⁰ This essay consists of extracts from an address given by William Wilde to the Anthropological Section of the British Association in Belfast, in 1874.

¹¹¹ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i., p. vii.

alone late at night; it cautions against sloth and untidiness and promotes the high standards of cleanliness to be maintained by a good housekeeper in a time when disease was rampant; it often warns of the dangers of working late on a Saturday and encroaching on the sanctity of the Sabbath.¹¹² Patrick Kennedy's version of the legend, 'Black Stairs on Fire' certainly provides entertainment and advocates domestic and religious diligence. Kennedy's main protagonist is the young granddaughter of a poor widow. The action takes place on All Hallow's Eve, a night when traditionally spirits were believed to be more active than on other nights of the year. The water in the tub, the band of the spinning wheel, the broom and the turf-coal obey a voice which demands entry. When they open the door 'in rushed frightful old hags, wicked shameless young ones and the *old boy* himself, with red horns and a green tail.'¹¹³ This being a Kennedy variant, orthodoxy is stressed, so the women's first reaction is 'to make the sign of the cross and call on the Holy Trinity'. After further adventures, the story ends as follows:

The poor women were now on their knees and cared little for their curses. But every Holy Eve during their lives they threw out the water as soon as their feet were washed, unbanded the wheel, swept up the house, and covered the big coal to have the seed of the fire next morning.¹¹⁴

Kennedy, characteristically, copper-fastens the moral of the tale by underlining both the piety of the women and their subsequent good housekeeping

Lady Wilde's version provides excitement and escape, but it does not promote either domestic good practice or religious propriety. As Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin indicates, it 'defies the expectation of moral-hunting readers'.¹¹⁵ The protagonist is not an ordinary woman, but a confident, rich one who opens her

¹¹² Áine O'Neill, ' "The Fairy Hill is on Fire" (MLSIT 6071): A panorama of multiple functions', *Béaloides*, 59 (1991), 189-196.

¹¹³ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions*, p. 164.

¹¹⁴ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions*, p. 165.

¹¹⁵ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, 'Speranza, an ancestor for a woman poet in 2000', in Ní Chuilleanáin, ed., pp. 17-34, (p. 33).

door and allows the first witch to enter. Having permitted the supernatural force to cross her threshold and to take her place at the hearth, the woman is powerless to prevent the arrival of the other witches. By the time the twelve horned women are carding and spinning around her fire, their progressive invasion of the woman's space has an air of almost natural inevitability.

Their activity is commonplace but their appearance is grotesque. Familiar words presented in an unfamiliar sequence describe the women: 'Strange to hear, and frightful to look at were these twelve women'. Lady Wilde uses language to create an effect of estrangement that enhances the sense of otherworldliness that permeates her story. When the woman goes, at the order of the witches, to fetch water in a sieve from a well outside, she enters a nightmare world where she is addressed by a disembodied voice which tells her what to do: "'Return, and when thou comest to the north angle of the house, cry aloud three times and say, 'The mountain of the Fenian women and the sky all over it is on fire'". And she did so.'¹¹⁶ The use of the archaic form of the verb 'comest' and accompanying pronoun 'thou', and the simplicity and finality of the last phrase, produce biblical cadences that underline the spiritual significance of the story. When the witches leave, the woman carries out three tasks to protect her home against further enchantment: she sprinkles water – in which she has washed her child's feet – on the threshold of the door; she breaks the witches' cake in pieces and places it in the mouths of her sleeping family, and lastly she secures the door with a great cross-beam. Water in which the feet of the innocent have been washed, wood and beams, and broken cakes of bread are all recognisable Christian tropes and images, but here they function as unorthodox, magical charms.

¹¹⁶ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 19.

In 'The Horned Women', Lady Wilde describes the dilemma of an isolated protagonist who finds herself exposed to a hostile supernatural force, in the shape of the witches, and a protective one, in the form of the Spirit of the Well. She plays with language, inverting phrases, employing archaisms and deliberately echoing biblical cadences to enhance the strangeness of her story. To underline the spiritual tensions in the story, she uses Christian imagery in an unorthodox way. The end result is that her version of the story, although it ends happily, remains unsettling. As we shall see in Chapter Three, Oscar Wilde employs similar strategies, for similar ends, in his fairy tales about isolated characters, particularly in *A House of Pomegranates*.

Another legend included in the collection demonstrates Lady Wilde's individual approach to her material. In 'The Priest's Soul', Ireland is a mystic site where what normally remains impossible and unseen is realised and becomes visible. The story concerns a learned priest whose pride leads him to deny the existence of purgatory, heaven, hell, God and the human soul to his students: "Who ever saw a soul?" he would say. "If you can show me one, I will believe".¹¹⁷ On the eve of his death, an angel appears and tells him that he will not be allowed to enter either heaven or purgatory as he has denied their existence. The sceptic feels his soul flutter in alarm and the angel concedes that he may escape hell, whose existence he has also denied, if he can find one person who believes in the existence of the soul. His students mock him when he now insists that God exists and that man has an immortal soul. Eventually, he meets a child from a far country who reasons that 'if we have life, though we cannot see it, we

¹¹⁷ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 61.

may also have a soul, though it is invisible'.¹¹⁸ The priest rejoices, knowing his soul is safe. On his order, the boy stabs him and his soul, in the form of a butterfly, ascends to purgatory. The people, seeing this, turn their backs on false wisdom as they ask: 'What is the use of going so far to learn when the wisest man in all Ireland did not know if he had a soul till he was near losing it; and was only saved at last through the simple belief of a little child?'¹¹⁹ Richard Pine argues that this story provides a major model for Oscar Wilde's 'The Fisherman and his Soul': 'Everything about Wilde's future writing is contained here: the nature of its soul, its value, the way life is lived and expressed'.¹²⁰ Lady Wilde's story also explores the redemptive potential of a little child, a theme that recurs in her son's fairy tales.

Lady Wilde's second collection, *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland: Contributions to Irish Lore*, was published in London in 1890. In addition to the items listed in the title, it contains a small number of legends, a collection of proverbs and some essays by Lady Wilde on topics ranging from 'Primitive Man' through 'Irish Minstrelsy' to 'The American Irish'. Much of the material, including the sections on the early inhabitants of Ireland and on contemporary festivals, is reworked from similar sections of the earlier work. Nevertheless, there are striking differences between the two books. In addition to a wide variety of legends, the earlier collection contains several charms and superstitions concerning emotional dilemmas including winning love, avoiding sorrow and causing hatred between lovers. The later collection has fewer legends, and the cures and charms relate almost exclusively to physical misfortunes such as the falling sickness, ague,

¹¹⁸ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 65.

¹¹⁹ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 67.

¹²⁰ Pine, p. 183.

jaundice and the bite of mad dogs.¹²¹ There is only one reference to a love charm.¹²² The result is that the second collection seems at first glance to be less magical and mystical than the first. The volume and variety of physical ailments for which cures are listed means that the material world never completely recedes. However, Lady Wilde's predilection for the weird and wonderful is not so easily contained. The cures and charms take up only the first fifty pages while the remaining two hundred are devoted to descriptions of witchcraft, sacred trees, burying grounds, the banshee, wake games and the nature of the fairies, in addition to the legends and essays already mentioned. The inclusion of essays at the end of the volume suggests that Lady Wilde regarded folklore not as a static tradition but as a continuum to which one could make one's own contribution.

William and Jane Wilde's shared interest in Irish folklore encompasses an awareness of the richness and variety of that tradition. In their collections of Irish folklore, both describe traditional practices and beliefs and include material drawn from the narrative tradition, but Lady Wilde is more interested in the narrative tradition, while her husband is more interested in traditional practices. Both lament the passing of these traditions, which they construe as the antithesis of modern utilitarianism. William interweaves his descriptions of popular traditions and accounts of legends with topographical descriptions, and social and political comment. Lady Wilde is more concerned with the spiritual dimension and imaginative excess of the Irish folk narrative tradition, which she presents as a vibrant, anarchic discourse. Her versions of traditional narratives play around with conventional expectations, twisting and subverting, rather than fulfilling, them. In

¹²¹ The material for this volume may well have been drawn from responses to William Wilde's list of 'Queries' printed in *Irish Popular Superstitions*, pp. vi-vii. The list featured topics including herb cures, charms employed against various diseases, and animal lore.

¹²² Lady Wilde, *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland: Contributions to Irish Lore* (London: Ward and Downey, 1890), p. 32.

the third chapter, I will argue that Oscar Wilde's recourse to Irish folklore in his fairy tales generally reflects his parents' shared interest in the subject and his mother's particular awareness of its spiritual dimension. Her deeply personal and non-scientific approach to folklore also influenced the young William Butler Yeats during the time when he was coming to be recognised as a major literary figure.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

While acknowledging that folklore remained an abiding interest for all of W. B. Yeats's life, this discussion will focus on his involvement with its materials until 1895, the year in which, as Terence Brown points out, the publication of *Poems* 'established Yeats's reputation as one of the truly significant English-language poets of the period.'¹²³ This cut-off date should facilitate an exploration of the importance of Irish folklore to Yeats's early literary output and demonstrate the fluidity of the concept at the time when Wilde was writing his short stories.¹²⁴

Yeats recalled that his interest in Irish folklore was sparked during early childhood when he spent long periods between 1869 and 1874 with his maternal grandparents, the Pollexfens, in Sligo: 'It was through the Middletons [his grandmother's family] perhaps that I got my interest in country stories, and certainly the first faery-stories that I heard were in the cottages about their houses'. He remembers: 'it was the servants' stories that interested me'.¹²⁵ These recollections illustrate the extent to which traditional lore circulated across social

¹²³ Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), p. 74.

¹²⁴ This discussion will focus on Yeats's *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1926); his two anthologies of Irish folklore, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (London: Walter Scott, 1888) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (London: Walter Scott, 1892) as contained in *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*; his poetry up to 1895; his early writings on Irish folklore, and *The Celtic Twilight, Men and Women, Ghosts and Fairies* (London: Laurence and Bullen, 1893) reprinted in W. B. Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Writing on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. by Robert Welch (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 108-134.

¹²⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, pp. 19, 20.

and religious divides. Exposure to popular culture was a common experience for Protestant, English-speaking children who spent time roaming the countryside, often in the company of local children and servants.¹²⁶ In rural areas, folklore could form part of a communal culture shared by literate and illiterate, rich and poor, and could foster individual creativity: 'When I was a boy I used to wander about at Rosses Point listening to old songs and stories. I wrote down what I heard and made poems out of the stories'.¹²⁷ When he started to write prose for publication in London in 1887, Yeats 'wrote nothing but ghost or faery stories, picked up from my mother or some pilot at Rosses Point'.¹²⁸ From the beginning, Irish folklore kindled the spark of Yeats's creative imagination.

For Yeats, exposure to Irish folklore came during one of the most secure periods in a peripatetic childhood. He recalls that his first realisation of death came with the passing away of his younger brother. The ships in the harbour had their flags at half-mast as a mark of respect but the young Yeats did not understand why: 'Next day at breakfast I heard people telling how my mother and the servant had heard the banshee crying the night before he died'.¹²⁹ The Pollexfens were merchant ship owners and the flags flying at half-mast were an international signal of respect for the family's loss. It was the uniquely Irish figure of the banshee, with which the young Yeats was familiar from listening to local legends, that explicated the international iconography and illuminated his loss. Folklore, for Yeats, was not only associated with Sligo and a feeling of rootedness but also provided a set of symbols with which to negotiate the mysteries of life and death.

¹²⁶ See Robert Welch, 'Introduction', *W. B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore*, pp. xix-xxxv, (p. xix), for an account of other Anglo-Irish children who were exposed to local popular culture.

¹²⁷ *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. R. K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1st edn 1966; rpt. 1979), p. 232.

¹²⁸ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 160.

¹²⁹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 32.

Later, when the family moved to London, Yeats's lonely mother 'would spend hours listening to stories or telling stories of the pilots and fishing people of Rosses Point, or of her own Sligo girlhood'.¹³⁰ Susan Yeats's recourse to storytelling reveals a continuing instinctive identification with primitive traditions and systems of belief, which contrasted with her husband's scepticism and materialism. Deirdre Toomey argues that W. B. Yeats derived from his mother a life-long respect for the folk imagination.¹³¹ His ongoing efforts to present the imaginative world of the Irish folk tradition as worthy of serious literary attention are a rejection of his father's rational scepticism and a vindication of his mother's opposing outlook.

His first full-length published work, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) is an anthology, based on tales published by other collectors, including Croker, Lady Wilde, William Carleton, Samuel Lover, Mr and Mrs S. C. Hall, Patrick Kennedy and Douglas Hyde, and a selection of poems inspired by folk belief. Between July 1887 and September 1888, Yeats combed periodicals, county histories and surveys, in addition to standard collections, to find suitable material for his own anthology. In 1889, he remarked that he had read 'most, if not all, recorded Irish fairy tales'.¹³² Yeats's complete dependence on previously published material indicates that he regarded the Irish folk narrative tradition as one that spanned the divide between orality and print culture.

In addition to a general introduction, Yeats provided brief prefaces for the different sections of the book, presented under the following headings: 'The Trooping Fairies'; 'The Solitary Fairies'; 'Ghosts'; 'Witches, Fairy Doctors'; 'Tir-

¹³⁰ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 38.

¹³¹ Deirdre Toomey, 'Away', in *Yeats and Women*, ed. by Deirdre Toomey (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 135-167, (p. 158); see also Terence Brown, p. 17.

¹³² Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore*, p. 31.

na-n-og'; 'Saints, Priests'; 'The Devil'; 'Giants', and 'Kings, Queens, Princesses' Earls, Robbers'. In order to emphasise the imaginative, visionary aspects of Irish fairy and folktales, Yeats edited the materials which he used. For example, he included eleven stories from Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* but left out the accompanying commentaries. Mary Helen Thuente concludes that Yeats's criteria for selection and his alteration of sources 'reflect his attempt to present fairyland as representative of a separate spiritual realm which was to be taken seriously even if it could not be understood'.¹³³ His editorial practices also reflect his conviction that Irish folklore was a vital cultural asset that he felt free to adapt and present in his own way.

Despite his classification of tales under various headings, Yeats allies himself with those collectors of Irish folklore who 'have made their work literature rather than science'.¹³⁴ A later comment, made in 1890, exemplifies his antipathy towards a scientific approach to folklore:

The man of science is too often a person who has exchanged his soul for a formula; and when he captures a folk-tale, nothing remains with him for all his trouble but a wretched lifeless thing with the down rubbed off and a pin thrust through its once all living body.¹³⁵

Like William and Jane Wilde, his approach to his material is subjectively romantic, rather than objectively scientific. In the sections dealing with the fairies (the two largest sections in the collection), Yeats integrates various conjectures on their origins and classifies them into two broad categories: the trooping or sociable fairies, and the solitary or malicious fairies. Thuente claims that this dual

¹³³ Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), p. 97.

¹³⁴ Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 6.

¹³⁵ *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, 4 vols, gen. ed. John Kelly, assoc. ed. Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), i, p. 229.

classification 'is not found in any of his predecessors'.¹³⁶ However, in the preface dealing with changelings, Yeats notes:

Lady Wilde gives a gloomy tradition that there are two kinds of fairies – one kind merry and gentle, the other evil, and sacrificing every year, a life to Satan, for which purpose they steal mortals.¹³⁷

Yeats derived his system of classification from Lady Wilde, whom he regarded as an authority on Irish folk traditions. In an assessment of his predecessors in the field of Irish folklore collection, Yeats is gently critical of Croker, approves of William Carleton and Patrick Kennedy, and praises Douglas Hyde for the accuracy of his transcriptions and the comprehensiveness of his vision. He reserves his greatest admiration for Lady Wilde, whom he regards as the best and most authentic collector of Irish folktales:

But the best book since Croker is Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends*. The humour has all given way to pathos and tenderness. We have here the innermost heart of the Celt in the moments he has grown to love through long years of persecution, when, cushioning himself about with dreams, and hearing fairy-songs in the twilight, he ponders on the soul and the dead. Here is the Celt, only it is the Celt dreaming.¹³⁸

Yeats endorsed Lady Wilde's non-scientific, intuitive approach to Irish folklore and shared her identification with its emotional and spiritual and dimensions.

The anthology shows Yeats was fascinated and inspired by the tensions inherent in Irish folklore between spiritual longing and material reality, particularly as expressed in fairy lore. He notes that commentators disagree on whether mortals lured by fairies enjoy a prelapsarian idyll of 'good living and music and mirth' or exist in a perpetual limbo, 'longing for their earthly friends'.¹³⁹ Poems by other authors included in the anthology describe fairy abductions. The collection opens with 'The Fairies' by William Allingham (1887), a poem that tells of the abduction of little Bridget by the fairies and her subsequent

¹³⁶ Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*, p. 84.

¹³⁷ Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 48.

¹³⁸ Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 7.

¹³⁹ Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 48.

death from sorrow and loneliness. Two poems by Sir Samuel Ferguson, 'The Fairy Well of Laganay' (1833) and 'The Fairy Thorn' (1834), tell of young women spirited away to an erotic fairy realm and juxtapose the weariness of ordinary life with the strange attraction of an extraordinary, magical reality. In 'Cusheen Loo', a translation of a Gaelic poem by J. J. Callanan, posthumously published in 1880, the attractions of fairyland are inadequate recompense for the loss of human affection suffered by a young bride, forcibly detained by the fairies. However, in 'The Fairy Nurse' by Edward Walsh (date unknown), the mortal world is characterised by loss and lamentation while the fairy realm is a place of soft enchantment.

Yeats draws together these varying approaches to the nature of life on the other side of the trembling veil that separates the natural and supernatural worlds in his own poem, 'The Stolen Child'. In the first four stanzas, he establishes an association between his fairy host and particular Sligo locations through the use of place-names. These stanzas represent the *sidhe's* attempt to seduce the boy. In the fifth stanza, when he has decided to join them, the weeping world that he is leaving undergoes a transformation. The 'calves on the warm hill-side', the 'kettle on the hob', and 'the oatmeal chest' evoke a world of natural harmony and secure, cosy domesticity. The boy, in responding to the call of the *sidhe*, is surrendering his inchoate masculinity to the inhuman forces of enchantment.¹⁴⁰ By turning his back on the world of weeping, he is also abandoning the familiar, protective world of human compassion. Yeats later claimed that the chorus of 'The Stolen Child' exemplified his poetry up to 1891, which he described as 'a flight into fairy land, from the real world, and a summons to that flight'. He concluded: 'That is not the

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 18 notes: 'Yeats's vision of fairyland as the place of the mother [...] was ambivalent: the cost of feminine wisdom might be insanity'.

poetry of insight and knowledge but of longing and complaint – the cry of the heart against necessity'.¹⁴¹ Taken in its entirety, 'The Stolen Child' suggests that, in order to survive, the heart must recognise the dangers of escape and therefore find the wisdom to ignore the summons to flight and the strength to cope with the demands of necessity.

In 1892, Yeats published *Irish Fairy Tales* as a continuation of *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. Mary Helen Thuente claims that by this date, the nature of Yeats's interest in Irish folklore had changed as he realised that 'the Irish peasant rather than his fairy lore provided the better subject matter'.¹⁴² However, this conclusion is debatable. The tales selected by Yeats for the first volume indicate that he was interested in the relationship between fairies and peasants, rather than in one category independent of the other. This interest continues in the second volume where half of the fourteen tales relate to the interplay between the two while a further three legends deal with the effects of evil spirits on the lives of Irish country people. It can be argued that Yeats used his extensive knowledge of Irish folklore to write of both Irish fairies and Irish peasants in his first two collections of poetry – *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889) and *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892). It is true that several of the poems based on fairy lore which had appeared in these collections were never included in later collections of Yeats's poetry.¹⁴³ However, those that do appear in later editions deal, like 'The Stolen Child', with the pull between the known, domestic world and the unknown, supernatural one.

¹⁴¹ Yeats, *Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, i, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴² Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*, p. 101.

¹⁴³ These include 'The Fairy Pedant', 'The Fairy Doctor', 'A Lover's Quarrel among the Fairies' and 'The priest and the Fairy', the texts of which are available in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russell K. Allspach (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

One such poem is 'The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland', which draws on aspects of Irish folk tradition described by Lady Wilde, to present a man who seems particularly susceptible to fairy enchantment.¹⁴⁴ Lady Wilde notes: 'When a person becomes low and depressed and careless about everything, as if all vital strength and energy had gone, he is said to have got a fairy blast'.¹⁴⁵ This is an apt description of the torpor of Yeats's dreamer. In the first stanza, he is in love and becomes prey to the type of sexual jealousy that fairies feel for enamoured humans. Lady Wilde mentions 'marriages between the pretty colleens and stalwart young hurlers' that took place 'despite all the envy and jealousy of the fairies who tried to mar the pleasures of the festival'.¹⁴⁶ In the second stanza, the dreamer's thoughts turn 'on money cares and fears' and his recent 'prudent years'.¹⁴⁷ Lady Wilde describes the scornful, vengeful attitude of the fairies towards prudent mortals who practice thrift and economy.¹⁴⁸ The third stanza finds the dreamer at a holy well, pondering his 'sudden revenge' on his 'mockers'.¹⁴⁹ Lady Wilde tells of the Lake of Revenge near Croagh Patrick.¹⁵⁰ The fourth stanza tells of the dreamer's discovery that there is 'no comfort in the grave'.¹⁵¹ Lady Wilde tells of a man, shunned by his neighbours, who, like the dreamer, was accursed 'both in life and death'.¹⁵² Yeats's familiarity with Lady Wilde's collections of Irish folklore provided him with imagery for 'The Man who dreamed of Faeryland', a distinctively Irish poem in the English language.

¹⁴⁴ This poem was first published in the *National Observer* of 7 February 1891 and subsequently appeared in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892). My identification of possible sources draws on, and expands, the discussion in Frank Kinahan, *Yeats: Folklore and Occultism* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 69-70.

¹⁴⁵ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, ii, 96.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 217.

¹⁴⁷ Yeats, *Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 127.

¹⁴⁸ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 91.

¹⁴⁹ Yeats, *Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 127.

¹⁵⁰ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, ii, p. 199.

¹⁵¹ Yeats, *Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 128.

¹⁵² Lady Wilde, *Ancient Cures*, p. 169.

Lady Wilde's identification of an age-old spirituality in Irish folklore may have encouraged Yeats to apply an occult lens to Irish folklore. Although his interest in esoteric religion postdates his interest in Irish folklore, the two increasingly merged as time went on. In London, in 1887, he joined the Theosophical Society, founded by Madame Blavatsky. Graham Hough identifies 'the idea of an age-old secret doctrine, passed on by oral tradition from generation to generation' as the primary attraction that Theosophy held for Yeats.¹⁵³ Both theosophy and Irish folklore were systems of belief based on oral tradition that were opposed to the Victorian materialism and scepticism that Yeats despised. Madame Blavatsky, who claimed that the 'hidden meaning' of fairytales could reveal the 'profound religion of our forefathers', was conscious of similarities between the two systems.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Lady Wilde claimed that a 'diligent study of the ancient myths, legends, and traditions of the world' would enable the folklorist 'to reconstruct the first articles of belief in the creed of humanity'.¹⁵⁵ While conducting his researches into Irish folklore and advancing his knowledge of the occult, Yeats met both women in London. Through their influence, he began to see a way in which folklore could combine with esoteric knowledge to provide access to a transcendent, spiritual reality.

The Celtic Twilight (1893) brings together twenty-two essays in which Yeats combines the lore and legends of the Irish countryside with his own individual mystical and visionary experiences. That Yeats saw no conflict in presenting his own experiences and traditional narratives on the same page suggests that he regarded both as part of a continuum that is the basis of literature. The title of the collection reveals the ongoing influence of Lady Wilde on Yeats's

¹⁵³ Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984), p. 39.

¹⁵⁴ Cited in Kinahan, p. 14.

¹⁵⁵ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 3.

approach to Irish folklore. In an 1890 review, entitled 'Tales from the Twilight', of *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland*, Yeats makes clear that the Celtic twilight represents the hour before dawn:

The grey of the morning is the Irish witches' hour, when they gather in the shapes of large hares and suck the cattle dry; and the grey morning melancholy runs through all the legends of my people. Then it is that this world and the other draw near, and not at midnight upon Brockens amidst the foul revelry of evil souls and in the light of the torches of hell. At the dawning the wizards come and go and fairy nations play their games of hurley and make their sudden journeys.¹⁵⁶

The Celtic twilight of Irish folklore, melancholy as it may be, is not an expression of *fin-de-siècle* gloom but a magic hour of metamorphosis that heralds the arrival of a new day. It is a brief interlude outside of chronological time when the real world is transformed by supernatural presences and anything becomes possible.

The Celtic Twilight opens with an essay entitled 'The Teller of Tales' in which Yeats praises Paddy Flynn, a storyteller from Sligo:

He did not live in a shrunken world, but knew of no less ample circumstance than did Homer himself. Perhaps the Gaelic people shall by his like bring back again the ancient simplicity and amplitude of imagination.¹⁵⁷

Here, Yeats is granting classical status to Irish folklore and identifying it as a source of cultural regeneration. Yeats and Flynn share 'the visionary melancholy of purely instinctive natures'. The essay concludes with an exhortation that includes both poet and peasant: 'Let us go forth, the tellers of tales, and seize whatever prey the heart long for, and have no fear'.¹⁵⁸ The traditional storyteller and the visionary artist can fashion a revival of Homeric proportions amongst the Gaelic people.

This discussion has demonstrated that in the period up to 1895, Irish folklore, for Yeats, represented the antithesis of Victorian materialism and

¹⁵⁶ Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Writing on Irish Folklore*, p. 59.

¹⁵⁷ Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Writing on Irish Folklore*, p. 110; in 1888, Yeats had also praised Paddy Flynn, see Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Writing on Irish Folklore*, pp. 109, 110.

rationalism. He was familiar with its English language forms, regarding it as a continuum that included the oral narratives of the uneducated, printed collections that had appeared earlier in the nineteenth century, and the work of contemporaneous poets writing in the English language. He found within that continuum the subject matter of much of his early poetry and the corroboration of his occult beliefs and experiences. His familiarity with Irish folk narratives in the English language was extensive, but nevertheless his knowledge of the entire folk tradition was less than comprehensive. He was particularly drawn to material that stressed the mystical, otherworldly quality of the Irish folk imagination. He found in this material, as Angela Bourke points out, 'a native way of understanding the world which would be comparable with those being put forward by Madame Blavatsky or by Sigmund Freud'.¹⁵⁹ He found in Irish folklore the traces of a pre-Christian, once universal world-view that could be harnessed to stem the flow of the filthy modern tide of forces hostile to the mind, spirit and imagination. Yeats valued Irish folk traditions at a time when they were often regarded with disapprobation and condescension. His interest in those traditions, and his recourse to them in his own creative writing, was both aesthetic and political as it reveals the depth of his commitment to an Irish folk imagination that contrasted with English rationality. His admiration for Lady Wilde indicates that he shared her romantic, subjective engagement with Irish folklore and endorsed her recognition of its spiritual significance, and its potential for emotional expression.

¹⁵⁹ Angela Bourke, 'Yeats and Irish Folklore in the 1890s', *Yeats Studies: The Bulletin of the Yeats Society of Japan*, 30 (1999) 3-22, (pp. 19-20).

Douglas Hyde (1860-1949)

This romantic approach to Irish folklore was challenged by a more scientific and partisan approach, which valorised accurately transcribed material in the Irish language, pioneered by Douglas Hyde in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Born near Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, Hyde had acquired an informal elementary education in the Irish language before his sixteenth birthday, and an interest in folklore which he pursued throughout life.¹⁶⁰ He was convinced of the intimate connection between the Irish language and Irish folklore: 'where the language dies, these folk memories scarcely survive one generation'.¹⁶¹ His commitment to the Irish language is evident in his decision to publish his first collection of thirty-five folktales, *Leabhar Sgeulaigheachta*, in that language in 1889. It sold well and initiated contact and correspondence with international folklore scholars.¹⁶²

Beside the Fire, containing the English translations of some of these stories in addition to the Irish texts and English translation of six new tales, was published in 1890. The Gaelic originals precede and face the English translations, suggesting the primacy of the Irish language versions. Hyde aimed to provide accurate transcriptions of tales which he had heard himself along with precise details of his sources. In addition to the tales in *Beside the Fire*, he includes a preface, a postscript by Alfred Nutt, founder and later president of the Folklore Society, a section which provides details of the informants, explanatory notes, and an alphabetical index of incidents which prefigures the type of motif-index later

¹⁶⁰ Janet Egleson Dunleavy and Gareth W. Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde, A Maker of Modern Ireland* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 29, 69.

¹⁶¹ Cited in Dominic Daly, *The Young Douglas Hyde* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1974), p. 67.

¹⁶² Dunleavy and Dunleavy, p. 195.

developed by the Finnish folklorist, Antti Aarne, and the American, Stith Thompson.

The lengthy Preface opens with the following observations:

Irish and Scotch Gaelic folk-stories are, as a living form of literature, by this time pretty nearly a thing of the past. They have been trampled in the common ruin under the feet of the *Zeitgeist*, happily not before a large harvest has been reaped in Scotland, but unfortunately, before anything worth mentioning has been done in Ireland to gather in the crop which grew luxuriantly a few years ago.¹⁶³

These remarks align Irish folk narratives with a past which contrasts with the prevailing spirit of the age. The harvest metaphor recalls the phraseology used by William John Thoms in the letter in which he coined the term folklore. Noting that in England, it has been swallowed up by ‘the waves of materialism and civilization combined’, Hyde characterises folklore as an organic resource, intrinsically opposed to, and threatened by, modernity (p. x). He differentiates between modern literature, the product of an individual brain, and folklore, the communal portal to a timeless ‘domain to which few of us who read books are permitted to enter’ (p. xi). Under these terms, Irish folklore is essentially opposed to all modern literature.

Hyde goes on to examine the work of previous collectors and observes that their efforts, ‘though interesting from a literary point of view, are not always successes from a scientific one’ (p. x). He bemoans the fact that Croker is, ‘alas! too often his own original’, manipulating the form and language of original tales ‘in order to give a saleable book, thus spiced, to the English public’ (p. xi). Patrick Kennedy’s failure to give sources is lamentable because ‘we cannot be sure how much belongs to Kennedy the bookseller, and how much to the Wexford peasant’ (p. xii). Lady Wilde’s ‘wonderful and copious’ collections are marred by her

¹⁶³ Douglas Hyde, *Beside the Fire*, facsimile of 1890 edn (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1978), p. ix; (because of quantity, further references to this volume in this chapter are given in parentheses in the text).

failure to give sources and by 'her entire ignorance of Irish' (pp. xiv, xiii). He particularly castigates the way in which previous collectors adapt their material:

the chief interest in too many of our folk-tale writers lies in their individual treatment of the skeletons of the various Gaelic stories obtained through English mediums, and it is not devoid of interest to watch the various garbs in which the sophisticated minds of the ladies and gentlemen who trifled in such matters, clothed the dry bones. But when the skeletons were thus padded round and clad, although built upon folklore, they were no longer folk-lore themselves, for folk-lore can only find a fitting garment in the language that comes from the mouths of those whose minds are so primitive that they retain with pleasure those tales which the more sophisticated invariably forget (pp. xvi-xvii).

He does not regard the engagement of his predecessors with traditional Gaelic narratives as being part of a process of transmission; instead their efforts are literary dilutions and corruptions of oral lore. He aims to improve on the efforts of his predecessors: 'I have attempted – if nothing else – to be a little more accurate than my predecessors, and to give the *exact* language of my informants, together with their names and various localities' (p. xvii). In defining the essential prerequisites for a national folklorist, Hyde identifies the need for scientific rigour and establishes language as a marker of authenticity.

Hyde's disdain for sophisticated manipulation of traditional material reflects a desire to legitimise traditions which had previously been denigrated. Declan Kiberd claims: 'He sought to restore self-respect to Irish people, based on a shared rediscovery of the national culture'.¹⁶⁴ However, that rediscovery privileged Irish language material so that Irish people who spoke only English were denied unmediated access to what purported to be national culture. John Wilson Foster distinguishes between Hyde, as an authentic folklorist, and other Anglo-Irish figures, like Yeats, who drew on folklore to promote a 'literary revival that discountenanced the purity of texts and actually preferred corrupted lore by which

¹⁶⁴ Declan Kiberd, 'Decolonising the Mind: Douglas Hyde and Irish Ireland' in *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?*, ed. by Jacqueline Genet (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), pp. 121-137, (p. 123).

to further its own fictions'.¹⁶⁵ However, both Hyde and the revivalists promoted the idea that folklore is a major repository of national identity. Hyde's use of pure texts was every bit as ideologically driven as the revivalists' recourse to what Foster describes as corrupted lore. Hyde combined scientific rigour with romantic nationalism in his approach to Irish folklore. The scholarly framework within which he worked made his romanticism seem less idiosyncratic and irrational than theirs. However, his insistence on the superiority and national significance of narratives in Irish, a language spoken only by a minority of country people and educated city dwellers, can be seen as a form of cultural elitism.

The collection and documentation of folklore generally depends upon the intervention of educated outsiders who interest themselves in the culture of communities of which they are never fully part. Whether that interest is patronising, exploitative or sympathetic, the intervention of collectors affects the choice and presentation of material. Foster notes that 'to imbue storytellers and informants with a self-consciousness about their tales and lore and their own art of storytelling, as collectors must, is itself corrupting'.¹⁶⁶ Hyde proposes a method of collection which aims to avoid this self-consciousness: first catch your storyteller; ply him with whisky and tobacco; put him at his ease by telling a story of your own; listen, without interruption or comment, while he tells his story; praise the story and his recitation of it and finally copy it down as he repeats it, reminding him of any omissions and querying him gently on any unusual words (pp. xlvi-xlvii). Hyde's advocacy of manipulation of the storytelling session reveals the extent to which the act of collection imposes a new form of extraneous control on a traditional practice. Unlike Yeats, Hyde did not feel an innate spiritual kinship

¹⁶⁵ John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), p. 224.

¹⁶⁶ Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival*, p. 223.

with the traditional storyteller. His approach to folklore collection depends upon an unequal distribution of power: the collector manipulates the teller and records his story in order to advance the causes of cultural separatism and folklore scholarship. This approach to Irish folklore is no less elitist or ideologically driven than Lady Wilde's or Yeats's romantic one.

Hyde bemoans the fact that no Irish collector rivals John Francis Campbell of Islay who published four volumes of traditional Highland tales, translated from Gaelic, between 1860 and 1862 (p. xvi). He notes that Campbell's translations are unwieldy: 'he has rendered the Gaelic originals something too literally' and Hyde aims to avoid this error: 'I have not always translated the Irish idioms quite literally, though I have used much idiomatic English, but only of the kind used all over Ireland' (p. xlvi). Language is Hyde's criterion of excellence and the area in which he can surpass all other folklore collectors, be they Irish or Scottish.

Hyde argues that the best versions of folk narratives are known only by speakers of Irish:

The people who recite them are, as far as my researches have gone, to be found only amongst the oldest, most neglected, and poorest of the Irish-speaking population. English speaking people either do not know them at all, or else tell them in so bald or condensed a form as to be useless (p. xli).

Hyde's commitment to the Irish language, which predisposed him towards a greater appreciation of narratives in that language, directed his research. Effectively, he instituted a disjunction between authentic folklore, which survived in its pristine oral form in marginalised Irish speaking areas, and popular culture, which thrived in various forms in the rest of the country. Mass literacy created a market in Ireland for English popular literature. Hyde's championing of traditional narratives told in Irish can be seen as an attempt to offset the de-nationalising

influence of this literature. He castigates the indifference of political and religious leaders to the demise of the Irish language and sets his championship of both language and folklore against those who 'have helped, more than anyone else, by their example, to assimilate us to England and the English' (p. xlv). His criticism reflects the distrust of both Anglicisation and modernisation that later fuelled his 1892 address on 'The necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland'.¹⁶⁷ For Hyde, the Gaelic past is opposed to English modernity.¹⁶⁸ Folklore, as it issues in its traditional form from the mouths of unsophisticated old storytellers who live in remote regions of Ireland, is valuable and worthy of preservation because it is a link with that glorious past. However, if it issues from the pens of sophisticated writers, or responds to the pressures of modernisation and anglicisation by clothing traditional motifs in new forms, it becomes a travesty to be rejected and deplored.

Subsequent Developments in Irish Folklore Scholarship

Hyde's valorisation of the Irish-speaking storyteller contributed to the development of a conceptual framework which dominated the study of Irish folklore during the twentieth century. This scholarship concentrated on narrative traditions, particularly on the collection and classification of material from Irish-speaking areas.¹⁶⁹ The concentration on narrative reflects the central place of the folktale in international folklore scholarship which, until the late 1960s, using the typology devised by the Finn Antti Aarne in 1910 and expanded by the American

¹⁶⁷ This was Hyde's inaugural address delivered to the National Literary Society on 25 November 1892.

¹⁶⁸ Commentators who argue that Hyde equated modernisation with Anglicisation include Lee, p. 139, and Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, p. 119. However, Kiberd, 'Decolonising the Mind', p. 126, disagrees.

¹⁶⁹ See Bo Almqvist, 'The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy', *Béaloides*, 45-47 (1977-1979), 6-26. (p. 13); James Delargy, *The Gaelic Story-Teller with Some Notes on Gaelic Folk-Tales*, from the *Proceedings of the British Academy*. Vol. 31 (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1945), pp. 6-7.

Stith Thompson in 1961, was concerned with classification by motif and tale type.¹⁷⁰ The concentration on narratives in the Irish language led to a process described by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin as ‘the Gaelicisation of Irish folklore’.¹⁷¹ This process refers to the development of a perceived link between authentic Irish folklore and the Irish language. The romantic approach of nineteenth century collectors, including the Wildes and Yeats, who worked with English language versions of traditional narratives, was regarded with a disapprobation that was extremely tenacious. In the year 2000, the folklorist Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, echoing Douglas Hyde over one hundred years before, observed that Lady Wilde’s contribution to Irish folklore collection was not highly regarded because of her entire ignorance of the Irish language and because she never gave sources for her material.¹⁷² As Oscar shared his mother’s ignorance of Irish and her romantic approach to Irish folklore, the development of folklore scholarship in Ireland during the twentieth century clearly did not facilitate an examination of how his fairy tales reflect his recourse to strands of the Irish folk tradition. However, Anne O’Connor’s mention of Patrick Kennedy, Lady Jane and Sir William Wilde, and W. B. Yeats, in a 2005 tribute to the pioneers of Irish folklore collection, reflects a more inclusive, liberal approach than that which prevailed amongst Irish folklorists during the twentieth century.¹⁷³

The focus, during that century, on the collection of oral narratives from Irish-speaking areas was largely the result of parallel drives to revive the Irish

¹⁷⁰ Reidar Christiansen and Seán Ó Súilleabháin compiled *The Types of the Irish Folktale*, Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 118 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1963), which applied the Aarne/Thompson classification system to Irish traditional narratives.

¹⁷¹ Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, pp. 114-141.

¹⁷² These comments were made as part of a presentation on ‘The Wildes, Archaeology, Folklore, Children’s Literature’ at *The Wilde Legacy*, held at Trinity College Dublin, 1-3 December 2000.

¹⁷³ Anne O’Connor, *The Blessed and the Damned: Sinful Women and Unbaptised Children in Irish Folklore* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006) p. 19.

language and to preserve Irish folklore spearheaded by Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League, of which Hyde was a founding member and long-time president from 1893 to 1915. Members of the Gaelic League were instrumental in the foundation of the Folklore of Ireland Society (An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann) in 1927. The planning and establishment of the Folklore of Ireland Society coincided with the foundation of Fianna Fáil. Before that party's accession to power in 1932 under the leadership of Eamon de Valera, the then Cumann na nGael government awarded a small grant in 1930 to fund the foundation of the Irish Folklore Institute. In 1935, the Irish Folklore Commission replaced this body and the first full-time folklore collectors were appointed. De Valera's government provided the Commission with an annual grant of £3,000 for 'collecting, cataloguing, and eventually publishing the best of what remained of Irish oral tradition'.¹⁷⁴ The Commission was attached to the Department of Education until 1971 when its staff and holdings transferred to the newly established Department of Irish Folklore in University College Dublin.

The Commission's focus on small, rural communities fitted well with the folk ideology underpinning the general vision of the nature of Irish society in the de Valera era.¹⁷⁵ The activities of the Government-funded Irish Folklore Commission may have facilitated the acceptance of the essentially Catholic Gaeltacht as a metonym for the Irish nation.¹⁷⁶ It focused on the Irish language and its oral traditions at a time when, as Angela Bourke argues, these elements of national culture 'were consistently invoked by the most conservative elements of a

¹⁷⁴ Seán O'Sullivan, *Folktales of Ireland* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. xxxiii.

¹⁷⁵ See Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, 'The Primacy of Form: A "Folk Ideology" in de Valera's Politics', in *De Valera and His Times*, ed. by J. P. O'Carroll and John A. Murphy (Cork: Cork University Press, 1986), pp. 47-61.

¹⁷⁶ See Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'An Cultúr Coiteann agus Léann an Bhéaloidis', *Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, 26 (1996), 137-158, (p. 151).

conservative society as unchanging expressions of censorious authority'.¹⁷⁷ The twentieth-century identification of Irish folklore with a conservative mindset occluded the extent to which, during earlier periods, an interest in Irish folklore could be construed as liberal, subversive and forward-looking.

The emphasis on oral narratives in the Irish language diverted critical attention away from the recourse of English-speaking, Irish writers to English language, printed and oral versions of Irish folk material.¹⁷⁸ However, increasingly, the emphasis of Irish folklore scholarship is shifting from a nationalistic preoccupation with Irish-language narrative to what Anne O'Connor describes as 'a universally acknowledged focus upon folklore performance and process'.¹⁷⁹ This focus reflects the work of international theorists including Regina Bendix, Simon J. Bronner and Pertti J. Anttonen who have considered the interplay between tradition and innovation, text and context, authenticity and representation in provocative ways.¹⁸⁰ In Chapter Three, these issues will inform my discussion of how and why Wilde, in the fairy tales, manipulates and adapts his source material, but in analysing the extent and nature of his recourse to Irish folklore, I will draw on twentieth-century folklore narrative scholarship. In order to prepare for this analysis, some relevant aspects and theories of folk narrative will now be identified and described.

¹⁷⁷ Bourke, 'Oral Traditions', (p. 1193).

¹⁷⁸ For example, the two seminal works on W. B. Yeats and Irish folklore, Kinahan, *Yeats, Folklore and Occultism* and Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*, did not appear until the 1980s.

¹⁷⁹ O'Connor, p. 23

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, Simon J. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998) and *Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity* ed. by Pertti J. Anttonen (Botkyrka: Multicultural Centre, 2000).

Folk Narrative

In 1816, Jacob Grimm articulated an important distinction between two genres of folk narrative based on the credibility and origin of each: 'das Märchen ist poetischer, die Sage historischer' (the wonder-tale is poetical, the legend historical).¹⁸¹ Subsequent folklore scholarship, in particular the classification system established by Antti Aarne in *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen* (1910) and expanded by Stith Thompson in *The Types of the Folktale* (1928), accepted this differentiation and outlined some structural differences between the two genres. The tale is a long, multi-episodic, fictional story that has no particular location in time or space while the legend is a shorter, single-episodic story, associated with a particular time, place and/or person, that purports to be an account of an actual historical event.¹⁸² Examples of folktales include 'Hansel and Gretel', 'Snow White' and 'Cinderella', while examples of legends include the lives of the saints and the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. In Irish folklore, the tale is referred to as a *scéal*, while legends are known as *seanchas*.

Although the distinction between tale and legend, *scéal* and *seanchas*, is theoretically useful, it is generally acknowledged that the two genres often overlap in practice.¹⁸³ In particular, the distinction between the levels of credence attached to each type of narrative is variable. Wonder tales can be made to appear factual by being localised or by being offered as the actual experience of a named individual. Audiences are not homogenous; some listeners may be more sceptical

¹⁸¹ Cited in Linda Dégh, 'Folk Narrative', in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. by Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972), pp. 53-83, (p. 58).

¹⁸² Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 8.

¹⁸³ See Lauri Honko, 'Folkloristic Theories of Genre', in *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Alan Dundes, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2005) iii, pp. 4-25, (p. 7).

than others.¹⁸⁴ Storytellers themselves vary in their evaluation of the authenticity of their material.¹⁸⁵ Because it permits a complex negotiation of belief and disbelief, the Irish folk narrative tradition is a viable figurative discourse that is particularly suited to the expression of ambiguity and ambivalence. In this sense, Oscar Wilde's work can be meaningfully related to that tradition.

Having distinguished between tale and legend, the Aarne/Thompson system further differentiates between five categories of folktale: animal tales, regular folktales, humorous tales, formula tales and unclassified tales, with supplementary subdivisions within each group. The category most relevant to Chapter Three's analysis of Wilde's fairy tales is that of the regular folktale, which includes tales of magic (also commonly called wonder tales), stories about supernatural or enchanted husbands or wives, supernatural helpers and tasks, and religious stories. Within the five broad categories are found over two thousand different types of folktale, where type refers to a complete, independent narrative composed of one or more motifs. Each tale type consists of a basic sequence of distinctive events and this plot outline is regarded as the defining feature of specific tales. A motif, the smallest narrative element in a tale, may refer to the characters, the objects or the incidents described and can be found in different tale types.¹⁸⁶ Examples of motifs include animal helpers, testing of a suitor, a star signifying a hero's birth, a dry rod blossoming, and selling one's soul to the devil. Several thousand motifs are listed in Stith Thompson's six-volume *Motif-Index of*

¹⁸⁴ See Timothy Corrigan Correll, "Believers, Sceptics, and Charlatans: Evidential Rhetoric, the Fairies, and Fairy Healers in Irish Oral Narrative and Belief", *Folklore*, 116:1 (Apr 2005), 1-18, for a discussion of listener scepticism.

¹⁸⁵ See Patricia Lysaght, 'Fairy Lore from the Midlands of Ireland', in Narvaez, ed., pp. 22-46, for a discussion of a storyteller's own scepticism.

¹⁸⁶ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, pp. 482-485, pp. 415-416.

Folk Literature. In Chapter Three, I will identify the types of folktale that Wilde's fairy tales resemble and list some of the motifs that they contain.

In particular, I will argue that Wilde's fairy tales engage thematically with the moral values of Irish religious tales, numerous types and versions of which have been collected and published over the years.¹⁸⁷ Seán Ó Súilleabháin suggests that these stories display a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, feature miraculous occurrences, focus on the power of innocence and its ultimate reward, and show that charity and generosity are abundantly rewarded while neglect of those virtues is punished.¹⁸⁸ Daithí Ó hÓgáin notes that unlike *exempla* – tales told by clergy of the middle ages to stress morality – ethical points have slipped quietly into the background of Irish religious tales.¹⁸⁹ From a survey of examples of these tales held in the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore in UCD, Pádraig Ó Héalaí argues that they exemplify the following moral values: generosity towards the poor, the most prized virtue, is rewarded in heaven and on earth; one generous act merits eternal reward but lack of generosity is punished; hypocrisy and mocking the deformed are castigated; rash judgement should be avoided, and uncharitable assessment of people's relationship with God is presented as being a peculiarly clerical vice. He concludes that these tales commend any form of behaviour that is helpful to others, or that leads to harmony, but condemn selfish or disruptive behaviours.¹⁹⁰ Angela Bourke suggests that while these tales preach virtue and forbearance, 'they also offer consolation in adversity and tacit support

¹⁸⁷ For examples of religious tales from oral tradition, see Douglas Hyde, *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1915) and Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Scéalta Cráibhtheachta', *Béaloideas*, 21 (1951-52).

¹⁸⁸ Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Storytelling in Irish Tradition* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1973) pp. 18, 43, 44.

¹⁸⁹ Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Lore of Ireland: An Encyclopaedia of Myth, Legend and Romance* (Cork: Collins, 2006) p. 433; the primary reference for *exempla* is F. C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum*, *Folklore Fellows Communications* 204 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969).

¹⁹⁰ Pádraig Ó Héalaí, 'Moral Values in Irish Religious Tales', *Béaloideas* 42-44 (1974-1976), 176-212, (p. 212).

for resistance to oppressive authority'.¹⁹¹ Some types of religious tale, including Type 753 (Christ and the Smith), feature God appearing as a stranger and rebuking an irresponsible human. Others, including those listed under Type 756, tell of how a sinner's repentance causes a dry staff or branch to blossom. In general, Irish religious tales illustrate the types of behaviour which Irish people have regarded as desirable and reprehensible. In Chapter Three, I will show that some of Wilde's fairy tales contain motifs similar to those found in Irish religious tales and engage with the moral values of those tales. This suggests that he drew on the Irish narrative tradition to explore, with his readers, which human behaviours are reprehensible and which are desirable, and to enrich his investigation of relationships between individuals, God, and their communities.

The structure of a folktale depends on its type and on the number of motifs it contains, as each type is made up a particular selection and arrangement of motifs. Nevertheless, some generalisations can be made: folktales are built around familiar frameworks that comprise an introduction (for example, 'once upon a time') and conclusion (for example, 'they all lived happily ever after'); they generally have happy endings where order is restored and/or justice is seen to be done; dialogue tends to be simple and formulaic, and tri-episodic repetition is a common feature.¹⁹² In order to compare the structure of Wilde's fairy tales with that of the folktale, I will draw on the theories of Max Lüthi (1909-1991) and Vladimir Propp (1895-1970). Lüthi, a Swiss literary scholar, stressed the one-dimensionality of folktale characters who regard the supernatural as natural and

¹⁹¹ Angela Bourke, 'Spirituality and Religion in Oral Tradition', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, iv, pp. 1399-1401, (p. 1399).

¹⁹² Dégh, pp. 60-62.

who operate in non-specific locales at non-specific times.¹⁹³ I will argue that Wilde's fairy tales resemble folktales in their depiction of natural and supernatural elements and general eschewal of specific locales and times but differ from folktales in their portrayal of some central characters. Vladimir Propp, drawing on an analysis of approximately one hundred Russian wonder tales, argued that although the names of the *dramatis personae* may vary between tales, their roles and actions remain constant. By analysing types of character and action, Propp arrived at the conclusion that there are thirty-one functions (his term for small narrative units) present in folktales.¹⁹⁴ All functions are not present in all tales. Every tale displays its functions in an unvarying sequence that begins with either a lack or act of villainy, progresses through intermediary functions, and concludes with reward, marriage, liquidation of lack or misfortune, or some other positive terminal function. Propp's thesis has been challenged on grounds including its lack of applicability to all types of folktale, its high level of abstraction and its neglect of the cultural contexts of folklore production and transmission. Nevertheless, it provides a useful insight into the basic structure of the folktale and I will refer to it in my discussion of the structure of Wilde's fairy tales in Chapter Three.

Oscar Wilde and Irish Folklore

To what extent, then, was Oscar Wilde familiar with Irish folk culture? Unlike his father, whose professional duties as a doctor and whose work for the Census provided him with considerable contact with rural and urban poor, Oscar had relatively limited access to the totality of Irish folk traditions. However, he was

¹⁹³ Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 104.

¹⁹⁴ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. by Louis A. Wagner (Austin: London, University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 20-25.

familiar with the folk narrative tradition, which consists of international folktales, legends, and indigenous hero tales drawn from Irish myth about figures including Fionn and Oisín. He was likely to have heard some of these stories in the English language, perhaps from servants, particularly during the long holidays spent on the two estates which his father purchased in the west of Ireland.¹⁹⁵ Terence de Vere White cites an unpublished memoir written by Conor Maguire, a contemporary and neighbour of young Oscar, which refers to one such servant, Johnny Holihan, who worked as a gardener in Moytura.¹⁹⁶ Oscar Wilde refers to an unnamed married couple, an excellent fisherman and good cook, who worked at Illaunroe.¹⁹⁷ Little is known of these shadowy figures, or of Irish born servants who must have worked for the Wildes in their Dublin home at 1 Merrion Square.¹⁹⁸

More is known of another servant, Mary Burke, who came from Aughamore, near Knock, in Co. Mayo and worked for the Wilde family at Moytura for fifty years.¹⁹⁹ On her death in 1870, Sir William Wilde erected a plaque to her memory that can still be seen on the wall of the ruined abbey in Cong. In it, he refers to her as a faithful servant and attached friend of his family. The inscription conveys the closeness of the bond between William Wilde and his servant, and his respect for her.²⁰⁰ During the long illness that preceded her death, she sent for her niece, Ellen Grogan, to nurse her. Grogan, a native Irish speaker who was also fluent in English and a noted storyteller in both languages, stayed on

¹⁹⁵ William Wilde bought Illaunroe, a fishing lodge on the shores of Lough Fee in Connemara in 1853, and built Moytura, a two-story villa near Cong, in 1864.

¹⁹⁶ White, p. 220.

¹⁹⁷ *Complete Letters*, p. 89.

¹⁹⁸ As no manuscript returns survive from the 1861 or 1871 Census, the existence or identity of these servants is difficult to corroborate.

¹⁹⁹ Information on Mary Burke and Ellen Grogan, and their relationship to the Wilde family, was provided in a personal communication from Mary McIver, great-grand daughter of Grogan, on 3 January 2003.

²⁰⁰ The full inscription reads: 'To the memory of Mary Burke who died at Moytura May 1870, the faithful servant and attached friend of the family of Sir William R. Wilde, by whom this tablet has been erected in grateful recollection. R.I.P.'

at Moytura after Mary Burke's death. Family lore has it that she acted, *inter alia*, as governess to the Wilde children during their holidays. On William Wilde's advice, she married Patrick Walsh, a local farmer with grazing rights on the Moytura estate.

One piece of family lore relates directly to the young Oscar. One evening, at dusk, Patrick Walsh met the child running towards him along the breen that the Wildes called the avenue leading to the house. The child was ashen-faced, trembling and visibly frightened. In reply to the older man's enquiries, young Oscar whispered that he had just seen a ghost. Local people believed that a copse, which was situated about half-way along the avenue on the left hand side as one approached Moytura House, was the site of a children's graveyard and it was here that the child saw the apparition. Oscar may have heard stories about the graveyard that led to his frightening experience, suggesting that he was exposed at an early age to Irish folk legends. Mrs Walsh kept up a correspondence, which has not survived, with Willie Wilde, Oscar's brother, and her family still have a picture of Willie's wife and infant daughter in their possession.²⁰¹ In an 1884 letter to Constance Wilde, Oscar's wife, Lady Wilde asks her to tell Oscar to send, in his own hand, '£1 to Ellen Walshe of Moytura'.²⁰² It is clear that the Wilde family, through their close relationship with the Walsh family, had access over a long period to Irish popular culture and folklore.

It seems reasonable to assume that Oscar Wilde would also have been familiar with published versions of Irish popular tales, particularly, but not only, those contained in his parents' collections. William Wilde was sufficiently well

²⁰¹ The photograph is reproduced in Joan Schenker, *Truly Wilde: The Unsettling Story of Dolly Wilde, Oscar's Unusual Niece* (London: Virago, 2000) facing p. 208.

²⁰² The letter is contained on reel 32-7 of *The Oscar Wilde Collection*, the microfilm version of the Wilde Collection, held in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library of the University of California.

acquainted with Croker to arrange his introduction to John O'Donovan, the Irish scholar.²⁰³ Sir William's library included nineteen volumes of the *Dublin University Magazine*, dating from 1839 to 1850.²⁰⁴ During this period the magazine published numerous articles relating to Irish folklore, including several by William Wilde. Lady Wilde, like Patrick Kennedy, was also a contributor to that magazine. During the time that she was working on her two collections of Irish folklore, she was in constant contact with her son, Oscar, who was working on his two fairy tale collections. Oscar and Lady Wilde were both in touch with W. B. Yeats during the years 1887 and 1888.²⁰⁵ Oscar reviewed W.B. Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), and spoke knowledgeably of its contents, lauding it as 'a collection of purely imaginative work'. In his view, two stories collected by his mother, 'The Horned Women' and 'The Priest's Soul', and one collected by Douglas Hyde, 'Teig O'Kane and the Corpse' are the highlights of the collection.²⁰⁶ All three stories feature an unpredictable interplay between natural and supernatural forces, suggesting that Wilde greatly admired this aspect of the Irish folk narrative tradition.

Oscar Wilde was familiar with printed versions of Irish religious tales contained in the anthologies compiled by his mother and W. B. Yeats. He could also have read religious tales in other collections, as printed variants of these stories appeared in the work of nineteenth century collectors including Thomas Crofton Croker and Patrick Kennedy.²⁰⁷ In addition, he may well have heard oral

²⁰³ See letter dated 18 August 1850 from William Wilde to John O'Donovan contained in the John O'Donovan archive, National Library of Ireland, Ms 132 [254].

²⁰⁴ See 'Catalogue of William Wilde'.

²⁰⁵ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 171.

²⁰⁶ Oscar Wilde, 'Some Literary Notes', *Woman's World*, February 1889, reprinted in *Oscar Wilde: Selected Journalism*, ed. by Anya Clayworth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 155-165, (pp. 155, 159); hereafter this volume will be referred to as *Selected Journalism*.

²⁰⁷ Christiansen and Ó Súilleabháin, pp. 145-165.

versions of other religious tales during his youth, perhaps from Mary Burke, Ellen Grogan, or indeed any other person to whom they had been transmitted and with whom he came in contact.

Overall, it seems that Wilde would have been primarily familiar with traditional narratives, legends rather than folktales, in the English language, either as they were told by servants or as they appeared in published versions. His exposure to the type of traditional narrative in the Irish language that provided the focus for folklore scholarship in Ireland would have been mediated through translation and manipulation for new audiences who did not belong to the class among whom those narratives traditionally circulated. His familiarity with Irish folklore was therefore primarily with strands of that material which lay beyond those privileged by Irish folklore scholarship. His romantic approach to Irish folklore, disdained by later scholars, clashes with the analytic approach that dominated twentieth century Irish folklore scholarship.

During the final two decades of the nineteenth century, when Wilde was writing his fairy tales, this analytic approach, introduced by Patrick Kennedy and developed and championed by Douglas Hyde, was fast gaining ground but it did not meet with universal support. Writing in 1888, W. B. Yeats approved a creative approach to folklore:

The various collectors of Irish folklore have, from our point of view, one great merit, and from the point of view of others, one great fault. They have made their work literature rather than science.²⁰⁸

Oscar Wilde opened his review of Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* by citing this passage. He, like Yeats, favoured an imaginative approach to folklore over the reductive, analytical one that subsequently dominated folklore

²⁰⁸ Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 6.

scholarship internationally and in Ireland. Writing in 1886, two years before his review of Yeats's anthology, Wilde notes:

Folklore is so often treated nowadays merely from the point of view of the comparative mythologist, that it is really delightful to come across a book that deals with the subject simply as literature. For the Folk-tale is the father of all fiction as the Folk-song is the mother of all poetry; and in the games, the tales and the ballads of primitive people it is easy to see the germs of such perfected forms of art as the drama, the novel and the epic.²⁰⁹

Wilde wrote his fairy tales at a time when the distinction between folklore as the property of particular communities and fiction as the product of an individual brain had been proposed but not clearly established. The link between authentic Irish folk narrative and the Irish language, articulated by Hyde, had yet to be accepted as it came to be during the course of the twentieth century. In order to appreciate Wilde's recourse to the Irish folk tradition in his fairy tales, it will be necessary to remember that he viewed it as a figurative discourse which he, as a creative artist, could mould to his individual requirements.

²⁰⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Poetry of the People', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 May 1886; reprinted in Oscar Wilde, *A Critic in Pall Mall* (London: Methuen, 1919), 29-32, (p. 29).

Chapter Two: The Literary Fairy Tale

Wilde's stories display a breadth of reference and a degree of stylistic innovation and linguistic sophistication that are not found within even the most liberally defined Irish folk tradition. Accordingly, this chapter will attempt to define and explore the rise of the literary fairy tale in order to expand the contextual framework set out in the first chapter on Irish folklore.

The Concept of the Literary Fairy Tale

It is as difficult to define the literary fairy tale as it is to propose a fluid yet generically distinct definition of Irish folklore. It is not essential that small, sometimes mischievous, sometimes beneficent, supernatural beings feature for a narrative to be classed as a fairy tale, but often some form of magical event or transformation is part of the story. The term 'fairy tale' is often used to describe the category of story classified as a tale of magic in the Aarne/Thompson system. Neil Philip defines it as a 'family drama in which the characters, by means of a series of transformations, discover their true selves'.¹ However, while self-discovery is a feature of some fairy tales, not all are family dramas. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne claims: 'The theme of all fairytales is the quest for love and marriage'.² As we shall see, although that quest is a common theme in fairy tales, it is not essential. The fairy tale is generally a brief narrative in simple language that details a reversal of fortune, features a hero or heroine, helpers and adversaries, ends

¹ Neil Philip 'Creativity and Tradition in the Fairy Tale', in *A Companion to the Fairy Tale* ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudri (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003) pp. 39-55, (p. 41).

² Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, 'International Folktales', in *The Field Day Anthology*, iv, pp. 1214-1218, (p. 1215).

happily with a wedding, and/or the winning of wealth or a kingdom.³ The German theorist, Jens Tismar, suggests that the following four principles can be used to categorise the literary fairy tale:

1. as it is written by a single, identifiable author, it can be distinguished from the oral folk tale that emanates from communities;
2. it tends to be more artificial and elaborate than the simple, anonymous folk tale;
3. the differences between the literary fairy tale and the oral folk tale do not mean that one genre is superior to the other;
4. the literary fairy tale is not an independent genre as it can only be understood and defined by its relationship to other genres including legends, novels and novellas, in addition to the oral and other literary fairy tales that it adapts and remodels to reflect the narrative conceptions of the author.⁴

Tismar's recognition that the literary fairy tale is not an independent genre indicates that the literary fairy tale is a mutant product of the oral folktale that it emulates or adapts. This recognition provides an interesting perspective from which to explore its development and relationship to oral folk tales. This exploration should facilitate an analysis of how Wilde's fairy tales relate to both genres. For the purposes of this research, a literary fairy tale is a story which displays all the following characteristics:

³ Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'Helpers and Adversaries in Fairy Tales', in Davidson and Chaudri, eds, pp. 99-122, (p. 99); Ruth B. Bottigheimer, 'Fairy and Folk-tales', in *International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature* ed. by Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 152-165, (p. 152).

⁴ Cited by Jack Zipes, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. xv.

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1. committed to print, it is identifiable with a particular author (perhaps masquerading as an editor);
2. although it may contain folklore motifs, the structure, style, and choice of linguistic register reflect the preference of the author;
3. it has some form of recourse to the supernatural, though this may be limited to the appearance of talking animals or flowers.

As part of the oral folk tradition, fairy tales and legends are associated with a less-educated stratum of a civilised, literate society; literary fairy tales, on the other hand, depend on writing and are associated with a readership that belongs to an elite culture. While there is a distinction between them, the literary fairy tale is a mutant product of oral folk narratives. Literary fairy tales freely borrow plots, tropes and motifs from oral folktales as situations, characters, and outcomes are transferred to literary stories. This dependence of the literary fairy tale on oral folktales produces thematic similarities between the two genres. However, the two tend to differ considerably in terms of characterisation and style. The hero of a traditional folktale is rarely endowed with any psychological depth or particular individuality, whereas the hero of the literary fairy tale is. In order to promote memorability, the oral folktale tends to divulge only necessary information so its narrative style tends to be sparse and focused. By contrast, the literary fairy tale can indulge in lush descriptions, general digressions, and poetic interludes. Despite these stylistic differences, literary fairy tales and oral tales of magic affirm the existence of a metaphysical dimension within the universe, and promulgate a belief in the existence of some form of numinous or divine element that impinges on the mundane realm of quotidian human life.

To appreciate the ways in which Wilde's fairy tales engage with the genre of the literary fairy tale, it will be helpful to discuss its establishment as a recognised, albeit marginal, genre in seventeenth-century France. An exploration of the work of Madame d'Aulnoy (1650/51-1705) will show that her recourse to the fairy tale involved a transformation of tradition involving linguistic sophistication and stylistic excess, features that are also found in Wilde's fairy tales. Her stories, first translated into English in 1699, were extremely popular on the other side of the Channel from the eighteenth century onwards.⁵ At the end of the nineteenth century, they featured in Andrew Lang's coloured Fairy Books.⁶ While Wilde may have read her fairy tales, my argument is not that he modelled his work on hers, but rather that the mingling of tradition and innovation, within the literary fairy tale, appeals, across cultures and centuries, to sophisticated writers whose work is concerned with aesthetic experimentation.

Beginnings of the Literary Fairy Tale

The literary fairy tale emerged as a recognisable genre in Italy during the sixteenth century, with the publication of Giovan Francesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* [*The pleasant nights*] (1550-1553). This was followed, almost a century later, by Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* [*The tale of tales*] (1634-1636). Both contain literary renditions of traditional folktales within a framing narrative. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Italian experimentation with the

⁵ Jacques Barchilon, 'Introduction', Mme d'Aulnoy, *Contes I: Les Contes des Fées: édition du tricentenaire*, texte établi et annoté par Philippe Hourcade (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1997), pp. v-lvi, (p. xlii). See also Ruth Bottigheimer, 'The Ultimate Fairy Tale: Oral Transmission in a Literate World', in Davidson and Chaudri, eds., pp. 57-70, (p. 65).

⁶ For example, *The Blue Fairy Book* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1889) contained adaptations of 'Le Nain Jaune', 'La Chatte Blanche', 'La Belle aux Cheveux d'Or' and 'Le Mouton', while *The Red Fairy Book* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1890) contained adaptations of 'La Princesse Printanière', 'La bonne petite Souris', 'Gracieuse et Percinet' and 'Le Rameau d'Or'.

transformation of folk narratives into literary tales had diminished.⁷ In France, it took off in salons attended by aristocratic, educated women. The salon fairy tale ‘belonged to a realm where conversation was an art pushed to its perfection’.⁸ The consideration of Wilde’s Irishness was one of the major paradigms guiding academic scholarship on Oscar Wilde at the end of the twentieth century. Working within this paradigm, Deirdre Toomey argues that Wilde’s genius for spinning tales to different audiences resulted from his familiarity with the oral traditions of Ireland.⁹ However, Jacques Barchilon’s observation that Mme d’Aulnoy’s witty, ironic humour has much in common with the English tradition exemplified by Oscar Wilde suggests another perspective from which to explore Wilde’s conversational prowess – that of the privileged salon, whether presided over by Speranza or the *Précieuses*.¹⁰

Mme d’Aulnoy frequently attended the salon of Mme Lambert, opened in 1692, where the vogue for telling fairy tales really took off. One of her contemporaries, Mme de Murat, felt that d’Aulnoy’s conversation outshone her written work: ‘J’ai fort connu Mme d’Aulnoy, on ne s’ennuyait jamais avec elle, et sa conversation vive et enjouée était bien au-dessus de ses livres’ [I knew Mme d’Aulnoy well, one was never bored with her, and her lively, cheerful conversation was far superior to her written work].¹¹ Wilde, too, was an accomplished raconteur, renowned for his brilliant conversation. W.B. Yeats remembered him primarily as ‘an excellent talker’, whose ‘plays and dialogues have what merit they

⁷ See Nancy L. Canepa and Antonella Ansani, ‘Introduction’, in *Out of the Woods: The Origins of the Literary Fairy Tale in Italy and France*, ed by Nancy L. Canepa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 9-33, (pp. 10-12).

⁸ Claire-Lise Malarte-Feldman, ‘Perrault’s *Contes*: An irregular Pearl of Classical Literature’, in Canepa ed., pp. 99-128, (p. 114).

⁹ Toomey, ‘The Story-Teller at Fault’, pp. 24-35.

¹⁰ Barchilon, p. xxxii.

¹¹ Cited in Barchilon, p. xxx.

possess from being now an imitation, now a record of his talk'.¹² The similar recourse of these two gifted conversationalists to oral tale-telling and fairy tale publication reminds us that Wilde's predilection for weaving marvellous tales is multi-determined rather than simply attributable to his Gaelic heritage.

The first French literary fairy tale, 'L'Ile de la Felicité', appeared in 1690, embedded within Mme d'Aulnoy's novel, *Histoire d'Hypolite*. Within the next decade, numerous collections of fairy tales by various authors, most of whom were aristocratic women, appeared in print and the genre became increasingly popular.¹³ At face value, the fairy tale, associated as it was with women, children and the lower classes, and with miraculous transformations, was an innocuous, even frivolous, narrative form that seemed to bear little relationship to the social and political complexities of the French society that spawned it. On the other hand, as Michèle L. Farrell points out, its very frivolity could be used as a defence enabling writers to escape the censure brought to bear on other literary forms.¹⁴ This resulted in a greater potential for social criticism and literary experimentation than that afforded by more canonical genres.¹⁵ Mme d'Aulnoy's literary fairy tales are characterised by their use of stylised diction, lush descriptions and embellished language.¹⁶ They draw on literary sources, including Basile and Straparola, as well

¹² Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 172.

¹³ These collections included Mlle L'Héritier's *Oeuvres Meslées* (1696); Mlle de la Force's *Les Contes des Contes* (1698); Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697); Henriette de Murat's *Contes des feés* (1698); Nodot's *Histoire de Mélusine* (1698) in addition to Mme d'Aulnoy's *Les Contes des Fées*, 4 vols (1697-1698).

¹⁴ Michèle L. Farrell, 'Celebration and Repression of Feminine Desire in Mme d'Aulnoy's Fairy Tale: La Chatte blanche', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 29:3 (1989) 52-64, (pp. 52-53).

¹⁵ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Traditions* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 39, notes: 'writers saw the fairy tale as a narrative strategy to criticise Louis XIV'.

¹⁶ Mary E. Storer, *Un épisode littéraire de la fin du 17e siècle: La mode des contes de fées (1685-1700)* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1972), p. 41.

as on the oral folk tradition.¹⁷ Jacques Barchilon points out that, in her corpus of twenty-five stories, oral tale types are so ingenuously transformed into literary tales that it is practically impossible to distinguish between newly invented material and material that originates in the popular tradition.¹⁸

In d'Aulnoy's story, 'Belle-Belle ou le chevalier Fortuné', traditional motifs acquire fresh significance when presented in a new way. 'Belle-Belle' tells the story of the youngest daughter of an impoverished father, who disguises herself as a soldier when the king decrees that all families must send one soldier to aid the war effort or pay a punitive tax. On her way to court, she helps an old lady, who turns out to be a fairy, to retrieve a sheep, and meets seven magic helpers. At court, the king takes a shine to her and his sister, the dowager queen, falls in love with her. After several adventures, aided by the seven helpers, Belle-Belle, or Fortuné as she is now known, marries the king. The story draws on the international folktale, 'A Girl Disguised as a Man is Wooed by the Queen' (Aarne-Thompson Type 884A), and contains several Aarne-Thompson motifs including H (tests) and L (reversal of fortune). As the framework of the story circulated amongst the French peasantry, it probably engendered a communal wish fulfilment as a courageous farmer's daughter ousted the lascivious queen and married the king, signifying that innate virtue was preferable to noble blood, and that such virtue would eventually be recognised and triumph over adversity.

D'Aulnoy's version, included in her second collection of fairy stories, *Contes Nouveaux ou Les Feés à la mode* [New Stories or Fairies in fashion] (1698), offers additional readings that highlight class tensions. It is embedded in a framing novella, 'Le Nouveau Gentilhomme Bourgeois', that tells of a self-

¹⁷ Barchilon, pxxxvii; Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 172.

¹⁸ Barchilon, pxxxvi.

important, newly elevated nobleman's courtship of the overly refined daughter of an impoverished Normandy baron, who spends her time composing fairy tales. The baron, impressed by the young man's wealth, is anxious to arrange a match between the new lord and his daughter but does not want to appear overeager. Trying to be refined and sophisticated, the young man decides to write a fairy story, but finds it more difficult than envisaged. A local prior, advisor of the baron, comes to the rescue by offering a fairy story that he claims to have just finished writing. Unknown to the young man, the prior has stolen the copybook from which he reads the story of Belle-Belle from the bedroom of the baron's daughter.

The framing story introduces various themes including the impoverishment of provincial nobility, the rise of the merchant classes and the clerical corruption that were features of French society at the time of publication. It playfully draws attention to the apparent disparity between the ideal world of the fairy stories created by the baron's daughter and the real world controlled by her father and the prior. The humorous handling of the question of authorship emphasises the difficulty of ascribing actual authorship of the embedded tale, drawn from oral tradition, to Mme d'Aulnoy. Finally, as the framing narrative alludes to works by Racine, Molière, Rabelais, and Cervantes, it positions the embedded story within a broad, literary framework querying the nature of civility.

The story of Belle-Belle itself opens with a portrait of 'un roi fort aimable, fort doux, & fort puissant' [a very likeable, very gentle and very powerful king].¹⁹ A more powerful emperor has just vanquished this exemplary king, a clear reminder that no monarch is invincible. Belle-Belle, who eventually goes on to save the kingdom, is the daughter of a nobleman. Her story can be read as an

¹⁹ Mme d'Aulnoy, *Contes II. Contes Nouveaux ou Les Fées à la Mode: édition du tricentenaire*, texte établi et annoté par Philippe Hourcade (Paris: Société des des Textes Français Modernes, 1998), p. 215.

ironic reversal of the progressive loss of status experienced by French noblemen from the time of Richelieu onwards. Nevertheless, the implied vindication of provincial nobility has to be set against the framing story's demonstration of that self-same nobility's cupidity and self-interest, in the form of the baron's elaborate machinations to secure a wealthy husband for his daughter. Despite her use of timeless motifs like a fairy benefactress, magical helpers and a royal wedding, d'Aulnoy's story embodies the political tension of her contemporary moment.

The issue of coded criticism raises the question of the intended audience for d'Aulnoy's stories. The framing narratives suggest that they are primarily intended for adult audiences, a suggestion substantially borne out by an examination of some of the frontispieces of early editions of her work. One of these shows a woman dressed in flowing robes and a headpiece associated with a Sybil, another presents a woman addressing a group of fashionable adults in an elegant salon, while yet another features a figure like Athena, with a helmet on her head, in front of a group of adults.²⁰ D'Aulnoy's tales draw playful attention to their own fictiveness. When characters themselves are sceptical and suspicious about the workings of a plot, the resultant note of irony induces a sense of humorous complicity between narrator and reader. D'Aulnoy uses asides to cement this tentative bond. In 'La Princesse Printanière', the princess suffers for running away with her lover:

La princesse, affligée, courut dans le bois, déchirant ses beaux habits aux ronces, & sa peau blanche aux épines. Elle était égratignée comme si elle avait joué avec des chats. Voilà ce que c'est d'aimer les garçons, il n'en arrive que des peines.²¹

²⁰ See Elizabeth W. Harries, 'Fairy Tales about Fairy Tales: Notes on Canon Formation', in Canepa, ed., pp. 152-175, (pp. 160, 162-163) for reprints of these frontispieces.

²¹ d'Aulnoy, *Contes I*, pp. 177-178.

[The princess, distressed, ran through the wood, tearing her fine clothes on the brambles, and her white skin on the thorns. She was as scratched as if she had played with cats. This is what falling in love with boys entails, all you get is trouble].²²

The reader is invited to share the writer's deflationary, worldly approach to love.

Overall, it seems that Mme d'Aulnoy's fairy tales were intended for a sophisticated adult audience and had relevance in the world outside the nursery and the salon.

The emergence of the literary fairy tale in France coincided with the heated cultural debate of *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. This polemic, a continuation of sixteenth century debates about romance, opposed those who viewed classical texts as perfect models for all time against those who argued that French literature possessed qualities that rivalled and surpassed those of antiquity.²³ Charles Perrault (1628-1709), who opened the main phase of this dispute in 1687 by reading his poem 'Le Siècle de Louis le Grand', proclaiming the primacy of contemporary French literature to a meeting of the French Academy, is perhaps better known as a collector of fairy tales. He is particularly associated with retellings of traditional folktales in language simple enough to be understood by children. The publication in 1697 of *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, generally attributed to Perrault, the first collection of traditional French tales, and the first collection of fairy tales not to be included in a framing narrative, can be seen as a challenge to classicists who proclaimed the superiority of Greek and Latin over the local and the vernacular.²⁴

The full title of the original collection, *Les Contes de ma Mère Loye, Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez*, [Tales of Mother Goose,

²² All unattributed translations from French in this thesis are my own.

²³ Warner, p. 169.

²⁴ See Marc Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault: culture savante et traditions populaires*, rev. edn (Paris : Gallimard, 1978), pp. 22-29, for an account of the controversy about whether Perrault himself or his son produced the collection.

Stories or Tales of times past, with morals] seems to underline its didactic function. Unlike d'Aulnoy's elaborate tales, which are set within a framing story which reproduces the carefully formulated repartee that was part of salon culture, Perrault's stories are simply told, as if to children. However, if the volume was intended to make a point in *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, Perrault must have had an adult readership in mind, so that the accessibility of the language does not necessarily signify that it was intended only for children. As if to bear this out, the verse morals added to his stories complicate the issue of intended readership as they frequently address a worldly-wise adult, not a naïve child. One moral that Perrault suggests can be drawn from 'Cendrillon' is that resolve, courage, high birth are less useful for social advancement than patronage.²⁵ In a similar vein, the reader of 'Le Chat Botté' is told that 'l'industrie et le savoir-faire valent mieux que des biens acquis' [diligence and ingenuity are worth more than wealth acquired from others]. As the simple prose style of the stories themselves is accessible to a child reader, it seems that Perrault was addressing a dual audience.

Perrault's plain rendition of traditional stories varies considerably from Mme d'Aulnoy's more elaborate approach to incorporating folktale motifs in original literary fairy stories. Both Perrault's 'La Belle au Bois Dormant' and d'Aulnoy's 'La Biche au Bois' open with a description of a childless royal couple. Perrault's version is clear, succinct and simply stated:

Il était une fois un Roi et une Reine qui étaient si fâchés de n'avoir pas d'enfants, si fâchés qu'on ne saurait. Ils allèrent à toutes les eaux du monde, vœux, pèlerinages, menus dévotions, tout fut mis en oeuvre, et rien n'y faisait. Enfin pourtant la reine devint grosse et accoucha d'une fille: on fit un beau Baptême; on donna pour Marraines à la petite Princesse toutes les fées qu'on pût trouver dans le Pays (il s'en trouva sept), afin que chacune d'elles lui faisant un don, comme c'était la coutume des Fées en ce temps là, la Princesse eût par ce moyen toutes les perfections imaginables.²⁶

²⁵ Charles Perrault, *Contes*, édition présentée et annotée par Nathalie Froloff (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 101, 87.

²⁶ Perrault, p. 58.

Once upon a time there was a king and queen who were grieved beyond words at not having children. They went to all the spas of the world, made vows, pilgrimages, meticulous religious devotions, did everything possible, all to no avail. Eventually, however, the queen became pregnant and gave birth to a little girl: there was a wonderful christening; all the fairies that could be found in the land (seven in all) acted as godmothers to the little princess and as each one gave her a present, as was the custom at that time, the princess received every conceivable, desirable gift.

This opening hurtles along, bypassing even a supernatural explanation for the messy business of conception. It sets up a disjunction between the time of the tale's action and that of its narration that makes the tale belong, as the title of the collection suggests, to a bygone era.

D'Aulnoy's opening, on the other hand, is more elaborate and detailed. It hints at complex psychological motivations, and delights in describing the beauty of material artefacts and the sensuality of the natural world:

Il était une fois un roi et une reine dont l'union était parfaite; ils s'aimaient tendrement & leurs sujets les adoraient. Mais il manquait à la satisfaction des uns & des autres de leur voir sans un héritier. La reine, qui était persuadée que le roi l'aimerait encore davantage si elle en avait un, ne manquait pas au printemps d'aller boire des eaux qui étaient excellentes. L'on y venait en foule, & le nombre d'étrangers était si grand, qu'il s'en trouvait là de toutes les parties du monde. Il y avait plusieurs fontaines dans un grand bois où l'on allait boire. Elles étaient entourées de marbre & de porphyre, car chacun se piquait de les embellir. Un jour que la reine était assise au bord de la fontaine, elle dit à toutes ses dames de s'éloigner & de la laisser seule. Puis elle commença ses plaintes ordinaires : 'Ne suis-je pas bien malheureuse, dit-elle, de n'avoir point d'enfants! Les plus pauvres femmes en ont, il y a cinq ans que j'en demande au Ciel : mourrai-je sans avoir cette satisfaction ?'²⁷

Once upon a time, there was a king and queen whose marriage was perfect; they loved each other tenderly and their subjects adored them. But everyone was unhappy that they had no children. The queen, who was convinced that the king would love her even more if she had a child, always went in springtime to drink some sparkling waters. Great crowds came there, and one could find people from all over the world amongst the visitors.

There were several fountains in a great wood where people went to drink. They were surrounded with marble and porphyry, because everyone took pride in decorating them. One day when the queen was sitting at the edge of the fountain, she told all her ladies-in-waiting to go away and leave her alone. Then she began her usual supplications: 'Am I not miserable, she said, not to have children! The poorest women have them, but I've been asking heaven for one for five years: will I die without having this satisfaction?'

During the course of the next twelve paragraphs, a crayfish emerges from the fountain, and turns into an old woman who leads the queen through a hidden

²⁷d'Aulnoy, *Contes II*, pp. 87-88.

passage woven from interlacing rushes, jasmine and orange trees to a glittering palace. There she meets six fairies who present her with flowers and tell her she will have a beautiful daughter. They remind the queen to call them at the birth of the child, who is to be called Desirée, and lead her into a beautiful garden filled with exquisite fruit trees. When Desirée is born, the Queen calls the fairies, who shower the baby with material gifts, but forgets to invite the crayfish, with disastrous results. Throughout the opening paragraphs, d'Aulnoy weaves together delicate, descriptive narrative strands to create a glittering linguistic cascade which resembles the fountain she describes.

The differing tone and emphasis carry through to the conclusion of the two stories. D'Aulnoy's concluding verse moral advocates that a young girl needs time to mature before entering the world and appreciating the value of reciprocal true love.²⁸ Perrault's tongue in cheek conclusion acknowledges that the type of young woman who is prepared to wait one hundred years for true love no longer exists and that as it is unrealistic to expect young lovers to defer gratification of their desires, they should marry as soon as possible.²⁹ D'Aulnoy's idealistic moral, therefore, emphasises the unselfish nature of a love that is as much spiritual as physical, while Perrault's worldly one advises a pragmatic approach to ardent sexual desire.

As we have seen, the fairy tale offered sophisticated writers, like Mme d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault, a malleable form with which they could experiment for literary or moral effect. Like his French predecessors, Wilde, in writing fairy tales, chose a marginal genre and showed how versatile it could be. Like Perrault, he used the fairy tale to address a dual audience of adults and

²⁸ d'Aulnoy, *Contes II*, p. 129.

²⁹ Perrault, p. 69.

children, but unlike Perrault or d'Aulnoy, he did not draw the reader's attention to the moral of his stories. His elaborate, enigmatic fairy tales have much in common with those of Mme d'Aulnoy: as we shall see, they are stylised, self-consciously literary creations that draw on a variety of oral and literary sources, and that combine traditional motifs and literary innovation in complex, complementary ways.

The work commonly known as *The Arabian Nights* is one obvious oral and literary source for the oriental imagery that pervades Wilde's fairy tales. Antoine Galland's 1704 translation into French of this sprawling work, which exists in several forms and versions and which contains tales that can be traced back to ancient Indian, Arab and Persian oral traditions, fired the European literary imagination.³⁰ Galland's version, translated into English in 1706 and German in 1710, tapped into a widespread interest in the Orient that had been stimulated by trade and travel accounts, and proved an immediate success with the literate classes. During the course of the eighteenth century, cheap chap-books diffused tales from the collection and they gradually became absorbed into the oral traditions of various European countries. Versions suitable for children were published from the closing years of the eighteenth century.³¹ During the nineteenth century, three new English translations aimed at adult readers appeared.³² In writing stylised, sometimes exotic, literary fairy tales, Wilde was drawing on a French tradition that included not only the original renditions of traditional

³⁰ For a full account of Galland's translation and the various Arabic texts it drew on, see Robert Irwin *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

³¹ Gillian Avery, 'George MacDonald and the Victorian Fairy Tale', in *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald*, ed. by William Raeper (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 126-139, (p. 128).

³² These were Edward Lane's *Arabian Nights* (1838-1841), John Payne's *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* (1882-1884) and Richard Burton's ten volume *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885). For an account of the popularity and pervasive influence of these collections see *The Arabian Nights in English Literature* ed. by Peter L. Caracciolo (London: Macmillan, 1988).

material provided by the *Précieuses* and Perrault, but also the influential translations of Antoine Galland.

The German Literary Fairy Tale

Like its Italian and French predecessors, the German literary fairy tale, which emerged as a recognisable genre in the final decade of the eighteenth century, drew on motifs and themes familiar from oral folklore and on literary predecessors. With the rise of German Romanticism, the literary fairy tale was increasingly employed as a paradigm for educating the imagination.³³ Although their creators referred to their texts as *Märchen*, later critics have described them as *Kunstmärchen* in order to differentiate between the German literary fairy tale and the oral folk tale that it simulates or adapts for a literate audience. The genre originated with Goethe (1749-1832), whose *Das Märchen*, or *The Fairy Story* (1795) features folktale motifs and characters, including a destructive giant and an enchanted princess, and insists on the viability of an ideal world in which ‘universal happiness will dissolve all individual pain’.³⁴ Following Goethe’s lead, writers, including Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, and E. T. A. Hoffmann produced complex, metaphorical tales that sought to engage an adult reader in a serious discourse about art, philosophy, education and love. A brief look at the work of these writers will illustrate that their fairy tales display a number of important characteristics that also feature in Wilde’s fairy tales.

³³ Bottigheimer, ‘Fairy and Folk-tales’, p. 154.

³⁴ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, ‘The Fairy Tale’, in *Romantic Fairy Tales*, ed. and trans. by Carol Tully (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 1-32, (p. 23).

Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853)

Ludwig Tieck's *Volksmärchen* (1797) contained a number of stories based on German folktales, but it also included an original story, 'Fair Eckbert', which provided a model for later fairy tale writers, including Hoffmann.³⁵ It tells the story of how Fair Eckbert becomes embroiled in a nightmare world of retribution in which 'the supernatural became confused with the everyday' so that it becomes impossible to differentiate between innocence and guilt, reality and illusion. The story ends on a note of apocalyptic cacophony:

Now totally out of his mind, Eckbert lay on the ground, dying, his head filled with the confused babble of the old woman talking, the dog barking and the bird singing its song over and over again.³⁶

As death offers no relief to the demented Eckbert, this bleak ending offers no hope of redemption from the misery of human existence.

In another original story, 'The Runenberg' (1802), Tieck posits the possibility of an alternative, though dubiously desirable, existence. The protagonist, Christian, like Yeats's 'Man who Dreamed of Faeryland', is torn between the dubious attractions of fairyland and the comforts of everyday existence. Eventually, he abandons his family to embark on a quest for a different way of life, returning briefly years later, looking sinister and dishevelled. He tells his abandoned wife, Elizabeth, that he must rejoin his beautiful lover, who waits for him in the forest. As Elizabeth watches him join 'the horrible old woman of the woods', her reaction is one of pity, mixed with bewilderment and fear.³⁷ To himself, he is a liberated soul who has tasted the visionary joys of fairyland; to the rational observer, he is a deluded madman. Tieck's narrator has provided sufficient

³⁵ Ralph Tymms, *German Romantic Literature* (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 81.

³⁶ Ludwig Tieck, 'Eckbert the Fair', in *Six German Romantic Tales* (London: Angel, 1985), ed. and trans. by Ronald Taylor, pp. 16-33, (p. 33).

³⁷ Ludwig Tieck, 'The Runenberg', in Taylor ed., pp. 34-55, (p. 55).

evidence to suggest that both judgements have some validity. The final insistence on the ambiguity of perception renders definitive interpretation impossible.

Novalis (1772-1801)

Novalis (the pen-name, meaning 'preparer of new land', chosen by Friedrich von Hardenberg) believed that the literary fairy tale should become the prophetic voice of the creative individual, whose imagination could produce order from chaos and use the lessons of the past and the contradictions of the present to weave a vision of an ideal future.³⁸ His major fairy tales, 'Hyacinth and Roseblossom' and 'Klingsohrs Märchen', both published posthumously in 1802, are allegories that dispense with the actual world. 'Klingsohrs Märchen' which reworks the motif of the lifeless court familiar from 'The Sleeping Beauty', is important to a consideration of Wilde's fairy tales because it introduces the theme of the child saviour to the literary fairy tale. The thread of the action is woven by Fable, who presumably represents the power of art or of the word. Although she is a child, she alone has the innocence and courage required to confront the horrors of the underworld, and the imaginative vision necessary to achieve the redemption of the court, thus creating a new order. As we shall see, George MacDonald, an admirer of Novalis, used the same device of an imaginative little girl who negotiates between the upper and lower worlds to create a new order in *The Princess and the Goblins* (1871). Novalis can be seen as the forefather of MacDonald and Wilde in his development of the literary fairy tale as the vehicle of an aesthetic, spiritual philosophy based on the victory of an ideal childlike imagination over forces inimical to self-realisation.

³⁸ Donald Hasse, 'Novalis', in Zipes, ed., *Oxford Companion*, pp. 356-358.

Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (1777-1843)

Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811, and first translated into English 1818), based on a German legend, is a long, highly stylised celebration of the ambiguous power of love, set in an idealised medieval world. The protagonist of his story is the charming, unpredictable water nymph, Undine, the ward of two humble fisherfolk. In order to gain a soul, Undine must marry a man who will never betray her. She falls in love with the handsome knight, Huldbrand, and, despite her beloved's reservations about her strange behaviour, the young couple marry with the blessing of an understanding priest. Undine, now imbued with a soul, becomes capable of selfless love and Huldbrand's love for Undine is still sufficient to offset his doubts about her. All goes well until they meet Bethalda, the ward of a powerful duke, who is actually the long-lost daughter of the fisherfolk. Bethalda is appalled when Undine reveals her lowly origins. Huldbrand becomes estranged from Undine and begins to fall in love with Bethalda. Despite her selfless attempts to thwart an evil destiny, a weeping Undine is finally forced by the law of the elemental world, to which she once belonged and has now been returned, to kill Huldbrand. As a bright silver stream encircles his grave, the love which Undine bore for him leaves a lasting monument to their unhappy love: 'Many years later, so the story goes, the inhabitants of the village still pointed to the stream, firm in their belief that it was the poor, rejected Undine whose kindly arms still embraced her lover.'³⁹

³⁹Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Undine*, in Tully ed., pp. 53-127, p. 125.

E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822)

We know from his letters that Wilde was familiar with, and admired, the work of E. T. A. Hoffmann.⁴⁰ Hoffmann's use of humour and irony are amongst his most valuable contributions to the development of the literary fairy tale. His stories develop the theme of the alienated hero, familiar from Tieck, and often feature a recognisable, contemporary urban background which contrasts with the timeless world of myth.⁴¹ This contrast, which enables him to use the timeless form of the fairy tale to comment on contemporary issues, separates him both from Novalis, whose fairy tales dispensed with reality, and from Tieck, whose fairy stories were set against an idealised, medieval background. A brief exploration of one of Hoffmann's best-known tales, 'The Golden Pot' (1814), will show how he explored the tension between recalcitrant, but ineluctable, reality and the ideal world of the imagination.

The main action of 'The Golden Pot' unfolds in Dresden, an ordinary German town, inhabited by unimaginative academics and bureaucrats. The hero of the story is the young student, Anselmus, a sensitive youth with a peculiar receptivity to the supernatural and the mystical. This receptivity marks him as a figure of the Romantic artist, whose ardent longing draws him forward towards a lofty goal. Confronted by the enchanting eyes of a snake, he finds himself possessed by passionate longing: 'And as Anselmus gazed ever more deeply into those magnificent eyes, his yearning grew more intense, his desire more ardent.'⁴² The snake as the embodiment of an enchanted woman is a feature of European Mélusine legends which tell of marriages between men and supernatural or

⁴⁰ See *Complete Letters* p. 393.

⁴¹ This contrast is a feature of both 'The Golden Pot' (1814) and 'The Artushof' (1816).

⁴² E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'The Golden Pot', in *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, trans. and ed. by Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 1-83, (pp. 5-6).

enchanted women. In Hoffmann's story, the snake turns out to be Serpentina, daughter of Archivist Lindhorst. In familiar fairy tale fashion, Anselmus must pass a test set by her father to win her hand. He falters as he contemplates marriage to Veronica, the worldly rival of the ethereal Serpentina, who is filled with dreams of social advancement, and entirely lacking in any spiritual aspiration. When he shows heartfelt regret for his loss of faith, Anselmus is united with Serpentina. If 'The Golden Pot' sounds solemn and pretentious, it is because the foregoing résumé lacks the deflating, ironic humour that suffuses Hoffman's exploration of the benefits and sacrifices involved in pursuing an imaginative, spiritual ideal.

Significance of German Literary Fairy Tales

The German literary fairy tale pits idealism against materialism, privileges imagination over realism and suffuses everyday existence with a sense of transcendent spirituality. A comparison between the work of Tieck and Hoffmann reveals a move away from reliance on folklore motifs towards a more original approach to the creation of allegorical literary fairy tales, which highlights the importance of imagination. This championing of imagination can be seen as a rejection of Enlightenment ideals, and a reaction against a contemporary valorisation of empiricism. As we shall see, the legacy of German Romantic writers of literary fairy tales resurfaces in the work of later writers of literary fairy tales in English, most notably Wilde himself and George MacDonald, who were opposed to the utilitarian, materialistic ethos of Victorian England. To varying degrees, the fairy tales written by these two authors combine the humour of Hoffman, the bleakness of Tieck, and the ambiguous spirituality of Fouqué and Novalis. Their reworking of the themes of German Romanticism partly reflects a

re-evaluation of German culture in England during the course of the nineteenth century.

The English reading public generally regarded German culture with distaste and disapproval during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was responsible for fostering and developing an informed, pervasive English interest in German literature through a series of translations and critical articles, beginning in the 1820s.⁴³ Most importantly for the purposes of this study, he published *German Romance: Specimens of its chief authors with biographical and critical notices* in 1827. This influential translation of German literary fairy tales, which included Tieck's 'Fair Eckbert' and 'The Runenberg' and Hoffman's 'The Golden Pot', introduced English readers to the world of the German Romantics and presented their work as a coherent literary movement. This volume, along with his other attempts to establish the value of German literature, were successful to the extent that its study was no longer regarded with suspicion or hostility in England in 1840.⁴⁴ Indeed, Gillian Avery claims that the impetus behind the explosion of Victorian fantasy writing for children came from the German tradition.⁴⁵

Wilde found Germany and its language less than scintillating.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, his fairy tales do show continuity with those written by German Romantics. *Kunstmärchen* are often open-ended and enigmatic; their reversal and re-utilisation of traditional motifs compels the reader to take a critical and creative approach to interpretation; the protagonist is often an alienated artist and the

⁴³ Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English writers and the reception of German thought 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 21-23.

⁴⁴ Ashton, p.147.

⁴⁵ Avery, 'George MacDonald', p. 129.

⁴⁶ See *Complete Letters*, p. 409.

ending is rarely happy.⁴⁷ While Wilde's enigmatic fairy tales similarly eschew happy endings, rework traditional motifs, resist definitive interpretation, and depict alienated heroes, it is difficult to assess the degree of his familiarity with German literary fairy tales. We know that he read and admired Goethe when he was a student and that he thought highly of Hoffmann.⁴⁸ Wilde and his mother were on friendly terms with Thomas Carlyle and Carlyle's desk took pride of place in Wilde's study in the house in Tite Street.⁴⁹ It seems reasonable to suggest that Wilde may have read Carlyle's *German Romance*. Sir William Wilde's library included Tieck's complete works, four volumes of Jean Paul's work (Jean Paul, 1763-1825, was a novelist renowned for works of fantasy which combined realism with romantic sentimentality), and five volumes of Goethe's work, as well as a number of unspecified novels in German.⁵⁰ Throughout his lifetime, Oscar Wilde had access to a wide variety of German literature, including literary fairy stories, so they may well have influenced his own ironic, and at times less than optimistic, investigation of the relationship between the ideal and the actual.

Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) and Fairy Tales for Children

Critics have continually compared Wilde to Hans Christian Andersen, often using Andersen's work as the criterion of suitability of fairy tales for children.⁵¹ I will argue in Chapter Three that Wilde deliberately alludes to Andersen in order to complicate his own investigation of themes including narcissism, selflessness, the

⁴⁷ Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 65, identifies these characteristics as typical of the *Kunstmärchen*.

⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, ed. by Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 135; *Complete Letters* p. 393.

⁴⁹ Coakley, *The Importance of being Irish*, pp. 1, 155; Melville, p. 192.

⁵⁰ 'Catalogue of William Wilde'.

⁵¹ See Beckson, p. 60; Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 56-57.

relationship between love and death, and the relative merits of nature and artifice, which were previously explored by the Dane. A consideration here of Andersen's contribution to the development of the literary fairy tale will prepare the way for that argument.

Born to poor parents, Andersen had little formal education as a child but was familiar with oral and literary fairy tales from an early age.⁵² His awareness of both traditions awakened his imagination to the power of fantasy as a means of understanding, escaping and transcending personal circumstances. He continually experimented with other genres, publishing poetry, a comic fantasy, travel accounts and a successful novel, and writing unsuccessful plays and an early autobiography, before he began to publish fairy tales.

His first collection, entitled *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn*, (*Tales, Told for Children*), a slim, unbound paper-covered booklet, containing four stories was published in May 1835.⁵³ 'The Tinderbox' was based partly on a Danish folktale, sometimes called 'The Spirit of the Candle', which itself parallels the story of Aladdin from the *Arabian Nights*, which in turn inspired *Aladdin* (1820), a romantic play by the Danish dramatist, Adam Oehlenschläger. 'Little Claus and Big Claus' is an adaptation of a common folktale, (Aarne Thompson Type 1535), recorded in various parts of Europe. 'The Princess and the Pea' reworks a Swedish tale, a variant of 'Puss in Boots', about a poor girl who goes out into the world accompanied by a cat who enables her to trick a prince into marriage.⁵⁴ 'Little Ida's Flowers' is Andersen's own invention. However, even when working with

⁵² Hans Christian Andersen, *The Story of my Life* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1871), reprinted as *The Fairy Tale of My Life* (London: Paddington Press, 1975), p. 8; see also Jackie Wullschlager, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller* (London: Allen Lane, 2000) pp. 11, 19.

⁵³ In a letter written on New Year's day, 1835, Andersen, cited in Wullschlager, p. 144, says: 'I am now starting on some "fairy tales for children". I am going to win over future generations'.

⁵⁴ See Elias Bredsdorff, *Hans Christian Andersen: the Story of his Life and Work, 1805-1875* (London: Phaidon Press, 1975), pp. 309-310.

familiar folkloric material, Andersen's early stories are literary recreations, rather than accurate transcriptions. He adds, changes, and deletes details, and, although the language is simple and direct, the tales are told in his own words. The collection initially met with little success: one of the few reviewers who deigned to comment on it criticised the stories for their lack of moral focus and their eschewal of literary diction.⁵⁵ The lack of critical support for the stories demoralised Andersen: 'I gave up writing them...I believed that I had found my true element in novel-writing'.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, he published a second volume in 1835 for the Christmas market. In it, he moved further away from oral sources by reworking literary versions of familiar stories: 'Thumbelina' was partly inspired by the Grimms' version of 'Tom Thumb' and partly by Hoffmann's *Meister Floh*, an hallucinatory tale of a diminutive heroine; 'The Naughty Boy' was based on Anacreon's poem about Cupid and 'The Travelling Companion' was a reworking of a Funen folktale.⁵⁷ A third volume containing the two earlier ones and two new stories – 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Emperor's New Clothes' – was published in 1836. 'The Little Mermaid' combines folk motifs with a reworking of de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811).⁵⁸ It also has close affinities with the story of 'Julnar the Sea-Born' from *The Arabian Nights*.⁵⁹ The outline for 'The Emperor's New Clothes' comes from a medieval Spanish collection of stories, *Libro de Patronia*, by Infante don Juan Manuel, itself based on earlier Arab and Jewish sources.⁶⁰ As

⁵⁵ Bredsdorff, p. 124; Alison Prince *Hans Christian Andersen: The Fan Dancer* (London: Watts, 2002) p. 164.

⁵⁶ Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, p. 135.

⁵⁷ See Wullschlager, 156-158; Prince, p. 169.

⁵⁸ Wullschlager, p. 169.

⁵⁹ Irwin, p. 101.

⁶⁰ See Wullschlager, p. 170 and Irwin, pp. 101-102, who say it is based on a story in the Turkish collection *The History of the Forty Viziers* or a variant version in *Conde Lucanor*.

Andersen mastered the form of the literary fairy tale, he became more inventive and original in his adaptation of traditional oral and literary motifs. Over his lifetime Andersen published one hundred and fifty six fairy tales and stories. Bengt Holbek points out that only seven of these ('The Travelling Companion', 'The Tinder Box', 'The Wild Swans', 'Little Claus and Big Claus', 'The Swineherd', 'All that Father Does is Right' and 'Simple Simon') 'are manifestly taken from Danish oral tradition'. Holbek argues that, in these stories, although Andersen uses the apparatus of traditional tales, 'instead of carrying the tradition on, he gives it a new direction, undoubtedly because he is transferring it to a new environment'.⁶¹

The subtitle of Andersen's first collections, *Told for Children*, indicates that they were primarily intended for a young audience.⁶² In the original Danish, the stories employ a conversational tone which Manfred Menzel argues is a deliberate narrative strategy adopted to create an effect of orality.⁶³ Full of puns, colloquialisms, grammatical inconsistencies and frequent humorous asides, the stories are readily accessible to children. However, Andersen later claimed that he included the subtitle to pre-empt criticisms of his lack of literary diction: 'my intention was that they should be for both young and old', adding that older people 'were interested in the deeper meaning'.⁶⁴ Alert to the possibilities offered by a dual audience, and reluctant to see his collections marginalised and trivialised by being perceived as juvenile, Andersen dropped the subtitle from collections published after 1843. His use of simple language undoubtedly made his stories

⁶¹ Bengt Holbek, 'Hans Christian Andersen's Use of Folktales', in Davidson and Chaudri eds., pp. 149-158 (pp. 149, 156).

⁶² Just before their first publication in 1835, Andersen, cited in Bredsdorff, p. 308, stated: 'I have written them completely as I would have told them to a child'.

⁶³ Manfred Menzel, 'Elements of Orality in the Fairy Tales of H. C. Andersen' http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/forskning/konference/tekst_e.html?id=10942 [accessed on 29 June 2004]

⁶⁴ Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, p. 204.

suitable for children, but it also was a way of rejecting literary convention and putting his own distinctive signature on his material. Andersen wrote in praise of the scope of the fairy tale: 'There flows a double stream through it: an ironic over-stream that plays shuttlecock with what is high and low; and then the deep under-stream, that honestly and truly brings all to its right place'.⁶⁵ He greatly admired Hoffman's fairy tales, which he believed embodied the Romantic notion of the divided self.⁶⁶ He aimed to write fairy tales in a style sufficiently simple to appeal to children but complex enough to offer something to adults. Unfortunately, his various early English translators did not appreciate this aim. As Brian Alderson points out, 'a gap nearly as wide as the North Sea itself existed between what the author originally wrote and what his English enthusiasts chose to publish'.⁶⁷

Four different English translations were published in 1846: Lady Duff-Gordon's translation of 'The Little Mermaid' which appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany*; Mary Howitt's *Wonderful Stories for Children*, Charles Boner's *A Danish Story Book* and Caroline Peachey's *Danish Fairy Tales and Legends*. Elias Bredsdorff notes that these Victorian translators substituted literary turns of phrase and archaisms for Andersen's more accessible phrases and everyday language.⁶⁸ Alison Price points out that translations of Andersen by worthy Victorians emphasised their sentimentality, destroyed their laconic, down-to-earth quality, and deflected attention away from his revolutionary use of demotic Danish.⁶⁹ In Caroline Peachey's translation of 'Great Claus and Little Claus', there is no sexual innuendo attaching to the sexton's presence in the farmer's house, as Peachey

⁶⁵ Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, p. 408.

⁶⁶ Wullschlager pp. 81-83.

⁶⁷ Brian Alderson, *Hans Christian Andersen and his Eventyr in England* (Hertfordshire: Five Owls Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁶⁸ Bredsdorff, pp. 334-335.

⁶⁹ Prince, p. 164.

explains that he ‘happened to be a first cousin of the farmer’s wife so they were old playmates and good friends’.⁷⁰ Brian Alderson notes that she completely removed the macabre events after Little Claus’s grandmother is killed. The translations were, therefore, less subversive and more mawkish than the originals.

Approximately twenty-seven different editions and volumes of Andersen’s stories in English translation appeared between 1846 and 1890 and he became one of the most widely read children’s authors in Victorian England. Notwithstanding this popularity, the later translations displayed the same type of infelicities as the early ones, particularly as English translators frequently used German translations as their source material. The first translator who came near to capturing Andersen’s conversational tone and ironic humour was R. Nisbet Bain in *The Little Mermaid and Other Stories*, published in 1893. In the introduction to this volume, Bain stresses the importance of capturing Andersen’s original tone: ‘All previous fairy tales had been *written* for children, his were *told* to them’. He goes on to note that Andersen ‘has not been happy in his translators’, noting that Mrs Howitt ‘committed blunders that would be the ruin of the average translator now-a-days’ while Miss Peachey ‘presumes to beautify and even bowdlerise him’. Various other translators miss ‘the humour of Andersen’, are guilty of ‘slavish literalness’ or ‘pedantic pedantry’, are ‘wooden and wayward’ or ‘feebly accurate and wildly slipshod’, and display ‘a perfect mania for moralising’.⁷¹

It seems that the versions of Andersen with which Wilde would have been familiar at the time he was writing his fairy tales were awkward, stilted translations that emphasised their sentimentality and conventional morality. In Chapter Three, I will argue that Wilde deliberately alludes to Andersen in a

⁷⁰ Cited in Alderson, *Eventyr in England*, p. 4.

⁷¹ R. Nisbet Bain, ‘Introduction’, *The Little Mermaid and Other Stories* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1893), pp. ix-xxiii, (pp. xv, xix, xxi, xxii).

number of his fairy tales. However, as he invariably deliberately inverts and subverts themes and motifs found in the Dane's stories, these allusions are not a form of mimicry or homage. Instead, they enable Wilde to imbue his tales with the type of ingenuity and inventiveness denied to Andersen by his English translators.

The Evolution of the English Literary Fairy Tale to 1860

Partly as a result of the popularity of the translations, or mistranslations, of Andersen's stories, the literary fairy tale became an increasingly popular genre in England during the second half of the nineteenth century. This development can be seen as one facet of a general Victorian fascination with fairyland, which was regarded as fit subject matter for painting, music and stage entertainment.⁷² The development of the English literary fairy tale was facilitated by the ready availability of material from other countries, including translations of European literary tales and of *The Arabian Nights*. In 1802, John Harris published *Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales* containing selections from d'Aulnoy and Perrault. In 1804, Benjamin Tabart began to publish a series of popular tales culminating in the publication of *Popular Fairy Tales* in 1818, which contained selections from *The Arabian Nights*, *Mother Goose* and Madame d'Aulnoy's collections. In 1818, a translation of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* appeared. In 1823, Edgar Taylor's translation of selected tales from *Kinder- and Hausmärchen* was issued as *German Popular Stories*, with illustrations by George Cruikshank. As we have seen, Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Tales and Legends of the South of Ireland* was published and became a popular success in 1825. Thomas Carlyle's *German Romances* were published in 1827. The 1840s witnessed the translation of *The*

⁷² See Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), pp. 225-235; Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 157-164.

Arabian Nights by Edwin Lane (1838-1841), Andersen's stories in 1846, and Anthony Montalba's *Fairy Tales of All Nations* in 1849.⁷³ The Norwegian folktales collected and published by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe in the 1840s were translated into English by G. W. Dassel in 1859. The burgeoning interest in folklore, and the popularity of translated fairy tales, fuelled the development of the Victorian literary fairy tale.

The development of a specific literature, in English, designed to entertain rather than simply instruct children dates from the publication of John Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket book* in 1744.⁷⁴ In 1802, Mrs Trimmer, one of the most vociferous opponents of exposing children to the pernicious influence of fairy tales, objected to them on four main grounds: they could be frightening; they had a low social status because they were associated with chap-books; they spread superstition and were anti-rational, and their depiction of bad family relationships undermined orthodox Christian values.⁷⁵ However, the Romantic elevation of imagination over reason lent a special appeal to fairy tales and by the middle of the nineteenth century, they formed part of the emerging canon of children's literature.⁷⁶ Bowdlerised translations of the work of the Grimm brothers contributed to the rehabilitation of the fairy tale.⁷⁷ As we have seen, Andersen's first collections, addressed to children, were sanitised on their translation into English. The association of fairy tales with the Victorian nursery meant that writers could use the form either to uphold conventional values or to covertly query them.

⁷³ Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, pp. 116-117.

⁷⁴ See John Rowe Townsend, 'John Newbery and Tom Telescope', in *Opening the Nursery Door*, ed. by Mary Hilton, Morag Styles and Victor Watson (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 80-88, (pp. 80-81).

⁷⁵ Nicholas Tucker, 'Fairy Tales and their Early Opponents: In Defence of Mrs Trimmer', in Hilton, Styles and Watson, eds. pp. 104-116, (pp. 107-110).

⁷⁶ See Zohar Shavit, *The Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 27.

⁷⁷ See Angela Bull, 'Fairy Tales for Pleasure', in Gillian Avery, *Nineteenth Century Children* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), pp. 121-137, (p. 122).

Jack Zipes argues that the main force behind the emergence of the Victorian literary fairy tale was the adult desire 'to recapture and retain childhood as a paradisiacal realm of innocence'.⁷⁸ However, childhood for a large number of Victorian children was far from ideal. Child mortality among the working classes has been variously estimated as being between thirty and fifty percent in the years between 1856 and 1879.⁷⁹ Despite the passing of the Children's Charter in 1833, which restricted ages and hours of employment, the exploitation of children continued.⁸⁰ The Victorian idealisation of childhood and its fascination with fairyland led to the production of memorable fairy tales for educated middle-class children that reflected class barriers of the time. Carole Silver argues that adult concerns with origin, evolution, race, class, and gender, find their way into the fairy literature written for Victorian children.⁸¹ This argument suggests that children's literature, produced, as it is, by adults, can never be seen as an independent genre and that Victorian fairy tales embodied tensions between contemporary perceptions of childhood and adulthood. U. C. Knoepfelmacher argues: 'In the better works of fantasy of the period, this dramatic tension between the outlooks of adult and childhood selves becomes rich and elastic'.⁸² Knoepfelmacher and Silver suggest that the Victorian fairy tale cannot simply be regarded as a genre produced by adult writers for child readers. Instead it should be viewed as a form that undermines boundaries between childhood and adulthood and reflects other ideological tensions of its contemporary moment.

⁷⁸ Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 121.

⁷⁹ James Kincaid, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 77.

⁸⁰ Eric Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed: Working Class Children in Nineteenth Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 51-54.

⁸¹ Silver, pp. 55, 60.

⁸² U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 'The Balancing of Child and Adult: An Approach to Victorian Fantasies for Children', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 37:4 (1983), pp. 497-530, (pp. 498, 499).

It may also reflect older concerns, as literary fairy tales inevitably retain traces of the savage, anarchic potential of the original folktales on which they draw. Simon Dentith argues that the 'antique-seeming material (even if invented)' of the Victorian fairy tale carries 'some generic traces of the pre-modern world which is its generic source', and that these traces, which persist into the modern world, 'have to be included as dissonant possibilities in any account of the meanings carried by the stories'.⁸³ On these terms, even didactic fairy stories specifically written for children retain discordant traces of their generic source in earlier adult material. An outline of the evolution of the English literary fairy tale during the course of the nineteenth century will show how successive writers reflect contemporary and older anxieties while adapting the emerging genre for their own aesthetic and moral purposes. This will provide a background for the evaluation of how Wilde's fairy stories compare to others written by his predecessors and contemporaries.

The earliest original Victorian fairy tale is 'Uncle David's Nonsensical Story about Giants and Fairies' which appeared as the central chapter of Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839). Set in fairyland 'in the days of yore', and featuring the good fairy Teach-all and a giant called Snap-'em-up who feeds on fat, lazy boys, this humorous, but didactic, story has little in common with the structure, style, or tone of oral folk tales. The sense of the Victorian present, in the form of references to school-room lessons and to 'Mama's best sofa in the drawing room', make it clear that it is intended to instruct a middle-class child.⁸⁴ The moralistic tone is tempered by humour but the moral that idle, greedy children will

⁸³ Dentith, p. 272.

⁸⁴ Catherine Sinclair, 'Uncle David's Nonsensical Story about Giants and Fairies', in *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and the Elves*, ed. by Jack Zipes (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 3-12, (p. 3).

come to a bad end is the driving force in this story about the transformation of lazy No-book into an industrious, studious man. Other early Victorian fairy tales, including Francis Paget's *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* (1844); Mark Lemon's *The Enchanted Doll* (1849); and Margaret Gatty's's *The Fairy Godmothers* (1851), display a similarly moral, didactic tone and emphasise the benefits of self-restraint over the disastrous consequences of a wilful pursuit of pleasure.⁸⁵

Established and respected Victorian authors, including John Ruskin, Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, contributed to the development of the English literary fairy tale, both through their recourse to the form and through their critical writings on it. Their wide-ranging contributions show how opinions varied in the middle years of the nineteenth century on how didactic fairy tales should be and how the form related to child and adult readers.

Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*, written in 1841 at the request of a young girl, Euphemia Grey, whom he later married, was published anonymously in December of 1850. Its lavish illustrations by Richard Doyle, one of the leading cartoonists and illustrators of the time, helped ensure its popularity.⁸⁶ Ruskin called the story 'a good imitation of Grimm and Dickens, mixed with some true Alpine feelings of my own'.⁸⁷ The Grimm influence is evident in Ruskin's choice of Stiria, an Austrian province, for the setting and in the use of German names for the characters. The Dickensian influence is more difficult to pin down; one possibility is that Ruskin may have been referring to the use of Doyle's

⁸⁵ Angela Bull, 'Fairy Tales with a Purpose', in Avery, *Nineteenth Century Children*, pp. 41-63, (p. 45), notes: 'None of the writers hesitates to use the conventions of fairyland for the purpose of teaching some useful lesson'.

⁸⁶ Rodney Engen, *Richard Doyle* (Stroud, Glos: Catalpa Press, 1983), p. 94.

⁸⁷ Cited in Avery, 'George MacDonald', p. 126.

illustrations to enhance the text.⁸⁸ The story is written for a child reader whom it hopes to entertain and unobtrusively instruct.

The King of the Golden River follows the established folk pattern whereby the good, youngest brother eventually triumphs over his greedy, selfish elder siblings, and features the series of tasks and the intervention of supernatural helpers and adversaries common to folktales. Ruskin's story departs from the framework provided by the folk-tradition in its Romantic depiction of the splendours of the Alps and in its creation of memorable, original characters. The testy, bugle-nosed South West Wind is, as Stephen Prickett points out, the first magical character to combine kindness with eccentric irascibility.⁸⁹ The King of the Golden River who emerges from the mug that the greedy brothers want to melt down also possesses 'a very pertinacious and intractable disposition' that masks his essential kindness.⁹⁰ Doyle's illustrations of these two characters greatly enhance their individuality and memorability. Text and illustration combine folkloric and literary elements in a story that shows its young reader that the desirable virtues of kindness and compassion will eventually triumph over evil.

Unlike the traditional tales that inspired it, *The King of the Golden River* reflects the philosophy of its individual author. The timeless moral that goodness and kindness will be rewarded while cruelty and greed will be punished, familiar from the folk tradition, was particularly relevant in a society where increasing materialism resulted in a laissez-faire approach to economics. Ruskin's message is

⁸⁸ See J. R. Harvey, *Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970), p. 12, who notes that the serial publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, illustrated by Phiz (1836-37), introduced and popularised the use of illustrations to complement written text. Amongst Dickens's other early, popular works were *Sketches by Boz* (1837) and *Oliver Twist* (1837), illustrated by George Cruikshank.

⁸⁹ Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), p. 69.

⁹⁰ John Ruskin, *The King of the Golden River*, in Zipes, ed., *Victorian Fairy Tales*, pp. 15-36, (p. 27).

that true riches are not to be found in the gold that the older brothers covet, but in the rich harvests restored to the valley through the unselfish intervention of little Gluck. Greed and self-interest are shown to lead inevitably to ruin and desolation for all. Nature is the great provider and no one individual has the right to appropriate its treasures. The ending of the story presents a vision of a caring, Utopian society:

And thus the Treasure Valley became a garden again, and the inheritance, which had been lost by cruelty, was regained by love.
And Gluck went, and dwelt in the valley, and the poor were never driven from his door.⁹¹

Ruskin shows that love and unselfishness have tangible benefits here on earth as they result in better living conditions for all. As we shall see in Chapter Three, Wilde's conclusion to 'The Star-Child' is less optimistic.

Ruskin outlined his philosophy of the fairy tale genre in an introduction written for a new collection of Grimm's fairy tales – *German Popular Stories* – published in 1868. In the twenty-seven years that had elapsed since he wrote *The King of the Golden River*, Ruskin had ample time to reflect on what a fairy tale should and should not be. He found several jarring elements in fairy stories written by his contemporaries. In particular, he deplored the inclusion of social satire and declared that fairy stories should not introduce 'premature gleams of uncomprehended passion, and flitting shadows of unrecognised sin'. Most importantly, they should not try to teach children ethical lessons as the inclusion of an overt moral detracts from literary quality: 'the effect of the endeavour to make stories moral upon the literary merit of the work itself, is as harmful as the motive

⁹¹ Ruskin, *The King of the Golden River*, p. 36.

of the effort is false'.⁹² The mature Ruskin's condemnation of explicit moralism amounts to a criticism of early Victorian fairy tales, including his own.

Ruskin's insistence that fairy tales should avoid overt morality echoes Charles Dickens's condemnation of George Cruikshank's transformation of traditional tales into temperance tracts. Cruikshank, the illustrator of Edward Taylor's 1823 translation of the Grimms' tales and of some early works by Dickens, was a reformed heavy drinker. He was, by 1847, a member of the temperance movement and a fanatical champion of total abstinence.⁹³ In 1853, he began to publish his *Fairy Library* in which he revised traditional fairy tales, introducing 'a few *Temperance Truths*, with a fervent hope that some good may result therefrom'.⁹⁴ Dickens regarded such tampering as sacrilege and condemned Cruikshank's manipulations in 'Frauds on the Fairies', the opening article in *Household Words* of 1 October 1853.

Dickens argues that fairy literature, 'by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown by weeds, where we may walk with children', provides a precious conduit between worldly-wise adults and uncorrupted children. Fairy tales do not need to have a specific moral grafted onto them as they nourish the complete development of the child by fostering 'forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force'. Having noted 'the intrusion of a Whole Hog of unwieldy dimensions into the fairy flower garden', he singles out 'our own beloved friend, Mr George Cruikshank' for

⁹² John Ruskin, 'Fairy Stories', in *Masterworks of Children's Literature*, ed. by Jonathan Cott, 8 vols (New York: Stonehill, 1983-1986), vi, ed. by Robert Lee Woolf, (1985), pp. 166-169, (pp. 166, 167).

⁹³ See Stella Beddoe, 'Fairy Writing and Writers', in *Victorian Fairy Painting*, ed. by Jane Martineau (London: Holberton, 1998), pp. 22-31, (p. 29).

⁹⁴ Cited in Cott, gen. ed., vi, p. 57.

particular criticism.⁹⁵ Dickens feels that overt moral didacticism may have a place in literature, but that place is emphatically not in the fairy tale, whose ‘innocent extravagance’ makes it particularly valuable ‘in an utilitarian age’. He concludes that the fairy tale should be allowed to continue to provide an antidote to reality: ‘The world is too much with us, early and late, leave this precious old escape from it, alone’.⁹⁶

This philosophy encouraged Dickens to write original fairy stories with contemporary relevance, which retain the imaginative extravagance of the traditional fairy tale even when departing from some of its conventions. In ‘The Magic Fishbone’ (1868), for example, he retains the traditional cast of royal characters, familiar from folktales and literary fairy tales, but turns the King, ‘the manliest of his sex’, into a salaried worker who goes daily ‘to the Office’, while the Queen, ‘the loveliest of hers’ is ‘a careful housekeeper’.⁹⁷ The story, therefore, reflects a Victorian bourgeois consensus on gender-differentiated domestic propriety. He also inverts the traditional motif of royal infertility, which as we have seen featured in both Perrault’s ‘La Belle au Bois Dormant’ and d’Aulnoy’s ‘La Biche au Bois’, by bestowing a large family on the royal couple. This ironic inversion enables Dickens to comment, like Malthus, on the financial repercussions of uncontrolled fertility while avoiding the adoption of an overt moralising tone. ‘The Magic Fishbone’ does have a moral lesson to impart; it teaches that forbearance, self-sacrifice, hard work and consideration for others are

⁹⁵ Charles Dickens, ‘Frauds on the Fairies’, in Cott, gen. ed., vi, pp. 58-62, (p. 58). The reference to ‘a Whole Hog’ alludes to an article in *Household Words* on 23 August 1851, entitled ‘Whole Hogs’, in which Dickens had attacked all fanaticism, whether for temperance, vegetarianism or any other cause. See Harry Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p. 8.

⁹⁶ Dickens, ‘Frauds’, pp. 58, 62.

⁹⁷ Charles Dickens, ‘The Magic Fishbone’, in Zipes, ed., *Victorian Fairy Tales*, pp. 91-99, (p. 91). The story was one of a series entitled *Holiday Romance* which was published in 1868 in the magazines *All The Year Round* and *Our Young Folks*.

at least as valuable as a magic wand. The story emulates what Dickens described in 'Frauds on the Fairies' as the traditional fairy tale's nurturance of similar virtues by adapting the machinery of the fairy tale to advocate the development of responsible behaviour within a domestic setting.

Dickens similarly combines social realism with fairy tale motifs, patterns and themes in other works to indict Victorian society and to promote the related ideals of individual responsibility and domestic harmony. This is obviously the case with *The Christmas Books* (1843-1848); these comprise *A Christmas Carol: Being A Ghost Story of Christmas* (1843), *The Chimes: A Goblin Story* (1844) and *The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home* (1845) first published in one volume in 1848. It is less obviously the case with *Bleak House* (1852), but the novel's contemporaneity with 'Frauds on the Fairies' justifies a brief reference to its references to fairy tales. The Smallweed family, rendered less than human by their uncontrollable avarice, are described in terms that draw on contemporary folkloric and evolutionary theory. Bart, 'a weird changeling' acts in 'a monkeyish way' while Judy, his twin, 'exemplifies the before-mentioned family likeness to the monkey tribe'. Judy has 'never heard of Cinderella' while Bart 'knows no more of Jack the Giant Killer, or of Sinbad the Sailor than he knows of people in the stars'.⁹⁸ Robbed of the imaginative extravagance and the social, moral precepts that Dickens believed were part of the texture of fairy tales, it is small wonder that these weeds strangle the generous, empathetic impulses that should flower at the domestic hearth. *Bleak House* is a novel that provides a trenchant, topical critique of various features of mid-Victorian society including the class system, Parliament, the institutional Church, the courts and the aristocracy. According to

⁹⁸ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 318, 335.

the philosophy outlined in 'Frauds on the Fairies', the fairy tale itself should eschew social realism in favour of the imaginative excess that fosters the emotional, social and moral development of all age groups. This philosophy will provide a useful perspective from which to explore Wilde's forays into the genre.

Not all of Dickens's contemporaries shared his view that the fairy tale provides a space within which adult and child can meet on equal terms. William Makepeace Thackeray described *The Rose and the Ring*, published in time for Christmas 1854, as a 'fireside pantomime'.⁹⁹ Like the pantomime it emulates, this fairy tale is a family entertainment, designed to be enjoyed by both adults and children, but at different levels. Thackeray adapts the convention, employed by Catherine Sinclair and Charles Dickens, of bestowing humorous names on their characters: Pildrafto is Thackeray's royal physician and Glumbosa his morose prime minister. Children can enjoy this humour but are less likely to appreciate the story's topical and literary allusions. The action of the tale opens in Paflagonia, across the Black Sea from Crimea, and then moves to Crim Tartary. At the time of publication, English attention was focussed on the war in Crimea so the adult reader is likely to appreciate the topicality of Thackeray's setting. Paflagonia was first mentioned in Sir Philip Sydney's *Arcadia*, an allusion likely to be lost on younger readers. As U. C. Knoepfelmacher points out, the child reader would have been unlikely to spot the resemblance between the good-natured, thoughtless Giglio, whose uncle deprives him of his throne, and Shakespeare's Hamlet or Henry Fielding's Tom Jones.¹⁰⁰ These topical and literary allusions function as a

⁹⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring: or History of Prince Giglio and Prince Bulbo*, in Cott, gen. ed., vi, pp. 67-136, (p. 67).

¹⁰⁰ U. C. Knoepfelmacher *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales and Femininity* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 125, 110-111.

nod and wink to the adult reader and set up a disjunction between adult and child that privileges the more sophisticated reader.

While Wilde's fairy tales can fruitfully be aligned with Dickens's vision of the fairy tale as a space within which adult and child can come together, they also reflect elements of Thackeray's use of the form. Robert Dunbar points out: '*The Rose and the Ring* can simultaneously incorporate the mixed blessings of hindsight and anticipation: the same fusion will typify much of the spirit of Wilde's nine tales, likewise controlled by irony and wishfulness'.¹⁰¹ As we have seen that irony is a feature of fairy tales written by Mme d'Aulnoy, Hoffman and Dickens, it is possible to trace a varied line of development from the French salon, by way of the German Romantics, through Dickens and Thackeray, to Wilde.

Robert Dunbar suggests that Frances Browne's *Granny's Wonderful Chair* (published in time for Christmas 1856, but dated 1857) is relevant to a consideration of Wilde's fairy tales.¹⁰² Browne (1816-1879), blind from birth, was the seventh child of a village postmaster who lived in Donegal until moving to Edinburgh in 1847, then London in 1852.¹⁰³ *Granny's Wonderful Chair* tells the story of little Snowflower, the harbinger of spring, whose magical chair takes her in search of her grandmother to the kingdom of King Winwealth. At the court of King Winwealth and Queen Wantall, nobody cares for anything but money. For seven days, the chair tells seven different fairy tales which melt the frozen heart of King Winwealth and so begins a period of harmonious prosperity. Colin Manlove argues that the stories narrated by the chair are Christian parables that heal the spirit of the king, and points out parallels between *Granny's Wonderful Chair* and

¹⁰¹ Dunbar, p. 90.

¹⁰² Ibid. pp. 88-89.

¹⁰³ This biographic information is taken from Robert Woolf's introduction to *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, in Cott, gen. ed., vi, p. 139.

the Book of Revelations.¹⁰⁴ In her depiction of a child who cleanses the vision of misguided adults, Browne paves the way for the English literary fairy tale's inclusion of the theme of the spiritual search, and prefigures Wilde's engagement with the theme in a number of his fairy tales. The ambiguous ending of the story, as Browne records a rumour that King Winwealth has fallen back into his old ways, is equally significant as it suggests that the new order, based on a childlike vision, is about to collapse. As we shall see, George MacDonald, in *The Princess and Curdie*, shares Browne's reservations about the durability of a utopian, childlike order and foreshadows Wilde's depiction of the transitory triumph of good over evil in 'The Star Child'.

The 1860s Onward

At the mid-nineteenth century then, although the English literary fairy tale was a recognisable genre addressed primarily to children, there was no consensus on how didactic or overtly moralistic it should be. The only convention on which critics and authors seemed to agree was that it should feature some sort of supernatural intervention which brought about a change in the fortunes of the main protagonist. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), all supernatural intervention is explained away as a dream, so it can be regarded as a fantasy, but not as a fairy tale. Nevertheless, the success of the Alice books contributed to a further experimentation with the literary fairy tale that made the genre even more difficult to categorise. It continued to incorporate motifs found in folktales, but it progressively moved away from its generic source in oral tradition. Jack Zipes distinguishes between two streams of English literary fairy tales in the

¹⁰⁴ Colin Manlove, 'George MacDonald and the Fairy Tales of Francis Pagit and Frances Browne', *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society*, 18 (1999), 17-32. (pp. 28-29).

years between 1860 and the turn of the century; conservative tales that did not represent a threat to established Victorian norms and utopian ones whose social criticism constituted a rebellion against conformity and convention.¹⁰⁵ However recent work by Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher suggests that apparently conservative fairy tales written by women, including Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), can subtly undermine Victorian orthodoxies.¹⁰⁶ A closer look at one woman writer associated with Oscar Wilde will demonstrate that even didactic moral tales are open to varying interpretations.

The Little Lambe Prince (1875)

Dinah Mulock Craik (1826-1887) was a popular novelist who produced a variety of realist and fantasy fiction for children.¹⁰⁷ Her best known children's story, *The Little Lambe Prince* tells the story of crippled Prince Dolor, whose mother dies young and whose father pines away, paying scant attention to the child who reminds him of his beloved, dead wife. After his father's death, the crippled young orphan is locked away in a tower by the usurper of his kingdom until his fairy godmother brings him a magic cloak on which he can fly all over the country. From his vantage point, he can see the dirty alleys of the city and begins to feel compassion for those who have even less than he has. Finally, Prince Dolor is restored to the throne and rules his country with wisdom and understanding.

Angela Bull praises Mrs Craik's light touch, eschewal of sentimentality and lack of overt moralism in this 'most charming allegory' of a boy who learns

¹⁰⁵ Zipes, ed., *Victorian Fairy Tales*, p. xxiii. Bull, 'Fairy Tales for Pleasure', pp. 121, 124, also divides Victorian fairy tales into two streams: didactic ones designed to impart a moral and others written to amuse or enchant children.

¹⁰⁶ Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and fantasies by Women Victorian Writers* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ These works include *Michael the Miner* (1846), *How to Win Love, or Rhoda's Lesson* (1848), *Cola Monti* (1849), *Alice Learmont* (1852), *The Little Lychetts* (1855) and *The Fairy Book* (1863).

'to bear hardships and discouragements'.¹⁰⁸ However, it is hard to detect these three qualities in the following extract:

The sense of the *inevitable*, as grown-up people call it – that we cannot have things as we want them to be, but as they are, and that we must learn to bear them and make the best of them – this lesson, which everybody has to learn soon or late – came alas! sadly soon to the young boy. He fought against it for a while, and then, quite overcome, turned and sobbed bitterly in his godmother's arms. She comforted him – I do not know how, except that love always comforts; and then she whispered to him, in her sweet, strong, cheerful voice – "Never mind!" "No, I don't think I do mind – that is, I *won't* mind," replied he, catching the courage of her tone and speaking like a man, though he was still such a mere boy'.¹⁰⁹

This heavy-handed passage, including its sentimental reference to the mollifying power of love, imparts the overt, didactic message that adults know best. The insistence on the necessity of bravely and cheerfully accepting the status quo exemplifies the conservative quality that seems to characterise Craik's work.

Nevertheless, *The Little Lambe Prince* possesses other, less obvious, qualities. Mrs Craik herself claimed: 'there is a meaning in this story, deeper than that of an ordinary fairy tale... But I have hidden it so carefully that the smaller people, and many larger folk, will never find it out'.¹¹⁰ It can be read as an allegory extolling the subversive power of the imaginative fairy tale, which, like Dolor's magic cloak, can broaden horizons, provide pleasurable distraction, comfort the spirit, and lead to a greater understanding of the human condition. Gillian Avery claims that it is a religious allegory that 'succeeds in showing children the beauty of holiness'.¹¹¹ Elaine Showalter suggests that the story is 'an allegory of Craik herself – cast out of the happy kingdom of the family by her father's desertion, crippled by her female role, and finally redeemed through self-

¹⁰⁸ Bull, 'Fairy Tales with a Purpose', pp. 58, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Dinah Mulock Craik, *The Little Lambe Prince* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935), pp. 44-45.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Sally Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* (London: Twayne, 1983), p. 87

¹¹¹ Avery, 'George MacDonald', p. 138.

discipline and imagination'.¹¹² *The Little Lame Prince* is a parable of rejection, enforced helplessness, and a subsequent journey of discovery that culminates in the realisation that compensation may be found by living for and through others. As such, it is a projection of a widespread female situation. It is also an exploration of the responsibilities of rulership. Prince Dolor achieves salvation by putting his subjects' interests before his own, by 'trying to forget himself, and live out of himself, and in and for other people'. He becomes a good ruler despite rejecting pomp and circumstance: 'though he never walked in processions, never reviewed his troops mounted on a magnificent horse, nor did any of the things which bring a show monarch so much before the public, he was able for all the duties and a great many of the pleasures of his rank'.¹¹³

Wilde knew and liked Mrs Craik, whose husband, George, was a partner in the Macmillan publishing company. Wilde acknowledged that it was at her suggestion that the name of the periodical he edited during the period of November 1887 to August 1889 was changed from *The Lady's World* to *The Woman's World* in order to increase its appeal to an educated female readership. Although he admired her personally, Wilde damned her literary output with faint praise in a carefully phrased appreciation written shortly after her death in 1887:

Mrs Craik was one of the finest of our women-writers, and though her art had always what Keats called "a palpable intention upon one", still its imaginative qualities were of no mean order. There is hardly one of her books that has not some distinction of style; there is certainly not one of them that does not show an ardent love of all that is good and beautiful in life. The good she perhaps loved more than the beautiful, but her heart had room for both.¹¹⁴

Wilde does not endorse Mrs Craik's valorisation of the good over the beautiful but he acknowledges the imaginative excellence of her work. As we shall see, in his

¹¹² Elaine Showalter, 'Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship', *Feminist Studies*, 2 (1975), 5-23, (p. 8).

¹¹³ Craik, p. 113.

¹¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'Literary and other Notes', *Woman's World*, Nov. 1887, 36-40, p. 40.

own fairy tales he probes the disjunction between the essence and the artifice of kingship, and the relationship between the good and the beautiful, themes previously explored by his friend, Mrs Craik.

The Water Babies (1864)

From the mid-1860s, the theme of a spiritual search begins to feature in English literary fairy tales, appearing first in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. Subtitled 'a fairy tale for a land baby', Kingsley dedicated the book to his youngest son, Grenville, and said it was intended 'to make children and grown folks understand that there is quite a miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature'.¹¹⁵ This marine fantasy, which recounts the adventures of Tom, a little chimney sweep, has few if any affinities with the folk narrative tradition. It seems as much directed to an adult reader as to a child one. Before appearing in book form, *The Water Babies* was serialised in *Macmillan's Magazine*. Brian Alderson points out that, as no child was likely to encounter this publication, Kingsley's 'regular apostrophising of "my little man" might have been thought an innocent screen over which the author could lob his polemical brickbats at an adult public'.¹¹⁶ Tom's spiritual pilgrimage, which draws on key aspects of evolutionary theory, is a divinely supervised process of development, mutation and metamorphosis. Just as Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid instruct Tom in the proper ways to behave, *The Water Babies* is a didactic allegory that provides moral guidance for Kingsley's dual readership.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Colin Manlove, 'MacDonald and Kingsley: A Victorian Contrast', in Raeper, ed., pp. 140-162, (p. 147).

¹¹⁶ 'Introduction', in Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. ix-xxix, (p. xv).

The Early Works of George MacDonald (1824-1905)

Like his friend Kingsley, George MacDonald was a committed Christian. By the time he started writing fairy tales in the 1860s, MacDonald had rejected many principles of the Calvinist creed in which he had been raised.¹¹⁷ His fairy tales suggest that redemption can, and indeed must, be earned. His mother died when he was eight, and significantly, his stories are peopled with beautiful women who seem to embody a semi-divine motherhood.¹¹⁸ While a student, he spent a summer cataloguing the library of a Scottish nobleman where he taught himself German and read the works of the German Romantics – Novalis, Hoffmann, Tieck and de la Motte Fouqué.¹¹⁹ These writers introduced him to literary fairy tales which use dream logic to reveal the workings of the human mind while leaving room for the incursion of the wondrous and the marvellous.

MacDonald's first published work (1850) was a translation of the *Spiritual Songs* of Novalis. His earliest prose work, *Phantastes* (1858), subtitled 'a Faerie Romance for Men and Women', is ostensibly the story of Anodos and his quest for a beautiful marble lady. The influence of Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, a symbolic parable that tells the story of Heinrich's ascent and deliverance from the bonds of earthly life in pursuit of a mysterious blue flower, is evident in MacDonald's story. Anodos' quest is really the story of a spiritual search for perfection. *Phantastes* is prefaced with some quotations from Novalis, one of which reads: 'A fairy story is like a disjointed dream-vision, an ensemble of wonderful things and occurrences'.¹²⁰ Anodos enters the bewildering fairyland through the agency of his fairy grandmother. As his grasp on reality loosens, he

¹¹⁷ William Raeper, *George MacDonald*, (Icknield Way, Tring: Lion Publishing, 1987), p. 45.

¹¹⁸ Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, pp. 118-124.

¹¹⁹ Raeper, p. 49.

¹²⁰ Cited in Raeper, p. 145.

experiences a series of dreamlike adventures during which he encounters a succession of symbolic archetypal figures. Another Novalis quotation from the preface reads: 'In a real fairy tale everything must be wonderful, secret and coherent; everything must be alive, each in a different way'.¹²¹ *Phantastes*, a fairy romance rather than a fairy story, is a vibrant parable whose dreamlike quality endows it with a mysterious coherency that defies restrictive interpretation.

MacDonald's decision to publish works for children may partly have been the result of his friendship with Charles Dodgson, who, as Lewis Carroll, published *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* to great acclaim in 1865.¹²²

MacDonald's first collection of fairy tales for children *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867) postdates the publication of *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, but three of the five stories it contained had been previously published as interpolated tales in the adult novel *Adela Cathcart* (1864).¹²³ The success of Lewis Carroll's fantasy seems to have created a public receptivity for the type of story that MacDonald was already producing.¹²⁴

Dealings with the Fairies, whose five stories detail the progress of young protagonists towards maturity, was dedicated to MacDonald's own children. All five stories draw on traditional motifs, familiar from folklore and other literary fairy tales: 'The Giant's Heart' echoes 'Jack and the Beanstalk'; 'The Light Princess' draws heavily on 'The Sleeping Beauty'; 'The Golden Key' has a wise old woman who lives in a enchanted forest and both 'The Shadows' and 'Cross

¹²¹ Cited in Stephen Prickett, 'Fictions and Metafictions: "Phantastes", "Wilhelm Meister", and the Idea of the "Bildungsroman"', in Raeper, ed., pp. 109-125, (p. 110).

¹²² See Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, pp. 125-126; Raeper, pp. 173-175.

¹²³ The three stories which had previously appeared in *Adela Cathcart* are 'The Light Princess', 'The Giant's Heart' and 'The Shadows'. The other two stories were 'The Golden Key' and 'Cross Purposes'.

¹²⁴ See David S. Robb, *George MacDonald* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p. 111 who identifies a close relationship between MacDonald's children's fantasies and the rest of his corpus: 'The same character types, plot situations, images and symbols, apparently from a stock pool, occur throughout the body of his work'.

Purposes' feature variations on the changeling theme. Between the stories in general, and within each individual story, MacDonald varies the tone so that each differs from the others, and from the folktale, or classic fairy tale, it evokes.

The tone of 'The Giant's Heart' is humorous and light, although at times it describes violent action. MacDonald reflects Catherine Sinclair's practice of using humorously apt names in his description of a bloodthirsty giant named Thunderthump who feeds on little boys 'with fat faces and goggle eyes'.¹²⁵ However, the children in MacDonald's story triumph as the giant receives his comeuppance, so Sinclair's didactic tone is missing here. 'The Light Princess' starts off in a light-hearted way with a royal birth and botched christening that recalls the openings of Perrault's 'La Belle au Bois Dormant' and d'Aulnoy's 'La Biche au Bois'. MacDonald's tone, however, differs from his French predecessors as it recalls the more contemporary, burlesque tone of Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring*. In his depiction of a giggling princess with no sense of gravity, MacDonald draws on a story by Hoffmann called 'Princess Brambilla'.¹²⁶ The tone of 'The Light Princess' becomes graver in the penultimate chapter which describes the naïve, childlike prince's readiness to sacrifice his life to save that of the princess. The increasing gravity of the narrative voice prefigures the princess's redemption through her discovery of the various forces of gravity described in the final chapter. The tone of 'The Golden Key' – the last story written for the collection – is more uniform. It tells of two children who spend years in a purgatorial fairyland before they eventually ascend beyond the rainbow 'up to the

¹²⁵ George MacDonald, *The Light Princess and Other Tales* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), p. 67.

¹²⁶ See Knoepfelmacher *Ventures into Childland*, p. 144 for a discussion of similarities between Hoffman and MacDonald's stories.

country whence the shadows fall'.¹²⁷ The tone of this allegory of awakening sexuality and spiritual development is mystical and sensitive to the predicament of its child protagonists. The varying tones of the stories in this volume suggest that MacDonald may have been writing for different readers and consciously addressing both children and adults.

MacDonald was aware that the collection's treatment of complex themes was sufficiently dextrous to enable it to appeal to both sophisticated and naïve readers. In a piece reprinted to introduce the 1893 edition of *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales*, he addressed a putative adult reader who wonders if a fairy tale must have a meaning:

It cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality and vitality is truth. The beauty in it may be plainer than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairy tale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, and another will read another.¹²⁸

He described his fairy tales as 'new embodiments of old truths' and asserted that they were intended for adults as well as children: 'For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy five'.¹²⁹

MacDonald did not only write for the childlike, he conceptualised the childlike as divine, and illustrated the concept in his fairy tales.

He explained the centrality of the concept of the divine child to the relationship between God, Christ and man in an essay called 'The Child in the Midst' (1867), in which he pointed out that Jesus told his disciples they could only enter heaven 'by becoming little children – by humbling themselves'. Stating that 'the *childlike* is the divine', MacDonald explained: 'God is represented in Jesus,

¹²⁷ MacDonald, *The Light Princess*, p. 240.

¹²⁸ The piece, entitled 'The Fantastic Imagination' originally appeared in *A Dish of Orts*, published in 1893 and reprinted in *The Gifts of the Christ Child: Fairytales and Stories for the Childlike*, 2 vols (London and Oxford: A. R. Mowbray, 1973), i, pp. 23-28, (p. 25).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

for that God is like Jesus: Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child. God is childlike'. To recognise and revere the childlike is to become like Christ: 'the Lord is like the child, and may be embraced, yea, is embraced, by every heart childlike enough to embrace a child for the sake of his childishness'.¹³⁰ This sense of the redemptive potential of the divine childlike faculty that exists in each human being imbues MacDonald's fairytales with a mystical quality lacking in didactic allegories by other writers, like Kingsley, who used the fairy tale to show that the child's redemption depended upon adult supervision.

MacDonald's experimentation with tone in *Dealings with the Fairies* reflects his developing valorisation of a childlike faith and vision. 'The Light Princess' was written in 1862 whereas 'The Golden Key' was written in 1867, the same year in which he outlined his philosophy of the divinity of the childlike vision in 'The Child in the Midst'. U. C. Knoepfelmacher argues that the earlier humorous story implicitly suggests that 'childishness must be superseded by the "divine childlikeness" that MacDonald prizes'.¹³¹ The later, more enigmatic story uses complex symbolism to endorse the necessity for childlike faith and vision and to show that the boundary between life and death is less rigid than is generally acknowledged. These themes are more fully explored in longer fairy tales written by MacDonald.

At the Back of the North Wind

At the Back of the North Wind, serialised in *Good Words for the Young* in 1868, and published in book form in 1871, was the first of MacDonald's full-length works for children. The story alternates between the daily life of London city

¹³⁰ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: First Series* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1867), pp. 8, 3, 17, 11-12.

¹³¹ Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 133.

streets and the night-time adventures of Diamond, a Christlike child, with the North Wind, a mysterious female force which is at once destructive and compassionate. In moving back and forth between the two streams of the narrative, reality and dream worlds collide and complicate each other as supernatural and natural forces commingle. U. C. Knoepfelmacher suggests that North Wind's 'dual role as preserver and destroyer' reveals MacDonald's 'troubled relation to the feminine'.¹³² Perhaps, but North Wind's most apparently wilful act of destruction in leading the storm that sinks a ship is shown to have several positive consequences. Furthermore, that act of destruction takes place just after she has nurtured Diamond at her breast and carefully set him down where he will not be forced to witness the destruction of the ship. Her dual nature reflects the seeming paradox of a compassionate God who allows bad things to happen. It takes a childlike trust to believe that compassion and destruction are both sides of one divine nature and that what seems to be evil can bring about good. MacDonald shows that human philanthropy may not always bring about a lasting, happy outcome. Mr Raymond is the saviour and devoted friend of Diamond's family but his thoughtless neglect of them actually causes them further hardship. His patronage of Diamond removes him from the family circle and contributes to his feeling of estrangement from his home on earth and to a longing for an easeful death that will bring him to the strange country at the back of the North Wind. MacDonald's concern with the nature and effects of divine providence and human philanthropy enrich his investigation of childlike innocence.

Diamond, unlike Tom in *The Water Babies*, does not require adult supervision or punishment to achieve a state of grace. Sleeping in a little room

¹³² Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 133.

over a manger, with 'hay at his feet and hay at his head', he is already Christlike before he meets North Wind.¹³³ However, not all children are equally Christlike or childlike. Diamond's association with North Wind makes him seem strange to Nanny, the little crossing-sweeper who thinks he 'must ha' got out o' one o' them Hidget Asylms'.¹³⁴ Nanny is a child whose capacity for divine childlike vision has been dampened by the harsh struggles of everyday life. Diamond's sojourn in a strange and beautiful country at the back of the North Wind sets him further apart from other people but his complete unconsciousness of his peculiar separateness makes him a great favourite. He becomes a beacon of light who succeeds in inspiring grown-ups: his cheerful, loving disposition convinces a drunken cabman that he is 'one o' them baby-angels you sees on the gravestones', while his resolute refusal to abandon his own intuitive reasoning in favour of adult logic convinces the philanthropic Mr Raymond that he's a genius 'and that's what makes people think him silly'.¹³⁵ Yet there is a sense that Diamond's holiness sets him too far apart from other people for his influence over them to be truly effective or enduring. He grows further away from his parents and from Nanny, who does not regard him as a playmate because he seems to have 'a tile loose'.¹³⁶ This embodiment of divine simplicity, whom the cabmen call God's baby, is too good for this world. North Wind does not know who or what directs her actions, but East Wind has told her that 'it is all managed by a baby'.¹³⁷ Diamond is the human face of this heavenly baby who is in charge of the universe. The contrast between his mystical dream world and the grubby, harsh reality of life in this one makes the

¹³³ George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, in Cott, gen. ed., vi, Wolff, ed. pp. 177-370, (p. 177).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 201.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 269, 285.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 353.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 206.

book mysterious and moving. The symbolic resonance heightens the instructional ambiguity of the story. Nevertheless, MacDonald's faith in the Christlike child imbues the story with a spiritual force comparable to that of North Wind herself.

Because of its length and the absence of familiar motifs, the story bears little structural resemblance to the folktale. However, the ambivalent figure of the North Wind recalls the flesh and blood *bean feasa* [wise woman] and the otherworldly figure of the *cailleach* [hag] of Irish and Scottish tradition. This mysterious, supernatural female being sometimes functions as a protectress who is not dangerous to humans, but who more often is a hostile force that must be appeased.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, MacDonald's recourse to folklore in the story is oblique.

The Princess and the Goblin

Just before North Wind carries Diamond away on his final journey, we find him reading Mr Raymond's 'story of the Little Lady and the Goblin Prince'.¹³⁹ This is obviously MacDonald's next work for the childlike, *The Princess and the Goblin*, which was serialised in *Good Words for the Young* between 1870 and 1871 and published in book form in 1872. Although he dies before he can pass judgement on it, we can assume that Diamond would have approved a story that reinforces the necessity for childlike faith in the existence of powerful forces beyond our comprehension. In this fairy tale, Irene, under the tutelage of her great-great-grandmother, learns to see through the outward cover to the inward reality of things. Curdie, the miner's son, is essential to the story on the level of plot because he ultimately rescues Irene from a fate worse than death with Harelip, the goblin

¹³⁸ Ó hÓgáin, *Lore of Ireland*, p. 283; Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), pp. 11-12; Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, 'Reading the Bean Feasa', *Folklore*, 116:1 (Apr 2005), 37-50.

¹³⁹ MacDonald, *North Wind*, p. 351.

prince. Thematically, he is even more indispensable as he initially lacks Irene's childlike faith and heightened perception, and only comes to acquire them through his association with her.

Irene's great-great-grandmother gives her an invisible thread that will always save her from danger. MacDonald borrowed the motif of the thread of faith from Norman MacLeod's *The Golden Thread* (1861). In this didactic religious allegory for children, a king's son loses his way in the forest when he lets go of the golden thread of trust in God, and finds himself facing danger and temptation. Irene's thread is more difficult to see, so that MacDonald's allegory is more enigmatic than MacLeod's. Irene follows it to places where she would rather not go, and, however circuitous the route, she never doubts that it will bring her home. Curdie, who cannot feel this thread of faith and love, finds it impossible to believe in the existence of something that cannot be seen or understood. His lack of faith limits his perceptiveness as we see in the scene where Irene brings him to the room where her great-grandmother spins, a scene which draws on two well known folkloric motifs – that of invisibility and of the association between spinning, straw and gold. Instead of the beautiful wonders visible to Irene, Curdie sees only 'a tub, and a heap of musty straw and a withered apple'.¹⁴⁰ Curdie has yet to attain the type of redemptive faith described in Hebrews 11:1 as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Irene's distress at the disjunction in their vision reflects the painful experience of being a believer in an unbelieving world. However, Curdie's essential honesty and courage outweigh his disbelief and heighten his awareness of dangers that are overlooked by Irene. When they are in the mine, he points out the sleeping goblins to her: 'Irene shuddered when she

¹⁴⁰ George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin / The Princess and Curdie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 21; hereinafter referred to as *Princess*.

saw the frightful creatures, whom she had passed without observing'.¹⁴¹ His vision is clouded rather than defective and, as it clears, he comes to feel the thread and believe in the existence of a woman whom he cannot see. The development of the two children is shown to be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Irene gains courage and insight as she leaves behind the childish ignorance of her sheltered existence. Curdie grows into a childlike faith that supplements his essential virtue and enhances the practical value of his courage.

The odious goblins who tunnel away under the castle are pitted against the wonderful great-great-grandmother who lives high up in one of the towers. The goblins are degenerated humans while the woman is the human embodiment of a divine force. As Carole Silver points out, MacDonald's description of the goblins' 'grotesque materiality, their physical ludicrousness combined with their "primitive" sexuality' is clearly influenced by evolutionary theory.¹⁴² However, the greedy goblins in their subterranean mine also signify the state of being cut off from God through excessive materialism. The goblins embody man's evil proclivities tunnelling away in dark recesses of the human psyche, threatening to topple the parapet of the mind and poised to take possession of the heart and soul of the unwary. MacDonald suggests that the only way to avert this takeover is to trust in the higher force of the imagination that dwells, like the great-great-grandmother, in the lofty tower of our better selves. The allegory is pervasive, but non-obtrusive. MacDonald preaches through hints and implications so the reader is constantly challenged by a teasing encouragement to go beyond the literal. He does not hesitate to weave weighty moral and metaphysical issues into the fabric of a children's story. At one stage, Irene tells her grandmother that she cannot

¹⁴¹ MacDonald, *Princess*, p. 115.

¹⁴² Silver, pp. 127, 128.

understand what she is saying to which the wise woman replies: 'I daresay not. I didn't expect you would. But that's no reason why I shouldn't say it'.¹⁴³ Similarly, MacDonald raises issues that a young reader may not fully comprehend in the confident belief that comprehension is less important than intuitive trust.

The Princess and Curdie

The Princess and the Goblin ends with a promise that 'the rest of the history of *The Princess and Curdie*' will be told in another volume. The bleak tone and disconsolate ending of this continuation, which was first serialised in *Good Things: A Picturesque Magazine for Boys and Girls* in 1877 and published in book form in 1883, sets it apart from its predecessor. Here, the medieval, pastoral world of the first book is under severe threat from the selfish greed of the inhabitants of the city of Gwyntystorm. *The Princess and Curdie* dramatises how the pursuit of material wealth increases the human propensity for evil. The sick king is symbolic of the country's spiritual degeneration. The situation in Gwyntystorm mirrors the degradation of King Winwealth's court in *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, and here, too, the power of the childlike vision and the victory of good over evil is shown to be precarious. At the beginning of the book, Curdie is in a state of moral regression: 'he was becoming more and more a miner, and less and less a man of the upper world'.¹⁴⁴ He shoots a white pigeon, an Ancient Mariner-like act of destruction that results in self-revulsion, but ultimately leads to a redemptive encounter with Irene's great-great-grandmother. This time, evil is not projected onto subterranean creatures but shown to be a distinctively human attribute that turns men into beasts. Evil wears a human face so it cannot be detected by the

¹⁴³ MacDonald, *Princess*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁴ MacDonald, *Princess*, p. 180.

naked eye, but the old lady bestows upon Curdie the power to feel beneath the skin in order to divine what animal nature lurks in the person he confronts. The story dramatises the pull between the divine and the bestial within the human psyche and the inevitability of the consequent combat between good and evil within the individual and the community.

The Princess and Curdie contains familiar folk and fairy tale motifs, including the old woman spinning in a hidden room, recalling the story of 'The Sleeping Beauty', and the young boy leaving home who eventually marries the princess, recalling numerous other tales. Derba, the old lady held in suspicion by her neighbours who regard her as a witch, is 'only a wise-woman', who intuitively knows good from evil.¹⁴⁵ The great-great-grandmother, loving and vengeful in equal measure, recalls, like North Wind, the ambivalent figure of the *Cailleach* [hag]. Folkloric echoes combine with biblical ones and evolutionary theory to create a religious allegory. Curdie, the child born to humble parents but actually of royal lineage, becomes a Christlike figure who can detect the beast in degenerating humans. He rids the temple of the false prophet and sends his messenger to the palace to tell the people to repent. When they refuse, he who has 'come to set things right in this house', restores the king with a eucharistic meal of bread and 'honest wine'.¹⁴⁶ However, this religious parable ends on a disturbing note, as Irene and Curdie die, leaving no heir, and he who comes after them rules evilly.

The unsettling ending of *The Princess and Curdie* highlights the precariousness of any victory in the ongoing combat between good and evil. Virtue's triumph is short-lived, as the good that Irene and Curdie do dies with them. After their death, the people 'sunk towards their old wickedness', while their

¹⁴⁵ MacDonald, *Princess*, p. 248.

¹⁴⁶ MacDonald, *Princess*, pp. 290, 276.

elected king, greedy for gold, undermines the foundations of Gwyntystorm so that 'the whole city fell with a roaring crash'.¹⁴⁷ This apocalyptic ending, unusual for a fairy tale, suggests that visionary truth is soon forgotten. The punishment seems just; the selfish, sadistic people of the city have only themselves to blame for its destruction yet the ending wipes out not only their evil but also the achievements of Irene and Curdie and their little band of helpers. Commenting on the eschatological resonance of the ending, Humphrey Carpenter notes: 'this is the Last Judgement. But it is a very strange Last Judgement: no one is saved'.¹⁴⁸ The story shows that good triumphs over evil, but the ending shows that triumph to be short-lived and provisional. The conclusion undermines the foundation on which the story is constructed. As it implodes upon itself, it shatters all complacent belief both in the ability of narrative to influence anything outside of itself and in the existence of a benign, divine providence whose purpose is to reward good and punish evil. As we shall see, Wilde's story, 'The Star-Child', similarly queries the ultimate value of a transitory triumph of good over evil.

The fairy tales of George MacDonald combine imaginative extravagance, metaphysical speculation and veiled social commentary. They draw on familiar folklore motifs, including the wise-woman, the commoner marrying the princess, and the testing of the suitor, but belong to the developing genre of the literary fairy tale. Although primarily addressed to children, they were written to appeal also to an adult reader. They highlight the necessity for a childlike vision to divine the presence of a spiritual reality behind the material surfaces of the everyday world yet they also acknowledge the difficulty of believing in the existence of that extra dimension. MacDonald is an idealist whose faith in the redemptive power of a

¹⁴⁷ MacDonald, *Princess*, p. 341

¹⁴⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 84

childlike imagination imbues his stories with a mystical significance that challenges Victorian materialism and progressivism. Although they are allegories, they resist definitive interpretation and appeal equally to naïve and sophisticated readers. MacDonald's orientation towards the spiritual and the metaphysical broadened the boundaries and extended the horizons of the English literary fairy tale.

Illustration of Victorian Fairy Tales

The appeal of MacDonald's writings for children was enhanced by the illustrations provided by Arthur Hughes for *Dealings with the Fairies*, *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*. Hughes, a respected artist associated with the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, became well known as an illustrator of children's books, collaborating not only with MacDonald but also with Christina Rossetti in *Sing Song* (1872) and *Speaking Likenesses* (1874). Illustration was an important aspect of the Victorian fairy tale in all its various forms. George Cruikshank's illustrations for the 1823 translation of the Grimm Brothers' *German Popular Stories* and William Henry Brooke and Daniel Maclise's illustrations for the first and second editions of Croker's *Fairy Legends* played a significant role in the commercial success of the volumes.¹⁴⁹ Richard Doyle's illustrations for Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* contributed to the book's success, and from the 1860s onwards, English translations of Hans Christian Andersen increasingly featured elaborate coloured illustrations.¹⁵⁰ Illustrated fairy tales for children became increasingly popular during the second half of the nineteenth century, largely due to the work of Edmund Evans. Evans, who developed a unique process employing

¹⁴⁹ See Schacker, pp. 69, 71.

¹⁵⁰ See Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 42; Alderson, *Eventyr in England*, pp. 9-16.

separate colour blocks for each printed illustration, sought to put pictures on an equal footing with text in books intended for child readers. His series of toy-books, published by Routledge between the 1860s and the 1880s, retailed at sixpence and were printed in editions of ten thousand copies to ensure their commercial viability.¹⁵¹ In the 1860s, Evans sought out Walter Crane (1845-1915), who went on to illustrate Wilde's *The Happy Prince and other Tales* (1888), for a highly productive partnership in children's book production that was to last many years. In Chapter Three, I will consider the importance of the choice of illustrators for Wilde's two collections of fairy tales in relation to the issue of intended audience.

Illustration plays a key role in *There was Once: Grandma's Stories*, a collection of abbreviated, simple versions of popular fairy tales and nursery rhymes adapted by Constance Wilde.¹⁵² The book, containing thirty-two unnumbered pages including the title and end pages, is designed to appeal to a young child. There are ten full-page colour illustrations and twenty pages of text inserted between black and white illustrations, provided by John Lawson. The texts include 'Old Mother Hubbard', 'Jack the Giant Killer', 'The Sleeping Beauty', 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Cinderella'. The published volume gave the author's name as Mrs Oscar Wilde, which suggests that her publishers felt that reference to her famous husband would help to sell the book. It has been suggested that Wilde started to write fairy tales to amuse his young sons. However, a comparison between *There was Once: Grandma's Stories* and *The Happy Prince and other Tales*, both published in 1888, reveals how Oscar's volume differs from one intended for young children. Whereas illustration predominates in Constance's collection, illustration is incidental in Oscar's. It consists of small black and white

¹⁵¹ See Pamela White Trimpe, 'Victorian Book Illustration', in Martineau, ed., pp. 54-61, (p. 59).

¹⁵² Mrs Oscar Wilde, *There was Once: Grandma's Stories* (London: Nister, 1888).

frontispieces to the five stories and four full-page illustrations set apart from the text. In Oscar's texts, language and tone vary and often work to create striking mental images whereas Constance's text is designed to complement the visual images that encroach on it. While my textual analysis of Wilde's fairy tales in Chapter Three will not include detailed discussion of the illustrations that were part of the original volumes, it will be worth bearing in mind that this key aspect of book production can shed light on the issue of intended readership.

The Literary Fairy Tale at the Fin-de-siècle

The Victorian appetite for fairy tales continued unabated during the final two decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁵³ By the time Wilde was publishing his stories, the English literary fairy tale provided writers with a recognisable but still developing form whose norms and intended readership had not been clearly defined. Although the tone varies considerably between authors, the plots and language used tend to be sufficiently simple and active so as to appeal to, and be understood by, children. There was no consensus on how didactic or moralistic the literary fairy tales should be and it could be used to provide entertainment, to further the socialisation or moral development of the reader, or to challenge Victorian complacencies. Although associated with children and the nursery, the comments made by Mrs Craik, George MacDonald and Wilde himself on their intended readership suggest a general consensus that the literary fairy tale

¹⁵³ In addition to Wilde's two collections, these years witnessed the publication of original stories such as Andrew Lang's *The Princess Nobody*, Mrs Ewing's *Jackanapes* and Mrs Molesworth's *Christmas Tree Land* (1884); Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* and Andrew Lang's *Prince Prigio* (1889); Mrs Molesworth's *An Enchanted Garden* and Wilhelmina Pickering's *The Queen of the Goblins* (1892), and also Andrew Lang's various coloured books of traditional and earlier literary fairy tales including *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), *The Red Fairy Book* (1890), *The Green Fairy Book* (1892), *The Yellow Fairy Book* (1894), *The Pink Fairy Book* (1897) and *The Grey Fairy Book* (1900).

addressed a dual audience. Therefore, it could say more than was apparent on the surface and could be read at more than one level. As it was ostensibly addressed to children in a society which recognised the impressionability of young minds, its superficial conservatism could either be endorsed or challenged by its deeper meaning. The multi-layered quality of the literary fairy tale leaves it open to multiple interpretations so that its deeper meaning may reflect authorial intent or it may be inscribed by the reader. As we have seen from the discussion of *The Little Lame Prince*, even tales which appear conservative can be read in ways that suggest a previously masked subversive potential. As Bruno Bettelheim observes: 'As with all great art, the fairy tale's meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life'.¹⁵⁴

Generally shorter than the novel, and not linked to realism as its dominant mode, the literary fairy tale offered writers the opportunity to experiment with various techniques in order to extend and enrich ways of perceiving reality.¹⁵⁵ It was a recognisable and hybrid genre which fed both on traditional oral folktales and on other literary fairy tales. The oral folktale, like the literary fairy tale, can embody the social wisdom of the community in which it circulates and reflect the cultural anxieties of that community. Just as the supernatural framework of the folktale can both explain and provide imaginative release from the vicissitudes of everyday life, the fin-de-siècle English literary fairy tale could posit an alternative reality to highlight the shortcomings of contemporary Victorian society. The literary fairy tale mingled the natural and the supernatural and could reflect the ontological insecurities of a society where technological developments and

¹⁵⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 12.

¹⁵⁵ See Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, p. 3, who notes that as early as 1789, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was extolling the virtues of fairy tales which opened up areas of human experience not available to the senses.

scientific advances undermined accepted notions of time, order and progress. Though usually set in a deliberately remote fantasyland, it could reflect Victorian anxieties on issues as diverse as evolution, education, sexuality, religion, materialism and childhood itself. It also provided authors with ways of engaging with personal concerns. The literary fairy tale, therefore, allowed authors and readers to examine individual and social anxieties through the consideration of fantasy worlds that allowed negotiation of actual, contemporary cultural and philosophical anxieties.

This use of the fairy tale to negotiate contemporary concerns was, as we have seen, a feature of the genre since its emergence as a recognisable form in Italy and France during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Victorian literary fairy tale, like its continental predecessors, uses and adapts traditional folkloric motifs to produce original texts that reflected the viewpoint of the individual author. It also draws on earlier French and German literary fairy tales, so that its hybridity is multi-faceted. The mix of tradition and innovation leads to continuities and discontinuities not only between folktales and literary fairy tales but also between literary fairy tales themselves. The continuity is most apparent at the level of plot and motif, while the discontinuities are most apparent in style and characterisation; the folktale uses simple language, avoids ornate description, and eschews elaborate characterisation while the literary fairy tale can either echo the style of the folktale or employ a more sophisticated linguistic register and indulge in more elaborate description and characterisation. The style of the literary fairy tale reflects authorial choice and is one of the main markers in identifying intended readership. The writer of the *fin-de siècle* fairy tale was working within a hybrid genre that offered a familiar framework of motifs and

conventions drawn from folkloric and literary sources yet allowed considerable leeway in terms of style and individual approach.

For this reason, the third chapter of this study will relate Oscar Wilde's fairy stories to other literary sources and to the strands of Irish folklore with which he was familiar. A consideration of both contexts should highlight not only the ways in which Wilde resembled and differed from other writers of original literary fairy tales but also the ways in which his fairy tales reflect his own individual approach to content and style.

Chapter Three: Wilde's Fairy Tales

This chapter, split into three main sections, looks at Wilde's two collections of fairy tales. The first section sets out and analyses the initial publication and reception of both collections. The second section examines the five stories in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and reviews the significance of the collection as a whole. Similarly, the final section examines the four stories in *A House of Pomegranates* and reviews the significance of the collection. In the discussion of individual stories, I will be distinguishing between elements that are found in the international folklore tradition and European literary sources, including the literary fairy tale, and those that seem to point to a source special to Irish folklore.

Publication and Initial Reception

Wilde originally submitted the manuscript of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* for publication to the firm of Macmillan and Co. in January 1888.¹ He was on friendly terms with George Macmillan, a partner in the firm since 1879, since they took a trip to Italy and Greece with J. P. Mahaffy, Wilde's professor from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1877.² Over the next ten years, Wilde was involved in a series of negotiations with George about publication of various pieces of work. A proposal for translations of Herodotus and Euripides came to nothing, two pieces of original work by Wilde were rejected and only one piece, a translation of Turgenev's 'A Fire at Sea' was published, appearing in the May 1886 edition of

¹ See Guy and Small, p. 69.

² See *Complete Letters*, pp. 43-44.

Macmillan's Magazine.³ Wilde had sent the story of 'The Happy Prince' for publication in the *English Illustrated Magazine*, a title owned and published by Macmillan, and later reported that it had 'languished in the magazine chest' for eighteen months before he finally got it back.⁴ On becoming editor of the newly re-titled *The Woman's World*, Wilde wrote to George Macmillan in October 1887, asking his friend to send copies of books written by women for review in the magazine.⁵ Anya Clayworth notes: 'A review of a Macmillan book appeared in each of Wilde's "Literary and Other Notes" suggesting that George took up Wilde's offer'. Clayworth proposes that Wilde's submission of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* to the firm in January 1888 was the result of the strong relationship between author and publisher.⁶ As Macmillan had previously published only one piece of Wilde's work, the submission of the collection was a triumph of hope over experience.

Wilde's manuscript of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* was rejected and the earliest surviving review dates from this period. The original reader's report explains why the stories were returned to their author in February:

There is undoubtedly point and cleverness in the way in wh[ich] these stories are told. The writer has, no doubt, the literary knack – the point and finish. You feel at once the hand of the man who knows how to write. Two or three of the stories are very pretty, but I can hardly say as a whole that they have any striking imaginative brilliance – nor do I think that they would be likely to rush into marked popularity. They are pretty and bright, but they hardly strike into the reader's mind. They are good and respectable. Whether they are more than that, I doubt.⁷

³ For an account of Wilde's relationship with the publisher, see Anya Clayworth, 'Oscar Wilde and Macmillan and Co.: The Publisher and the Iconoclast', *English Literature in Transition*, 44:1 (2001), 64-78.

⁴ Guy and Small, p. 6; *Complete Letters*, p. 385.

⁵ *Complete Letters*, p. 327.

⁶ Clayworth (p. 71).

⁷ Cited in Small, 'Introduction', p. x.

Ian Small describes this report as ‘one of the least perspicacious judgements in nineteenth century literary history’.⁸ However, Anya Clayworth suggests that the reader may have felt that the publication of Wilde’s volume, illustrated by Walter Crane, would interfere with sales of Mary Molesworth’s *The Rectory Children*, also illustrated by Crane and published by Macmillan and Co. in 1889.⁹ As there is no evidence that the manuscript Wilde submitted to Macmillan contained the illustrations by Crane, the degree of competition with Molesworth’s book might have been less than Clayworth suggests.

The Happy Prince and Other Tales, containing ‘The Happy Prince’, ‘The Selfish Giant’, ‘The Devoted Friend’, ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’ and ‘The Remarkable Rocket’ was published by the firm of David Nutt in May 1888. This firm, established in 1829, originally specialised in continental books on classics and religion. It also published educational books and conversational grammars.¹⁰ In 1878, Alfred Trubner Nutt (1856–1910) became head of the firm founded by his father. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the firm became increasingly involved in the publication of folklore-related material. This included the journal of the Folk-Lore Society established in 1878, of which Alfred was a founding member.¹¹ Alfred Nutt wrote extensively on Celtic traditions and collaborated with folklorists in Scotland and Ireland. As we have seen, he provided a postscript to Douglas Hyde’s *Beside the Fire* (1890), a volume published by the firm of David Nutt. Nutt went on to publish the early volumes of the Irish Texts Society, founded in 1898 to promote the study of Irish literature. In 1893, the

⁸ Small, ‘Introduction’, p. x.

⁹ Clayworth (p. 72).

¹⁰ See Patricia J. Anderson and Jonathan Rose, eds., *British Literary Publishing Houses* (London: Gale Research, 1991), p. 228.

¹¹ Juliette Wood, ‘Folklore Studies at the Celtic Dawn: The Role of Alfred Nutt as Publisher and Scholar’ *Folklore*, 110 (1999) 3-12, (p. 4).

'distinguishing mark' of the firm, as described by *The Bookman*, was 'the issue of choice and beautiful books for the bibliophile and the scholar'.¹²

There is no record of why Wilde decided to submit the manuscript to this firm, but it indicates that he did not regard the collection as primarily intended for children. Encouraged by David Nutt's general interest in folklore and special interest in Irish material, he may have felt that the firm's publications were sufficiently eclectic to suggest that acceptance would bring the collection to a wide readership. Alfred Nutt may have been interested in publishing the volume because he perceived gaps in his firm's targeted market, particularly in the area of children's literature. He may also have been sufficiently impressed by Wilde's reputation as an academic and literary man in his own right, and as the son of two highly-regarded authorities on Irish folklore, to believe that Wilde's credentials rendered him suitable to join the firm's list of published authors.

When the volume appeared in May 1888, Walter Crane (1845-1915) and Jacomb Hood (1857-1929) supplied the illustrations. Crane provided the frontispiece and two full plates while Hood was responsible for the head and tailpieces to the stories. Hood was already associated with the publishing company through his work as an illustrator.¹³ According to Crane's account, Wilde, rather than the publisher, asked him to 'do some illustrations'.¹⁴ By 1888, Crane had earned a reputation as a gifted illustrator of children's books. These included Edmund Evans's popular series of toy books, Crane's own versions of traditional fairy tales, and works by other authors, including eighteen books by Mrs. Molesworth, published by Macmillan. However, by 1888, Crane was also known

¹² Cited in Guy and Small, p. 54.

¹³ See *Complete Letters*, p. 340n.

¹⁴ E.H. Mikhail, ed. *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1979), i, p. 151.

as a leading socialist artist. He began to take an active interest in politics during the 1860s, campaigning for the 1867 Reform Act. During the 1880s, he became interested in socialism, and joined the Social Democratic Foundation, one of Britain's first Marxist political groups, in 1884. Later that year, he became a member of the Socialist League and provided illustrations for its journal *Commonweal*. In 1886, he joined the Fabian Society to whom he had previously delivered a paper entitled 'Art and Commercialism'.¹⁵ Crane went on to become first president of Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, founded in 1888 to promote a revival of handicrafts threatened by the effects of modern manufacturing and the commercialisation of craftsmanship and design.

Crane's involvement with socialist politics was reflected in the illustrative work he undertook during the late 1880s. He provided the cover illustration for William Morris's *Death Song*, a poem inspired by the events and aftermath of Bloody Sunday, 13 November 1887. On that occasion, police intervention during a public meeting held in Trafalgar Square to protest against the policies of the Conservative government resulted in two deaths, over two hundred injuries and several arrests. Wilde knew of the atrocities committed by the police that day and sympathised with the victims.¹⁶ He also knew of Crane's active involvement in socialist politics. In 1888, Crane illustrated *Chants of Labour*, a collection of socialist songs edited by Edward Carpenter. Oscar Wilde reviewed this volume in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and drew attention to Crane's association with it.¹⁷ In that same year, Crane provided murals in the public hall of Red Cross, a model village set up by Octavia Hill to improve housing conditions for some of London's poor.

¹⁵ See Isobel Spencer, *Walter Crane* (London: Studio Vista, 1975), pp. 203, 142-145..

¹⁶ See *Complete Letters*, pp. 340, 511.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'Poetical Socialists', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 February 1889, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, pp. 34-36, (p. 34).

The choice of Crane as illustrator may, as Guy and Small claim, point to an astute commercial consciousness that children's literature could sell as much on illustration as on narrative.¹⁸ On the other hand, it may indicate that the contents of the volume were in keeping with Crane's socialist beliefs and reflected his valorisation of art in an age of mechanisation.

The first edition of *The Happy Prince* (one thousand copies priced at 5s.) sold out in less than a year. While this suggests that the book was a success, Guy and Small point out the size of the run was comparatively small.¹⁹ Perhaps Alfred Nutt was taking a gamble with a volume which, unlike the rest of the firm's publications, seemed to be primarily aimed at the popular children's market. Nutt may well have wanted to test the waters of this unknown market before taking a definitive plunge whose ripples could adversely affect his firm's reputation. In order to maximise profits, the publisher issued a limited large-paper edition of seventy-five copies (priced at £1 1s.) and a less expensive edition (priced at 3s. 6d., number of run unknown) in January 1889.²⁰ This cheap edition sold poorly. In 1894, Wilde voiced his disappointment, reporting that Nutt's 'average yearly sale of *The Happy Prince* is about 150!'.²¹ It seems that Nutt's initial caution was justified.²²

Following the book's publication, Wilde received a glowing tribute in a private letter dated 12 June 1888, from Walter Pater:

I am confined to my room with gout, but have been consoling myself with *The Happy Prince*, and feel it would be ungrateful not to send a line to tell you how delightful I have found him and his companions. I hardly know whether to admire more the wise wit of 'The Wonderful Rocket', or the beauty and tenderness of 'The Selfish Giant'; the latter is perfect in its kind.²³

¹⁸ Guy and Small, p. 56.

¹⁹ Guy and Small, p. 55.

²⁰ Guy and Small, p. 53.

²¹ *Complete Letters*, p. 617.

²² Nutt's Juvenile Library did not appear until 1910; see Anderson and Rose, p. 229.

²³ Reprinted in Beckson, ed., pp. 59-60.

However, the press barely noticed the book.²⁴ In June 1888, Wilde wrote to Alfred Nutt, suggesting ways of attracting critical and popular attention:

I find I have forgotten the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*. Will you kindly send them a copy for review – at 28 Southampton Street, Strand, WC. The *Irish Times* I suppose has got its copy? Also, would it not be well to have a *card* for the booksellers to hang up in their shops? It may show Crane's frontispiece as well as the title etc. of the book. And is it not time for a few advertisements? *Punch* and the *World* are capital papers to advertise in.²⁵

It seems that Wilde was trying to prod Nutt into attracting the attention of an eclectic readership.

The journals and newspapers mentioned by Wilde were adult ones, not associated with the promotion of books for children. The *Century Guild Hobby Horse* was the organ of the Century Guild, founded in 1882 to promote the appreciation of crafts. The annual magazine was started in 1884 by Herbert P. Horne, architect and art historian, and Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo, architect and furniture designer, both of whom were on friendly terms with Wilde.²⁶ John Stokes claims that the magazine was 'undoubtedly homosexual or "Uranian"' in its 'manner and interests'.²⁷ However, there is nothing in the contents to support this claim. In confirmation of the assertion that 'Art is our Queen, for whom stern war we wage', made by Selwyn Image, a frequent contributor to the journal, it covered items relating to art, design and literature.²⁸ Wilde contributed an article on his meeting with Emma Speed, daughter of John Keats's younger brother, George, which appeared in the 1886 issue, along with a facsimile of the manuscript of Keats's 'Sonnet in Blue', which Mrs Speed had presented to Wilde in 1882.²⁹ In 1887, it printed a fulsome review of Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends, Mystic*

²⁴ Guy and Small, p. 54

²⁵ *Complete Letters*, pp. 350-351.

²⁶ *Complete Letters*, pp. 282, 290.

²⁷ John Stokes, 'Wilde the journalist', in Raby, ed., pp. 69-79, (p. 73).

²⁸ Selwyn Image, 'To the Century Guild', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 1886, p. 87.

²⁹ *Complete Letters*, p. 157n.

Charms and Superstitions of Ireland which Wilde may have felt boosted sales of his mother's collection of Irish folklore. Wilde's mention of the magazine reveals his belief that *The Happy Prince* would appeal to lovers of art and connoisseurs of craftsmanship.

Wilde's mention of the *Irish Times* suggests that he thought the book might appeal to educated Irish readers. The references to *Punch* and the *World* indicate that Wilde wanted to maximise sales amongst a sophisticated, educated adult readership. *Punch*, founded 1841 and famed for its satiric humour, caricatures and cartoons, appealed to a wide readership. The *World*, founded 1874, was an extremely popular daily newspaper which covered national and foreign news, crime reports, criticism and a popular weekly gossip column. It printed poems by Wilde during the period 1879-1880 and during 1886 it published the increasingly acrimonious correspondence between Wilde and the artist James McNeill Whistler.³⁰ Wilde's letter to Alfred Nutt advocates an eclectic promotional campaign to maximise readership of what he self-deprecatingly described as 'my little book'.³¹

While none of the publications mentioned by Wilde reviewed *The Happy Prince*, those reviews that did appear post-dated his appeal for publicity. An unsigned notice that appeared in the *Athenaeum* on 1 September 1888 lauded the collection's charm and noted that the satirical edge of Wilde's stories undermined their superficial similarity to the work of Hans Andersen:

The Happy Prince, and other Stories, are full of charming fancies and quaint humour. Though with a distinct character of their own, they are not unworthy to compare with Hans Andersen, and it is not easy to give higher praise than this. There is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr. Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales; but it is so delicately introduced that the illusion is not destroyed and a child would delight in the tales themselves without being worried or

³⁰ *Complete Letters*, pp. 81n, 93n, 251n, 288n.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 349.

troubled by their application, while children of larger growth will enjoy them and profit by them.³²

Andrew Galt Ross, the elder brother of Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor, wrote another reasonably complimentary review that appeared in the *Saturday Review*, 20 October 1888. Ross approves the stories' 'very pleasant sensation of the humorous' but, perplexed by their bitter aftertaste of satire, raises the issue of intended readership:

Mr. Oscar Wilde, no doubt for excellent reasons, has chosen to present his fables in the form of fairy tales to a public which, though it should count among its numbers most persons who can appreciate delicate humour and an artistic literary style, will assuredly not be composed of children. No child will sympathise at all with Mr. Wilde's *Happy Prince* when he is melted down by order of the mayor and Corporation in obedience to the dictum of the art professor at the University that, since 'he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful'. Children do not care for satire, and the dominant spirit of these stories is satire – a bitter satire differing widely from that of Hans Andersen, whom Mr. Wilde's literary manner so constantly recalls to us. This quality of bitterness, however, does not repel the reader.³³

The generally favourable tenor of these reviews did little to consolidate popular appeal and Wilde continued to promote the book himself.

Wilde's correspondence shows that he sent copies of the book to a number of adult acquaintances, including John Ruskin, Florence Stoker, the librarian of Toynbee Hall, and W.E. Gladstone.³⁴ Wilde knew Ruskin from his time at Oxford where he had made a point of attending the professor's lectures on Florentine art in the Michaelmas term of 1874.³⁵ In the letter that accompanied the gift to Ruskin, Wilde describes his former mentor as a mixture of prophet, priest and poet: 'to you, the gods gave eloquence such as they have given no other, so that your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music, making the deaf to hear and the blind to see'. The gift is a form of homage from an acolyte to the sage from whom he has 'learned nothing but what is good' and

³² Reprinted in Beckson, ed., p. 60.

³³ Reprinted in Beckson, ed., p. 61

³⁴ *Complete Letters*, pp. 349-350, 354.

³⁵ Ellmann, p. 47.

Wilde hopes Ruskin will find some 'charm or beauty' in the volume.³⁶ This letter suggests that *The Happy Prince* is an eloquent reflection on life and art which will appeal to a sensitive, sophisticated reader.

In the letter to his first love, Florence Stoker, née Balcombe, Wilde hopes that she will like his fairy tales, 'simple as they are', and draws her attention to 'Crane's pretty pictures and Jacomb Hood's designs'. Florence and Bram Stoker had one child, Noel, born in 1879. While Wilde sends 'kind regards to Bram', there is no mention of their child, as might reasonably have been expected if Wilde had seen his collection as primarily intended for children.³⁷ Again, the implication is that the volume was addressed, perhaps mainly, to an adult readership. This is borne out by the gift of the book to the Librarian of Toynbee Hall, a social settlement founded in 1884 in the East End of London in memory of the economist Alfred Toynbee (1852-1883), who had been a contemporary of Wilde's at Oxford. Its aim was to bring the socially advantaged, particularly students from Oxford and Cambridge, to live in a deprived area where they would use their skills and advantages to help the less privileged.³⁸ Wilde's gift of a book whose title story can be read as a meditation on social responsibility shows that he wanted it to reach a wide readership that included a community dedicated to social reform.

In June 1888, Wilde sent Gladstone a copy of *The Happy Prince*, describing it as 'only a collection of short stories' that is 'really meant for children'. Wilde implies that the gift was prompted by Gladstone's efforts to procure Home Rule for Ireland: 'I should like to have the pleasure of presenting it such as it is, to one whom I, and all who have Celtic blood in their veins, must ever

³⁶ *Complete Letters*, p. 349.

³⁷ *Complete Letters*, p. 349.

³⁸ *Complete Letters*, p. 354n.

honour and revere, and to whom my country is so deeply indebted'.³⁹ This gift cannot be construed as a simple attempt to curry political favour as Gladstone's Liberal party was out of office in 1888 as a result of the fallout from his 1886 Home Rule Bill. Wilde's reference to Ireland suggests that he was aware, at some level, of a connection between the volume and his own Irish background. Indeed, this connection may also lie behind his gift of the volume to Florence Stoker.

In a letter to the poet G.H. Kersley, Wilde qualifies his claim to Gladstone that the volume is 'really meant for children' by stating that it is 'meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy'.⁴⁰

Wilde's identification of his ideal reader as childlike recalls his mother's valorisation of a once universal mytho-poetic faculty that, in her words, 'only exists now, naturally and instinctively, in children, poets and the childlike races, like the Irish'.⁴¹ Wilde's childlike reader, like his mother's idealised Irishman, is 'simple, joyous, reverent', and impervious to 'science, culture and the cold mockery of the sceptic'.⁴² Lady Wilde believes that 'the educated classes in all nations' have much to learn from the Irish 'instinctive belief in the existence of unseen agencies that influence all human life'.⁴³ Her son may similarly believe that his adult, educated reader can benefit from the adoption of the childlike openness to experience advocated by his fairy tales. Declan Kiberd, drawing on the work of Ashis Nandy, argues that the discourse of British Imperialism ascribed the negative quality of childishness to the Irish.⁴⁴ By using a form associated with childhood and the childlike races, Wilde, in *The Happy*

³⁹ *Complete Letters*, p. 350.

⁴⁰ *Complete Letters*, pp. 350, 352.

⁴¹ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 11.

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 11, 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. vi.

⁴⁴ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, pp. 44-45.

Prince, adapts the fairy tale to query some moral values underpinning metropolitan society in late Victorian England.

Wilde's letters engage with the issue of genre and form. On different occasions, he refers to the contents of the collection as 'fairy tales', 'short stories' and 'studies in prose, put for Romance's sake into a fanciful form'. In relation to 'The Happy Prince', he claims: 'The story is an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment; it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art'.⁴⁵ These comments suggest that Wilde deliberately chose an archaic form that merged the simplicity of the folktale with the artifice of medieval romance to comment on contemporary life. The form of the fairy tale appealed to him, not only because it was suitable for children, but also because it could be read in more than one way and at more than one level. His fairy tales are designed to challenge the mimetic function of modern art. When one considers the type of publication that Wilde considered suitable to publicise the collection, his decision to send copies to influential public figures and adult personal acquaintances, and his insistence on the importance of form, his original claim that the volume is primarily intended for children seems disingenuous. However, his theorising of the literary fairy tale as an art form that can comment on contemporary life is readily reconcilable with his later claim that *The Happy Prince* is intended partly for children and partly for childlike adults.

Wilde went on to publish a second collection of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates*, containing 'The Young King', 'The Birthday of the Infanta', 'The Fisherman and his Soul' and 'The Star Child', in November 1891. He described

⁴⁵ *Complete Letters*, pp. 349, 350, 352, 355.

this collection as 'rather like my *Happy Prince* [...] only more elaborate'.⁴⁶ The title itself is more elaborate, as it does not directly echo the title of any of the tales it contains, but instead evokes the classical myth of Proserpine, caught between the worlds of the living and the dead. Each elaborate, stylised story, contained in the volume, features a protagonist similarly caught between two worlds.

The volume itself was dedicated to Wilde's wife, Constance, and each story was separately inscribed to a society lady. 'The Young King' was dedicated to Margaret, Lady Brooke, the wife of Sir Charles Johnson Brooke, the second Rajah of Sarawak, whom Wilde met in Paris in 1891.⁴⁷ 'The Birthday of the Infanta' was dedicated to Mrs William H. Grenfell of Taplow Court. Mrs Grenfell, later Lady Desborough, was a member of 'The Souls', an anti-Philistine group of wealthy aristocrats who perceived themselves as set apart from their more aimless contemporaries by their intellectual and aesthetic tastes and pursuits. They interested themselves in literature, art and music, and prided themselves on their wit and love of fantasy and fun.⁴⁸ Wilde visited the Grenfells' country seat, Taplow, in May 1891, and dedicated the story to Mrs Grenfell in return for her hospitality.⁴⁹ 'The Fisherman and his Soul' was dedicated to H. S. H. Alice, Princess of Monaco, an art patron whom Wilde also met in Paris in 1891.⁵⁰ 'The Star Child' was dedicated to Miss Margot Tennant, an intelligent and vivacious member of 'The Souls', with whose family Wilde had been acquainted for years and who in 1894 married the future Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith.⁵¹ Wilde clearly admired leisured ladies but he was not simply a social climber. W. B. Yeats

⁴⁶ *Complete Letters*, p. 493.

⁴⁷ *Complete Letters*, p. 495n.

⁴⁸ Jane Abdy and Charlotte Gere, *The Souls* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984) pp. 9-11.

⁴⁹ *Complete Letters*, pp. 483, 493.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 495.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 622n; Ellmann, p. 38, Abdy and Gere, pp. 144-148.

calls Wilde a parvenu but claims that the dedications show 'that he [Wilde] was Jack and the social ladder his pantomime beanstalk'. Yeats implies that the stories employ a frivolous form to pose a subversive threat to Victorian complacencies.⁵² As editor of *Woman's World*, Wilde solicited articles from a regiment of literary ladies, including Lady Gregory and the Marchioness of Salisbury.⁵³ He published work by others, including Lady Jeune, who wrote about child poverty in London, Lady Archibald Campbell who wrote on classical mythology and English folklore, and Lady Pollock who wrote about drama as an art form.⁵⁴ Wilde associated the English aristocracy and leisured classes, particularly women, with a liberal open-mindedness and an appreciation of culture not found in other social strata. The dedications suggest he saw his stories as unsettling fictions that would appeal to liberal, urbane readers.

Only one story, 'The Star-Child', had not previously been published or offered for publication. Wilde offered 'The Fisherman and his Soul' to J. M. Stoddart, managing editor of *Lippincott's Magazine*, in 1889.⁵⁵ Stoddart turned it down, on the basis that it was a children's fairy tale and would not appeal to his readers.⁵⁶ 'The Young King' appeared in the 1888 Christmas edition of *The Lady's Pictorial*. This periodical, founded in 1881, was aimed mainly at a middle-class female readership and featured court and society notes, advice on beauty and cookery, reviews, advertisements and short stories. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' first appeared as 'The Birthday of the Little Princess' and 'La Naissance de la

⁵² Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 171

⁵³ *Complete Letters*, pp. 319, 330.

⁵⁴ Lady Jeune, 'Children of a Great City', *Woman's World*, November 1888, 27-31; Lady Archibald Campbell, 'The Woodland Gods', *Woman's World*, November 1887, 1-7; Lady Pollock, 'The Drama in relation to Art', *Woman's World*, April 1888, 249-252.

⁵⁵ *Complete Letters*, pp. 413n, 416.

⁵⁶ Merlin Holland, 'Killing One Peacock with Two Stones: Dorian Gray and the downfall of Oscar Wilde', paper delivered in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, 14 October 2004.

petite Princesse' in *Paris Illustré* on 30 March 1889. This weekly publication, founded in 1883 and published in both French and English versions from 1888, featured illustrations, news, society gossip, fiction and articles on art. Wilde's decision to amend the story for publication in *A House of Pomegranates* will be discussed at a later stage. At this stage, suffice to note that Wilde's dedications of the stories, along with the previous history of three of them, suggests that this volume was primarily intended for a sophisticated, adult audience.

The publisher was the newly formed (1891) Osgood, McIlvaine, who had published *Intentions*, a collection of Wilde's critical essays, and *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* in July 1891. This firm aimed to produce physically beautiful books, and backed innovations in binding, illustration and typography.⁵⁷ The illustrators were Charles Ricketts (1866-1931) and Charles Shannon (1863-1937). These two collaborators had sent Wilde a copy of the first edition of the *Dial*, a privately printed magazine that was notable for featuring some of the first Symbolist art in Britain.⁵⁸ Neither illustrator was associated with the popular children's market. The run consisted of 1000 copies, priced at £1 1s. The choice of publisher and illustrator, and the price of the volume, suggest that *A House of Pomegranates* was consciously aimed at a connoisseur market.

The volume's appeal to this market was weakened by production problems. The high quality of its outward appearance – two linen boards with a moss green binding and gilt motifs – was not matched by the standard of the internal illustration. The four plates were printed in Paris using a new process which went wrong, resulting in a dirty deposit appearing on each plate. Upon removing this, much of the surface of the image was also removed, leaving the illustrations

⁵⁷ Giles Barber, 'Rossetti, Ricketts, Ricketts, and Some English Publishers' Bindings of the Nineties', *The Library*, 25:4 (December 1970), 314–330, (p. 325).

⁵⁸ *Complete Letters*, p. 411n.

almost invisible.⁵⁹ The poor quality of the illustrations reduced its appeal for the connoisseur collector and it sold poorly.⁶⁰

Early critics were quick to point out flaws in the illustrations.⁶¹ One anonymous reviewer, writing as 'an artist', claimed that the cover, although 'devoid of charm' was 'not ugly enough to be fascinating, that Mr Rickett's illustrations were 'drawn in rather too coarse a line', and that 'as to the drawings by Mr Shannon, we cannot say anything because we cannot see anything'.⁶²

Critics were equally quick to criticise the text. The writer of an unsigned review in the *Saturday Review* of 6 February 1892 wondered if the stories were written as 'a deliberate provocation to the *bourgeois au front glabre*'.⁶³ The reviewer identifies the stories as 'all tales of the Märchen order' but notes that 'The Birthday of the Infanta' is more a fabliau.⁶⁴ As a fabliau is an often comic and sometimes ribald medieval French verse tale, and Wilde's prose story is tragic and far from bawdy, the reviewer's questionable description of it highlights the difficulty of classifying the stories in this collection. 'The Fisherman and his Soul' is praised for its dexterous handling of familiar features: 'the separate ingredients of the piece are, of course, not very novel', but 'Mr Wilde has put them together with considerable skill'. The reviewer detects the shadow of Adelbert von Chamisso in the 'business-like manner in which the fisherman separates his soul from him'.⁶⁵ Overall, the reviewer detects an unsettling originality in the collection, notwithstanding a mixture of European narrative echoes.

⁵⁹ See Sotheby's *Oscar Wilde*, catalogue of the sale held in London on 29 October 2004, p. 69.

⁶⁰ Guy and Small, p. 62.

⁶¹ See *Complete Letters*, p. 501n; Beckson, ed., pp. 113-114.

⁶² 'Notable Illustrated Volumes', *Magazine of Art*, February 1892, 135-137, (p. 135).

⁶³ Reprinted in Beckson, ed., pp. 114-116, (p. 114)

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 115.

⁶⁵ Beckson, ed., p. 116

An unsigned review in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 30 November, 1891, opens with a question: 'Is *A House of Pomegranates* intended for a child's book?'.⁶⁶ The question is posed because both 'the "fleshly" style of Mr Wilde's writing' and 'the ultra-aestheticism of the pictures' seem to the perplexed reviewer to be 'hardly suitable to children'.⁶⁷ The epithet 'fleshly' is a deliberate echo of Robert Williams Buchanan who had denounced the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Algernon Swinburne in an article called 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871. Wilde's reviewer suggests that the stories contain the type of affectation, sensuality and self indulgence which Buchanan had argued characterised the work of the poets. The reviewer compares Wilde's 'pretty, poetic and imaginative flights' to the stories of Hans Andersen; the abundance of sumptuous detail to 'the Countess d'Aulnoy's charming tales' and his 'capital descriptions of the sea' in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' to those of Charles Kingsley.⁶⁸ The bemused reviewer associates fairy tales with children and finds this assumption challenged by this volume. The contrived style of Wilde's stories differentiates this collection from the work of writers like Kingsley who wrote specifically for the English child, and other writers like d'Aulnoy and Andersen, whose work was translated with the same generic child in mind. Wilde's stories draw on a wide range of literary and narrative sources, and display an original approach to familiar material that makes them difficult to reconcile with contemporary perceptions of the fairy tale genre.

Wilde responded provocatively to the reviewer's opening question in a letter which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 11 December 1891: 'Now in building this *House of Pomegranates* I had about as much intention of pleasing the British

⁶⁶ Reprinted in Beckson, ed., pp. 113-114, (p. 113).

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 113, 114.

⁶⁸ Beckson, ed., pp. 113, 114.

child as I had of pleasing the British public'.⁶⁹ His rejection of British standards irritated the author of an unsigned notice in the *Athenaeum* of 6 February 1892:

Mr. Oscar Wilde has been good enough to explain, since the publication of his book that it was intended neither for the 'British Child' nor for the 'British Public', but for the cultured few who can appreciate its subtle charms.⁷⁰

This reductive paraphrase of Wilde's defence of *A House of Pomegranates* facilitates the reviewer's ridicule of Wilde's presumption in criticising British taste:

The same exiguous but admiring band will doubtless comprehend why a volume of allegories should be described as *A House of Pomegranates*, which we must confess is not apparent to our perverse and blunted intellect.⁷¹

The reviewer goes on to acknowledge 'a good deal of forcible and poetic writing' in the stories but feels they are marred by 'too much straining after effect and too many wordy descriptions'.⁷²

Wilde's rejection of British standards raises interesting questions concerning the related issues of intended audience and the purpose of art. His defence of the book continues:

Mamilius is as entirely delightful as Caliban is entirely detestable, but neither the standard of Mamilius nor the standard of Caliban is my standard. No artist recognises any standard of beauty but that which is suggested by his own temperament. The artist seeks to realise in a certain material his immaterial idea of beauty, and thus to transform an idea into an ideal. That is the way an artist makes things. That is why an artist makes things. The artist has no other object in making things.⁷³

Mamilius, the boy prince from *The Winter's Tale*, is an image of quintessential innocence. Caliban, the son of a witch and a devil in *The Tempest*, embodies libidinous, destructive forces normally repressed beneath the veneer of civility. By referring to Caliban in a debate about the British child, Wilde queries the civility of the British public. In rejecting the standards of both incorruptibility and

⁶⁹ *Complete Letters*, p. 503.

⁷⁰ Reprinted in Beckson, ed., pp. 117-118, (p. 117).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Complete Letters*, p. 503.

monstrosity, Wilde refuses to accept the application of external standards to his work. Instead, he insists on the individual artist's right to produce work according to his own standards. The stories in *A House of Pomegranates* represent Wilde's idea of beauty, suggested by his own temperament and transformed into ideal works of art whose value cannot be judged by any external standard.

This conception of the fairy tale as an art form moulded by the individual temperament of the artist challenges contemporary perceptions of it as a genre whose primary purpose is either to celebrate the essential purity of childhood or to provide moral instruction for the young. Wilde claims that his objective in writing fairy tales is to create beautiful literary artefacts whose sole purpose is to reflect his own subjective idea of beauty. They may contain elements of social critique and offer moral insights, but Wilde's intention was that they should be seen as embodying the principles of an abstract, immaterial beauty. Wilde's stories suggest that such beauty has a spiritual dimension that transcends conventional morality. As we have seen, Lady Wilde and W. B. Yeats believed that Irish folklore expresses a similar spirituality. Wilde himself introduces the adjective "British" to the debate on intended audience. His rejection of the standards of the British child and the British public suggests that the creative matrix from which the stories in *A House of Pomegranates* emerged could well include those aspects of Irish folklore with which he, but not his English reader, was familiar. Perhaps because she was not a British child, Wilde's mother loved the book:

Caro Figlio Mio, Your book is beautiful, most beautiful! Jewels of thought set in the fine gold of the most exquisite words. And yet it all seems written with the most unconscious grace, without strain or effort, and no matter how strange and fantastic the incidents, yet the pathos, the human pathos is always real.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *The Oscar Wilde Collection*, reel 32-7.

Her heartfelt praise for her son's second collection of fairy tales echoes W.B. Yeats's endorsement of the 'pathos and tenderness' that characterise *Ancient Legends*, her own collection of Irish folklore. It seems that *A House of Pomegranates*, like *Ancient Legends*, embodies a most un-British pathos that, in Yeats's view, was to be found only in 'the innermost heart of the Celt'.⁷⁵

Overall, while *The Happy Prince* met with a more favourable response than *A House of Pomegranates*, critical reaction to both volumes was muted and ambivalent. The issue of intended readership, raised by the critics of the first volume, became central to the reception of the later one. As we have seen, Thackeray aimed at a dual readership. *The Rose and the Ring* contains allusions which appeal to an adult but which do not detract from a child's enjoyment of the unfolding action. Thackeray's story does not, however, unsettle the distinction between child and adult reader as it endorses, rather than challenges, the construction of childhood as a necessary, but temporary, stage in the progress towards adulthood. George MacDonald challenged this construction of childhood but did so in stories that were intended for a young readership. In claiming that *The Happy Prince* 'was meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy', Wilde constructs childhood as a lifelong mode of perception, and challenges the distinction between child and adult reader.⁷⁶

Reviewers pointed out that Wilde's first collection of fairy stories contained elements that ran counter to dominant understandings of childhood and to the norms governing the developing genre of the English literary fairy tale. In producing a second volume of stories aimed specifically at a sophisticated adult

⁷⁵ Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ *Complete Letters*, p. 352.

readership, Wilde deliberately rejected the standards of a British public who insisted that fairy stories belonged in the nursery. *A House of Pomegranates* heralds the coming of age of the literary fairy story as Wilde aligns the genre with aesthetic and spiritual development. Wilde was, however, ahead of his time, and the perception that his two volumes were intended primarily for children adversely affected their initial critical reception.

The Happy Prince and Other Tales

This section discusses the five stories in this volume.⁷⁷

'The Happy Prince'

'The Happy Prince' is the ironic title of a story about a young prince who lived a carefree existence before his early death and whose statue can now see the misery of life in the city beneath him. Aided by a Swallow, who continually defers his departure to Egypt, the statue distributes the jewels that bedeck him amongst the poor, enabling them to live happier, healthier lives. While the town officials argue over the fate of the dilapidated statue, God welcomes its broken, leaden heart and the bird's dead body to paradise.

Wilde first told the story to an appreciative group of Cambridge undergraduates in November 1885.⁷⁸ Its oral origin in an elite cultural setting aligns 'The Happy Prince' with seventeenth-century French salon fairy tales, which like Wilde's story, were told to sophisticated, educated audiences and were often concerned with issues of social responsibility. Like the French salon tale,

⁷⁷ All references to the stories from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* will be to the versions contained in the most recent academic edition, *Oscar Wilde: Complete Short Fiction*, ed. by Ian Small, and will be given in parentheses in the text.

⁷⁸ Ellmann, p. 253.

'The Happy Prince' contains some motifs commonly found in wonder tales but also associated with literary fairy tales. These include the depictions of the prince as hero and the swallow as an animal helper, and the allusion to a forthcoming ball. These features do not correspond exactly with particular folktale motifs as described in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, suggesting that Wilde was not drawing directly on the folk narrative tradition but invoking it indirectly. These motifs conjure up the magical world of the wonder tale. Other elements, including the story of the Swallow's ill-fated love for the Reed, the account of poverty in the city, and the sardonic description of the Town Councillors' self-absorption, show that all is not perfect in this magical world. In folktales, animals help humans to escape physical hardship or to accomplish tasks that result in a materially prosperous outcome. In Wilde's story, the Swallow helps the Prince destroy himself. Folktales often tell how a lowly hero acquires wealth and marries a princess; Wilde reverses this to tell of a prince who gives away all he has and loses his only friend. Unlike a folktale hero, Wilde's prince does not live happily ever after, but dies on two occasions before finally ascending to heaven.

Structurally, the story resembles the folktale through the use of triadic patterning as the statue asks the Swallow for help on three occasions. However, Wilde's complex story departs from the simple structure of the folktale, in which episodes of the narrative always follow a certain sequence.⁷⁹ Wilde's story is not structured sequentially; it opens with a description of the splendid statue as the Swallow arrives in the city, then switches back in time to describe both the Swallow's experience with the Reed and the Prince's life in the palace, before

⁷⁹ Propp, p. 22.

moving to a bifurcated conclusion that juxtaposes human disregard and divine approbation. The structural progression is ironised as the travel-loving Swallow leaves the Reed only to become enamoured of an even more immobile statue. Throughout, Wilde plays with the narrative expectation, familiar from the folktale, that an initial lack will be liquidated.⁸⁰ On one level, a glaring lack is liquidated when the poor are fed, but the persistence of other lacks complicates the structural progression of the story. Wilde not only substitutes the prince's lack of mobility for his earlier lack of compassion but also highlights the continuation of other lacks; the poor of the city lack any knowledge of the source of their good fortune while the town councillors display an ongoing lack of imagination and any capacity for spiritual growth. Wilde's story does not reward love and constancy with a transformation of the central character's situation in this life and this lack of a conventionally happy ending adds to the story's complexity.

Stylistically, the story differs from the folktale, which typically eschews description and focuses only on what is essential to the plot.⁸¹ The opening paragraph of 'The Happy Prince' conforms to this convention: the height of the statue establishes that the Prince can see the misery of the city; the gold leaves, sapphire eyes, and red ruby that adorn the statue subsequently become the largesse distributed by the Swallow at the Prince's request. However, the Swallow's descriptions of Egypt exceed what is necessary to the plot. His ornate fusion of the fantastic and the exotic explodes in one long synaesthetic sentence that mingles colours, textures, natural and enigmatic images in a succession of fluid appositional clauses:

He told him of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile, and catch gold fish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and

⁸⁰ Propp, p. 35.

⁸¹ See Lüthi, p. 25.

lives in the desert, and knows everything; of the merchants, who walk slowly by the side of their camels, and carry amber beads in their hands; of the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal; of the great green snake that sleeps in a palm-tree, and has twenty priests to feed it with honey-cakes; and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies (p. 9).

By contrast, the Prince's reply is direct and deflationary:

'Dear little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery as great as Misery' (p. 9).

Wilde's style counterpoints the directness of the folktale with luscious detail to produce a variously textured story that acknowledges the appeal of both sensual decadence and selfless sacrifice.

References to sources other than folklore but including various literary fairy tales greatly enhance the stylistic richness and complexity of the story.

Wilde's poor seamstress recalls Thomas Hood's 'The Song of the Shirt' (1843), a popular social protest poem in which a starving needlewoman laments that she must work:

While underneath the eaves
The brooding swallows cling
As if to show me their sunny backs
And twit me with the spring.⁸²

Unlike Hood's brooding swallows, Wilde's cheerful one helps the unfortunate seamstress. The figure of the little match girl who appears in Wilde's story had a topical relevance as there was a strike of London match girls in June 1888 but this figure also alludes directly to Hans Christian Andersen, suggesting that Wilde is consciously invoking a fairy tale tradition that aestheticises social deprivation. In Andersen's story, the match girl sees sweet visions, dies, and is transported to heaven. In Wilde's story, she runs home happily with the Prince's jewelled eye, and it is the statue's leaden heart and the bird's dead body that are transported to

⁸² Thomas Hood, *Selected Poems of Thomas Hood*, ed. by John Clubbe, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970) p. 306.

heaven. His story, more clearly than Andersen's, suggests that divine values differ from human ones. This suggestion complicates the story's investigation of the value of suffering, and the complex requirements of social responsibility.

The oriental imagery of 'The Happy Prince' may partly reflect Wilde's admiration of the fourteenth-century Persian poet, Hafiz.⁸³ It also reflects the pervasive influence of *The Arabian Nights* on the European literary imagination and the particular Victorian interest in the Orient fanned by Edward Fitzgerald's 1859 translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Here, Wilde uses exotic imagery to highlight the harsh reality of life in a northern city and thereby emphasise the unselfish nature of the Swallow's decision to stay. The Swallow's evocation of the orient recalls Théophile Gautier's 'Ce que disent les hirondelles' [What the swallows say]. In this poem, a group of swallows describe the wonders of Egypt, including the temple at Balbeck, while the speaker compares himself to a captive bird who cannot escape to warmer climes: 'car le poète est un oiseau, mais captif' [for the poet is a captive bird].⁸⁴ This intertextual echo aligns the figure of Wilde's Swallow with the artist whose vocation can be seen as a liability.

The Charity Children in 'The Happy Prince' are not unlike those who feature in Blake's 'Holy Thursday', in *Songs of Innocence*, which describes the angelic radiance of London's young poor. This Blakean tradition of childhood faith and radiance had been updated for the Victorian reader by George MacDonald's account of a Christ-like child who flies over London in *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871). The unhappy Happy Prince who looks down with pity on the people of the city recalls Dinah Mulock Craik's *The Little Lame Prince* who sees the misery of the city from his magic carpet. Wilde, however, eschews Craik's

⁸³ *Complete Letters*, p. 621.

⁸⁴ Théophile Gautier, *Émaux et Camées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) p. 115.

conventional happy ending where virtuous compassion is rewarded in this life. The Swallow's description of death as the brother of sleep in 'The Happy Prince' is taken from the opening lines of Shelley's *Queen Mab*. This allusion to a poem that criticises corrupt, tyrannical political systems enhances Wilde's contrast between the innocent childlike vision of the Charity children and the venal, self-aggrandising behaviour of the Town Councillors. The Swallow helps an exploited seamstress from a popular poem, a struggling playwright, and a little match girl imported from a Danish fairy tale, suggesting that the story's imaginative matrix encompasses a variety of literary traditions. Wilde's valorising of childlike vision is prefigured by Blake and MacDonald but it is also rooted in Irish folk tradition. Irish religious folktales tend to criticise irresponsible, hypocritical behaviours and endorse unostentatious generosity, which places the giver in a special relationship with God.⁸⁵ Wilde invokes these values in 'The Happy Prince' to criticise an urban, materialistic society that shares many of the cultural standards, and social injustices, of late-Victorian London.

'The Happy Prince' was published in 1888, the year after Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and less than six months after the mass protest rally in Trafalgar Square, which became known as 'Bloody Sunday'. The Mathematical Master, the Art Professor, the Mayor and his Town Councillors represent the unimaginative, self-serving middle class. Unlike the Prince, whose callow ignorance of social misery develops into a mature recognition of the need for social responsibility, the Town Councillors are incapable of opening their eyes to what is not immediately

⁸⁵ Ó Héalaí, 'Moral Values', pp. 178-179.

apparent. On this basis, it is difficult to see how Regina Gagnier can argue that Wilde's fairy tales 'reek of middle class virtue and sentimentality'.⁸⁶

In Wilde's own words, 'the story is an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem'.⁸⁷ He did not define what that problem was and the story highlights several. Through its allusions to other narratives, 'The Happy Prince' both transcends and reflects the Victorian context which produced it. Aspects of that context explored by the story include the conflicting claims of socialism and individualism, the value of philanthropy and sacrifice, bourgeois philistinism and materialism, and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, issues which Wilde later explored in his critical writings.

Jack Zipes argues that an understanding of Wilde's essay, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in February 1891, is essential for an appreciation of 'The Happy Prince'.⁸⁸ He argues that by contrasting the Prince with the town officials, Wilde exposes the hypocrisy of the English bourgeoisie and the futility of individual sacrifice. Zipes's argument is based on the premise that 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' is a serious polemic in favour of social change. This view is disputed by Josephine Guy, who places the essay within the context of a topical periodical debate on the relative merits of the opposed doctrines of Individualism and Socialism. She comments on journal articles relating to these doctrines by W.E. Gladstone and the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes in the *Nineteenth Century* in 1890, Auberon Herbert in the same periodical between 1888 and 1889, and Grant Allen in the *Contemporary Review* 1889. Arguing that Wilde concentrated on 'the more sensationalist aspects of

⁸⁶ Regina Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p. 63.

⁸⁷ *Complete Letters*, p. 355

⁸⁸ Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, p. 116.

Individualism', she concludes that the essay 'needs to be seen for what it was designed to be – entertainment' and should not be used 'to style Wilde as a serious thinker'.⁸⁹

Wilde first told 'The Happy Prince' in 1885, before the appearance of the periodical essays to which Guy refers. This undermines her claim that the essay's focus on the relative merits of individualism and socialism is derivative and opportunistic. Both the story and the later essay display a willingness to engage with serious issues in an entertaining, provocative way. This suggests that the essay was not an opportunistic attempt to cash in on a topical debate on which Wilde held no strong personal views but was rather an engaged development of themes which he had already explored in fictional form. Both texts explore desirable and reprehensible behaviours, and consider the relationship between the individual and the community. As we have seen, these issues are also central to Irish religious folktales. Both 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' may, therefore, draw on that strand of the Irish folk narrative tradition in their exploration of poverty, altruism, and individual responsibility.

In the essay, Wilde argues that the true individualism of the future, which will develop through joy, will reject 'any hideous cant about self-sacrifice' and will effect 'the reconstruction of society'. The story explores the ambiguous effects of the type of altruistic self-sacrifice which the essay describes as 'merely a survival of savage mutilation'. The story shows that charity, which destroys the philanthropic statue, is a form of savage mutilation that achieves no lasting good. In the essay, Wilde notes: 'sympathy with pain is not the highest form of

⁸⁹ Josephine M. Guy, ' "The Soul of Man under Socialism": A (Con) Textual History' in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 59-85, (pp. 63, 73).

sympathy'.⁹⁰ He goes on to argue that this type of emotional response gives rise to acts of altruism which are irrational because they prolong the disease of poverty, rather than cure it. The relationship between the Swallow and the Prince is founded on an emotional sympathy that seeks to remedy the worst effects of social inequity and deprivation. However, their actions paper over the cracks rather than tackle the root causes of poverty and misery. At the end of the story, the Mayor and Town Councillors are still in charge; the gold leaf that fed the children of the poor has all been used up; God is in his heaven and nothing has really changed. The essay makes explicit the shortcomings of sympathy with pain and the limitations of individual sacrifice that are implicit in 'The Happy Prince' which indicates that Zipes's linking of essay and story is valid and informative.

'The Happy Prince' can be read as an indictment of a monarchical society which allows deprivation to exist in the midst of plenty. Jarlath Killeen points out that the story is saturated with the urban poverty that characterised London during the nineteenth century. Noting that during that period London contained slums that housed large numbers of Catholic, Irish families, Killeen suggests that the primary divisions of the story are religious and national rather than social. Wilde uses the figure of the little boy who cries for the moon to allow 'the Irish child to interrogate his imperial parent', while 'the Mathematical Master demonstrates the Anglican disapproval of ...an obviously Irish belief in angels'. As the Happy Prince divests himself of the material wealth produced by colonial exploitation,

⁹⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, February 1891, reprinted in *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. by Linda Dowling, (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 127-160, (pp. 155, 159, 157); hereafter this volume will be referred to as *Selected Critical Prose*.

Killeen concludes: 'The implicit lesson is that England must become more like Ireland if she is to become truly philanthropic'.⁹¹

Although Killeen's argument is persuasively presented, it equates Catholicism with Irish Catholicism and does not acknowledge that poverty in Victorian London was experienced by a variety of social, ethnic and religious groupings. Killeen's identification of the Charity Children as Catholic because of 'their obviously Irish belief in angels' is problematical.⁹² Belief in angels is not confined to Irish Catholics, nor is it always consistent with the desire to subvert English orthodoxies in the name of social justice. The children in 'The Happy Prince' seem to belong more to a Blakean tradition of childhood faith and radiance distorted by all established religions than to a specifically Catholic, Irish tradition. The Happy Prince's sympathy lies with all his impoverished subjects so that Wilde's sympathy seems to lie with all those whose labour and misery go unrecognised and unrewarded, regardless of nationality.

The central protagonist of the 'The Happy Prince' is a work of art and the story presents a number of positions on the function of art. The Town Councillor believes that art should be beautiful and useful. The sensible mother believes that art should effect an inspirational moral influence on the young. The disappointed man thinks that art can compensate for life's frustrations. The Charity Children believe that art gives access to a transcendent reality. The Prince shows that art can indeed possess practical utility as his jewels provide the bread that feeds the poor. In 'The English Renaissance of Art', Wilde maintains: 'The good we get from art

⁹¹ Killeen, 'Diaspora, Empire, and Religious Geography', pp. 184, 186, 187.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 186.

is not what we learn from it; it is what we become through it'.⁹³ The Happy Prince becomes a Christlike martyr; the Swallow becomes his loving disciple and the reader of the story becomes a witness to the beauty of their actions. Like Christ, the Happy Prince leaves the shelter of his early life behind to embark on a public crusade which ends in total self-sacrifice. Paralleling Christ, his body provides the bread that nourishes his people. The story can be read as a Christian parable but it is also a vindication of the Charity Children's belief in the spiritual dimension of art.

The story reflects on the philanthropic project of bringing culture and art to the poor. Diana Maltz argues that essays published in *Woman's World* during the period of Wilde's editorship (1887-1889) display a profound ambivalence about missionary aestheticism.⁹⁴ While his contributors' attitudes may have been ambivalent, Wilde clearly expressed his own views in an editorial review of a biography of the philanthropist, Mary Carpenter, who devoted her life to the promotion of educational reform:

There is something a little pathetic in the attempt to civilise the rough street-boy by means of the refining influence of ferns and fossils [...] The poor are not to be fed upon facts. Even Shakespeare and the Pyramids are not sufficient; nor is there much use in giving them the results of culture, unless we also give them those conditions under which culture can be raised.⁹⁵

Wilde points out that the poor need to be fed before they can benefit from exposure either to education, literature, or art. The statue of the Happy Prince is a prominently displayed, gaudy example of public art. Through the reactions of various characters, Wilde shows that exposure to art can enrich

⁹³ Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance in Art', a lecture delivered in 1882, in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Robert Ross, 15 vols (London: Routledge, 1993), xiv, pp. 243-277, (p. 273).

⁹⁴ Diana Maltz, 'Wilde's *The Woman's World* and the Culture of Aesthetic Philanthropy' in Bristow, ed., pp. 185-211.

⁹⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'Literary and Other Notes', *The Woman's World*, Dec. 1887, 81-85, (p. 83).

the lives of the poor but also shows that they need food more than they need aesthetic stimulation.

Various critics have drawn attention to the kiss between the Swallow and the statue to suggest that 'The Happy Prince' contains a homosexual subtext.⁹⁶ The story discusses hedonism, guilt and responsibility and may well reflect elements of Wilde's developing sexual quandary. Its emphasis is on spiritual development rather than physical pleasure but its ending suggests that Wilde did not endorse a disjunction between the two. 'The Happy Prince' concludes with God approving his Angel's choice of the Prince's leaden heart and the dead bird's body as the two most precious things in the city. As the bird sings in Paradise, art has a divine dimension but requires physical expression. As the Prince praises God in his city of gold, the material and the spiritual coexist in a realm where ethics and aesthetics are not opposed.

This complex story contains a variety of intertextual echoes and explores issues as varied as the value of philanthropy and the function of art. While children can enjoy the story, its complexity guarantees its appeal to an adult audience. The Swallow's tales of Egypt provide imaginative escape from harsh reality and the Prince's stories about the poor enable him to help them. As the friendship between the Swallow and the Prince develops through the stories they tell each other, Wilde highlights the power of narrative. While the primary emphasis is on self-sacrifice, 'The Happy Prince' draws attention to the redemptive power of storytelling.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 138; Duffy, p. 331.

'The Nightingale and the Rose'

'The Nightingale and the Rose' expands Wilde's exploration of individual sacrifice, instigated in 'The Happy Prince', in a story about a young Student who must find a red rose if he is to dance with his beloved at the royal ball. A Nightingale, inspired by the mystery of love, decides to help him. That night, she dies while creating a red rose, which the Student brings to his beloved. She rejects it and him. Disillusioned, the Student throws the rose into a gutter, decides that Love is impractical and returns home to study Metaphysics.

This story works less by direct statement than by implication so the reader is free to ponder the significance of what is left unsaid. In a letter to one of his readers, Thomas Hutchinson, Wilde acknowledges that their interpretations differed: 'I am afraid that I don't think as much of the young Student as you do'. Wilde sees the Student and his beloved as shallow while the Nightingale is 'the true lover, if there is one'. He continues: 'So, at least, it seems to me, but I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it, and the others, I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets, and many answers'.⁹⁷ These comments suggest that Wilde believed that art should conceal as much as reveal. Authorial intent is not the key to interpretation, which must remain provisional and incomplete. To paraphrase Beckett's comparison of his work with that of Joyce, Wilde, in 'The Nightingale and the Rose', is moving away from omniscience and omnipotence as an artist.⁹⁸ Wilde suggests that the purpose of art is to encompass

⁹⁷ *Complete Letters*, p. 354.

⁹⁸ Beckett, cited in Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre* (London: John Calder, 1988) p. 14, states: 'The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance'.

levels of experience that complicate interpretation. The key word in interpreting 'The Nightingale and the Rose' may well be 'perhaps'.

Formally, the story is structured around the Student's quest to find a red rose in winter. The quest is a feature of romance narratives and of a number of international folktales, AT Types 460-485, which generally end happily on successful completion of a task. This story, which features a man and an animal helper, also resembles AT Type 545, the best-known variant of which is 'Puss in Boots'. It incorporates some folklore motifs, including testing of the suitor (motif type H310), bringing rose in winter (motif type H1023.3), and scorned suitor consoles self (motif type J877).⁹⁹ The sequence of the Nightingale's three approaches to the different rose trees and her three bursts of song echo the triadic patterning of the folktale. The structure gestures towards familiar narrative templates but confounds expectations because successful completion of the task does not lead to a happy outcome for the suitor. The deflationary ending imbues the story with an unexpected, ironic subtlety.

The story departs from folktale conventions in several ways. Wilde's Student is not an active hero who undergoes various tests and adventures but a shallow youth who lies weeping on the grass before going to his room to fall asleep. The faults that he attributes to the nightingale – lack of sensitivity, style at the expense of sincerity and unwillingness to sacrifice herself – ironically apply to him instead. His beloved is equally superficial. Their fickle shallowness turns them into villains while the Nightingale's selfless devotion transforms her into an unsung heroine. Their villainy is a compound of ignorance and self-absorption, and differs from the knowing desire to inflict harm or cause misfortune familiar

⁹⁹ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature*, revised and enlarged ed., 6 vols (Bloomington, Indiana; London: Indiana University Press, 1955-58) iii, pp. 398, 458; iv, p. 61.

from the folktale.¹⁰⁰ The role of the Nightingale is also problematical as she combines elements of the helper and the hero. By blurring the traditional attributes of villain, hero, and helper, Wilde undermines the expected, conventional triumph of good over evil.

‘The Nightingale and the Rose’ echoes the stylised tradition of the literary fairy tale more than the narrative simplicity of the folktale. The background detail of the royal ball recalls not only the international folktale, Cinderella, (AT Type 510), but also the court setting of several of Mme d’Aulnoy’s fairy tales. The ornate language used by the three rose-trees recalls d’Aulnoy’s lush and detailed descriptions which are not essential to the development of the plot but which reveal a delight in the intricacy of language itself. Wilde’s lovelorn student in a university town recalls similar details in Hoffmann’s ‘The Golden Pot’, which, like Wilde’s story, pits the deflationary recalcitrance of ordinary life against the ecstatic, but disquieting, life of the imagination. Both stories contrast a rare, idealised form of love with the more shallow emotion that forms the basis of most human relationships.

‘The Nightingale and the Rose’ exemplifies Wilde’s engagement with a number of Andersen fairy tales. In Andersen’s ‘The Nightingale’, nature triumphs over artifice as the dying emperor realises that the real bird, unlike the mechanical one, has the power to defeat Death. As she promises to sing ‘of the good and evil that happen round you, and yet are hidden from you’, the nightingale becomes the emperor’s eyes and his conscience, and art is shown to have an ethical value.¹⁰¹ Wilde’s Nightingale dies and the unnatural rose she creates through her belief in a higher form of love is discarded. Wilde shows that the artist’s efforts go

¹⁰⁰ See Propp, p. 27, for a description of villainous intent.

¹⁰¹ Hans Christian Andersen, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. by Erik Christian Haugaard (London: Gollancz, 1974), p. 211.

unrecognised and that art exerts no ethical influence on human behaviour or understanding.

'The Nightingale and the Rose' invokes and inverts Andersen's 'The Swineherd' on a number of levels. Andersen's princess rejects the rose and nightingale proffered by a prince but then kisses him, in swineherd disguise, in order to acquire a mechanical music box. The story concludes as her suitor, who realises how unworthy she is, rejects the Princess. In Wilde's story, nature is not pitted against artifice and the Student does not notice the beloved's obvious unworthiness. Both stories end with the retreat of the erstwhile lover, but Wilde's characters, unlike Andersen's, have not learned from their experience.

Andersen's 'The World's Most Beautiful Rose' tells of a dying queen restored to health by a magical rose grown from Christ's blood on the Cross 'that symbolises the highest and purest love'.¹⁰² Wilde echoes this story in his description of the rose created in honour of 'the Love that dies not in the tomb (p. 16). Andersen's story concludes with the epiphanic realisation of the divine power of the beautiful rose. Wilde, on the other hand, shows that the rose is unappreciated so it is difficult to draw a conventional Christian moral from his story. 'A Rose from Homer's Grave' tells of a nightingale who dies while singing 'of the joy and pain of its love' for a rose which grows on Homer's grave.¹⁰³ While Andersen's rose excites the nightingale's passion, the passion of Wilde's Nightingale gives birth to the flower which is not appreciated by anyone. Andersen focuses on the pride and beauty of the rose while Wilde stresses the selflessness of the Nightingale. Once again, 'The Nightingale and the Rose' refracts, rather than reflects, an Andersen story to which it bears a superficial resemblance.

¹⁰² Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 390.

¹⁰³ Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 175.

By placing a nightingale at the centre of the action, Wilde alludes to a variety of narrative and literary precedents that enrich his story. The figure of the suffering nightingale comes from the Greek myth of Philomela, who, in Ovid's version in Book 6 of *Metamorphoses*, is transformed into a nightingale. This classical myth, which considers *inter alia* the source of artistic inspiration and its effect on human lives, was familiar to readers of English poetry. In 'To the Same Tune', from *Certain Sonnets*, (1598), Sir Philip Sidney writes of the nightingale who 'sings out her woes, a thorn her song-book making'.¹⁰⁴ Matthew Arnold drew on the myth in 'Philomela' (1853) in which the nightingale sings of her eternal pain and passion in an English garden.¹⁰⁵ Wilde himself drew on the myth in 'The Burden of Itys', in which the nightingale, who 'canst make sorrow beautiful', transforms suffering into a form of transcendent aesthetic.¹⁰⁶ In both 'The Burden of Itys' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose', Wilde adapts the classical myth for his own artistic ends. In the story, the nightingale can be seen as the figure of the ideal artist who goes against nature to produce a beautiful artefact that has no practical use and whose value goes unnoticed in the real world.

The description of the Nightingale's final moments – 'Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song' (p. 16) – echo the imagery and wildness of the opening lines of Wordsworth's 'O Nightingale' (1807):

O NIGHTINGALE! thou surely art
 A creature of a "fiery heart":--
 These notes of thine--they pierce and pierce;
 Tumultuous harmony and fierce!¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Philip Sidney, *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. by William J. Ringler Jr. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 157.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1979) pp. 372-375.

¹⁰⁶ Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde: Complete Poetry*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 48.

¹⁰⁷ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, ed. by John O. Hayden (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 734.

Wilde's story also evokes Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), in which the bird embodies ideas of perfection and permanence that contrast with the transitory human world. In Keats's poem, pain and suffering are ineluctable elements of human existence from which the poet longs to escape with the immortal nightingale 'on the viewless wings of Poesy'.¹⁰⁸ In Wilde's story, the Nightingale is not immortal, but willing to suffer and die for the sake of an ideal love. Pain and suffering are transferred from the realm of human existence to the sphere of art as the Nightingale's pain creates the beautiful red rose. Wilde subtly reverses the terms by which Keats explores suffering and perfection, life and art, death and immortality.

'The Nightingale and the Rose' invokes the world of medieval legend, according to which the nightingale presses herself against the thorn to quell the throes of her unrequited passion for the rose. Isobel Murray suggests that Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817) was Wilde's most likely source for this Persian legend.¹⁰⁹ As this book-length poem contains only two brief and oblique references to a nightingale and a rose, it seems an unlikely source.¹¹⁰ The opening sentence of Andersen's 'A Rose from Homer's Grave' refers to this legend so Wilde could have been aware of it from that source. Wilde's story, like 'A Rose from Homer's Grave', incorporates elements of another legend in which the red rose derives its colour from the divine blood drawn by the crown of thorns.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1980), p. 530.

¹⁰⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 267n.

¹¹⁰ A. D. Godley (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore* (London and New York: Frederick Warne, 1915) pp. 346, 441.

¹¹¹ See *Larousse Dictionary of World Folklore*, ed. by Alison Jones (Edinburgh: Larousse, 1995) p. 374.

Regardless of exact sources, 'The Nightingale and the Rose' draws on medieval legend to enrich and mystify its exploration of love and sacrifice.¹¹²

The story privileges *agape*, a love that is spiritual and selfless over *eros*, a physical, sexual love. The Nightingale vaunts an unsullied form of priceless love:

Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold (pp. 12-13).

She believes that the student embodies this ideal, capitalised Love that produces art: "Here indeed is the true lover", said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers" (p. 12). She sings of love in three ascending stages: first she tells 'of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and girl'; then she recounts 'the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid' while the climax comes as she sings 'of the Love that is perfected by Death' (p. 16). In the first two stages, there is a progression from love to passion, from heart to soul, from boy to man, and from girl to maid. John Charles Duffy suggests that as the third stage 'omits heterosexuality from its conception of the final, or highest, Love', the story implicitly suggests that love between men is the ideal form of love. He argues that the piercing of the Nightingale's breast by the thorn represents 'an act of sexualised, but non-reproductive, penetration'.¹¹³ However, as the act of penetration produces the red rose, Duffy's argument is not convincing. The Nightingale's final burst of song suggests that all human forms of passion pale beside a superior form of love 'that dies not in the tomb' (p. 16).

The nightingale presents the artist as a Christ-like figure suffering for the sake of an ideal love that is expressed through art. The Nightingale's song reflects

¹¹² See Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), pp. 106-111 for further references to medieval recourse to the symbolic figure of the nightingale.

¹¹³ Duffy, p. 334.

her perception of the Student's love for the young girl, rather than the reality of their shallow interest in each other. The bird creates a work of art that is based, not on recalcitrant reality, but on artistic perception. The story highlights the process of art as it transforms imaginative perceptions into a visible, tangible artefact that is beautiful but useless. This stance prefigures Wilde's philosophy of art as expressed in 'The Decay of Lying': 'Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely along its own lines'. In that same essay, he claims: 'Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions'.¹¹⁴ 'The Nightingale and the Rose' can be read as an early expression of Wilde's theory of art.

The story demonstrates the formative power of storytelling and its capacity to limit perception. The Student, who 'only knew the things that are written down in books' (p. 15), sees himself as the type of poor but worthy suitor familiar from folktales, literary fairy tales and romance narratives. He is assigned a similar role in the story which the Nightingale tells to the stars. They both use narrative templates to interpret events and their interpretations are shown to be flawed. The Green Lizard, the Butterfly and the Daisy, who cannot understand why the Student is indulging in histrionic weeping, can see that he is ridiculous. This group is clearly not familiar with stories that celebrate unrequited love so their perceptions and judgement are not clouded by narrative preconceptions. The story shows how powerful and misleading storytelling can be, a theme to which Wilde returns in 'The Devoted Friend'.

¹¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', *Nineteenth Century*, January 1889, reprinted in *Selected Critical Prose*, pp. 163-192, p. (191).

'The Nightingale and the Rose' subverts the familiar use of the fairy tale for didactic purposes to advocate development of the imagination. Wilde responded to Andrew Galt Ross's criticism of the story's fantastic treatment of nature:

No doubt there will always be critics who, like a certain writer in the *Saturday Review*, will gravely censure the teller of fairy tales for his defective knowledge of natural history, who will measure imaginative works by their own lack of any imaginative faculty.¹¹⁵

'The Nightingale and the Rose' concludes as the Student decides to immerse himself in the study and pulls out 'a great dusty book' (p. 18). This scene reverses the impetus of Wordsworth's 'The Tables Turned' in which the poet encourages his friend to abandon the study of books and absorb the wisdom present in the song of a bird:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife;
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.¹¹⁶

While Wilde does not advocate a return to nature, his story echoes Wordsworth's valorisation of openness to experience over dreary study. His antipathy towards rote learning, implicit in 'The Nightingale and the Rose', is explicitly expressed in 'The Critic as Artist', where Gilbert proclaims: 'We teach people how to remember, we never teach them how to grow'.¹¹⁷ In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde rejects the standards of 'the dullard and the doctrinaire', and looks forward to the day 'facts will be regarded as discreditable'.¹¹⁸ 'The Nightingale and the Rose' proposes a Romantic form of education that eschews facts in favour of imaginative

¹¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 178.

¹¹⁶ Wordsworth, p. 357.

¹¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist: Part 2', *Nineteenth Century*, September 1890, reprinted in *Selected Critical Prose*, pp. 243-279, (p. 274).

¹¹⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', pp. 164, 190.

development, and that challenges the reader to unravel the many secrets and answers it contains.

'The Selfish Giant'

The title of 'The Selfish Giant' contains no hint of irony; it perfectly describes the giant when he banishes the children from his garden where winter subsequently reigns supreme. One morning, he awakes to see that the children have crept through a hole in the wall, bringing spring with them. In the furthest corner of the garden a small boy cannot reach the branches of a tree that is still covered in frost and snow. The Giant realises how selfish he has been and he helps the little boy into the tree which breaks into blossom. Years go by, and the Giant delights in the children but longs to see his first little friend again. One winter morning, he sees the boy standing under a tree in blossom but is appalled to see the prints of nails on his hands and feet. The child tells him that they are the wounds of love and that he has come to bring the Giant to his own garden, which is paradise. When the other children come to play, they find the Giant lying dead under the tree.

This story revisits the theme of selfless love that receives no material reward explored in both 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. It differs from these stories in that it does not allude to the power of storytelling and contains few literary allusions. Despite a reference to the north wind, which bears some similarity to Andersen's personification of that force in 'The Garden of Eden', itself based on 'The Isle of Bliss', Madame d'Aulnoy's first literary fairy tale, there is no clear analogy between 'The Selfish Giant' and any particular European literary fairy tale. The weakness of the little boy in 'The Selfish Giant' resembles the frailty of Diamond in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North*

Wind but while Diamond is Christlike, the little boy in 'The Selfish Giant' is actually Christ in the form of a child. In presenting Christ as a vulnerable, apparently ordinary child, Wilde may be drawing on artistic, rather than literary, precedent. 'Christ in the House of his Parents' by John Everett Millais (1850), shows Christ as a small boy with a bloodied hand in a carpenter's workshop. The painting was criticised for its depiction of the Holy Family, and Jesus in particular, as ordinary, rather than idealised, figures but Wilde greatly admired it and described it as a work of genius.¹¹⁹

'The Selfish Giant' seems less complex than the other stories that precede it in the collection. The tone is understated, the language uncomplicated, and the style shorn of ornate, ornamental descriptions. The resulting simplicity enables 'The Selfish Giant' to read like a parable, which employs Christian imagery to illustrate the demands and rewards involved in responding to the childlike call of Christ. The central importance of the garden recalls the story of man's fall from paradise as Wilde adapts Genesis to rewrite the story of original sin. Man, as represented by the children, remains innocent although banished from the garden. The Giant can be seen as the retributive God of the Old Testament who refuses to let man back into paradise. The New Testament ethic of love triumphs over the Old Testament insistence on authority as the Giant welcomes the children back and even helps one of them into the tree of knowledge:

'I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever.' He was really very sorry for what he had done (p. 21).

Recognition of past sins is accompanied by a vow of repentance that leads to redemption.

¹¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Grosvenor Gallery', *Dublin University Magazine*, July 1877, 118-126, p. 119.

The story shows that to be selfish is childish, whereas to be unselfish is both childlike and Christ-like. Although the child at the heart of the story is divine, other mortal children also play a role in the Giant's redemption so childlike innocence is shown to be an antidote to selfishness. At the beginning, the Giant, like a petulant child, refuses to share his prized possession: 'My own garden is my own garden' (p. 19). Once he realises how selfish he has been, his heart melts and he shares himself, as well as his garden, with the children: 'Every afternoon, when school was over, the children came and played with the Giant' (p. 22). As time passes, he becomes as helpless as the little boy whom he had helped into the tree: 'The Giant grew very old and feeble. He could not play about any more, so he sat in a huge armchair' (p. 22). At the conclusion, the Giant takes the divine child's place under the tree: 'And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree' (p. 23). Now it is the child's turn to help the feeble Giant ascend to paradise.

While the language of the story remains simple throughout, its changing syntax reflects the Giant's developing sense of childlike wonder.

The opening paragraphs consist of clear, paratactical sentences:

Every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's garden.

It was a large, lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit (p. 19).

Sentence follows sentence as season follows season. This measured tone changes when the Giant places the little boy in the tree:

And the Giant stole up behind him and took him gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree. And the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them around the Giant's neck, and kissed him (p. 21).

The repeated use of 'and' produces an oral, childlike form of hypotactical syntax, which heaps clause upon clause, sentence upon sentence, in an outpouring of exuberant wonder. In the final section, the exuberance is tempered with awe:

'Who art thou?' Said the Giant, and a strange awe fell on him, and he knelt before the little child.

And the child smiled on the Giant, and said to him, 'You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise.'

And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms (p. 23).

These three short, balanced paragraphs combine a childlike profusion of clauses with a compelling sense of divine order.

'The Selfish Giant' embodies the message conveyed by Jesus that the kingdom of God belongs to the child (Luke 18:16; Mark 10:14). The little boy's final invitation to the Giant to 'come with me to my garden, which is Paradise' (p. 23), recalls the words spoken by Christ to one of the two thieves crucified alongside him: 'Today, thou shalt be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). These biblical echoes imbue the story with a spiritual significance that is enhanced by its oblique allusions to the lives of well-known saints. Stigmata are associated with the thirteenth-century Italian saint, Francis of Assisi, of whom Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*: 'He understood Christ, and so he became like him'.¹²⁰ The Giant who lifts the child into the tree recalls the figure of St Christopher, as described in Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth century *The Golden Legend*, a work that enjoyed lasting, popular appeal. According to the tradition promulgated by de Voragine and popularised in medieval art, a repentant Christian of giant stature carried a child across a river. The child, who was Christ, baptised his benefactor with the name Christopher, Greek for Christ-carrier, and instructed him to plant his staff in the ground. The staff

¹²⁰ *Complete Letters* p. 753.

miraculously blossomed into a fruit-bearing tree.¹²¹ Wilde's Giant, like St Christopher, lifts the Christ child and is rewarded by a blossoming tree.

Davis Coakley, noting that Wilde's parents had a key to private gardens in the centre of Merrion Square, has already proposed an Irish context for an appreciation of 'The Selfish Giant'. Just as the village children are excluded from the Giant's garden, the one in Merrion Square remained off bounds to the poor children of Dublin.¹²² One phrase in the story suggests a further link with Ireland. The unusual expression 'Years went over' (p. 22), is a literal translation of the Irish phrase, '*Chuaigh blianta thart*'. It is exactly the type of phrase that Mary Burke, the Wilde's loyal servant, or any storyteller raised through the medium of Irish but later becoming proficient in English, would have used. This story, more than any of the other in the collection, reveals the influence of the Irish folk narrative tradition.

Structurally, as it chronicles the Giant's acquisition of compassion, it follows the folktale sequence leading from an initial lack to the liquidation of that lack.¹²³ Elements of the story echo a number of folklore motifs including hard-heartedness punished (Q 291), man seeks forgiveness, is told to plant a garden and offer free hospitality to all (Q523.5), reward for kindness to Christ in the form of a child (Q 25), reward takes form of admission to heaven (Q172).¹²⁴ Other aspects of the story, particularly the portrayal of the Giant, depart from the folk tradition. The giant of the Irish folktale was variously portrayed during Wilde's lifetime as cannibalistic and stupid, as in Douglas Hyde's version of 'The King of Ireland's Son', or peaceable and clever, as in Patrick Kennedy's version of 'Fionn McCumhaill and the Scotch

¹²¹ Hebermann, Charles G. et al., *The Catholic Encyclopedia: an international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline, and history of the Catholic Church*, 15 vols (New York: Appleton 1907-1912), iii, pp. 728-729.

¹²² Coakley, *The Importance of being Irish*, pp. 109-111.

¹²³ Propp, p. 35.

¹²⁴ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-index*, v, pp. 214, 245, 199, 187.

Giant'.¹²⁵ Wilde incorporates some elements of the folk tradition and changes others to produce an original fairy tale that echoes the Irish religious folktale's valorisation of generosity and castigation of selfishness.

The story's emphasis on wrongdoing, repentance and forgiveness aligns it with Aarne/Thompson religious tale Type 756c, 'The Greater Sinner', which links these elements in the story of a penitent sinner. This tale type, which may derive from Luke 15: 7, often, like the Tannhäuser legend, links redemption with the miraculous appearance of leaves on a dry shoot.¹²⁶ Numerous variants have been published and collected in both Irish and English, including stories published in Wilde's lifetime by Thomas Crofton Croker and Patrick Kennedy.¹²⁷ The basic link between crime, repentance and divine forgiveness is a feature of 'The Selfish Giant'. One of the variants mentioned in *The Types of the Irish Folktale* is Lady Wilde's story of 'The Priest's Soul'.¹²⁸ Her version, as we have seen, foregrounds the necessity for repentance and the redemptive potential of an unknown child, themes which recur in her son's story of 'The Selfish Giant'.

Wilde's description of how the tree in the furthest corner of the garden willingly bends its branches links 'The Selfish Giant' to the oral Irish folk tradition: "Climb up! little boy," said the Tree, and it bent its branches down as low as it could' (p. 21). Pádraig Ó Héalaí points out that the oral Irish tradition contains songs and stories that tell of the tree that bent down low in response to a request from the infant Jesus.¹²⁹ Irish versions of the story, in common with 'The Cherry Tree Carol' (54 in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*), recount how the

¹²⁵ Hyde, *Beside the Fire*, pp. 19-47; Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions*, pp. 203-205.

¹²⁶ Stith Thompson, *Types of the Folktale*, p. 261.

¹²⁷ Christiansen and Ó Súilleabháin, p. 161.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Pádraig Ó Héalaí, 'An Crann a Chrom: Scéal Apacrafúil', in *Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, 14 (1983), pp. 151-172, (p. 151).

pregnant Mary longs for fruit. St Joseph peevishly tells her to ask the father of her child to pick them for her. Jesus then speaks from the womb to command the tree to lower a branch to Mary, which it does.

Douglas Hyde was the first to publish a version of this apocryphal story in the form of a song in the Irish language in 1897.¹³⁰ In 1902, he used a version of the story in a nativity play, *Dráma breithe Chríosta* [*The Drama of Christ's Birth*]. In the play, a housewife refuses to give a heavily pregnant Virgin Mary fruit from the cherry tree in her garden, whereupon 'the big tree bent down of itself to her, and laid its branches on the wall, and out on the road'.¹³¹ In *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (1915), Hyde provided an English translation of the song, entitled 'Mary and St Joseph and the Cherry Tree'. In the preamble, Hyde states that he had heard an English language prose version from one Michael Mac Ruaidhri, from Ballycastle Co. Mayo which contains the following line: 'And Jesus said, "Arise, O palm tree; thou shalt be the companion of the Trees which grow in the Paradise of my Father"'.¹³² Ó Héalaí notes that the distribution of prose and song versions of the story, collected in both Irish and English during the twentieth century, indicates that its hold was strongest in Connacht.¹³³ Oscar Wilde, as we know, spent long periods in that province. The similarities between some details of this apocryphal story as told in Ireland and 'The Selfish Giant' suggest that Wilde drew on it for his fairy tale.

Ó Héalaí draws attention to the great emphasis that prose versions from Ireland place on St Joseph's peevishness.¹³⁴ Both the Selfish Giant and St Joseph are originally convinced that they have been wronged and forced to share something that

¹³⁰ See Douglas Hyde, 'Religious Songs of Connacht', *New Ireland Review* 7 (1897), 376-378.

¹³¹ Douglas Hyde, *Dráma breithe Chríosta*, trans by Lady Gregory (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1903); see also Dunleavy and Dunleavy, pp. 224-225, Angela Bourke, *Maeve Brennan: Homesick at the New Yorker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), pp. 284-285n.

¹³² Douglas Hyde, *Legends of Saints and Sinners*, pp. 164-165, 163.

¹³³ Ó Héalaí, 'An Crann a Chrom', p. 154.

¹³⁴ Ó Héalaí, 'An Crann a Chrom', p. 166.

is morally and legally theirs – St Joseph his wife and the Giant his garden. Both react bitterly and vehemently to a perceived violation of their property, venting their anger on the innocent, whom they judge guilty of trespass. Irish variants of the song recount Joseph's repentance when he witnesses the miracle of the bending tree.¹³⁵ In 'The Selfish Giant' a similar sequence occurs as the Giant realises how selfish he has been: 'He was really very sorry for what he had done' (p. 21). The child's promise to the Giant that he shall come with him to Paradise echoes the child's promise to the tree in the Mac Ruaidhri version of the story recounted by Douglas Hyde. Ó Héalaí points out that while the majority of Irish versions mention a cherry tree, others mention jewels or precious objects.¹³⁶ Wilde's description of the miraculous peach tree seems to owe something to these versions: 'Its branches were all golden, and silver fruit hung down from them' (p. 22). Ó Héalaí acknowledges that Irish variants of the apocryphal story of the bending tree shed light on mundane issues such as an older husband's jealousy of his wife and a pregnant woman's cravings for particular foods, but concludes that their primary function is devotional.¹³⁷ They make manifest the petty sinfulness of man, the need for repentance and the power of a merciful God. The apocryphal story, therefore, is relevant to everyday life but its primary significance lies in its evocation of spiritual truths. The same applies to 'The Selfish Giant', as Wilde adapts the story of the bending tree into a literary parable for his Victorian reader.

The reference to the blossoming tree and the story's focus on repentance and redemption recalls the Tannhäuser legend, according to which a thirteenth-century German knight confesses his love for Venus to the Pope, who says a dry staff will sprout before God forgives the sinner. Tannhäuser leaves, the staff sprouts, and the

¹³⁵ Ó Héalaí, 'An Crann a Chrom', p. 163.

¹³⁶ Ó Héalaí, 'An Crann a Chrom', p. 161.

¹³⁷ Ó Héalaí, 'An Crann a Chrom', p.170.

Pope is condemned to eternal punishment.¹³⁸ As we shall see, this legend is also echoed in 'The Young King' and 'The Fisherman and his Soul'. Here, in 'The Selfish Giant', the reference to children who make trees blossom echoes Wilde's poem 'Le Jardin des Tuileries', which celebrates the magical spontaneity of childhood:

And now in mimic flight they flee,
And now they rush, a boisterous band—
And, tiny hand on tiny hand,
Climb up the black and lifeless tree.

Ah! Cruel tree! If I were you,
And children climbed me, for their sake
Though it be winter I would break
Into Spring blossoms white and blue!¹³⁹

In 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', published after his release from prison in 1895, Wilde directly evokes the Tannhäuser legend when he refers to 'the barren staff the pilgrim bore' that 'blossomed in the great Pope's sight'.¹⁴⁰ The miraculous appearance of blossoms and their connection to innocence, repentance and forgiveness, prefigured both in the Irish folk tradition and European medieval legend, was a trope that Wilde deployed in different genres throughout his literary career. This shows how important the themes of repentance and forgiveness were to Wilde's philosophy over a long period.

The use and abuse of private property is one of the issues relevant to everyday life explored in the story. By celebrating the individual and communal benefits that accrue from sharing possessions, it criticises the ideology of rights underpinning the ownership of private property and advocates acknowledgement of the responsibilities of privilege. Jack Zipes describes 'The Selfish Giant' as Wilde's 'most consummate statement on capitalist property relations and the need to restructure society along

¹³⁸ Carl Lindale, John McManus and John Lindow, eds., *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopaedia of Myths, Legends, Beliefs and Customs*, 2 vols (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), i, pp. 968-970.

¹³⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poetry*, p. 134

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 167.

socialist lines'.¹⁴¹ However, Wilde's story is not concerned with society but with the emotional and spiritual development of the individual. There is no suggestion that what happens in the confined space of the garden has any effect on the outside world. The story does not advocate the abolition of private property; instead it shows the benefits that can accrue through sharing it and reveals that even a rich man can enter heaven if he becomes like a little child.

The story features one special divine child but it also draws attention to the needs of other ordinary children who want nothing more than an open space in which to play. The Giant is punished, not because he has hurt the special child, but because he has denied all children access to his garden. As editor of *The Woman's World*, Wilde published articles that engaged with the nature of childhood and suggested various ways of improving the miserable conditions in which the poor children were forced to exist. In 'The Ministering Children's League', an article illustrated with a drawing by Walter Crane of a young knight in shining armour, Lady Meath states that children from comfortable homes tend to be spoilt, blasé and 'intensely selfish' and old before their time, so that 'the innocent loving child, content with the simplest of pleasures, and only anxious to share them with others, [is] somewhat exceptional'. She argues that 'these young persons – misnamed children' would benefit greatly from helping other children who do not share their advantages.¹⁴² She advocates the establishment of benevolent societies, directed by adults but specifically geared towards encouraging children to help other children. In a two-part essay entitled 'The Children of a Great City', Lady Mary Jeune draws attention to the plight of children, abandoned and neglected by their parents and left with little option but to adopt a life of crime. She advocates the establishment of playrooms and trips to the country to

¹⁴¹ Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, p. 120.

¹⁴² Lady Meath, 'The Ministering Children's League', *Woman's World*, Dec 1887, 78-80, (p. 79).

forestall this undesirable outcome.¹⁴³ In 'Playgrounds and Open Spaces', Blanche Medhurst describes the slum child 'who cannot play, who is never young, because he is born old, who is not beautiful, but is rickety and sickly for lack of fresh air, fresh water, good food, and exercise; the child who cannot, who dare not, be good'. To help this poor child avoid immersion in a life of crime, she advocates the establishment of urban parks and playgrounds where he 'and those who are like unto him' can be taught by lady volunteers to benefit from some of the pleasures which should attach to childhood.¹⁴⁴ Despite the fact that these articles were written by women, their tone is paternalistic. They all imply that children need adult help to be childlike. 'The Selfish Giant' vindicates the right of all children to a place in which to play and refracts a topical focus on the nature of childhood to suggest that adults should learn to be childlike from children.

Critics have suggested that as the story vindicates love between a man and a boy, it explores an issue which was becoming increasingly relevant to Wilde's everyday life in 1888.¹⁴⁵ Biographical evidence confirms that Wilde was attracted to young men, particularly those around the age of seventeen, whom he often addressed as boys.¹⁴⁶ Wilde was not a paedophile and the story presents childhood as a time of spontaneity and innocence, rather than of sexual awakening. The child's kiss of the Giant is not sexual, but as we have seen from the syntax in which it is described, artless and impulsive. The Giant, who can hold the little boy in his hand, is outraged when he sees how the child's body has been violated. The story celebrates love but does not condemn or champion any form of sexuality.

¹⁴³ Lady Mary Jeune, 'The Children of a Great City', *Woman's World*, Nov. 1887, 27-31; Apr. 1888, 253-258.

¹⁴⁴ Blanche Medhurst, 'Playgrounds and Open Spaces', *Woman's World*, Sep. 1888, 510-512 (pp. 510, 511).

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Duffy, p. 339 and McCormack, p.106.

¹⁴⁶ See Ellmann, pp. 366-367, 261.

The primary focus of 'The Selfish Giant' is spiritual, rather than social or sexual. It alludes to the New Testament and, less obviously, to devotional strands of the Irish folk narrative tradition. The paucity of literary allusions in 'The Selfish Giant' limits the interpretative possibilities of the story, making it difficult to read it as anything other than a parable on sin and redemption that celebrates childlike selflessness.

'The Devoted Friend'

'The Devoted Friend' is a reverse fable, told by a Linnet to a group of pond animals, about the friendship between self-sacrificing little Hans and the self-serving, smooth-talking Miller. The Miller inveigles his gullible friend into carrying out a number of increasingly onerous chores on his behalf. Eventually, little Hans dies one stormy night while on the Miller's business. After his funeral, the Miller, acting as chief mourner, vows to be less generous in future. On hearing that the Linnet's story was intended to convey a moral, the Water-rat goes off in high dudgeon while the Duck remarks that telling a story with a moral is always a very dangerous thing to do, a conclusion with which the narrator agrees.

While 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Selfish Giant' chart a movement from egotism to compassion, this story more closely resembles 'The Nightingale and the Rose', as both query the value of selfless devotion in the face of unreflective selfishness. The deaths of both the Nightingale and Little Hans enable the beneficiaries of their selflessness to see themselves as victims of what they perceive to be their own artless belief in the value of love. Who is the devoted friend, Hans or the Miller? The title of the story is a double-sided mirror that points to various levels of irony operating within what seems to be a

the story about me?” asked the Water-rat. “If so, I will listen to it” (p. 25). The issues of self-referentiality and lack of comprehension, flagged by the framing story of the pond animals, are central to Wilde’s investigation of the contingent nature of interpretation.

Instead of finding the Miller’s behaviour reprehensible, the Water-rat finds his human counterpart wholly admirable: ‘I like the Miller immensely. I have all kinds of beautiful sentiments myself, so there is a great sympathy between us’ (p. 27). The Water-rat’s self-absorption results in his complete lack of comprehension of the Linnet’s purpose in telling the story. The Linnet believes that the moral, woven as it is into the fabric of the story, is self-evident. He ends his tale with the philosophical observation that ‘one always suffers for being generous’ (p. 34), confident that his listeners will be aware of the irony of placing this sentiment in the Miller’s mouth. However, he over-estimates both the Water-rat’s powers of perception and the apparent clarity of the moral of his story:

‘Well?’ said the Water-rat, after a long pause.
‘Well, that is the end’, said the Linnet (p. 34).

The moral has completely eluded the Water-rat who wants to hear what happened to his alter-ego, the Miller.

In playfully highlighting the gap between authorial intent and subjective interpretation, Wilde transforms a parable about selflessness into a self-reflexive allegory on the function of storytelling. Wilde later wrote in defence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that ‘each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray’, but admitted that it was ‘difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place’.¹⁴⁷ ‘The Devoted Friend’ shows that some readers will persist in mistaking sin for virtue and thus remain oblivious to any story’s intended moral, regardless of how

¹⁴⁷ *Complete Letters*. pp. 439, 435.

obliquely or directly it is conveyed. The danger of telling a story with a moral is that it may well be lost on listeners or readers whose enjoyment depends on the extent to which the story reflects their own outlook and who do not take kindly to having their subjective interpretation corrected. Like the Water-rat, readers who focus only on the story's investigation of selfless love miss the point that Wilde's purpose was to draw attention to the spurious relationship between storytelling and life.

Critics have suggested that 'The Devoted Friend' is reminiscent of Andersen and the story certainly seems to bear some relationship to 'Little Claus and Big Claus'.¹⁴⁸ Norbert Kohl claims that the form and structure of this story, like all of Wilde's fairy tales, is 'very much in the tradition of European folktales'.¹⁴⁹ 'Little Claus and Big Claus' is a literary representation of an international folktale (AT type 1535) in which a poor peasant outwits his rich counterpart and becomes wealthy himself. Under the Aarne-Thompson system, it is classified as an anecdote about a clever man and typically includes the following features which provide the basis of narrative progression: the rich peasant kills the poor peasant's horse; a talking, clairvoyant horse-skin and an adulterous priest; the rich peasant kills his horse and his wife; the poor peasant tricks the rich one into diving for sheep, leading to the death of the trickster's enemy.¹⁵⁰ A summary of Andersen's story will show how little resemblance 'The Devoted Friend' bears to it.

'Little Claus and Big Claus' tells of Big Claus, who owns four horses and Little Claus, who owns only one. Big Claus is so irritated by his poor neighbour that he kills Little Claus's horse. En route to the market to sell the horsehide, Little Claus sees a farmer's wife entertaining a sexton, whom she hides in a chest. The

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, Raby, p. 59.

¹⁴⁹ Kohl, p. 55.

¹⁵⁰ Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, p. 440.

farmer enters with Little Claus who convinces his host that the sack containing the horsehide has told him that the devil is in the chest in which the sexton is hidden. The farmer gives Little Claus a bushel of money for the sack and asks him to remove the chest. Little Claus then inveigles another bushel full of coins from the unfortunate sexton. He tricks his neighbour into believing that he got all the money from the sale of the horsehide. Avaricious Big Claus then kills his horses, sets off to sell the hides, and, on meeting only mockery, vows revenge. He attacks the figure in his neighbour's bed with an axe, unaware that Little Claus has solicitously placed his dead grandmother there on the off chance that she might revive. The ever-inventive Little Claus then places the dead grandmother on a cart and asks an inn-keeper to give her a glass of mead. When she topples from the cart, Little Claus convinces the inn-keeper that he has killed her and accepts a bushel of money in return for not reporting the crime. He tells gullible Big Claus that he got the money for his dead grandmother. Big Claus then kills his own grandmother and tries to sell her before realising that he has again been tricked. He bundles Little Claus into a sack which he leaves outside a church. The clever trickster dupes a cattle-drover into exchanging places and takes off with the cattle. Big Claus emerges from the church, drops the sack into the river, and is astounded to see Little Claus with the herd. Little Claus tells him that a water maiden gave him the cattle. Big Claus prevails upon Little Claus to put him in a sack and throw him into the river where he drowns. Little Claus goes home a happy, wealthy man.¹⁵¹

Although Andersen's version features a grandmother instead of a wife, and cattle instead of sheep, 'Little Claus and Big Claus' retains the distinguishing

¹⁵¹ Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, pp. 8-19.

features of the folktale on which it is based. As the rich peasant's slaughter of the poor peasant's horse ultimately leads to the death of the former and the triumph of the latter, it progresses in line with the folktale. It retains the folktale's celebration of the trickster's guile in the face of his enemy's stupidity. 'Little Claus and Big Claus', therefore, remains true in form, structure, and perspective to the traditional material it recasts. While the setting of 'The Devoted Friend' recalls the timeless setting of both the folktale and Andersen's story, Wilde's fairy tale departs completely in form and content from the traditional material to which it gestures.

Wilde departs from traditional sources in which the trickster triumphs over his enemy to suggest that merit is related less to cleverness than to selflessness. In Andersen's story, the trickster dupes not only his domineering neighbour, but also the luckless farmer, the unfortunate inn-keeper and the hapless cattle-drover. The moral seems to be that guile will triumph over guilty and innocent alike. By presenting the Miller as a clever exploiter of opportunity and Little Hans as the victim of his own gullibility, Wilde retains both Andersen and folktale's vindication of the superior power of guile but shows how problematical that vindication can be when judged by ethical standards. 'The Devoted Friend' encourages ethical questions that are not raised by the folktale. Wilde's reader cannot easily identify with the figure of gullible, obsequious Little Hans and derives little satisfaction from the vindication of the Miller's outlook. Perhaps Wilde's choice of name for his cheerful, but foolish, optimist conveys his judgement of Andersen. Wilde's frame story introduces an element of narrative complexity lacking in Andersen's story. The Linnet's story, told with ethical intent, draws attention to the danger of similar stories which encourage identification with the clever underdog without concerning themselves with the

dubious morality of celebrating the triumph of a trickster. 'The Devoted Friend' provokes a meditation on the ethics of extrapolating from fiction to life.

The mother duck tries to teach her young to stand on their heads and the story similarly inverts the Christian ideal of devoted friendship. The Miller echoes the rhetoric of the Lord's Prayer to justify his exploitation of Little Hans: 'I will always watch over him, and see that he is not led into any temptations' (p. 26). The Miller's rhetoric justifies his actions and he remains unaware of his own selfishness. Little Hans, dazzled by 'all the wonderful things the Miller used to say about the unselfishness of true friendship' (p. 26), ultimately lays down his life for his friend. The Christian ideal of devoted friendship, it seems, is a charade that makes dupes of rich and poor alike but ultimately serves the interests of the rich. Complimenting her husband's oratory, the Miller's wife remarks: 'I am sure the clergyman himself could not say such beautiful things as you do, though he does live in a three-storied house, and wears a gold ring on his little finger' (p. 26). Both the Miller and the clergyman extol the virtues of Christian charity while enjoying their creature comforts. Institutional Christianity fosters unreflective complacency as the Miller's wife adds: 'How well you talk! [...] really, I feel quite drowsy. It is just like being in church' (p. 27). Wilde suggests that the Christian ideal of devoted friendship can be a smoke screen that allows self-interest to triumph over self-sacrifice.

Both the framing and embedded stories draw attention to the disjunctions between theory and practice. The Water-rat, who disapproves of moral tales, is a theorist whose views on narrative structure reflect up-to-date critical theory: 'Every good story-teller nowadays starts with the end, and then goes on to the beginning, and concludes with the middle' (p. 27). He expects the Linnet's story to

endorse his own theoretical perspective and reacts angrily when, instead, it critically questions the superiority of fine sentiments over noble actions. The Miller is a theorist who privileges philosophy over action, patronisingly telling Little Hans: 'At present you have only the practice of friendship; some day you will have the theory also' (p. 31). Theory and practice are independent concepts, which, like flour and friendship, 'are spelt differently, and mean quite different things' (pp. 26-27). As the Water-rat fails to see the moral in the Linnet's story, Wilde suggests that the relationship between fiction and life is equally arbitrary. Yet the reader is aware that at some fundamental level the desire to keep these concepts separate is perverse; theory needs to reflect practice and fiction is most effective when it is seen to bear some relationship to lived experience.

The key to aligning these concepts lies in the notion of applicability:

'Is the story about me?' asked the Water-rat. 'If so, I will listen to it, for I am extremely fond of fiction'.

'It is applicable to you,' answered the Linnet (p. 25).

The Water-rat is incapable of understanding this concept, but Wilde credits his reader with greater powers of perception. That reader is aware that the Water-rat's refusal to apply the story to his own situation leads inexorably to further self-delusion. By drawing clear parallels between the Water-rat and the Miller, Wilde collapses the divide between frame and story and highlights the fallacy of insisting on a clear distinction between fiction and life. Readers of 'The Devoted Friend' are encouraged, but not forced, to ponder the power and limitations of fiction and to apply the insights the story provides to their own situations.

Both the framing story and the embedded narrative reflect on relationships between parents and children. In depicting these relationships, Wilde provides a series of correspondences and contrasts that raises questions about the responsibilities of parenting and the process of socialisation. The mother Duck

wants her children to get on in society and so shows them how to stand on their heads: 'But the little ducks paid no attention to her. They were so young that they did not know what an advantage it is to be in society at all' (p. 24). In the animal world, parental desire for social advancement is predicated on active example which has little effect on the young. In the human world, action connotes childishness and rhetoric connotes adulthood. Little Hans busies himself while the Miller voices beautiful thoughts. His son suggests that devoted friendship should be based on positive, charitable action: 'If poor Hans is in trouble I will give him half my porridge, and show him my white rabbits' (p. 26). His father is scandalised: "'What a silly boy you are!" cried the Miller. "I really don't know what is the use of sending you to school. You seem not to learn anything"' (p. 26). To the Miller, empathy and altruism are signs of immaturity that must be corrected by the parent, with the help of the school system. The role of the educator is to transform childlike sympathy for others into high-flown, self-justifying rhetoric. Cowed by his father's speech, the little boy 'hung his head down, and grew quite scarlet, and began to cry into his tea', whereupon the Linnet comments: 'However, he was so young that you must excuse him' (p. 27). Childhood is associated with powerlessness and a lack of social awareness that can be excused on the grounds of immaturity.

However, by the time the Miller's son is browbeaten into silence, the reader is aware that his father's outlook is seriously flawed. The offer of practical help put forward by the Miller's son is a childlike antidote to his father's bombast. Wilde encourages his reader to consider that the parent would do well to learn from the child. 'The Devoted Friend' is intended for Wilde's ideal, childlike reader

who can appreciate that the verbal chicanery reveals the duplicity of language and its tenuous capacity to convey moral truths.

'The Remarkable Rocket'

'The Remarkable Rocket' tells of the misadventures of a vain firework who fails to ignite at the celebrations for a royal wedding. When the Rocket finally takes off at the top of a fire set by two little boys, nobody notices. He remains totally unperturbed, convinced that he has been a great success.

This story develops Wilde's investigation of selfishness introduced in the earlier stories in the collection. However, it differs from its predecessors because it does not contrast selflessness with selfishness and the sense of anti-climax at the conclusion is stronger here than elsewhere. Jerusha McCormack argues that the subject of the 'The Remarkable Rocket' is not the absurdity of egotism, but the 'disengagement of language from "reality" or plot'.¹⁵² The Rocket's capacity for self-delusion may well be ridiculous, but his capacity to express laudable sentiments, which he carries to absurd conclusions, draws attention to the deceptive capacities of language itself. As with 'The Devoted Friend', Wilde's investigation of selfishness in 'The Remarkable Rocket' masks a subtle exploration of the problematic relationship between language and truth.

The Rocket is a master of language, using it, coining it, and twisting it for his own self-glorifying ends. He is aware that style is as important as substance, and even his mode of delivery reflects his sense of self-importance. He coughs three times to draw attention to himself, and waits for perfect silence before speaking. His capacity to delay speech until in control of the audience establishes

¹⁵² McCormack, p. 103.

the Rocket's authority. When speaking of his late father's brilliant career, the Rocket misquotes a flattering newspaper report:

'Indeed, the Court Gazette called him a triumph of Pylotechnic art.'

'Pyrotechnic, Pyrotechnic, you mean' said a Bengal Light; 'I know it is Pyrotechnic, for I saw it written on my own canister.'

'Well, I said Pylotechnic,' answered the Rocket, in a severe tone of voice, and the Bengal Light felt so crushed that he began at once to bully the little squibs, in order to show that he was still a person of some importance (p. 38).

The Rocket is not going to allow pedantic insistence on the proper use of language to detract from the glowing parental portrait he is determined to paint. Mastery of language depends more on confident delivery than on correct usage as the Bengal Light, like the Miller's son, is cowed into submission. Unfortunately for the Rocket, he is so taken in by his own linguistic skill that he talks himself into an outburst of tears, which results in his failure to ignite. His self-importance, bolstered by his self-aggrandising use of language, is so complete that when he finally does perform, he fails to realise that nobody has witnessed his moment of glory: "I knew I should create a great sensation," gasped the Rocket, and he went out' (p. 46). The Rocket's version of events is the truth as he sees it, but the narratorial conclusion – 'and he went out' – reminds the reader that subjective perceptions can be erroneous. Wilde takes the last word to indicate not only how language can distort perceptions of reality but also how those perceptions render problematical the notion of objective truth. In a critical essay, Wilde pointed out that 'one of the results of the extraordinary tyranny of authority is that words are absolutely distorted from their proper and simple meaning, and are used to express the obverse of their right signification'.¹⁵³ 'The Remarkable Rocket' shows how far language can be set adrift from reality and challenges the status of truth itself.

¹⁵³ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 156.

Wilde uses a variety of narrative techniques to show how three egocentric characters, the King, the Rocket and the Frog, mirror each other, thus providing a multi-faceted depiction of self-absorption. The King's character is established initially through action; he is so pleased with the young page that he doubles his salary twice. As the Page receives no salary, the King's actions effectively nullify themselves so that he appears foolish but also comes across as a shrewd operator. The narrator's description of the King's flute-playing skill supplies further detail: 'He played very badly, but no-one dared to tell him so, because he was the King' (p. 36). The reader is invited to deduce that the King's inflated notion of his own ability is not challenged because of his powerful position. The King goes on to observe that the fireworks are 'as delightful as my own flute-playing' and concludes 'You must certainly see them' (p. 36). The King judges everything in relation to himself, but the reference to his flute-playing, which the reader knows to be deplorable, totally undermines his praise of the fireworks. However, even the narrator seems subject to his authority, as if in obeisance to Royal command, the narrative shifts to the fireworks that the King has indicated must be seen. Wilde provides a multi-layered depiction of the King's egocentrism through action, narratorial observation and reported speech to suggest that self-absorption is a form of power difficult to resist.

Fittingly enough for a story which revolves around the central character's inability to perform, the Rocket is not introduced through action. The narrator establishes his character in broad brush-strokes by describing him as 'a tall, supercilious-looking Rocket' (p. 37). The title of the story recalls James Abbott McNeill Whistler's painting, 'Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket', which Wilde dismissed as worth looking at 'for somewhat less than a quarter of a

minute'.¹⁵⁴ Richard Ellmann suggests that Whistler may have served as the model for Wilde's arrogant, narcissistic rocket.¹⁵⁵ However, the portrait of the Rocket may well contain an element of self-parody. His mode of delivery not only corroborates the initial suggestion of vanity but resembles Wilde's own: 'He spoke with a very slow, distinct voice, as if he was dictating his memoirs' (p. 37). W.B. Yeats described Wilde's speech as a 'slow, precise, rhythmical elocution'.¹⁵⁶ Like Wilde in *De Profundis*, the Rocket is proud of his lineage and his avowed disdain for suburbia and domesticity (p. 44) were shared by his creator. The element of self-parody complicates the story's exploration of non-reflective, unassailable narcissism.

The Rocket's first words confirm the narratorial suggestion of egocentrism; "How fortunate it is for the King's son," he remarked "that he is to be married on the very day on which I am to be let off" (p. 37). The Rocket's authority is challenged by a little Squib who 'thought it was quite the other way, and that we were to be let off in the Prince's honour' (p. 38). The Rocket summarily dismisses this objection: 'It may be so with you [...] indeed, I have no doubt that it is, but with me it is different. I am a very remarkable Rocket' (p. 38). The story goes on to show that the Rocket's perception of events is based on an inflated notion of his own importance, but as he expires, still interpreting events to suit himself, that notion is never completely deflated. Simon Dentith observes: 'This is a story about the evident absurdities of narcissism, but also about the special perspective that its indulgence bestows'.¹⁵⁷ Through the challenge posed by the little Squib, Wilde invites his reader to identify with a perspective that is not clouded by convention,

¹⁵⁴ Wilde, 'The Grosvenor Gallery', p. 124.

¹⁵⁵ Ellmann, p. 279.

¹⁵⁶ Yeats, 'Introduction to Oscar Wilde', (p. 147).

¹⁵⁷ Dentith, p. 277.

education or habit. The Squib's interjection is ignored, but it provides a yardstick against which the Rocket's self-aggrandising use of rhetoric can be measured. The focus on the Rocket confirms the impression, conveyed by the initial depiction of the King, that egocentrism is a form of power that rides roughshod over perspectives that challenge it.

The depiction of the Frog, who presents the greatest challenge to the Rocket, demonstrates just how crucial speech and language are to the maintenance of power. The narrator's introduction of 'a little Frog' (p. 42) is neutral and his character is revealed almost entirely through conversation. The Frog, who remarks 'I like to do all the talking myself' (p. 42), admires the firework's cough because it resembles his own croaking, and does not allow the Rocket to control the conversation. The Frog, whose insouciance is conveyed by the qualifier 'complacently', annoys the Rocket, who responds 'angrily' (p. 42). The narrator's choice of adverb subtly conveys that the Rocket is unable to cope with a challenge to his authority posed by an individual whose views are remarkably similar to his own. The Rocket is so unused to jostle for authority that he fails to notice that the Frog has swum away. Although the Rocket has the last word, it is addressed to thin air so the Frog effectively wrests authority from him. The Rocket goes on to articulate the alienating linguistic binds into which arrogant self-obsession leads: 'I often have long conversations all by myself, and I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying' (p. 43). Narcissism is a self-perpetuating form of linguistic self-imprisonment that spirals inwards leading to a lack of comprehension of both self and others.

'The Remarkable Rocket' shows that while language can be manipulated to support various forms of authority, it can also be liberating. The interventions of

the narrator and characters including the Squib and the Frog continually undermine the Rocket's manipulation of language to reflect his exaggerated sense of self-importance. The reader is playfully invited to acknowledge that words are counters in struggles for power. The story suggests that language, which belongs to everyone, can be used to challenge, as well as bolster, authority.

Wilde uses the Catharine Wheel, a figure who resembles the deluded heroine of 'The Nightingale and the Rose', to draw attention to the tyranny of language over perception and its dissociation from any verifiable, external reality.

Lamenting the demise of Romance, she opines: 'love is not fashionable any more, the poets have killed it' (p. 37). She repeats her assertion that 'Romance is dead' three times, prompting the narrator to comment: 'She was one of those people who think that, if you say the same thing over and over a great many times, it becomes true in the end' (p. 37). Wilde suggests that, by sheer dint of repetition, language can create an illusion of truth and as the Catharine Wheel talks herself to sleep, he playfully invites the reader to reflect on its hypnotic power over perception.

The presentation of different perspectives, revealed through conversation, demonstrates how perception and judgement can be adversely affected by experience and prejudice. The little Squib comments: 'I am very glad I have travelled. Travel improves the mind wonderfully, and does away with all one's prejudices' (p. 36). The Squib's statement represents an aspiration suggested by his own limited experience. The Roman Candle knows more than the Squib: 'The King's garden is not the world [...] the world is an enormous place, and it would take you three days to see it thoroughly' (p. 36). As the logic of the first part of this assertion is undermined by the absurdity of its conclusion, the Candle shows that judgement can be ridiculously limited by knowledge. The Catharine Wheel

then comments: 'Any place you love is the world to you' (p. 36). This limited view suggests that the world shrinks under the influence of love. Although discounted in the subsequent conversation, the Squib's childlike advocacy of openness to experience is the most liberating perspective presented in the story.

'The Remarkable Rocket' has no links with the Irish folk tradition. It does, however, allude to a number of familiar fairy tales, several by Hans Christian Andersen. The opening scenes depicting the arrival of the Russian Princess invoke Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' and 'The Princess and the Pea', while the Goose who thinks it is raining sticks at the story's end is a near relation of Chicken Licken. The Squib's childlike articulation of a truth ignored by a figure of authority echoes Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. The King's problematic valorisation of the artificial over the natural echoes Andersen's treatment of that issue in 'The Nightingale' and 'The Swineherd'. Indeed, 'The Remarkable Rocket' seems more to mirror Andersen's ultimate castigation of the artificial than to pave the way for Wilde's subsequent valorisation of it in 'The Decay of Lying'. However, in its investigation of self-delusion and vanity, 'The Remarkable Rocket' departs from the model provided by Andersen in 'The Darning Needle'.

'The Darning Needle' tells how the eponymous, supercilious heroine ends up in a gutter, being mistreated by little boys. While Andersen focuses only on the needle, Wilde provides conversations between groups of fireworks and animals to provide various perspectives from which the central character's story can be evaluated. Like Wilde's Rocket, the needle remains convinced of her superiority, even when she is about to be run over by a heavy wagon: 'But it didn't break, even though a loaded wagon went over it. There it lay, lengthwise in the gutter; and

there we'll leave it'.¹⁵⁸ While Andersen's reader is coerced into abandoning the needle as she lies unbroken on the cobblestones, Wilde's final sentence involves the reader in a consideration of the implications of the Rocket's demise. 'The Remarkable Rocket' reworks the influence of Andersen to produce a story that uses differing perspectives to show how consolatory, as well as delusory, narcissism can be.

This story provides a fitting conclusion to *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, as it, and the volume, expire with the Remarkable Rocket. The issues raised by Wilde in the stories that make up the volume range from the ultimate value of selfless love, through the role that language plays in shaping perception, to the ways in which stories can either challenge or reinforce individual perceptions and prejudices. The Rocket expires, convinced that he has made a great sensation, while the reader knows that nobody has noticed him. Despite continually drawing attention to himself, the Rocket is finally ignored. The reader of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is free to decide if the issues raised are to meet the same ignominious end.

Review of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*

The Happy Prince and Other Tales provides a cumulative but ambiguous exploration of the relative merits of selflessness and self-absorption. The reader moves from an initial story in which selflessness is recognised and rewarded by God to a concluding story in which selfishness brings its own solipsistic rewards. If the first stories were 'The Devoted Friend' and 'The Remarkable Rocket', followed by 'The Nightingale and the Rose' and 'The Happy Prince', and the

¹⁵⁸ Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 274.

volume concluded with 'The Selfish Giant', the reader would be left in little doubt that selflessness is preferable to selfishness. The actual structure of the volume works against such easy identification of moral intent and challenges the reader to evaluate the conflicting perspectives offered by the stories.

While the primary focus is on self-absorption, the stories, with the exception of 'The Selfish Giant', reveal a persistent fascination with storytelling. The other four tales feature groups who tell themselves different stories about the same event or character, and who react differently to the same story, so that storytelling is shown to be a complex, often contradictory, form of interaction whose outcome is impossible to predict. 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose' contain a wide variety of intertextual echoes, showing that stories are shaped by what has already been said. Having established this, the remaining three stories contain noticeably fewer allusions to various literary and narrative traditions, while the final two focus on the multifaceted relationship between stories and experience, language and perception, art and life.

Fittingly enough for a volume which explores the magical power of storytelling, Wilde's five fairy tales contain echoes of other literary and narrative traditions, including that of the folktale. Wilde's use of characters including animal helpers, a questing suitor, a giant and a prince, coupled with his vaguely medieval but essentially timeless settings, and his repeated recourse to triadic repetition, result in a pervasive evocation of the generic world of the folktale. His recourse to the Irish folk narrative tradition, by contrast, is selective and by no means pervasive. In terms of content and theme, only two stories, 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Selfish Giant', in which Wilde engages with the moral values communicated by Irish religious folktales, resemble one strand of that tradition.

The influence of the Irish folk narrative tradition is strongest in ‘The Selfish Giant’, which celebrates the innocence of childhood and the value of childlike vision. As this story lies at the heart of the volume, the influence of the Irish folk tradition, however limited Wilde’s knowledge of it was, is central to the collection as a whole.

A House of Pomegranates

This section discusses the four stories in this volume.¹⁵⁹

‘The Young King’

The opening story recounts the events leading to the coronation of a sixteen-year-old youth. On his deathbed, the King acknowledges the young man, his grandson, who had been banished at birth to a remote part of the forest, as his heir. On arrival at the palace, he is fascinated by the beautiful fittings, lush furnishings, and jewelled paraphernalia assembled for his coronation. His composure is shattered by three dreams in which the human misery of procuring these beautiful objects is revealed to him. He rejects the costly trappings and goes to his coronation clad in a leather tunic and sheepskin cloak, and crowned with a spray of wild briar. The courtiers and nobles laugh at him and the people denounce him as unworthy. The Bishop remonstrates with him, saying that one man cannot carry the burden of the world. As he stands in the cathedral, a shaft of light comes through the stained glass window. The young King is transfigured as his robe sparkles and the dry thorn blossoms. The people fall on their knees in awe while the Bishop

¹⁵⁹ All references to the stories from *A House of Pomegranates* will be to the versions contained in the most recent academic edition, *Oscar Wilde: Complete Short Fiction*, ed. by Ian Small, and will be given in parentheses in the text.

acknowledges that a greater power has crowned him. No man dares to look on his face 'for it was like the face of an angel' (p. 96).

'The Young King' was originally published in the Christmas number of *The Lady's Pictorial*, 1888. Wilde edited the version that appears in *A House of Pomegranates*, and while the changes made relate mainly to short phrases or single words, their cumulative effect is significant. He introduced archaic words or constructions to replace commonplace ones, thus echoing the cadences of the King James Bible and increasing the effect of subtle strangeness that pervades the story: 'anything' becomes 'aught'; 'spoke' becomes 'spake' (p. 92); 'and' becomes 'and lo!' (p. 88).¹⁶⁰ He added and changed nouns and adjectives to produce more exotic and decadent descriptions: 'bracelets of gold' become 'bracelets of jade'; 'strange stories' become 'curious stories' (p. 85); the 'black vultures' who accompany Plague into the land of Famine become 'lean vultures' (p. 91); the 'world' becomes the 'wide world'; 'robbers' become 'fierce robbers' (p. 94).¹⁶¹ Verbs are altered to convey more precise impressions: 'work' becomes 'toil' (p. 86); the great earrings that 'hung down' from the galley master's ears now 'dragged down the thick lobes of his ears' (p. 88); the young King 'plucked' instead of 'took' a spray of wild briar as his crown and 'mounted' instead of 'got' (p. 93) upon his horse.¹⁶²

In *The Lady's Pictorial* version, the weaver's description of his bleak world reads: 'Poverty creeps through our sunless lanes, and Sin follows close behind her'.¹⁶³ In the revised version, the sentence reads: 'Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows

¹⁶⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Young King', *The Lady's Pictorial*, 29 December 1888, pp. 4, 2.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* pp. 2, 3, 4.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* pp. 2, 4.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 2.

close behind her' (p. 88). Josephine Guy and Ian Small note that Wilde used the phrase 'poverty creeps through our sunless lanes' in his poem 'Humanitad' in *Poems* (1881) and in Act II of *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), as well as in the periodical version of 'The Young King', and that the phrase is slightly altered to 'the poverty that creeps through sunless lanes' in 'The Critic as Artist' in *Intentions* (1891). They argue that it is difficult to regard this series of repetitions as evidence of anything other than lazy workmanship.¹⁶⁴ However, Wilde's revision of the line as it appeared in *A House of Pomegranates* suggests careful thought to link social deprivation and crime; poverty produces hunger, which in turn gives rise to degrading sin. The revision produces a balanced condemnation of social injustice, one of the primary themes of the story. An additional revision from periodical to volume publication highlights another main theme, the pleasure that attaches to privilege. In the original version, the young King awakens from the final dream to see bright sunlight streaming into the room; in the revised version, the following phrase is added: 'and from the trees of the garden and pleasaunce the birds were singing' (p. 92). These two revisions eloquently convey the chasm between measureless misery of the worker's sunless world and the bright, ordered domain of the Kubla Khan-like, tyrannical ruler.

Josephine Guy and Ian Small describe Wilde's revisions to stories previously published in periodicals as minor, often 'merely typographical', and argue that 'he did not think the effort in recasting them from periodical to book worthwhile'.¹⁶⁵ In order to decide if the revisions made to 'The Young King' are worthwhile or not, it may be useful to consider Wilde's own views on the related

¹⁶⁴ Guy and Small, p. 262.

¹⁶⁵ Guy and Small, pp. 230, 232.

issues of textual revision and ultimate form. Commenting on apparently minor changes which Keats made to a sonnet, Wilde notes:

In the case of poetry, as in the case of the other arts, what may appear to be simply technicalities of method are in their essence spiritual, not mechanical, and although, in all lovely work, what concerns us is the ultimate form, not the conditions that necessitate that form, yet the preference that precedes perfection, the evolution of the beauty, and the mere making of the music, have, if not their artistic value, at least their value to the artist.¹⁶⁶

The slight changes he made to 'The Young King' are, as demonstrated above, essentially spiritual rather than mechanical because they enhance the aesthetic effect. The ultimate form of the story, as it appeared in *A House of Pomegranates*, is testament to Wilde's evolution as an artist concerned with beauty.

The story charts the double awakening of the young King as the lowly goatherd turns into a Paterian aesthete before becoming a Christlike figure. On his arrival in the palace, his fascination with objects of beauty stimulates his latent aesthetic sensibility: 'And it seems that from the very first moment of his recognition he had shown signs of that strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life' (p. 84). Although he sends merchants around the world to procure 'rare and costly materials', his fascination is focussed on 'the robe he was to wear at his coronation' (p. 85). This fascination leads him to reject his lowly apparel as he moves from prelapsarian innocence to acquisitive awareness: 'Those who accompanied him [...] often spoke of the cry of pleasure that broke from his lips when he saw the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him, and of the almost fierce joy with which he flung aside his rough leathern tunic' (p. 84). His dreams, which reveal the human cost of procuring the coronation robe, transform the 'cry of pleasure' to a 'great cry' of anguish (pp. 84, 89). He moves from a solipsistic worship of beauty as he kneels

¹⁶⁶ Oscar Wilde, 'Keats's Sonnet on Blue', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 1886, 81-86, (p. 83).

‘in real adoration before a great picture that had just been brought from Venice’ to a mature recognition of Christian responsibility as ‘he stood before the image of Christ’ (pp. 85, 95). This recognition prompts a deliberate return to a more innocent state as after a baptism in clear water, ‘he took the leathern tunic and rough sheepskin cloak [...] These he put on, and in his hand he took his rude shepherd’s staff’ (p. 93). An initial period of natural innocence is followed by a fall into awareness but a return to a higher innocence is finally achieved. Having remade himself in line with Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, he is recognised as a true king by the little page but denied three times by the people, the courtiers and the bishop. In the closing scenes, naturalism and supernaturalism are integrated as ‘the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe [...] the dry thorn blossomed’ and ‘the glory of God filled the place’ (pp. 95, 96]. The blossoming thorn, like Tannhäuser’s staff, the blossoming peach tree in ‘The Selfish Giant’, and the fruit-bearing gallows tree in ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’, is symbolic of man’s sinfulness and God’s forgiveness.

Like the German Romantic fairy tale, this story highlights, but does not resolve, the tensions between the inner life of the spirit and the demands of reality, and eschews a happy ending in favour of an ambiguous one. The series of three dreams awakens the young King’s conscience and he rejects the robe, crown and sceptre that have been prepared for him. His courtiers, who know the difference between private conscience and public obligation, are not impressed: ‘Surely he is mad; for what is a dream but a dream, and a vision but a vision?’ (p. 92). The young King may salve his conscience by not wearing the robe, but that does not solve the problems it represents. As a man in the crowd bitterly points out: ‘Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor?’ (p.

93). The young King is unable to solve this moral conundrum. His angelic status is finally recognised, but as no man dares to look at him, the implication is that the social order, based on economic exploitation, does not undergo any real change. The third dream shows the king his own face, but as his subjects later avert their gaze from that same face, the gap between private vision and public reality is never effectively closed.

Unlike the German Romantic fairy tale, this story evokes a Christian framework to interrogate the relationship between temporal power and spiritual responsibility. It ultimately suggests that tending to the affairs of Caesar cannot easily be reconciled with doing the will of God. The young King's movement from innocence through conflict to unity with a higher power, and consequent redemption, recalls man's fall, recounted in Genesis, and later redemption, recounted in the New Testament. His dreams recall the prophetic visions of Joseph (Genesis 37. 5-9), which ultimately become reality. The outraged nobles scorn him as 'a dreamer of dreams', but unlike the false prophet of Deuteronomy (13. 1-10) whose death at the hands of his people is divinely ordained, the young King has God on his side. His progress through a mocking crowd recapitulates Christ's journey to Calvary. This Christian frame of reference is enhanced by Wilde's use of parallel phrases and archaic pronouns, which echo the sonorous cadences of the King James Bible :

And the people fell upon their knees in awe, and the nobles sheathed their swords and did homage, and the Bishop's face grew pale, and his hands trembled. 'A greater than I hath crowned thee,' he cried, and he knelt before him (p. 96).

As Norbert Kohl notes, the 'deliberate stiltedness of expression reinforces the sense of other worldliness and [...] imbue[s] the action with a sort of magic

amounting in some cases to almost Christian exaltation'.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the parallels drawn between church and state, and between religious and secular ornamentation, complicate the story's espousal of Christian values. The coronation is as much a religious as a civil ceremony. The bishop rises from a throne to urge the young King to disregard his conscience and 'put on the raiment that beseemeth a king' (p. 95). The cathedral, like the palace, is bedecked with luxurious, beautiful objects including pictures, stained glass windows, 'marvellous vessels of gold' and a 'jewelled shrine' (p. 95). Church and state are both enthralled by beauty and appalled by the young King's rejection of it. The church, like the whore of Babylon, is bedecked with gold and jewels and colludes with secular power to lure the young King from the path of righteousness.

Following that path involves renouncing pomp and luxury as the young King retrieves and dons the simple clothes of his pastoral childhood. While the contrast between the young King's rural upbringing and life at court evokes a pastoral tradition that stretches back to the Arcadia of ancient Greece, it also alludes to the type of landscape associated with Irish folklore. Jarlath Killeen describes the King as 'the classic Irish boy, brought up in the rustic beauty of the countryside' and argues that 'the story suggests that an Irish Catholic should rule England'.¹⁶⁸ In a later work, Killeen claims that Wilde's oeuvre reflects his life-long fascination with an Irish 'folk-Catholic, rather than either a Continental or English Catholic, imagination'.¹⁶⁹ The boy, whom Wilde describes as 'like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters' (p. 83) seems to embody pagan energy, some of which, as we have seen, survived in Irish folk beliefs of the nineteenth century. Even the title of Wilde's

¹⁶⁷ Kohl, p. 57.

¹⁶⁸ Killeen, 'Diaspora, Empire, and Religious Geography', p. 187.

¹⁶⁹ Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, p. 25.

story seems to echo a poem by his mother, called 'The Young Patriot Leader', which describes how a Christlike young patriot, 'like a martyr or a conqueror' stands beneath the sun, before his people, 'with a glory and a light circling round his brow of might/ that revealed his right royal kingly nature'.¹⁷⁰ The speaker addresses the onlookers: 'For high Heaven hath decreed that a soul like his must lead,/ Let us kneel, then, in deep adoration'.¹⁷¹ The resemblance between this description of an Irish patriot who will lead the fight against the English invader and the account of the young King's transfiguration as people kneel in awe before the divinely indicated leader is striking. This resemblance strongly supports Killeen's suggestion that Wilde's story draws on his Irish background to criticise the values of the metropolis.

While the story indirectly evokes the type of rural landscape associated with Irish folk Catholicism, the story also alludes to a medieval European tradition of ascetic Catholicism. The Christian ideals that the young King comes to espouse are rooted in this tradition. Like St Francis of Assisi, he experiences a series of dreams that lead to his spiritual awakening, rejects the pleasant life that has been mapped out for him, abjures wealth, embraces austerity and is mocked as a madman by a jeering mob.¹⁷² We know from Wilde's letters that he greatly admired St Francis and was familiar with the details of his life contained in *Liber Conformitatum*, a fourteenth-century work by Fr. Bartholomaeus de Pisa which illustrates the similarities between the lives of Christ and St Francis.¹⁷³ By naming the palace 'Joyeuse' which recalls the Castle of Joyous Gard in *Le Morte Darthur*, Wilde alludes to Malory's accounts of knights, including Perceval and Gareth,

¹⁷⁰ Lady Wilde, *Poems by Speranza*, (Dublin: Gill, 1907) pp. 28, 29.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷² Michael Robson, *St Francis of Assisi: The Legend and the Life* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997), pp. 12-25.

¹⁷³ *Complete Letters*, pp. 747, 753.

who are recognised after being brought up far from court. The name of the palace not only evokes the medieval world of chivalric romance, but also places the story firmly within the framework of European Catholicism. The Catholic Joyeuse family supported Henri III during the sixteenth-century French Wars of Religion. Wilde's reference in Chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to Anne de Joyeuse's predilection for costly jewels in general, and pearls in particular, forges a link between decadent extravagance, Catholic ostentation, and spiritual atrophy that had been prefigured in 'The Young King'. The young King's blossoming staff recalls the Tannhäuser legend. Here the Bishop's recognition of the Young King's right to rule echoes the Pope's realisation that he was wrong to condemn Tannhäuser. These references to medieval legend greatly enrich the story's exploration of repentance, asceticism, and social justice.

It has been suggested that this story's preoccupation with solipsistic, narcissistic worship of art reflects Tennyson's similar focus in 'Palace of Art'.¹⁷⁴ 'The Young King' adds to the themes presented in this possible intertext by exploring the relationship between exploitation and privilege. The three dreams embody a powerful critique of all forms of injustice as they show how integral economic exploitation is to the social order. The first vision, which reveals the misery of the gaunt weavers in their attic, can be read as an indictment of the inhumane conditions that underpinned the lucrative textile and fashion industries of Wilde's day. The central image of the loom suggests that fate is hardest on those who must work to survive. As editor of *Woman's World*, Wilde published an article that drew attention to the abuses suffered by young London needlewomen whose miserable lot was not known or acknowledged by fashionable ladies who

¹⁷⁴ Cohen, p. 84.

wore garments frequently produced under wretched conditions.¹⁷⁵ The young King's first dream reveals the hardship that characterises life for workers in the city. Another *Woman's World* article published by Wilde prior to the initial publication of 'The Young King' suggests that his critique of exploitation in the story may be fuelled by his knowledge of Irish economics. In 'The Poplin Weavers of Dublin', Charlotte O'Connor Eccles describes how the Dublin weaving industry, established by Huguenot refugees, was first encouraged then actively discouraged by successive governments, leading to great hardship for numerous families whose well-being depended on erratic demand for their produce.¹⁷⁶ The story's description of weaving as a family industry, manned by fathers, mothers and children, and vulnerable to market and imperial forces beyond the family circle, echoes Eccles's account of the weaving industry in Dublin.

The second dream is set in an exotic, eastern landscape. The galley-master is described in luscious, aesthetic detail: 'He was black as ebony and his turban was of crimson silk. Great earrings of silver dragged down the thick lobes of his ears, and in his hands he had a pair of ivory scales' (p. 88). The scales, the image of justice, are to weigh pearls, suggesting that greed outweighs integrity. The image of the scales also recalls the black horse in Revelation 6.5, thus introducing an apocalyptic note into the story. Covetousness is a canker that affects everyone in the social hierarchy; the king's love of precious commodities is shared by the galley-master and even the Negro overseers 'began to quarrel over a string of beautiful beads' (p. 89). The description of the pearl diver's death recalls Keats's 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil', based on the fifth story of the fourth day in

¹⁷⁵ See Clementina Black, 'Something about Needle Women', *Woman's World*, May 1888, 300-304.

¹⁷⁶ Charlotte O'Connor Eccles, 'The Poplin Weavers of Dublin', *Woman's World*, July 1888, 396-399

Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Isabella's two brothers are rich, acquisitive, murderous merchants for whom 'the Ceylon diver held his breath' until 'his ears gushed blood'.¹⁷⁷ As the galley master observes that the pearl is destined for the coronation sceptre, Wilde's story echoes Keats's condemnation of exploitation and duplicity fuelled by greed. It also forces the realisation that exploitation and injustice overseas stem from metropolitan greed.

The third dream employs the language of allegory to interrogate the terminology of colonialism, as Death, Avarice and Plague stalk a ravaged landscape. The personification of these evils draws on the description of the Apocalypse in the Revelation of St John the Divine and, as it teaches the young King a lesson, the dream draws on the conventions of the medieval morality play. The references within the story to Tartary, India and Egypt suggest an eastern setting but critics have plausibly claimed that the Irish experience of famine is central to this vision.¹⁷⁸ Neil Sammells claims that allegory in the story represents an aesthetic of dissent: 'Wilde's political point in the fairy story – that repressive authority can be both subverted and transformed from below – is refracted through the allegorical mode of representation'.¹⁷⁹ Although it is set in the east and operates in mythic time, the young King's third dream suggests that the story's critique of exploitation and imperialism is fuelled by Wilde's knowledge of the causes and effects of the Irish Famine of the 1840s.

This suggestion is strengthened by the ways in which the King's first two dreams echo Lady Wilde's 'The Famine Year', a poem which emotively describes the catastrophe of the Irish Great Famine. The poem opens with the following line: 'Weary men, what reap ye? -- Golden corn for the stranger', and goes on to say

¹⁷⁷ Keats, p. 333.

¹⁷⁸ Pine, p. 178; Killeen, 'Diaspora, Empire, and Religious Geography', p. 188.

¹⁷⁹ Sammells, p. 14.

that while others enjoy the fruits of the workers' labour 'our children swoon before us'.¹⁸⁰ The weaver in the King's first dream complains: 'We sow the corn, and our own board is empty', with the result that 'our children fade away before their time' (p. 87). The young slave whose body is unceremoniously thrown overboard in the story resembles the poem's unlamented famine victim who dies 'Without a tear, a prayer, a shroud, a coffin or a grave'.¹⁸¹ The imagery of the third dream, and the personification of Avarice, Ague and Death, who gallops away on a red horse, recalls the apocalyptic landscape of Lady Wilde's 'Foreshadowings', where 'that red steed is flying', accompanied by the Plague-Spirit and the black steed of Famine.¹⁸² Undoubtedly, his mother's passionate, poetical response to horrors of the Irish Famine fuelled Wilde's condemnation of colonial exploitation in 'The Young King'.

An appreciation of Wilde's Irish background clearly enriches the reader's identification of a critique of imperial exploitation within the story. Nevertheless, the story has little in common with the Irish folk narrative tradition as the language, imagery, and tone reflect literary, biblical and Romance influences rather than oral, folk ones. Richard Pine suggests that Wilde drew on the Irish folk narrative tradition in this story by depicting the young King as a changeling, 'born to humble parents, but intended for greatness'.¹⁸³ As we have seen, the changeling of Irish folk tradition is of fairy, not of human, stock so Pine's alignment of this story, which he describes as a folktale, and the Irish folk narrative tradition is questionable.

¹⁸⁰ Lady Wilde, *Poems*, p. 10.

¹⁸¹ Lady Wilde, *Poems*, p. 11.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* p. 18.

¹⁸³ Pine, p. 177.

'The Young King' has provided a rich seam for critics concerned with Wilde's sexuality. Neil Bartlett identifies the Bithynian slave of Hadrian, whose statue the young King kisses, as Antinous, the Emperor's lover.¹⁸⁴ He points out that Narcissus was a code word for attractive young men in gay circles during the 1890s and that flowers figure extensively in the gay literature of the time.¹⁸⁵ The young King's furnishings include 'a laughing narcissus in green bronze' and he surrounds himself with flowers (p. 86). Bartlett suggests that Wilde's story is a covert exploration of an adolescent's desire for other men. John Charles Duffy cites from Victorian texts which show that both homosexuality and masturbation were judged to produce the type of languor experienced by the young King. He argues that the young King is a masturbating dandy whose 'passion for beauty is vindicated when God himself clothes the King in vestments'.¹⁸⁶ Duffy's references to contemporary discourses and texts dealing with male-male desire support the thesis that this story presents a positive representation of desire between men. Nevertheless, as the young King walks alone through people who are afraid to look on his angelic face, the story ultimately suggests that spirituality is a solitary virtue and that true beauty, which transcends sexuality, inspires awe rather than desire.

While Wilde's young King resembles his Happy Prince in many ways, the titular shift from prince to king signals the increased complexity of the later story. Both young royals come to realise that a life devoted to pleasure is a blinkered existence, and that realisation provokes a compassion for humankind that is divinely rewarded. In 'The Happy Prince', that reward goes unnoticed in this

¹⁸⁴ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 32.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 56, 44-45.

¹⁸⁶ Duffy, pp. 332-333, 337.

world, whereas the Young King's subjects are awed by his transfiguration. The later story's conclusion seems to vindicate the protagonist's rejection of exploitation and his embrace of social justice. Yet the ending is ambiguous because it does not show how social justice is to be achieved. The young King passes through socialism on the way towards taking his rightful, divinely ordained place at the top of the social hierarchy. Rejecting the fruits of exploitation does not enable the exploited to control their own lives so his actions may perpetuate a system that depends on social inequality. 'The Young King' is a powerful fairy tale that juxtaposes pleasure and responsibility and suggests that neither path leads to social justice.

'The Birthday of the Infanta'

This story focuses on the twelfth birthday celebrations of a Spanish princess whose father still mourns the death of his adored wife, the child's mother. Wilful, proud and petulant, she laughs at the little dwarf who has been brought from the forest to dance for her amusement. She throws a white rose to him, which he takes to be a symbol of love. When he looks for her in the palace, he comes across a mirror, sees his own image for the first time and is appalled by it. Shamed, wounded and sobbing he crawls into the shadows where the Infanta and her entourage find him. She is most put out to be told that he will never dance for her amusement again because he has died of a broken heart: "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts," she cried, and she ran out into the garden' (p. 114).

The story was first published in both the English and French versions of *Paris Illustré* on 30 March, 1889. In French, the story was titled 'L'Anniversaire de la naissance de la petite Princesse', and in English, 'The Birthday of the Little

Princess'. It is not known in which language the story was first written but as the two versions resemble each other very closely, it seems likely that one is a translation of the other. Wilde's remark that he 'thought of it [the story] in black and silver and the French makes it pink and silver' suggests that while the story was originally conceived in English, its appearance in two languages enriched it.¹⁸⁷ As Wilde's name appears at the end of the French version, he may have translated the story himself.

Wilde edited the story for volume publication. The change from 'Little Princess' to 'Infanta' in the title immediately situates the action in Spain and suggests that this story is not simply a generic fairy tale. In the volume version, the word 'dwarf' is sometimes capitalised, as are the names of the flowers, birds and animals who see the dwarf in the palace. These differences in the story as it appeared in *Paris Illustré* and *A House of Pomegranates* are minor, but more significantly, Wilde changed the ending of the story. The final section of the periodical version reads:

'Mi bella Princesa, your ugly little dwarf will never dance again'.
'Why?' said the Infanta laughing.
'Because his heart is broken', answered the Chamberlain.
And the Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain.
'For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts', she cried and she ran out into the garden.
'It is a pity he is dead', said the Chamberlain, turning him over with his foot.
'He is so ugly that he might have made the king smile'.¹⁸⁸

Any sympathy that the Chamberlain may feel for the Dwarf is immediately undermined by the way in which he turns the twisted little body over with his foot. His suggestion that the Dwarf's ugliness might have made even the King smile twists sympathy for the morose, grieving monarch into thoughtless cruelty. The story ends with a tableau of the dead dwarf's twisted body under the foot of the

¹⁸⁷ Cited in Stuart Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*, new edn. (London: Rota, 1967) p. 174

¹⁸⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Little Princess', *Paris Illustré*, 30 March 1889, 203-209, (p. 209).

Chamberlain, whose warped emotions reveal him to be as heartless as the playfellows desired by the Infanta.

In the revised version, the Chamberlain refers to the dwarf as 'funny' rather than 'ugly', the Infanta's question is expanded, and sentences are reordered so that she, rather than the Chamberlain, gets the last word.

'Mi bella Princesa, your funny little dwarf will never dance again. It is a pity, for he is so ugly that he might have made the king smile'.

'But why will he not dance again?' asked the Infanta, laughing.

'Because his heart is broken', answered the Chamberlain.

And the Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain. 'For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts', she cried, and she ran out into the garden (p. 114).

The cumulative effect of these changes is to produce a more sardonic, understated and disturbing conclusion to a story concerned with cruelty, pleasure, and power. The Chamberlain's observations mingle humour, indifference and compassion as what is 'funny' is revealed to be 'ugly', and 'pity' refers to a missed opportunity for mockery rather than sympathy, as the King will not have the chance to 'smile' at the dwarf's ungainliness. In the periodical version, the Chamberlain's remark about the King was spoken to himself whereas now it is addressed to the child being initiated into the values of a court which believes that royal pleasure is the greatest ideal to which a subject can aspire. The Infanta's lengthier question signals her childish and imperious lack of comprehension as to why her desire to be entertained should be thwarted. Her laugh, stronger than the King's imagined smile, suggests that she is unlikely to allow sympathy, a negative emotion, to interfere with her pleasure. On hearing of the dwarf's broken heart, she frowns, decrees that all her future playmates should be heartless, and runs out into the garden. The garden to which she runs is not a space of Edenic innocence. The final focus is on childish selfishness, lack of sensitivity, and ability and desire to block out whatever is potentially unpleasant or disturbing. This heartless child truly is

the product of a cruel Spanish court 'always noted for its cultivated passion for the horrible', and governed entirely by 'formal etiquette' (pp. 104, 99). The changed ending produces a story which is critically concerned with childhood.

In a letter to Mrs W. H. Grenfell, to whom he dedicated the story in *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde explains that 'it is about the little pale Infanta whom Velasquez painted'.¹⁸⁹ Velasquez (1599-1660), court painter to Philip IV of Spain, painted several portraits of different Infantas, but it seems likely that Wilde was referring to the Infanta Maria Marguerite, who featured most famously in the painting popularly known as *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honour), housed in the Prado since 1819. In her journal, Katherine Bradley recalls that on 21 July 1890, Wilde 'told her a whole story of the Infanta of Velasquez in the Louvre, with a pink rose in her hand. He was bent on learning the history of that rose, and found it in a portrait near at hand, of a dwarf'.¹⁹⁰ Bradley's account suggests that the story was inspired by two separate paintings in the Louvre, at least one of which – that of the Infanta – was painted by Velasquez. However, the catalogue of the Louvre shows that while its holdings include two portraits of Infantas by Velasquez (or Velasquez and/or his studio), they do not include any of his portraits of dwarfs.¹⁹¹ An English language catalogue from the 1880s, which lists all holdings by room, shows there were no portraits of dwarfs anywhere near the portrait of the Infanta Maria Marguerite holding a pink rose, housed in the Long Gallery on the first floor.¹⁹² Bradley's account of the genesis of the story is flawed, perhaps by

¹⁸⁹ *Complete Letters*, p. 493.

¹⁹⁰ T. Sturge Moore and D. C. Sturge Moore (eds.) *Works and Days: from the Journal of Michael Field* (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 136.

¹⁹¹ See the catalogue in the Atlas database of exhibited works of art in the Louvre Museum, at http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=rs_display_res&langue=fr&critere=velasquez&operator=AND&nbToDisplay=5&x=17&y=4 [accessed 14 September, 2006].

¹⁹² S. Sophia Beale, *The Louvre, a Complete and Concise Handbook to all the Collections of the Museum* (London: Hudson, 1883), p. 40.

mistaken recollection on her part, or exaggeration on Wilde's. It seems likely that the Velasquez portrait of the Infanta Maria Marguerite housed in the Louvre may have initially or partially inspired Wilde's story but that he also drew on copies of other Velasquez paintings which he saw elsewhere, conflating details from various portraits with other sources for his own narrative purposes.

Whichever portrait/s inspired the story, Wilde used the work of Velasquez as an imaginative springboard, inventing details rather than reflecting historical reality. Wilde's twelve-year-old Infanta is a good deal older than the Infanta Maria Marguerite in any Velasquez portrait. Wilde's King mourns the death of his young wife shortly after the birth of their only daughter. Elizabeth Bourbon, first wife of Philip IV and mother of Infanta Margarita, bore seven living children. She died after twenty-nine years of marriage, leaving Philip free to marry Mariana of Austria five years later. As Isobel Murray points out, Wilde is interested in reflecting the atmosphere and sombre splendour of the Spanish Court conveyed by Velasquez so that 'he takes no care here for careful chronology – identifying persons is fruitless'.¹⁹³

Mary Shine Thompson relates the story to *Las Meninas* to argue that the similarities between painting and story are not confined to a shared ambience, but include an exploration of perspective that highlights the problems of representation.¹⁹⁴ *Las Meninas* shows an artist's studio filled with canvases, the detail of which cannot be deciphered. It depicts the artist painting the king and queen who are outside the frame of the painting but whose reflection can be clearly seen in a mirror in the background. It is unclear whether this mirror image reflects the figures represented on the artist's canvas or the actual couple who are

¹⁹³ Oscar Wilde, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, p. 269n

¹⁹⁴ Mary Thompson, 'Surface and Symbol: Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales', online at <http://www.childlit.org.za/irsclpalthompson.html> [accessed 19 January 2006].

positioned, like the spectator, just beyond the forefront of Velasquez's painting. The painting is dominated by the central figure of the Infanta. She captures the light from the open door in the background and a side window so that her radiance sets her apart from the darker figures who surround her. She is simultaneously looking at her parents and the spectator of Velasquez's painting, whose eye is first drawn to her but then ranges around other, less obvious but no less compelling, loci of interest in the painting. Veronique Foti describes the painting's unsettling effect:

It offers no univocal message to be disengaged but brings the viewer up against the ineluctable differential and an anarchic character of perceptual and interpretative coherence. Illusionary form and materiality are equally compelling, so that which commands primacy is undecidable.¹⁹⁵

'The Birthday of the Infanta' is similarly unsettling as it draws attention to the wilful Infanta but also draws the reader into a contemplation of such varied issues as parental neglect, the socialisation of children, the precarious position of the artist who depends on patronage, and the relationship between the good and the beautiful.

As well as reflecting the visual inspiration of Velasquez, Wilde's story recalls a number of literary texts, including Victor Hugo's 'La Rose de l'Infante' from *La Légende des Siècles* (1859). Hugo's poem was, itself, inspired by the Velasquez portrait of the Infanta Maria Marguerite, housed in the Louvre. If Wilde was not familiar with Hugo's text in its original form, he was very likely to have come across an English prose translation that appeared in the same issue of *Century Guild Hobby Horse* as a fulsome review of Lady Wilde's *Ancient*

¹⁹⁵ Veronique Foti, 'Representation Represented: Foucault, Velasquez, Descartes', *Postmodern Culture*, 7:1 (September 1996) online at <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.996/foti.996> [accessed 19 January 2006].

Legends.¹⁹⁶ Hugo's poem departs imaginatively from the portrait which inspired it. He moves the child from the interior setting of the portrait and places her outside, under the care of a Duenna, beside a shaded fountain, and makes her father Philip II, not Philip IV of Spain. The text switches between the graceful, innocent child standing beside the fountain to an upstairs room where her father, who has never been known to smile, follows, in spirit, the progress of his great Armada. An unexpected wind arises, scattering the petals of the rose on the now turbulent fountain in which the bewildered child can see a foundering fleet. The poem concludes with the Duenna's observation that that on earth everything belongs to princes except the wind.

'The Birthday of the Infanta' bears significant similarities to 'La Rose de l'Infante'. Both texts use a figure of the Infanta, as painted by Velasquez, to show that beneath a superficial air of childish innocence and grace lurks a will of steel. Hugo's serene and charming Infanta is nonetheless disdainful and imperious:

Elle est l'infante, elle a cinq ans, elle dédaigne.
 Car les enfants des rois sont ainsi; leurs fronts blancs
 Portent un cercle d'ombre, et leurs pas chancelants
 Sont des commencements de règne. Elle respire
 Sa fleur en attendant qu'on lui cueille un empire.
 Et son regard, déjà royal, dit: C'est à moi.¹⁹⁷

She is the Infanta, five years old, disdainful, for so are the children of kings. On their white brows is a circle of shadow, and their tottering steps are the beginnings of rule. She inhales the flower, waiting till they pluck her an empire; and already her royal looks say 'It is mine'.¹⁹⁸

Wilde's Infanta, while less serene and more wilful than Hugo's, shares her precocious air of superiority and haughty sense of her own importance. Both texts place the central figure of the Infanta against a threatening background of political uncertainty and religious upheaval. In both, the child is under the care of a female

¹⁹⁶ Anne Gilchrist, 'The Rose of the Infanta', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 1887, 10-17; Arthur Galton, 'Ancient Legends of Ireland', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 1887, 67-94.

¹⁹⁷ Victor Hugo, *La Légende des Siècles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1945), p. 472.

¹⁹⁸ Gilchrist, p. 12.

courtier while her preoccupied father seems scarcely aware of her existence. In Hugo's text, the fountain, in which the child foresees the impending destruction of the Spanish fleet, is a mirror that reflects an unwelcome and threatening truth. In Wilde's story, the mirror, which reveals the dwarf's ugliness to him, reflects a similarly appalling and catastrophic truth. Both writers, therefore, introduce the theme of reflection, albeit for different ends – Hugo to comment on the limitations of temporal power and Wilde to comment on the disastrous consequences of seeing ourselves as others see us.

Wilde's initial description of the Infanta reflects the delicacy and innocence that characterises Velasquez's portrait:

But the Infanta was the most graceful of all, and the most tastefully attired, after the somewhat cumbrous fashion of the day. Her robe was of grey satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls. Two tiny slippers with big pink rosettes peeped out beneath her dress as she walked. Pink and pearl was her great gauze fan, and in her hair, which like an aureole of faded gold stood out stiffly round her pale little face, she had a beautiful white rose (p. 98).

This description enables the reader to visualise the surface details of a static portrait; the childish grace that cannot be hidden even by the awkward, but delicately coloured, clothing; the shimmering satin and glistening pearls; the pale face and the beautiful white rose pinned in golden hair. However, this verbal portrait also conveys the primacy of writing over visual forms of representation. Because writing is sequential, it moves from one detail to another and unlike spatial forms of representation, there can be no background as each detail is isolated from those which precede it. If the paragraph from which this description is taken were a painting, the viewer would be constantly aware of the other slim, Spanish children in the background. Here, the reader's attention is focused entirely on the Infanta. Wilde guides his reader in a way in which even as gifted a painter as Velasquez cannot direct his spectator. Wilde begins with wide brush strokes that

establish the Infanta's overall grace, then picks out the detail of her dress, moving from skirt to sleeve to bodice, before zooming in on her feet, her fan, her hair, face, and finally the white rose. The reader has no choice but to follow where Wilde, the word artist, leads, and it is no accident that both end up focusing on the rose which will feature so prominently in the as yet unintroduced story of the little dwarf. By the chilling end of 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the reader is aware that the Infanta's superficial grace and charm mask her heartless cruelty. The tale is effectively a mirror which reveals her true self to the reader and highlights literature's superior capacity to represent the dangerous reality that lurks beneath the surfaces reflected by visual art forms.

The evocations of French literature in 'The Birthday of the Infanta' extend beyond thematic allusions and similarities to Hugo's 'La Rose de l'Infante' as the story also echoes aspects of Flaubert's 'Herodias', more obviously a source for Wilde's later drama, *Salomé*. In Flaubert's tale, the Tetrarch has been married to Herodias for twelve years and has now tired of her, realising that his earlier passion resulted in neglect of his political interests and left him vulnerable to powerful opponents. Salome is his young, graceful, but wilful, stepdaughter, summoned to court by her mother for her own devious purposes. Iakannan, like Wilde's dwarf, is an uncouth figure who exposes the false values which govern the sumptuous court. Salomé, like Wilde's Infanta, cares nothing for this wild creature but she brings about his death, as with a childish air, she lispingly demands his head upon a plate.¹⁹⁹ Flaubert suggests that Salomé's childish cruelty is manipulated by her mother, who wants revenge both on the Tetrarch and on Iakannan, who has denounced the passionate love, now withered, that led to her

¹⁹⁹ Gustave Flaubert, *Trois Contes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) p. 147.

marriage to that same Tetrarch. Wilde suggests that the Infanta's cruelty is fanned by paternal indifference that is the result of a passionate, conjugal love that refuses to wither. Flaubert's tale, set at the dawn of Christianity, shows how temporal power is challenged by religious upheaval. Wilde's tale, set during the time of the Inquisition, shows how temporal power can use religion to bolster its own position. While the details of the two stories vary considerably, they display a thematic similarity as they both investigate wilfulness, cruelty, and parent/child relationships in a decadent court setting during a time of political and religious upheaval.

'Herodias' is full of references to actual figures and places, and contains a comprehensive account of a court celebration. As noted, Wilde eschews historical accuracy, yet his attention to detail, as exemplified by his use of proper names and titles for his imaginary characters, and his vivid description of the Infanta's birthday celebrations, creates an effect of authenticity which is not dissimilar to Flaubert's achievement. 'Herodias' is also remarkable for its deflationary, impersonal ending. The story does not end with the death of John the Baptist but goes on to describe the removal of the head by his disciples: 'Comme elle était très lourde, ils la portaient alternativement' [as it was very heavy, they took it in turns to carry it].²⁰⁰ This detached and unemotional concluding sentence underscores the violence that saturates the story. The last sentence of 'The Birthday of the Infanta', as it appeared in *A House of Pomegranates*, combines the Infanta's chilling lack of feeling with the more prosaic image of a little girl running out to play. Like the final sentence of Flaubert's 'Herodias', Wilde's altered ending combines the horrific and the banal in an understated conclusion that simultaneously deflects

²⁰⁰ Flaubert, p. 150.

and directs attention to wilful cruelty. The revised ending makes the story seem less like a traditional fairy tale than a modern short story that leaves the reader free to ponder its implications.

In portraying the dwarf as a clown, Wilde is perhaps alluding to the tradition of the Shakespearean fool as social critic. However, in presenting the dwarf as a disfigured clown who is never taken seriously and who is ultimately disillusioned and destroyed, Wilde is mining a rich seam of nineteenth-century French literature uncovered by Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire. In the work of these writers, the clown is always a performer, sometimes gifted, sometimes not, who is destroyed by a mixture of his own ingenuousness and the cruelty of others. The clown, therefore, can be seen as the figure of the misunderstood artist destroyed by those on whose patronage he depends.

In Hugo's verse drama, *Le Roi S'Amuse* (1832), on which Verdi's *Rigoletto* is based, Triboulet is the deformed street clown brought to court by Francis I.²⁰¹ Triboulet is a complex character, an ugly misanthrope, full of twisted hatred for life itself, who nonetheless loves his secret daughter. As W. D. Howarth notes, he 'is the epitome of physical and moral deformity'.²⁰² When the king, for his own amusement, seduces his jester's beloved daughter, Blanche, an idealised, innocent figure, he destroys both their lives. Wilde's dwarf resembles both Triboulet who discovers that an admired figure is a callous egoist, and the naïve Blanche, who falls passionately in love with a Royal monster.

In *L'Homme Qui Rit* (1869), a novel set in England during the reign of Queen Anne, Hugo presents Gwynplaine, a noble youth kidnapped as a baby by a vagabond tribe who mutilate his face so that it resembles a clown's mask. His

²⁰¹ Victor Hugo, *Le Roi S'Amuse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

²⁰² W. D. Howarth, 'Hugo and the Romantic Drama in Verse', in *Victor Hugo* ed. by Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 63-84, p. 76.

mouth is frozen into a perpetual grin so that when he cries, the sound emerges as laughter. As a young man, he ekes a miserable living performing in funfairs where the crowds are provoked to laughter by his grotesque face. Brought to court on the whim of Josiana, a spoilt and wilful duchess, to whose physical beauty Gwynplaine is attracted, his true identity is discovered. This noble figure speaks movingly to the lords of the realm about the miserable lives of the poor but, overcome with passion, feels a sob rising in his throat which emerges as an uncontrollable fit of laughter. His hold over his listeners is broken and they greet his words with ridicule. All ends unhappily for the unfortunate Gwynplaine who drowns himself at the end of this story of monstrosity, revelation and sorrow.²⁰³ Hugo's novel 'convey[s] the impression of a fairy tale within the context of a historically situated action'.²⁰⁴ Wilde's tale does likewise. The dwarf, like Gwynplaine, is a compassionate, loving creature, condemned by his deformity to be tolerated as an amusing fool who is never taken seriously. Like the man who laughs, the dwarf 'finds himself condemned to provoke horror and derision'.²⁰⁵

Wilde's story refracts various elements of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) in a number of ways. Hugo's historical novel revolves around a beauty-and-the-beast theme, in which the selfless love of the misshapen bell-ringer, Quasimodo, is contrasted with the corrupt lust of the cathedral's archdeacon, Claude Frollo, for the beautiful gypsy dancer Esmeralda.²⁰⁶ The novel combines realistic description, especially in the evocation of medieval Paris and its underworld, with a melodramatic plotline, replete with ironic twists. Anticlerical and anti-aristocratic, the novel uses medieval grotesquerie as a backdrop for its

²⁰³ Victor Hugo, *L'Homme Qui Rit* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982).

²⁰⁴ Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) p. 170.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 172.

²⁰⁶ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975)

indictment of church and monarchy. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' similarly combines realistic description with melodrama and irony. Wilde uses the figure of the grotesque dwarf to indict the venal values of the Spanish court and to highlight the shallowness of the Grand Inquisitor and the little Infanta. In both Hugo's and Wilde's texts, the forlorn lover's ugliness contrasts with the beauty of the beloved and, in both, the ugly suitor's knowledge of his unsightliness force the realisation that he will never be loved in return and precipitates his death.

'The Birthday of the Infanta' suggests that surface beauty can mask ugliness and that true beauty may be found beneath an ugly surface. In his account of Whistler's famous 'Ten O'Clock' lecture on art, Wilde defends the artist's right to 'find beauty in ugliness, *le beau dans l'horrible*', a concept he associated with Charles Baudelaire. Having ridiculed those who use the example of Velasquez to promote dress reform, Wilde claims that the poet is the supreme artist, 'the master of colour and form' and names Baudelaire as one such artist.²⁰⁷ In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', Wilde uses the work of Velasquez as a springboard for his vivid, multicoloured exploration of beauty and ugliness. Like Baudelaire, he finds that the two can co-exist.

From an early age, Wilde found much to admire in Baudelaire's work, copying two lines from 'Un Voyage à Cythère' in his Oxford notebook: 'O Seigneur! Donnez-moi la force et le courage [/] De contempler mon corps et mon coeur sans degout [sic]' [O God, Give me the strength and the courage to contemplate my body and my heart without disgust].²⁰⁸ In fact, Baudelaire's poem reads 'mon coeur et mon corps' [my heart and my body], so Wilde slightly misquotes, giving greater priority to the body than the heart. Wilde includes these

²⁰⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 February 1885, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, pp. 6-8, (pp. 7,8).

²⁰⁸ Oscar Wilde, *Oxford Notebooks*, p. 135.

two lines, with the same reversal of body and heart, in his long prison letter to Sir Alfred Douglas, which has come to be known as *De Profundis*.²⁰⁹ Wilde was intrigued for a long period by Baudelaire's identification of the self-loathing that one's body can inspire. In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', he explores this theme, showing how the dwarf's inability to contemplate his body without disgust results in his broken heart.

Baudelaire's influence on the story is not confined to a thematic insistence on the coexistence of beauty and ugliness but extends to an exploration of the relationship between the artist and his audience. In Baudelaire's prose poem 'Une Mort Héroïque', Fanciouille, the court jester whose Italian name draws attention to his childlike naiveté, enters into a conspiracy to overthrow the prince. Discovered and sentenced to death, he is forced to partake in one last court entertainment. Vivien L. Rubin argues that the certainty of death enables Fanciouille to disregard his audience and give himself totally to his art.²¹⁰ His breathtaking performance seems to be divinely inspired: 'Ce bouffon allait, venait, riait, pleurait, se convulsait, avec une indestructible auréole autour de la tête' [this clown went, came, laughed, cried, convulsed himself, with an indestructible halo around his head].²¹¹ A pageboy, on the order of the prince, interrupts the performance with a sharp whistle whereupon Fanciouille closes and opens his eyes, tries to breathe, totters, and falls down dead on the stage. Both Fanciouille and Wilde's dwarf are suffering artists, compelled to entertain a cruel and wilful ruler in a court setting. Both texts draw attention to the relationship between the artist and his audience: Fanciouille is a consummate artist whose performance is well received but who

²⁰⁹ *Complete Letters*, p. 745.

²¹⁰ Vivien L. Rubin, 'Two Prose Poems by Baudelaire: Le Vieux Saltambanque and Une Mort Héroïque', *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 14: 1& 2 (1985), 51-60, (p. 57).

²¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1989), p. 200.

takes himself too seriously and becomes involved with politics; the dwarf, who seems to be a successful artist whose performance is well received, is actually a failed artist because his audience cannot take him seriously. Fancioulle dies as a result of his role in the conspiracy; the dwarf dies when he sees his own reflection, so in both works, the artist dies as a result of a process of self-realisation.

Fancioulle loses all sense of himself and his audience in his final performance so that he becomes an ideal artist whose death is heroic. The Dwarf's performance is fuelled by his desire to impress the Infanta so that he is a failed artist who cannot separate art from life and whose death represents a tragic defeat.

The texts of Hugo, Baudelaire and Wilde provide ironic, contradictory portraits that are at once deprecating and flattering as the artist is simultaneously portrayed as a buffoon and as a tragic figure whose inner nobility goes unrecognised. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' belongs to a tradition that identifies the artist as a descendant of the mocked figure that Pontius Pilate exhibited to a scornful, ignorant crowd. However, while the dwarf may be Christlike, he is also fallibly human. Like the Remarkable Rocket, he believes, on very little evidence, that he is destined for greatness. Like the Rocket, he judges events from his own limited, egotistical viewpoint. Unlike the Rocket, the Dwarf is forced to see himself as others see him. Without resorting to psycho-criticism, it seems reasonable to suggest that there may be an element of self-portraiture in Wilde's depiction of the dwarf as a deluded artist who believes he is successful and appreciated until the realisation that he has been an unwitting figure of fun is forced on him. Wilde's letters show that on his arrival in London he systematically set about courting the rich and influential. James Joyce later unflatteringly

described Wilde as 'court jester to the English'.²¹² The tender, but unflinching, treatment of the unwitting figure of fun in 'The Birthday of the Infanta,' in a volume in which all the stories were dedicated to society women, suggests that Wilde was sufficiently self-aware to see himself in that same unflattering light. Capable of seeing his own reflection in both texts, ultimately he has more in common with the disillusioned Dwarf than with the Remarkable Rocket.

'The Birthday of the Infanta', through its use of the classic trope of the ugly hero who falls in love with a beautiful princess, engages with a number of literary fairy tales. Madame d'Aulnoy's 'Le Dauphin' recounts the exploits of Alidor, who is so ugly that his parents are repulsed by him. When he arrives at court, the beautiful Princess Livorette laughs at his ugliness. After many adventures, the two marry and live happily. In 'Le Prince Lutin', Furibon, the king's son, who is as short as a dwarf, ugly and malicious, is often taken for the court buffoon and is eventually beheaded. 'Le Nain Jaune' tells of the courtship of a beautiful, disdainful princess, Toute-Belle, by an ugly yellow dwarf. When the princess reneges on a promise to marry him, the dwarf kills her other suitor and she dies immediately afterwards. With the exception of 'Le Dauphin', Madame d'Aulnoy's stories equate physical deformity with malevolent heartlessness and suggest that the ugly suitor does not deserve the fair maid. Wilde reverses this in a story which suggests that the heartless Infanta princess does not deserve her ugly suitor.

'The Birthday of the Infanta' very obviously evokes the classic story of 'Beauty and the Beast' (AT Type 425C), which became extremely popular when a literary version was published by Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont, a French

²¹² James Joyce, 'The Poet of Salomé', in Ellmann, ed., pp. 56-59, (p. 56).

woman working as a governess in England, in *Magazine des Enfants* in 1757.

However, Wilde evokes a familiar fairy tale only to reverse its focus and conclusion. Christopher Nassaar points out that Wilde gives us 'a beauty who is a heartless egocentric and a beast who remains a beast and dies of a broken heart'.²¹³

Wilde inverts this classic fairy tale in other ways. The dwarf is brought to the beauty's palace, rather than the poor beauty being brought to the beast's home. His deformity is congenital, rather than the result of an enchantment. Other than talking plants and animals, there are no supernatural agencies at work in Wilde's tale so that 'The Birthday of the Infanta' focuses on human frailty and its consequences. In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the ugly suitor is not transformed into a handsome prince so Wilde's story inverts the conventionally happy fairy tale ending in favour of an unhappy one which shows that human nature can be as destructive as any supernatural force.

The story similarly reverses those folk and fairy tales, including AT Types 559 and 571, in which an unlikely suitor wins the hand of the princess by making her laugh (motif H341.3).²¹⁴ Here, the Princess's laughter does not signify her common humanity, but serves to underline her imperious heartlessness, and leads to the death of her suitor, not their marriage.

'The Birthday of the Infanta' also engages with two Andersen fairy tales. In 'The Ugly Duckling', Andersen famously turns the gauche misfit into a beautiful swan; here, Wilde's misfit dies of a broken heart. Both stories suggest that ugliness brings rejection, misery, and mockery. Wilde complicates this by presenting the physically beautiful Infanta as a moral monster, and the monstrous dwarf as the personification of innocence, thereby introducing a disjunction

²¹³ Christopher Nassaar, 'Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" and Wilde's "The Birthday of the Infanta"', *Explicator*, 55: 2 (1997), 83-85, (p. 83).

²¹⁴ Stith Thompson, pp. 201-202, 211-212.

between the beautiful and the good that is totally lacking in Andersen's story. Consequently, the tone of Wilde's story, with its sombre atmosphere of corruption and cruelty, is considerably darker than Andersen's. 'The Birthday of the Infanta', like Andersen's 'The Swineherd', features a gift of a rose, and a princess who is childish, wilful and imperious, but the stories contrast more than they resemble each other. Andersen's princess, like her emperor father, prefers man-made objects to natural ones, and she is acquisitive rather than cruel. The story playfully highlights the dangers of being greedy as the princess's suitor, a prince who has disguised himself as a swineherd, comes to despise her. Once again, the tone of Wilde's story is darker than Andersen's. This difference in tone exemplifies the nature of Wilde's engagement with Andersen as he uses the work of the Dane as a springboard for an unflinching investigation of themes, including the nature of childhood and the value of art, not fully explored by his predecessor.

Reflection and revelation play a vital role in the story as the Dwarf's glimpse of himself in the mirror brings about his death. Reflection and revelation are also important in the Irish folk tradition, as reported by Oscar Wilde's parents. William Wilde drew attention to the folkloric figure of the 'fetch' or 'thivish', a ghostly reflection that augurs death for those who see it. He recounts how a young man announces that he will shortly die: 'There it was in a gap in the ould wall, as like me as if I stood before a lookin'-glass. Whatever I did, it did the same [...] and then I knew it was the *thievish* [...] Mother I'm a gone man'.²¹⁵ Lady Wilde recounts the fate of a young woman who tried to see her future lover in the looking glass on November eve: 'she was found quite dead, with her features horribly contorted, lying on the floor before the looking-glass, which was shattered to

²¹⁵ William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, p. 112.

pieces'.²¹⁶ It seems that Wilde draws on Irish folk belief in his description of the Dwarf's revelatory vision of his mirror image. Nevertheless, the influence of the Irish folk narrative tradition on this story, which, as we have seen, recalls a number of French intertexts, is negligible.

Reflection is an important stylistic, as well as thematic, feature of 'The Birthday of the Infanta'. Nature reflects life as the flowers voice the prejudice that the human characters harbour towards the little Dwarf. The birds share the reader's appreciation of his spontaneity and kindness. The Dwarf and the Infanta are obverse images of each other. The tale consists of three interrelated stories; that of the King and his love for his Queen, that of the Infanta herself, and that of the dwarf. This enables Wilde to explore the relationship between childhood and adulthood. In the court setting, childhood is not a special time of innocence but a form of miniature adulthood. The Infanta is the image of her mother as she was when the King first saw her, and her awkward clothes, which follow 'the somewhat cumbrous fashion of the day', seem to be scaled down versions of adult attire (p. 98). The Spanish children are remarkable for their stately grace and even the birthday celebrations ape adult amusements as the children engage in a mock bullfight. Into this stultifying, adult world stumbles the awkward figure of the little dwarf who possesses all the attributes of childish innocence and wonder. He is an intuitively kind creature who delights in the unexpected turn that events have taken and presumes that he is worthy of the Infanta's affection. As his optimism cedes to disillusion, it seems that to be childlike is to be vulnerable. Childish values can counterpoint the heartlessness of the adult world but ultimately adult values

²¹⁶ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i .p. 209.

prevail. As the dwarf judges himself by the adult values of the Infanta, Wilde suggests that the tragic transition from innocence to experience is inevitable.

In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', Wilde shows that childhood is a contingent, multi-determined state. Both the Infanta and the dwarf are motherless victims of their genetic inheritance and paternal neglect. The Infanta's beauty is inherited from her mother, her imperiousness comes with her royal blood, while her heartlessness is attributable to her upbringing. The King's obsession with his dead wife leads him to neglect their living child. On her birthday, she is entrusted to the care of a bad-tempered, hard-featured Duchess, ably abetted by the King's hated brother, 'whose cruelty even in Spain was notorious', and the Grand Inquisitor whose sympathy extends only as far as wooden puppets (p. 99). Understandably, she absorbs the values of the adults who surround her. The dwarf's deformity is congenital. Ignored by his father, he is free to roam the forest where, bereft of adult guidance, he devises his own value system. He is a child of nature, a noble savage, who feeds the birds and views the forest as an earthly palace. His values are never tested, checked or corrected until he comes to court, where he discovers his own inadequacies. By showing the similarities and differences between his two protagonists, Wilde suggests that the concept of childhood as an innocent space is simplistic. Childhood, it seems, is incorrigibly plural, as children can be cruel and kind, stilted and spontaneous, imperious or generous, depending on their mood, genetic inheritance, and upbringing.

'The Fisherman and his Soul'

In 'The Fisherman and his Soul', a young man catches a beautiful mermaid whom he releases when she promises to sing to him whenever he calls. Every evening she

sings to him of the mysteries of the sea and he becomes besotted with her. She explains that they cannot wed while he has a soul so he asks the Priest how he can send it away. The horrified Priest denounces the fisherman and his beloved. The merchants tell him that his soul is not worth anything. Finally, he searches out a young witch who tells him to cut away his shadow. This releases his soul which goes away weeping, and the fisherman joins the mermaid under the sea. His soul returns annually to recount its adventures and tempt him with knowledge and riches. On its third visit, the fisherman, mesmerised by the description of a marvellous dancer, is reunited with it. The soul, without a heart, makes him do terrible things. When he resolves to rid himself of it again, he learns that it can only be sent away once. He waits for his beloved in the rocks, resisting his soul's temptations, until her dead body is washed up. He dies embracing her, and his soul and heart are reunited. On the Priest's command, the fisherman and the mermaid are buried in unhallowed ground. Three years later, the altar is bedecked with flowers that grow on their grave and the priest repents his earlier condemnation of them. After that, flowers never again grow on the grave and the Sea-folk go to another part of the sea.

Although 'The Fisherman and his Soul' was first published in *A House of Pomegranates* in 1891, Wilde was working on it in 1889 as he offered it for publication in *Lippincott's Magazine* to J. M. Stoddart in August of that year. Stoddart turned it down, and Wilde instead wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for publication in the magazine.²¹⁷ *Lippincott's Magazine* published articles of cultural, political and scientific interest as well as original fiction and poetry. Wilde's initial offer of the story to Stoddart strongly suggests that he regarded it as

²¹⁷ *Collected Letters*, pp. 413, 416, 478.

suitable for an adult readership. Stoddart, however saw it in a different light and turned it down on the basis that it was a fairy tale, therefore meant for children, which would not appeal to his readers.²¹⁸

When the collection appeared, early reviewers drew attention to possible influences and to the question of intended readership. As we have seen, the anonymous reviewer from the *Pall Mall Gazette* compared Wilde's 'capital descriptions of the sea' to those of Charles Kingsley.²¹⁹ Like *The Water Babies*, Wilde's story describes life under the sea but it differs completely from Kingsley's in tone, use of exotic imagery, stylised language and critique of religious orthodoxy. Another, more astute, anonymous reviewer in the *Saturday Review*, 6 February 1892, detected the shadow of the German Romantic, Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838), in 'The Fisherman and his Soul'.²²⁰

Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl*, first published in 1814 and translated into English in 1823, is a variation of the Faust legend. It tells of a man who sells his shadow to the devil in the guise of a magician but ultimately refuses to buy it back at the cost of his soul. The loss of the shadow, which results from temptation by the magician, cuts Schlemihl off from the possibility of love, but he learns from what has happened and refuses to sell his soul. In Wilde's story, the fisherman cuts away his shadow to find that the loss of his soul leaves him free to enjoy the love of the mermaid but also leaves him open to temptation by his soul. In both stories, the initial loss is the first step on a long journey towards self-realisation. Chamisso uses folktale motifs such as the selling of the soul to the devil and seven-league boots to create a story of a man who becomes an outcast who never quite achieves redemption. Wilde's use of triadic repetition similarly gestures towards the folktale

²¹⁸ Holland, 'Killing One Peacock'.

²¹⁹ Beckson, ed., p. 114.

²²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 114, 116.

in a story of an outcast who sacrifices his soul to enjoy a love that society condemns but that ultimately appears to be redemptive.

Andersen reworks Chamisso's theme in 'The Shadow', which tells of a young scholar who light-heartedly bids his shadow go take a look around the apartment facing his where he has glimpsed a beautiful girl. The shadow leaves him, discovers the girl is poetry, and in three weeks learns all he needs to know to become a man. A new shadow grows to replace the old one so the scholar is not concerned by the loss of the original one. Years pass, and on three occasions the shadow, now a cynical blackmailer, revisits his former master, now a philosopher. Gradually the shadow comes to dominate the man who is forced to act as his former shadow's shadow. Finally, the shadow marries a princess and the philosopher is killed at their command.

'The Shadow', as Christopher Nassaar points out, 'is a noticeable anomaly in the body of Andersen's fairy tales for it offers no hope of salvation, redemption, or change'.²²¹ Evil triumphs as the philosopher discovers that the world is not interested in 'all that is true and beautiful and good', and he is destroyed by the calculating, vengeful shadow.²²² Despite occasional touches of ironic humour, Andersen's tale is darker and more pessimistic than *Peter Schlemihl*. On a superficial level, it seems to share a thematic correspondence with 'The Fisherman and his Soul', as both feature men who lose their shadows. However, Wilde alludes to 'The Shadow' only to invert familiar themes and to complicate Andersen's conclusion.

Andersen plays down the metaphysical dimension of his story by focusing on practicalities; the shadow needs clothes to be able to show his face by day, and

²²¹ Christopher Nassaar, 'Andersen's "The Shadow" and Wilde's "The Fisherman and his Soul": A Case of Influence', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 50: 2 (1995), 217-224, p. 218.

²²² Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 336.

he gets these by blackmail. Wilde, by contrast, disdains such pragmatism and focuses on the metaphysical dilemma facing the fisherman; the naked soul wanders through the world at will and the fisherman's body proves no barrier to his joining the mermaid under the sea. Because Wilde, like Chamisso, makes a direct connection between the shadow and the soul, his story has a spiritual dimension lacking in Andersen's. Andersen's scholar does not intend to banish his shadow when he bids it depart: 'Yes, go! But remember to come back again'.²²³ Wilde's fisherman deliberately cuts free his shadow in order to get rid of his soul. The scholar loses one shadow and grows another; Wilde shows that souls are not so easily lost or acquired. 'The Shadow' is less a story of a divided self than of good persecuted and destroyed by evil. These qualities are polarised between the noble man and the venal shadow. Wilde avoids such clear distinctions; the soul becomes evil because it has been cut loose and deprived of access to the heart. Like Frankenstein's creature, it becomes monstrous because it has been abandoned. Ultimately, it longs to be reunited with the fisherman, not to destroy him. Its connection with the fisherman is never totally severed; it visits him annually and goes 'weeping away over the marshes' when it is once more rejected (p. 132). The battle is an internal one between the fisherman's heart and soul, with his body as the Achilles' heel that leaves him vulnerable to temptation. In 'The Fisherman and his Soul', good is a complex entity that cannot exist independently of evil and its eventual triumph is not unqualified: 'never again in the corner of the Fullers' Field grew flowers of any kind' (p. 148).²²⁴ Because of its focus on internal struggle, Wilde's story is more complex and enigmatic than 'The Shadow'.

²²³ Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 336.

²²⁴ In ii Kings 18.17 the Fullers' Field is unhallowed ground outside the walls of Jerusalem.

On a superficial level, 'The Fisherman and his Soul' bears some resemblance to another Andersen story, 'The Little Mermaid', which, in turn, draws upon the Undine legend, popularised by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. However, Wilde's story also differs from these sources, which in turn, differ significantly from each other. In Fouqué's literary version of the Undine legend, first translated into English in 1818, Undine is a water sprite who gains a soul by marrying a knight, only to lose him to a human lover. Like 'The Fisherman and his Soul', it is a stylised story of human weakness, set against a vaguely medieval background. Both show that human life is subject to primal forces which lie beyond the ken of orthodox Christianity. However, the priests in the legend are Undine's champions, as one baptises her and another marries her. Her other champion is the water spirit who protects and defends her interests. As both orthodox religion and primal forces unite in their appreciation of Undine, the legend suggests that there is no tension between the two. Wilde, on the other hand, highlights the rift between orthodox Christianity and primal desire as his priest denounces the love between the mermaid and the fisherman. As he comes to regret this condemnation and realises that all things under heaven are worthy of God's blessing, the story suggests that orthodox religion needs to be reminded that it has lost sight of the fundamental message it should be promulgating. The fisherman's appeals to the Priest and the merchants enable Wilde to suggest that the Church and the market place misguidedly govern the values of human society. Wilde's story, therefore, incorporates a critique of orthodox religion and consumerism not found in its source.

Wilde departs considerably from the details of the Undine legend as recounted by Fouqué. Wilde's mermaid never walks on dry land and never gains a

soul, while his fisherman loses his soul in order to join the mermaid under the sea. This reversal is further complicated by Wilde's investigation of the relationship between the soul, the heart and the body. In the legend, Undine, living on land but sensitive to the power of water, is torn between two elements whereas in Wilde's story, the fisherman, living under the sea but sensitive to the temptations of his soul, represents the divided self. The knight is tempted away from Undine by his affection for a human woman, Bethalda, while the fisherman is tempted away from the mermaid by his own soul. Fouqué focuses on the development of Undine from her initial appearance as a wayward, wilful girl, not unlike Wilde's Infanta, through her love for Huldbrand and acquisition of a soul, to her incarnation as a mature, selfless woman. In Wilde's story, the mermaid remains an enigmatic figure to the end and the focus is on the fisherman's development as he loses his heart to the mermaid, and then loses his soul only to be ultimately reunited with both. 'The Fisherman and his Soul', as it shows the heart, which is the source of one form of temptation, to be at odds with the soul, which is the source of others, concentrates on the divisions within the individual human psyche. The legend, on the other hand, is more concerned with the interplay between a number of characters than with the individual. Undine becomes whole through her contact with the human world while the fisherman becomes whole through his love for an elemental creature. The legend suggests that love gives birth to the soul and makes us truly human. Wilde suggests that love gives rise to a desire that makes us more than human. For all these reasons, 'The Fisherman and his Soul' departs from the legend to which it alludes.

Wilde's story also reverses the terms and conclusion of Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', which in turn departs from the Undine legend which inspired it.

Andersen retains the legend's focus on the elemental creature who wants to gain a soul, but his mermaid, unlike Undine who is raised on land by humble fisherfolk, spends her childhood in her father's palace beneath the sea. Andersen's descriptions of the wonderful world under the sea set up a disjunction between it and the terrestrial world above. Nevertheless, his mermaid is part of a loving family circle so that world beneath the sea is partially portrayed in familiar, domestic and unthreatening terms. Before she ever sets eyes on the prince, captivated by stories told by her grandmother and sisters, she is fascinated by the human world. Wilde retains his focus on the mermaid as a sea-creature, but unlike Andersen's mermaid, she is enamoured of her own world, rather than the terrestrial one and her songs, recounting its wonders, enchant the fisherman. She is a lone siren who lures the fisherman away from the comfortable safety of dry land. Andersen's mermaid, by contrast, saves the prince from drowning and exchanges her voice for a set of legs which enable her to follow him onto dry land. Wilde's mermaid is a temptress while Andersen's is a saviour.

Both 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Fisherman and his Soul' depart from the Undine legend in their introduction of the motif of dancing. In Andersen's story, the little mermaid's almost unbearably painful dance earns her the affection, but not the love, of the prince. In Wilde's story, the fisherman's dizzying dance with the alluring red-haired witch enables him to cut loose his soul and join the mermaid, while his desire to see the veiled dancer takes him away from her. In Andersen's story, dancing reveals that the sacrifice the mermaid has made will be ineffectual. In Wilde's story, the motif of dancing facilitates the loss of the fisherman's soul, which he does not see as a sacrifice, and his reunion with it, which he regards as a curse. Dancing, in Andersen's story, is a painful, physical

activity. Dancing, in Wilde's story, is charged with disturbing eroticism and possessed of metaphysical significance.

Fouqué's version of the legend ends with Undine, in the form of a spring, guarding the grave of her beloved knight. Andersen's story ends with the mermaid's transformation into a spirit of the air who discovers that she may earn a soul by trying earnestly to be good for a period of three hundred years. That time span will be reduced by one year each time she finds 'a good child, who makes his parents happy and deserves their love' while it can be increased by a day if, instead, she comes across 'a naughty and mean child'.²²⁵ Andersen wrote in a letter to a friend: 'I have not, like de la Motte Fouquet in Undine, let the mermaid's gaining an immortal soul depend on a stranger, on the love of another person. It is definitely the wrong thing to do. It would make it a matter of chance and I'm not going to accept *that* in this world. I have let my mermaid take a more natural, divine path'.²²⁶

In order to show that salvation depends on individual action, Andersen alters the details of the legend. He then adds a conventional moral tag for his child reader, whose actions can ensure not only that child's eventual salvation, but also that of the spirit who was once the little mermaid. Wilde, by contrast, ends the story in a way that departs both from the legend and 'The Little Mermaid'. The body of Wilde's mermaid is washed up on the shore, and the fisherman drowns while embracing it. Buried together in a deep pit, flowers grow to mark their grave. The miraculous appearance of blossoms recalls the Tannhäuser legend. Here, the flowers that grow on the grave and which later decorate the altar show the love between the fisherman and the mermaid to have been divinely blessed and

²²⁵ Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 76.

²²⁶ Cited in Hans Christian Andersen, *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. by Jeffrey Frank and Diana Crone Frank (London: Granta, 2004) p. 266.

prompt the repentance of the Priest who cursed them, making him speak of love instead of wrath. As he is stripped of 'the alb and the girdle, the maniple and the stole', he realises that he is dealing with something he cannot understand without divine assistance; 'And the Priest trembled, and returned to his own house and prayed' (p. 147). He returns to bless the sea and all its creatures but the story does not end with this reconciliation between an elemental force and orthodox religion. Wilde leaves his reader to ponder the significance of why flowers never again grew on the lovers' grave and why the Sea-folk went to another part of the sea. 'The Fisherman and his Soul' is ultimately darker and more enigmatic than either the Undine legend or 'The Little Mermaid'.

Wilde's preoccupation with the fisherman's relationship with his soul is foreshadowed in the work of his mother. In a footnote to a poem entitled 'Undine' included in her collection, *Poems*, Lady Wilde notes: 'Love gives soul to a woman but takes it from a man'.²²⁷ The Undine legend is closely allied to folktales concerning the marriage of a man to a supernatural woman (AT Type 400). Versions of these narratives abound in Irish folklore, particularly in those western regions where the Wilde family spent long periods on their properties.²²⁸ Generally, these stories end with the woman abandoning her husband to return to her own medium, but Lady Wilde included one unusual version, 'The Dead Soldier', in *Ancient Legends*. Her story tells of a young fisherman whose peace of mind is shattered by an encounter with a seductive mermaid and whose sanity is restored only when he goes to the priest who exorcises him. In a poem called 'The Fisherman', she tells of a young man who drowns while under the spell of the songs of a sea nymph: 'half drew she him, half sunk he in/ And never more was

²²⁷ Lady Wilde, *Poems*, p. 135.

²²⁸ See Bo Almqvist, 'The Mélusine Legend in Irish Folk Tradition', *Béaloideas* 67, 1999, 13-70, (p. 21); Bo Almqvist, 'Of Mermaids and Marriages', *Béaloideas* 58, 1990, 1-74, (p. 4).

seen'.²²⁹ As we have seen, in 'The Priest's Soul', Lady Wilde's protagonist queries the nature and existence of the soul. Her son develops this interrogation in 'The Fisherman and his Soul'. His focus on the suffering fisherman reflects the influence of the Irish folk narrative tradition as mediated by his mother. His story, which contains some international folk motifs, including lovers buried in one grave (T86) and plants growing from a grave (A2611.0.1), vindicates the unorthodox love between the fisherman and the mermaid. Pádraig Ó Héalaí argues that some Irish religious folktales suggest that God does not frown on transgressive relationships. One story, collected in Galway in 1939, tells how a holly bush grew through a hearth as a sign to a priest that a loose-living woman he thought was damned is saved, and that the priest himself is now damned because of his rash judgement.²³⁰ The analogues with 'The Fisherman and his Soul', a story that advocates forbearance and vindicates resistance to oppressive authority, suggest that Wilde was not advocating general Christian principles, but drawing on the specific moral values of Irish religious folk tales.

Acknowledging the importance of an Irish context for the appreciation of the subtleties of 'The Fisherman and his Soul' opens the story to unexplored lines of interpretation. In 'The Origin of the Harp', published in 1810 in the third volume of his Irish melodies, Thomas Moore portrays Ireland as a siren of old, forsaken by her human lover. As Fintan Cullen points out, Moore's portrayal alludes to 'the genre of eighteenth-century Jacobite and nationalist *aislingí* (allegorical poetry) in which Ireland is a beautiful woman abandoned by her lover

²²⁹ Lady Wilde, *Poems*, p. 139.

²³⁰ Ó Héalaí, 'Moral Values', pp. 206, 210.

and awaiting deliverance'.²³¹ In 1842, Daniel Maclise exhibited his painting, *The Origin of the Harp*, inspired by Moore's poem at London's Royal Academy. Both poem and painting present allegorised representations of Ireland as an alluring, but wronged, female who refuses to go away quietly. Both were produced in London and were popular with English audiences.²³² As the figure of the siren was associated with Ireland in the Victorian imagination, 'The Fisherman and his Soul' can be read as a reflection on that country's continuing disturbing significance both for Wilde and for his English reader.

If Ireland is the alluring mermaid who represents the antithesis of Victorian industry, the fisherman who finds her call irresistible may represent Wilde. She lures him away from a restrictive world that is dominated by religious orthodoxy and the values of the market place. Yielding to her call involves renouncing not only the soul but also all worldly ambition. She has a hold on his heart that can never be severed and she is the instrument by which all the elements of his psyche come together in harmony. Ireland is a separate sphere, governed by values other than those that dominate other societies. Ireland, in the form of the mermaid, can offer the hope of fulfilment to those, like Wilde and the fisherman, who love, abandon, but never forget her. On the other hand, the fisherman who captures the mermaid may represent the imperial power of England. The fisherman is undeniably and irrevocably changed as a result of his encounter with the mermaid. As the story goes on to reverse the power relations between the man and the siren, it suggests that a similar shift in power could affect the relationship between metropolitan master and colony. Wilde shows that threatening as this possibility

²³¹ Fintan Cullen, 'From mythical abstractions to modern realities: depicting the Irish émigrée', in *'Conquering England': Ireland in Victorian London* ed. by Fintan Cullen and R. F. Foster, (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2005) pp. 54-65, (p. 57).

²³² *Ibid.*

may seem by conventional standards, it is also seductively liberating. The captor has much to learn from his captive from under the sea, so England may learn from the island across the sea

Wilde's well-read reader would have picked up on several other literary echoes in 'The Fisherman and his Soul'. It indistinctly echoes Matthew Arnold's 1849 poem 'The Forsaken Merman', partly based on the Danish ballad, 'Agnes and the Merman'. Accounts of this ballad had appeared in the English press and in Mary Howitt's 1847 translation of Andersen's autobiography, *The True Story of my Life*.²³³ In it, the human wife forgets nearly all she knows of religion at the bottom of the sea but, as in Arnold's poem, eventually she hears bells ringing and is lured back to the church on land, never to return to her family. Wilde incorporates the conflict between Christianity and elemental passion in his story but reverses his sources' vindication of orthodox religion. Wilde's reference to the Kraken recalls Tennyson's 1830 poem of that name while his description of a life of opulence and sensuality under the sea calls to mind two other poems, 'The Mermaid' and 'The Merman', also published by Tennyson in 1830. One of Tennyson's sources for these poems was Thomas Crofton Croker's 1825 collection *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*.²³⁴ The reference to the Sirens recalls Homer's description in the *Odyssey* of the sea-songstresses who lure sailors to their deaths. Wilde's mermaid clearly embodies an international assortment of ancient and modern, literary and narrative echoes.

The story also has affinities with Hoffmann's modern fairy tale, 'The Golden Pot', in which as we have seen, the beloved woman takes the form of a snake. The fisherman, like Hoffmann's Anselmus, moves between two worlds, and

²³³ Arnold, pp. 100 -101.

²³⁴ Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), p. 195.

is captivated by the charms of a woman who is not human. Both heroes are strangely susceptible to the lure of a supernatural realm that can only be accessed through the natural world. In both stories, the fidelity of the male human lover is tested and he succumbs to temptation before coming to regret his abandonment of his true love. In both stories, the human lover leaves the terrestrial world to join his beloved in a marvellous realm where love reigns supreme. Both heroes are figures of the Romantic artist, whose ardent longing sets him apart from other mortals and propels him on a heady but dangerous journey of self-realisation. The fisherman's desire is kindled by the artistry of the mermaid's song and he must leave all that is safe and familiar to answer her call. As in 'The Golden Pot', the implication is that Art is an uncompromising mistress who demands unwavering allegiance at no small personal cost to the artist.

In his descriptions of the soul's travels, Wilde exploits the exotic imagery of the east familiar from *The Arabian Nights* but also alludes to the work of his French literary master, Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) tells of an Egyptian saintly hermit who finds himself pulled in opposing directions, but who succeeds in resisting every temptation that the devil throws at him. Wilde reflects but redirects this influence in a story where the fisherman's love for the mermaid isolates him and leaves him vulnerable to the temptations of his own soul. His soul tempts him with descriptions of precious stones and commodities, which reflect the influence of Wilde's decadent French literary masters, Gautier and Huysmans. The preoccupation with sumptuous detail aligns Wilde's style with the fairy tales of Madame d'Aulnoy. Wilde's oriental imagery is refracted by a style heavily influenced by French literary tradition. The biblical echoes of the opening image of the fisherman casting his nets upon the

water alert the reader to the religious implications of the unfolding story. However, that image also refracts the influence of the story of 'The Fisherman and the Genie' from the *Arabian Nights*. Through its combination of local and global, narrative and literary traditions, 'The Fisherman and his Soul' stands at the confluence of various cultural flows which it re-channels in ways that resist definitive interpretation.

The story's structural complexity compounds the difficulties of interpretation. The fisherman's appeals to the Priest, Merchants and Witch, and the soul's three returns to the fisherman echo the triadic repetition of the folktale. However, the language employed is biblical, rather than demotic, so the tone of the story differs from that of the folktale. Furthermore, the plot elements do not conform to those described as typical of the folktale by Vladimir Propp and the characters are not clearly villains, heroes, or helpers. The ambiguous ending is also not characteristic of the folktale, but recalls the unsettling endings of Tieck's romantic fairy tales. The sense of ambiguity is enhanced by imagery which is simultaneously aesthetically alienating and exotically attractive: 'Thou couldst not believe how marvellous a place it was. There were huge tortoise-shells full of pearls, and hollowed moon-stones of great size piled up with red rubies. The gold was stored in coffer of elephant-hide, and the gold-dust in leather bottles' (p. 137). The ambiguity, stilted language and aesthetic imagery stylise the story and enable it to float free of the familiar generic conventions of the folk narrative.

The story gestures towards the triadic repetition of the folktale in order to undermine binary oppositions between good and evil, body and soul, salvation and damnation. The soul tempts the fisherman with wisdom, riches and physical

perfection so three powerful flames spark desire. The sentence structure echoes this tripartite division:

He tugged at the thin ropes, and nearer and nearer came the circle of flat corks, and the net rose at last to the top of the water.
But no fish at all was in it, nor any monster or thing of horror, but only a little Mermaid lying fast asleep (p. 115).

The fisherman is torn between his heart, soul and body so identity is shown to share this triadic structure. Thematically, the story is divided between the fisherman's love for the mermaid, the separation of soul, body and heart, and the consequences of their eventual reunion. Through the pervasive introduction of a third dimension, Wilde avoids reductive binary oppositions and imbues the story with an enigmatic significance that eludes definitive interpretation.

John Charles Duffy argues that the priest's description of that love as vile, evil, and accursed echoes Victorian anti-homosexual religious rhetoric. As 'the Victorians associated the Orient with homosexuality', Duffy argues that the exoticism of the disembodied soul's journeys represents the fascination of both. He points out: 'Since the Middle Ages, at least, sodomy had been referred to as the "unmentionable vice"'.²³⁵ The unnameable is alluded to twice in Wilde's story: on the first occasion the fisherman calls on the holy name during the witches' Sabbath to be told that he has 'named what should not be named' and on the second occasion, the Emperor speaks 'the word that may not be spoken' as a door opens to reveal marvellous treasure (pp. 124, 136). Duffy argues these allusions to the unnameable invite a reading 'in which homosexual love can appear as something holy or unspeakably marvellous'.²³⁶

Duffy's close attention to the text of 'The Fisherman and His Soul' supports his argument that this story engages with contemporary religious

²³⁵ Duffy, p. 344.

²³⁶ Duffy, p. 344.

discourses that categorised love between men as unblessed and unmentionable. Nevertheless, his claim that because 'there is no indication that the mermaid even has a vagina', her relationship with the Fisherman 'falls into the category of sodomy' is questionable.²³⁷ The presence of a tail would seem to preclude the presence of an orifice and thus protect the mermaid from any form of penetration below the waist, and Duffy does not go so far as to suggest that the tail has phallic power. Rather than validating either homosexual or heterosexual love, the story valorises an ideal form of love that incorporates body, heart and soul.

The story contains several Biblical echoes and allusions that enable Wilde to explore the metaphysical, divine dimensions of love. The fisherman's belief in the power of love gives rise to the hope that it will survive his betrayal of it so, in line with Corinthians 13.13, love is shown to be greater than faith and hope. The fisherman describes it in ecstatic, lyrical terms: 'Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men. The fires cannot destroy it, nor can the waters quench it' (p. 146). Love's superiority to riches is prefigured in Corinthians 13.1-2, while the imagery of the beautiful feet and the love that can withstand fire and water echoes the Song of Solomon 7.1 and 8.6-7. He goes on to comment on the mermaid's enduring and forgiving love for him: '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' (p. 146). Wilde substitutes the love of a soulless creature for the enduring rock on which, in Matthew 16.18, the Church is built and against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. Philip Cohen argues that 'The Fisherman and his Soul' moves from an Old Testament ethic of vindictive damnation, exemplified by the Priest's

²³⁷ Duffy, p. 133.

condemnation of a profane love, towards a New Testament ideal of redemptive forgiveness, revealed through the Priest's change of heart.²³⁸ This argument is convincing but Cohen's conclusion that 'love in "The Fisherman"...changes from *eros* to *agape*' is less persuasive.

'The Fisherman and His Soul', combines Old and New Testament allusions to vindicate a love that is at once spiritual, emotional and physical. The story's concern with love and desire undermines the conventional identification of desire with the body and obfuscates the usual distinction between *eros*, a selfish physical love, and *agape*, a selfless spiritual love. The mermaid's body is described in cold, metallic terms: 'Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl' (p. 115). The fisherman's desire, kindled by her beauty, is more aesthetic than sensual. That desire is whetted by the songs she sings of the wonderful, dangerously fascinating world of the sea. Yet his desire for her is also physical: 'Yet would she never come near him that he might touch her [...] and when he sought to seize her she dived into the water' (p. 117). Unlike the female protagonists of the Undine and Mélusine legends, and the animal bride folktales that derive from them, Wilde's mermaid never adopts a human form so her union with the fisherman can never be consummated and the erotic bond between them remains incorporeal. He remains prey to physically erotic temptation as he abandons the mermaid to find a veiled dancer with naked feet: 'he remembered that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance. And a great desire came over him' (p. 138). As the flowers that grow on their grave decorate the altar, their love is shown to be both erotic and spiritual.

²³⁸ Cohen, pp. 98-103.

The story engages with questions posed by Christ to Peter (Mark 8.36-37), which in the King James Version reads: 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul. Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' Wilde complicates these questions by presenting a man who loses all worldly ambition before willingly losing his soul, without having to give anything in exchange. The profit he gains is a redemptive love that transcends death and forces the Priest's acknowledgement that it was not an abomination but a sign that everything created by God is blessed. Christian love comprises love of God and love of one's neighbour. As the fisherman's love for the mermaid necessitates the loss of his soul and cuts him off from human contact, it is difficult to agree with Christopher Nassaar's claim that the story 'is about the victory of all-embracing Christian love'.²³⁹ The love between the mermaid and the fisherman belongs to a different order, but as the story does not end with death, Wilde tentatively returns the story to a Christian framework by providing hope of some fragile form of resurrection.

'The Fisherman and His Soul' is a complex meditation on the nature of love and human identity. That complexity is enhanced by the way in which it gestures towards familiar narratives, including the Undine and Mélusine legends, and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, only to alter their focus and invert their conclusions. The influence of the Irish folk narrative tradition lies not in the story's structure or style, but in its thematic vindication of an unorthodox spirituality. Critics, who focus on the fisherman's separation from his soul, regard the story as a precursor of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as it provides an early

²³⁹ Nassaar, 'Andersen's "The Shadow"', p. 224.

example of Wilde's interest in the idea of a personality split in two.²⁴⁰ This focus has precluded a consideration of the significance of the tripartite split between heart, soul, and body which is fundamental to the story's investigation of human identity and the nature of love. The biblical allusions imbue the story with a spiritual significance that undermines the Christian framework they evoke. 'The Fisherman and his Soul' is an enigmatic story that differs from Wilde's other fairy tales because it does not provide a childlike perspective from which events and characters can be judged. Instead, it invites its reader to leave familiar, safe territory and plumb the depths, along with the fisherman.

'The Star-Child'

In this story, two poor Woodcutters, lost in the forest on a snowy night, find an infant boy in a golden cloak at the spot where a star has fallen. One brings the baby home to his wife, who, despite her initial irritation, cares for him as if he were her own. The Star-Child grows up to be beautiful, proud and cruel. He delights in looking at his own reflection and revels in inflicting pain on animals and outcasts. To his horror, he discovers that a foul beggar-woman is his mother. When he rejects her, he becomes physically ugly, realises that he has done wrong, and vows to seek her out to make amends. During his search, he is imprisoned by a magician and given three tasks to perform. Aided by a hare that he has released from a trap, he manages to accomplish each, but gives away the gold he gets to a leper. He expects to be killed by the magician, but instead, regains his beauty and is worshipped by the people of the city. The beggar-woman and the leper, who are his mother and father, are revealed to be a King and Queen and the Star-Child is

²⁴⁰ See, for example, Raby, p. 63.

crowned. He rules generously and justly but the story ends on an ominous note: 'after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly' (p. 164).

'The Star-Child' brings together themes which Wilde has already explored in the other stories in *A House of Pomegranates*. Like 'The Young King', it charts the development and accession to the throne of a prince who has been reared in a humble family in a rural setting far away from the palace. Both stories focus on the awakening conscience and subsequent spiritual maturation of a protagonist who moves from narcissism to compassion. While the conclusion of 'The Young King' sets up a form of rapprochement between temporal power and spiritual authority, the conclusion of 'The Star-Child' demonstrates how fragile and transient that rapprochement is.

'The Star-Child', like 'The Birthday of the Infanta', is concerned with the relationships between physical and spiritual beauty, cruelty and sensitivity, pride and humility, and once again, there is a focus on reflection and recognition. This time, however, the tensions are embodied within the protagonist rather than being split between two characters, and recognition is followed by growth instead of instant death. Initially, the Star-Child's pride and cruelty are fuelled by the beauty of his reflection; when he becomes ugly, his altered reflection kindles his repentance and humility; finally, after many trials, his transfigured reflection reveals his spiritual growth: 'And the Star-Child looked, and lo! his face was even as it had been, and his comeliness had come back to him, and he saw that in his eyes which he had not seen there before' (pp. 162-163). Wilde shows that physical attractiveness is the outward manifestation of both pride and compassion and that ugliness is an impetus that leads to the development of spiritual beauty. Neither

attribute is a simple reflection of an internal state. While this suggests that this story challenges conventional perceptions of the relationship between the good and the beautiful, it also re-inscribes them as the Star-Child regains his comeliness and the repellent beggar woman and leper are revealed to be a king and queen. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' unsettles the relationship between the good and the beautiful, partly because it echoes works by Victor Hugo in which the ugly hero possesses an innate innocence or nobility. 'The Star-Child', which opens conventionally with 'once upon a time', has more in common with a fairy tale tradition in which ugliness is a punishment and beauty an index of virtue. The result is that the relationship between the good and the beautiful is shown to be conventional.

This story's exploration of the connections between love, sin, and redemption develops one of the major themes of 'The Fisherman and his Soul'. While that story suggests that passionate love is redemptive as well as potentially sinful, 'The Star Child' is more conventional in its suggestion that the development of compassionate love can compensate for sinful pride and hard-heartedness. When he is a physically attractive child, the Star-Child, like Kay in 'The Snow Queen, exerts an evil influence over his companions: 'And in all things he ruled them, and they became hard of heart, even as he was' (p. 154). It seems that hard-heartedness is contagious and attractive. He rejects his unknown mother's love, adding: 'Rather would I kiss the adder or the toad than thee' (p. 156). As he is transformed into an ugly creature with the face of a toad and scales like an adder, he becomes the living embodiment of his own denial of love. He experiences the type of rejection he inflicted on others as his companions mock him and the soldiers guarding the city abuse him. When he regains his beauty, the

high officers of the city abase themselves before him and when he is crowned, the principles of 'love and loving-kindness and charity' direct his rule (p. 164). The unexpected ending destabilises this apparent correlation between compassionate rule and communal well-being; as the Star-Child's successor 'ruled evilly', the story suggests that a period of compassionate rule has no lasting effect but instead facilitates a longer, more typical, period of corruption (p. 164).

The cautionary, deflationary ending allows a retrospective irony to temper the story's investigation of the value of individual sacrifice and the ultimate efficacy of compassion. The Star-Child's coronation marks the beginning of a short period of 'peace and plenty in the land', but that golden age quickly passes into history (p. 164). The implication is that corruption triumphs over justice and that kind deeds inspired by individual suffering are not enough to change the world. As Maria Tatar points out, the story 'suggests that it takes more than a single savior to redeem mankind'.²⁴¹ As we have seen, 'The Happy Prince' similarly queries the ultimate value of altruism based on sympathy and suffering, and prefigures Wilde's description of self-sacrifice as 'a survival of savage mutilation' in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'.²⁴² The ambiguous ending of 'The Star-Child' suggests that Wilde continued to be fascinated by the tension between the value and inefficacy of individual sacrifice, and underlines the thematic consistency between his two collections of fairy tales and other writings.

'The Star-Child' echoes and inverts details of changeling lore from the Irish folk tradition as reported by Wilde's mother. In a story called 'The Fairy Changeling' in *Ancient Legends*, a man overhears two women discussing how they have swapped an ugly, dead fairy child for a bonny, human one. The man rescues

²⁴¹ Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1999) p. 250.

²⁴² Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', p. 155.

the stolen infant and brings it home to his mother. She 'was angry at first, but when he told her the story, she believed him and put the baby to sleep'.²⁴³ The next day, he hears that the lord's son has been discovered dead in his cradle and throws the changeling that has been placed there on the fire:

Then the man sent word to his mother to bring the other child, who was found to be the true heir, the lord's own son. So there was great rejoicing, and the child grew up to be a great lord himself, and when his time came, he ruled well over the estate; and his descendants are living to this day, for all things prospered with him after he was saved from the fairies.²⁴⁴

'The Star-Child' retains the details of the rescued child who turns out to be of noble lineage, being brought home to an initially reluctant, female caregiver. Like the lord's son, the Star-Child is restored and, acclaimed by his people, becomes a just ruler. Wilde, however, eschews the happy ending and alters other basic details of his mother's story. Although the woodcutter's wife calls the infant a changeling and is afraid that it will bring her family bad fortune, the Star-Child is not, as Richard Pine claims, actually a changeling.²⁴⁵ A changeling, as described by Lady Wilde, 'is an ugly, wizened little creature', who 'is generally hated by all the neighbours for its impish ways'.²⁴⁶ The Star-Child, by contrast, is revered by his companions, 'for he was fair and fleet of foot' (p. 153). As he could 'dance, and pipe, and make music' (p. 153), he does, however, possess attributes which Lady Wilde describes as characteristic of a child who is half-human, half-fairy: 'But the children of the Sidhe and a mortal mother are always clever and beautiful, and specially excel in music and dancing. They are, however, passionate and wilful'.²⁴⁷ The Star-Child, a foundling of noble lineage, is not a changeling but seems to possess some of the qualities associated with the Sidhe.

²⁴³ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i pp. 170-171.

²⁴⁴ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, pp. 171-172.

²⁴⁵ Pine, p. 177.

²⁴⁶ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 273.

²⁴⁷ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 273.

In another story called 'The Fairy Child', Lady Wilde describes how a well functions as the interface between mortal and fairy worlds as a mother enters fairyland through a well to retrieve her stolen baby.²⁴⁸ As we have seen, in 'The Man who dreamed of Faeryland', W. B. Yeats similarly describes the well at Scanavin as a threshold between human and supernatural worlds. In describing the Star-Child's affinity with 'the well in the priest's orchard' (p. 153), which reflects first his beauty and later his ugliness, Wilde seems to be drawing on the reverence for the holy well that is common in Irish folk tradition. The emphasis on the threshold, which as we have seen is a feature of Lady Wilde's 'The Horned Women', also features in 'The Star Child'. When the woodcutter arrives home, he tells his wife that he has brought the infant for her to have care of it 'and he stirred not from the threshold'. When she remonstrates with him and calls the child a changeling, 'the man answered nothing, but stirred not from the threshold'. When she relents, he takes decisive action 'and he came in swiftly, and placed the child in her arms, and she kissed it' (p. 152). As in Lady Wilde's story, the woman is the guardian of the interior domestic space that nobody can enter without her acquiescence. Once she allows the threshold to be crossed by whatever force is waiting to enter, she cedes control and the story can unfurl.

'The Star-Child' alludes to selective aspects of the Irish folk tradition but does not remain faithful to that tradition. Instead Wilde dispenses with the most basic trope found in changeling lore – that of the exchange of a sickly fairy infant for a healthy human child. The Star-Child embodies the ugliness of the former and the beauty of the latter. The contrast, which in the folk tradition can be used to explain childhood illness or mortality, becomes internalised, enabling Wilde to

²⁴⁸ Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends*, i, p. 120.

investigate the tensions that exist within the individual psyche. Wilde retains the Irish folk tradition's emphasis on the supernatural and its effect on human life, particularly in places like the threshold and the well, to imbue 'The Star-Child' with an uncanny quality that reflects Wilde's oblique recourse to that tradition.

While selectively alluding to aspects of the Irish folk tradition, 'The Star-Child' deliberately evokes narrative conventions generally associated with the international folktale. The formulaic opening transports the reader into the type of forest landscape associated with folktales such as 'Hansel and Gretel' (AT Type 327A). The story repeatedly employs the type of triadic repetition associated with the folktale; the Star-Child is rebuked three times for his lack of charity; he asks three animals if they have seen his mother; he is given three tasks by the magician, in which he is aided by an animal helper whom he has rescued from a trap; he has three physical states which reflect his moral development. This deliberate evocation of narrative conventions associated with the folktale makes the deflationary ending all the more shocking as the reader's expectation that all will end well is initially fulfilled and then withdrawn.

Although it follows some conventions associated with the folktale, 'The Star-Child' flouts others. On a structural level, it possesses a complexity that is not found in traditional oral narratives. Like 'The Devoted Friend', it employs a *mise-en-abyme* structure that enables Wilde to inject an element of social satire into the story. The opening paragraphs feature a group of animals whose discussion sets the scene for the ensuing human interaction that constitutes the main body of the story. The Woodpecker, described as 'a born philosopher', does not care for explanations and prefers to describe things as they are: 'If a thing is so, it is so, and at present it is terribly cold' (p. 149). The woodcutter is also a philosopher with a

somewhat stoic approach to life: 'much is given to some, and little is given to others. Injustice has parcelled out the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow' (p. 150). The Wolf, who 'had a thoroughly practical mind', resembles the Woodcutter's wife who raises pragmatic objections to caring for the Star-Child (p. 149). These objections are not unreasonable; when the woodcutter claims that God, who cares even for sparrows, will provide for them, his wife asks: 'Do not the sparrows die of hunger?' (p. 152). The reader, who has already encountered a group of suffering birds, including linnets, frost-bitten turtle-doves and a philosophical woodpecker, cannot help but realise the force of her argument. As he blames the Government for the bad weather, the Wolf parodies social commentators who blame those in authority for all ills and inconveniences. As he also threatens to eat anyone who disagrees with him, he shows how tyrannical social commentary can be.

Unlike 'The Devoted Friend', the interaction between animals does not provide a frame that surrounds and reflects an embedded story about human interaction. Instead, the animals who feature in the opening scenes in the forest provide a leitmotif to which the developing story returns on a number of occasions. We have already seen how the reference to the sparrows made by the woodcutter's wife is enriched and justified by the reader's awareness of the hardships faced by the birds of the forest. Here, birds become emblems of the provisory nature of divine providence. Later, they become indices of compassion as the old priest seeks to teach the cruel Star-Child the love of living things: 'The wild birds that roam through the forest have their freedom. Snare them not' (p. 153). It becomes apparent that the animals survived the hard winter only to be

attacked by the child, as they re-appear later when he asks for their help to find his mother:

And the Linnet answered, 'Thou hast clipt my wings for thy pleasure. How should I fly?'

And to the little Squirrel who lived in the fir tree, and was lonely, he said, 'Where is my mother?'

And the Squirrel answered, 'Thou hast slain mine. Dost thou seek to slay thine also?' (p. 157).

As the Star-Child 'wept, and bowed his head, and prayed forgiveness of God's things' (p. 157), the birds become agents of divine revelation. The little hare, the first creature to whom the Star-Child shows any kindness, becomes his magical helper so the connection between human action, providence, and the animal kingdom is reinforced.

The relationship between the protagonist and animals echoes both the life of St Francis of Assisi, and 'La Légende de St Julien l'Hospitalier' as recounted by Flaubert in *Trois Contes* (1872). This echo is strengthened by the Star-Child's changing relationship with a leper. At the outset, 'he cast stones at the leper' (p. 154), but when he repents, he gives three pieces of gold to an impoverished leper whose feet he later embraces. During his youth St Francis of Assisi, like the Star-Child, was a talented musician and charismatic figure, surrounded by a band of devoted followers. His decision to turn his back on pleasure and pursue a life of the spirit was sealed when he overcame his aversion to a poor leper, embraced the unfortunate man and gave him all his money. His spiritual quest involved long periods of physical hardship and his compatriots mocked him before they recognised his exceptional merits. As Wilde admired St Francis and was familiar with the details of his life, it seems reasonable to suggest that the similarities between the Star-Child and the saint are not accidental.

biblical allusion. The human characters formally address each other as 'thou' and 'thee'. Archaisms abound in phrases such as 'And she was wroth against him', 'thou has blinded mine eyes' and 'to the naked he gave raiment' (pp. 152; 157; 164). The order of words in sentences is often unexpected so that the language appears formal and constructed rather than fluid and natural: 'Yet did his beauty work him evil' (p. 153). Longer sentences are divided into sub-clauses introduced by conjunctions such as 'but', 'and', 'so', 'for' and 'yet': 'So he ran away into the forest and called out to his mother to come to him, but there was no answer' (p. 156); 'Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died' (p. 164). This syntax mimics the cadenced sentence structure of the King James Bible and heightens the sense that an appreciation of this story requires an acknowledgement of its spiritual significance. That sense is enhanced by the length of the Star-Child's reign, as it lasts for three years, like Christ's public campaign.

The sense of the story's spiritual significance is further heightened by a number of direct and indirect biblical allusions. The reference to the sparrows echoes Matthew 10.31; the allusion to the cattle of the field echoes Isaiah 43.20; the leper seeking help recalls Mark 1.40, and the Star-Child's banishment – 'they drave him out of the garden' (p. 156) – brings to mind the story of man's expulsion from paradise (Genesis 3.24). Other allusions are less direct but telling. The falling star that leads the woodcutters to the child's resting place recalls the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem (Matthew 2.9). The suggestion that the one of the woodcutters should take the child's cloak recalls the sharing out of Christ's clothes after the Crucifixion (John 19.24). These two indirect allusions to the life and death of Christ suggest that the Star-Child is indeed an exceptional, inspirational

being. The beggar woman's claim – 'thou art indeed my little son' (p. 155) refracts God's acknowledgement of his beloved son (Matthew 17.5). The Star-Child reacts angrily when the woodcutter reproves him: 'Who art thou to question me what I do? I am no son of thine to do thy bidding' (p. 154). This rebuttal refracts Christ's response to Joseph and Mary when taxed about remaining in the temple (Luke 2.49). The Star-Child's rejection of his mother recalls Peter's denial of Christ (Luke 22.58-62). These indirect, inverted biblical allusions underline the Star-Child's pride and sinfulness. Others draw attention to his developing humility and saintliness. The return of his comeliness recalls the transfiguration (Mark 9.2) and his kissing and bathing of his mother's feet with tears recalls Mary Magdalen's penitent approach to a loving Christ (Luke 7.38). Overall, the deliberate stiltedness of the language and the biblical allusions imbue 'The Star-Child' with a sense of mystic, specifically Christian, exaltation.

Despite Wilde's calculated evocation of a Christian framework, 'The Star-Child' resists restrictive interpretations which focus only on its spiritual significance. This is partly due to its equally deliberate evocation of the magical world of the folktale evident in the story's formulaic opening and its cast of stock characters including a foundling, woodcutters, magical animal helper, and a magician who seems to have been imported from *The Arabian Nights*. The Star-Child, like the typical folktale hero, undergoes various trials and emerges victorious after a period of arduous struggle. Wickedness is punished and virtue rewarded so the story reflects a conventional approach to good and evil that is not exclusively Christian. Furthermore, Wilde's lexical choice not only creates a sense of biblical authority but also works to aestheticise the story and to alienate it from any contemporary or historic reality. The stylised language and cadenced phrases

create a sense of otherworldly elegance and beauty that contrasts both with the simplicity of the folktale and the biblical focus on self-abnegation and suffering. This contributes to an ongoing tension between inner, spiritual and outward, physical beauty that is never completely resolved.

The final, deflationary paragraph marks the end of Wilde's experimentation with the form of the fairy tale. It seems to suggest that happy endings are only found in fairy tales, which can reflect aspects of reality and alert readers to the ubiquity of various forms of injustice and tyranny but cannot change the world. They can posit a magical world in which inner beauty can triumph over adversity and in which self-sacrifice can effect self-realisation. Ultimately, however, they are not agents of social change but belong to the self-referential world of art. Each individual, either as a character within the story or as a reader of the story, is faced with the challenge of negotiating a path towards self-fulfilment that acknowledges the allure of other options. Each individual is also faced with the realisation that self-fulfilment depends on others but is essentially a solipsistic achievement that does not produce lasting social change. Individual action and communal well being are linked, but while the individual who swims against the tide may stem it temporarily for the benefit of all, individual effort is not enough to turn the tide and change the world. This final story re-inscribes the message conveyed by the other eight that there is no simple equation between ethics and aesthetics. The gap between language and action can never be fully bridged. The relationship between good and evil, beauty and ugliness remains enigmatic and troubling. The ending of 'The Star-Child' allows the incertitude of actual life to flow retrospectively over the miraculous action of the fairy tale. As it ends on a cautionary note, it punctures

any lingering hope that the good we do may live after us or that fairy tales reflect life, and brings *A House of Pomegranates* to a pessimistic close.

Review of *A House of Pomegranates*

The four stories in this collection display Wilde's ongoing investigation of the effects of selfishness and the need for selflessness, instigated in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, but here that investigation is complicated by an increased focus on beauty in various forms. In the opening story, the young King's latent aestheticism is aroused by the profusion of beautiful objects in the palace but his dreams reveal the human cost of producing beautiful objects, leading to his spiritual awakening and beatification. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' complicates the relationship found in traditional fairy tales such as 'Beauty and the Beast' between the good and the beautiful to suggest that beauty is a veneer that hides emotional monstrosity. In 'The Fisherman and his Soul', the mermaid's body is compared to precious jewels so that the love the Fisherman feels for her is aesthetic, although it is also physical and spiritual. Beauty is shown to inspire both erotic passion and spiritual devotion and both are shown to be blessed. The final story, 'The Star-Child', is concerned with the relationships between physical and spiritual beauty, cruelty and sensitivity, pride and humility. While it advocates humility and sensitivity, its approach to the relationship between physical and spiritual beauty is contradictory, as the humble, penitent Star-Child regains the comeliness he enjoyed as a proud, cruel youth. The conflict between the decadent lure of beauty and the spiritual call of asceticism is never fully defused. This unresolved tension adds to the ambiguity not only of the story itself but also of the entire collection as all the stories investigate the relationship between the good and

the beautiful to suggest that the two are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive.

With the exception of 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the stories deal with sin, repentance, and redemption and contain a variety of direct and indirect allusions to both the Old and New Testaments. They employ, at least intermittently, a stylised diction that favours the use of long sentences, often containing archaisms, divided into sub-clauses, introduced by conjunctions. This syntax mimics the cadenced sentence structure of the King James Bible and heightens the sense suggested by biblical allusions that the appreciation of these stories requires an acknowledgement of their spiritual dimension. Nevertheless, the deliberate evocation of the timeless, magical world of the folktale in stories which feature foundlings, magical helpers, talking animals, magicians and witches, suggests that they cannot be read as conventional Christian morality tales. Again with the exception of 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the stories feature the type of triadic repetition found in folktales all over the world and specifically evoke the non-Christian orient of *The Arabian Nights*. The first three stories feature a worldly Bishop, a heartless Grand Inquisitor, and a judgemental, self-righteous Priest, so that Christianity is repeatedly represented as spiritually deficient. Furthermore, the collection's aesthetic focus heightens the sense that the stories are not intended as simplistic or didactic Christian allegories.

The stories' interpretative ambiguity is heightened by their allusions, not only to the Bible and the generic conventions of the folktale, but also by their oblique, but nonetheless pervasive and significant recourse to the Irish folk tradition. Stylistically the stories have little in common with the Irish folk narrative tradition as the language, imagery, and tone reflect literary biblical and Romance

influences rather than oral, folkloric ones. Nevertheless, an acknowledgement of Wilde's Irish background greatly enhances an appreciation of the stories' advocacy of justice and assault on false values. 'The Young King' draws on two of Lady Wilde's poems, 'The Young Patriot Leader' and 'The Famine Year', to indict the values underpinning an imperialist monarchical system of exploitation. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' refracts the Irish folk tradition's focus on the link between reflection and death, as reported by both Lady Jane and Sir William Wilde, thereby drawing attention to the dangers of delving into the depths concealed beneath familiar surfaces. 'The Fisherman and his Soul' draws on two poems, 'Undine' and 'The Fisherman', and a traditional legend 'The Dead Soldier', anthologised by Lady Wilde to present a story in which the focus is on a suffering human lover who joins his beloved under the sea. 'The Star-Child', a story in which the protagonist possesses attributes which Lady Wilde described as characteristic of children who are half-human and half-fairy, engages with the trope of the changeling and reflects the Gaelic folk tradition's focus on the importance of thresholds. An awareness of Wilde's recourse to the Irish folk tradition, particularly as mediated by his mother, greatly enhances an appreciation of the blending of natural and supernatural elements in these enigmatic, ambiguous stories.

The stories' complexity is further enhanced by their allusions to various other sources. As we have seen, these include the evocation of medieval saints' legends, allusions to nineteenth-century French writers including Hugo, Flaubert and Baudelaire, the inspiration provided by the work of Velasquez, as well as the type of oriental imagery familiar from *The Arabian Nights*, echoes of the work of German Romantics including Tieck, Fouqué and Chamisso, and allusions to

stories by Hans Christian Andersen. The inclusion of these intertextual echoes enriches and complicates the stories' exploration of the relationships between spiritual and physical beauty, temporal power and social responsibility, solipsism and selflessness. It also highlights the fact that these stories are complex cultural hybrids that blend Irish, European, and other elements in a distinctive Wildean way.

In each of the stories, an outsider, either a figure who has been raised away from the court like the Young King, the Dwarf, or the Star-Child, or a misunderstood lover like the Fisherman, draws attention to the false values that govern his contemporary society. Wilde could be seen as something of an outsider in Victorian London, not least because of his Irish background and his sexual relationships with other men. The stories in *A House of Pomegranates* deliberately eschew clear identification with late Victorian society. Nevertheless, the issues they raise and the questions they provoke were relevant to Wilde's contemporary readers and continue to be relevant to all readers interested in the interaction between individual freedom and social constraint. The collection ends on a deflationary note as the Star-Child's loving reign comes to an end: 'And he who came after him ruled evilly' (p. 164). This ending punctures any lingering hope that the good the individual does lives after him. As *A House of Pomegranates* comes to a pessimistic close, Wilde suggests that the happy ending traditionally associated with the fairy tale is a fleeting, but nonetheless desirable, chimera.

Conclusion.

Wilde's claim that 'the Folk-tale is the father of all fiction' conveys his conviction that folk narrative is a communal, primordial, fertile resource whose traces are ineluctably found in the individual enunciations of subsequent writers of fiction.¹ For Wilde, folk narrative is not mimetic or rational, but instinctively expressive and inventive, so he values it for its 'expression of joy and sorrow; it is in the highest degree imaginative'. Nevertheless, he finds it to be an inferior aesthetic mode, because unlike 'the great masterpieces of self-conscious art', folk art cannot aspire 'to the highest expression of life'.² Wilde is a Romantic, eulogising what he perceives to be the unconscious stream of emotion flowing through the oral tradition, but differentiating between it and superior, self-conscious, artistic creation. As Angela Bourke remarks of W. B. Yeats in the 1890s: 'The dynamics and aesthetics of the oral tradition, and the place of individual creativity and of performance within it were subjects quite foreign to him'.³ Wilde believes that the best art should not eschew the passion and freshness that, in his view, characterise folk art: 'it is pleasant sometimes to leave the summit of Parnassus to look at the wildflowers in the valley, and to turn from the lyre of Apollo to listen to the reed of Pan'.⁴ The nine stories contained in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* are carefully crafted works of art that contain traces of the Irish folk tradition and other literary and narrative traditions. Wilde's fairy tales combine motifs and tropes familiar from folklore with stylistic embellishments, digressions, and flourishes associated with literary fiction. This combination enables Wilde to juxtapose the artifice of the lyre with the simplicity of the reed,

¹ Oscar Wilde, 'Poetry of the People', p. 29.

² Ibid. pp. 29, 30.

³ Bourke, 'Yeats and Irish Folklore', p. 9.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'Poetry of the People', p. 29.

and to ascend the heights of Parnassus while pointing out the beauty of the valley below.

The stories contained in Wilde's two collections of fairy tales display structural resemblances to the folktale in general and particular thematic resemblances to Irish religious tales. This suggests that the distinctive nature of Wilde's fairy tales is partly due to the way in which he reworks particular strands of Irish folklore. As we have seen, early collectors of Irish folklore, including Croker and Lover, adopted a condescending attitude towards the superstitions and beliefs evident in the material they presented. Wilde's parents, on the other hand, regarded Irish folk traditions and beliefs as worthy of respect and shared a romantic rather than analytic or scientific approach to their subject. Their contributions to the collection of Irish folklore show an appreciation of the broader cultural practices and traditions to which oral narratives belong. While Oscar's work reflects a more limited knowledge of Irish folk tradition, his fairy tales do reflect his parents' shared Romantic, respectful approach to their subject. They echo both his mother's view of folklore as the repository of timeless spiritual values and his father's belief that folklore can reflect a basic, humanitarian desire for social justice.

The preceding examination of the stories has shown that Wilde's recourse to the Irish folk tradition in both volumes is oblique and selective and far less influential than some recent commentators have suggested.⁵ This is hardly surprising as his familiarity with that tradition was limited. While he was undoubtedly aware of its existence through his parents and through contacts with servants such as Mary Burke, he did not have first-hand experience of collecting or

⁵ See, for example, Ann Shillinglaw, 'Fairy Tales and Oscar Wilde's Public Charms', in *Oscar Wilde: The Man, his Writings and the World*, ed. by Robert N. Keane (New York: AMS Press, 2003), pp. 81-91, (pp. 82-83).

publishing it. There is no evidence to support Jarlath Killeen's claim that, as a child, Oscar accompanied his father on visits to cottages in the west of Ireland.⁶ Unlike his compatriots, Yeats and later Synge, he did not, in adulthood, deliberately set about familiarising himself with the Irish folk tradition, or advocate its use as the basis of a distinctively Irish literature in the English language. Scholars including Mary Helen Thuente and Declan Kiberd have fruitfully explored the work of Yeats and Synge to show how it mines the rich seam of Irish folklore.⁷ The fairy tales of Oscar Wilde do not display the same type of informed, extensive engagement with the Irish folk tradition.

Nevertheless, Wilde's recourse to that tradition in his two collections of fairy tales is pervasive as, with the exception of 'The Remarkable Rocket', some allusion to it is discernible in all the stories in these volumes. This means that they could not have been written by somebody who did not have access, however limited by the standards that governed the development of folklore studies in Ireland during the twentieth century, to that tradition. Wilde's selective recourse to Irish folklore in the fairy tales not only underlines his less than comprehensive knowledge of a vast range of material but also, and more importantly, highlights his perception of Irish folklore as a reservoir of spiritual significance and literary inspiration. His recourse to Irish folklore in the stories includes references to bending trees, flowering boughs and graves, variations on the trope of the changeling, marriages between mortal men and supernatural women, and a focus on thresholds and on the link between reflection and death. Most importantly, his recourse to Irish folklore is reflected in his engagement with the moral values found in Irish religious tales. Vyvyan Holland claimed that 'we find in Oscar

⁶ Killeen, *Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, p. 31.

⁷ Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*; Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

Wilde's stories that blend of folklore and religious impulse that has always actuated Irish poets'.⁸ Oscar Wilde, Holland's father, does indeed combine religious impulse and folklore in original fairy tales written for an eclectic readership.

Like Irish religious folktales, Wilde's fairy tales explore the effects of reprehensible and desirable behaviours, and probe the relationship between the individual, the community, and God. Again and again, his fairy tales show that generosity is preferable to avarice, but that individual selflessness, while approved by God, does not invariably lead to wealth or happiness in this life, and does little to change the social order. Wilde's fairy tales, like Irish religious folktales, castigate hypocrisy and advocate the avoidance of rash judgement. As, in the words of Angela Bourke, his stories 'offer consolation in adversity and tacit support for resistance to oppressive authority', they are steeped in the amniotic fluid of the Irish religious folk narrative tradition.⁹ The values of that tradition in his original fairy tales echo their generic source in their affirmation of a metaphysical dimension to human life. Wilde's Irish background and his parents' shared interest in Irish folk traditions are essential contexts for the appreciation of his fairy tales.

Equally essential is the acknowledgement that folklore is not the repository of a distinctive national identity and that to be Irish is also to be European. To be Anglo-Irish, as Wilde was, involved exposure, not to two conflicting traditions but to a variety of cultural influences. Wilde's general Irish, and particular Anglo-Irish family, background exposed him not only to the wonders of the oral Irish folk

⁸ Vyvyan Holland, 'Once Upon a Time...A Critical Note', in *The Happy Prince; The Complete fairy Stories of Oscar Wilde* (London: Duckworth, 1955), pp. 193-203, (p. 193).

⁹ Bourke, 'Spirituality and Religion', p. 1399.

tradition but also to the delights of classical and modern European literature, and to the sophisticated discussions in his mother's salon and at his father's dinner table. All of these influences resurface in his fairy tales in the form of an eclectic range of literary and narrative echoes which he re-channels in a highly distinctive, individual way.

Oscar Wilde chose to work with the form of the literary fairy tale because it offered a mode of expression free from the tyranny of realistic representation. His work represents an innovative approach to the use of the form of the fairy tale. One aspect of that approach is the adaptation of the fairy tale to reflect his own critical thinking on issues as varied as the relationship between art and life, the purpose of education, the dangers of private property, the efficacy of individual sacrifice and the disjunction between surface and depth. His letters and critical writings show that these issues were of continuing, deep significance to him. Wilde's innovative approach to the fairy tale is likewise seen in pervasive allusion to other narrative and literary traditions, including the genre of the literary fairy tale in its various incarnations. Wilde's fairy tales combine the stylised elegance of Mme d'Aulnoy, the tempting exoticism of the *Arabian Nights*, the unsettling ambiguity of the German Romantics, and allude to the work of Hans Christian Andersen and his Victorian contemporaries. His fairy tales also refract elements of his mother's poetry, the works of nineteenth-century French writers ranging from Hugo, through Baudelaire to Gautier and Huysmans, and of English poets, including Keats, Shelley, Arnold and Tennyson. References to classical myth and medieval legend, combined with direct and indirect biblical allusions, further enhance Wilde's innovative appropriation of the literary fairy tale. Allusions to other literary and narrative traditions outnumber and outweigh

allusions to the Irish folk tradition but the combination of both types of allusion enhances the aesthetic complexity and moral ambiguity of his stories.

‘Is it possible for a writer to work in a tradition without being fully aware of it?’, asks Vivian Mercier, who then replies, ‘I believe it is’.¹⁰ Mercier’s question and response raise interesting issues that are pertinent to this study’s exploration of the links between Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales and the Irish folk tradition. Mercier’s approach suggests that tradition is an enclosing continuum within which the work of individual writers can be placed. However, tradition is like a folktale; it exists in various forms, and individuals at different times and in different places come in contact with diverse versions of it. Although one version may be older than another, no one version is more authentic, legitimate, or intrinsically valuable than another. This study has shown that the Irish folk tradition splintered during the course of the nineteenth century, when as a result of several factors, folktales and legends began to reach new audiences. Oscar Wilde came in contact with, and endorsed, a Romantic approach to Irish folklore that stressed the imaginative extravagance and spiritual richness of the narrative tradition. That version of Irish folklore provided him with one source of inspiration for his own literary creations. He was aware, at some level, of the Irish folk tradition when he was writing his fairy tales and they show continuity with it, but that is not to claim that they form part of that tradition. They are self-conscious literary fictions that draw not only on the Irish folk tradition but also on a variety of other literary and artistic sources. Within his fairy tales, tradition, of all sorts, becomes a springboard for innovation. His particular genius lies in incorporating echoes of various narrative traditions in highly distinctive, original fairy tales.

¹⁰ Mercier, p. 236.

The inclusion of these various echoes raises questions about intended readership, an issue raised by contemporary reviewers of both volumes of Wilde's fairy tales. More recently, Ian Small and Josephine Guy have suggested that *A Happy Prince and Other Tales* was written and marketed for a child readership while *A House of Pomegranates* was produced for a connoisseur market. They argue that the second volume failed to gain the approval of this market because the stories in *A House of Pomegranates* were not different enough to signal unequivocally that they were intended for adults and this confirms the suspicion that Wilde's and his publisher's identification of them as adult material was a marketing rather than creative decision'.¹¹ This view is disputed by Michelle Ruggaber who argues 'that each collection implicitly acknowledges a different audience' with *A Happy Prince and Other Tales* being intended for children and *A House of Pomegranates* for adults.¹² I propose that both volumes were intended, at least partly, for an adult readership but that the first was more readily accessible to children, making it more suitable for a dual audience of children and adults than the second.

Wilde was contradictory on the subject of intended audience, originally claiming that the *A Happy Prince and Other Tales* was 'really meant for children', and later claiming that it was 'meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy'.¹³ His claim that the volume was partly intended for a childlike adult is supported by his advocacy of an eclectic promotional campaign and his gift of it to various influential adults and acquaintances. All the stories contain enough humour and lightness of touch to attract young readers. The narrative voice is pitched at a level which is accessible to children but is never

¹¹ Guy and Small, p. 81.

¹² Ruggaber, p. 142.

¹³ *Complete Letters*, pp. 350, 352.

condescending. One leading theorist of children's literature, Barbara Wall, identifies the most successful mode of adult writing for children as a form of dual address 'that allows adult narrator and child narratee a conjunction of interest'.¹⁴ Although Wall does not include Wilde in her selection of writers who adopt this form of address, the stories contained in *The Happy Prince and other Tales* successfully bridge the gap between child and adult reader. The child does not have to appreciate the intertextual allusions to Gautier's 'Ce que disent les hirondelles' or to Shelley's *Queen Mab* to enjoy 'The Happy Prince' but the adult's appreciation is heightened by recognition. Both adult and child can appreciate the reference to Andersen's little match girl but the adult would be more likely to know of the match girl strike in 1888. The inclusion of intertextual allusions offers the sophisticated reader a range of positions from which to approach the stories and enhances their satiric effect. A less erudite reader can still appreciate the playful irony and often the child's point of view expressed in the story is ultimately vindicated or implicitly endorsed, so the child reader is not patronised. Wilde adopts a form of dual address that does not privilege a sophisticated reader over an innocent one. As his contemporary reviewer in the *Athenaeum* pointed out, a child will delight in these stories, while children of larger growth will also enjoy them.¹⁵

The themes explored in *A Happy Prince and Other Tales* include the use and abuse of power, the value of philanthropy, the function of art, the nature of childhood and the relationship between child and adult. These themes are also present in *A House of Pomegranates*, but the humour and lightness of touch that enhanced the appeal of the first collection to the young reader is entirely lacking here. The witty, tongue-in-cheek description of the King and his court in 'The Remarkable Rocket' is

¹⁴ Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: the Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 35.

¹⁵ Beckson, ed. p. 60.

far more likely to appeal to a child reader than the lavish account of the palace in 'The Young King' or the detailed, stylish account of the court celebrations in 'The Birthday of the Infanta'. The Swallow's colourful account of Egypt in 'The Happy Prince' is a lot more appealing and accessible than the soul's descriptions of its eastern travels in 'The Fisherman and his Soul'. The darker, bleaker stories in the second collection are all concerned with the painful process of maturation. This is not to claim that they will not engage or disturb a child reader, but to propose that they were written to engage and disturb an adult one, who realises that maturation is as much a state to be avoided as a consummation to be devoutly desired.

Wilde himself described *A House of Pomegranates* as being like the previous collection, 'only more elaborate'.¹⁶ Visually, the elaborate binding and illustrations were designed to appeal to a reader who was also a connoisseur of fine printing. Thematically, the exploration of issues introduced in the first collection was complicated by an increased focus on beauty in various forms. Stylistically, the range and number of intertextual echoes to sources, including contemporary French literature, medieval romance and the work of the German Romantics, with which the child reader was unlikely to have been familiar, exceeds those in the first collection, where allusions to Andersen predominate. Linguistically, the stories are strikingly more elaborate as they employ a more archaic, stylised diction. These various elaborations produce a sense of estrangement and alienation that is more likely to appeal to a sophisticated reader than to a childlike adult or to a naïve child.

A Happy Prince and Other Tales successfully addresses a dual audience of adults and children, while *A House of Pomegranates* is primarily addressed to an adult reader. Nevertheless, both volumes are concerned with the construction of childhood

¹⁶ *Complete Letters*, p. 493.

and its relationship to maturation and adulthood. Jacqueline Rose argues that children's fiction has consistently constructed the child it purports to address. This constructed, innocent child, who has direct and unproblematic access to language and the world, reassures adults who feel challenged by the uncertainties which characterise their own relationship with both.¹⁷ While Wilde's approach to childhood in both volumes is undoubtedly tinged, in places, with elements of this ideology, the stories also present the multiplicity of childhood.

In *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, the title story contrasts the visionary innocence of the Charity Children with the greed of the little boy who cries for the moon. The two rude boys who enjoy throwing stones at the little Swallow are totally unlike the two little boys lying in each others arms under a bridge, in a vain attempt to keep warm. The child bride in 'The Remarkable Rocket' is a miniature adult. Adult characters act in childish ways; the Selfish Giant, like a child who refuses to share his ball, will not allow the children to play in his garden; the Rocket is a boastful child who never grows up. It follows from this that to be childlike is not the same thing as being childish. Being open to experience does not mean being naïve and Wilde cautions against the uncritical adoption of any one viewpoint or perspective. John Stephens, building on the work of Peter Hollingdale, argues that the implicit ideologies that permeate fictions created by adults for children are conveyed by the ways in which a story's perceptual point of view privileges one interpretation of events or attitude towards characters over others not explicitly suggested by the text. He concludes 'that implicit authorial control is a characteristic marker of the discourse

¹⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 8-9.

of children's fiction'.¹⁸ By applying that conclusion to *The Happy Prince and other Tales*, it becomes apparent that the structure of the volume and the narrative strategies used in the stories enable Wilde to query, not reinforce, dominant ideologies. Wilde exposes his reader, child and adult, to differing perspectives within stories that in turn challenge other stories, leaving that reader free to ponder the significance of the volume as a whole. While *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* advocates a childlike openness to experience to both adult and child reader, it conveys the incorrigible plurality of childhood and reveals it to be a state open to corruption like any other.

In *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde continues to present differing aspects of childhood. 'The Birthday of the Infanta' contrasts the heartless childishness of the Princess with the childlike naiveté of the Dwarf. The Spanish children, dressed like miniature adults, ape their elders in their games and amusements and lack the spontaneity of childhood. As the Star-Child's companions follow their leader and do whatever he bids them, Wilde shows how children are influenced by those they admire. When the woodcutter's daughter speaks kindly to him after he has lost his comeliness, Wilde shows that children can be compassionate as well as cruel. However, this volume is more concerned than its predecessor with the painful process of maturation. 'The Young King' is concerned with the passage from childhood to maturity so the focus is on adolescence, which is shown to be a time of unusual receptivity and sensitivity. In 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the Dwarf's painful maturation results in death while the princess develops into a heartless monster. The Star-Child is more fortunate as he matures into a responsible ruler, and the fisherman's maturation involves the reconciliation of his heart, body and soul. Nevertheless, the sombre, dark tone of the stories and their ambiguous, enigmatic

¹⁸ Peter Hollingdale, 'Ideology and the Children's Book', in *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by Peter Hunt, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 19-40; John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (Harrow: Longman, 1992), p. 27.

endings suggests that the passage from childhood to maturity involves a regrettable loss of innocence and spontaneity.

Overall, the two volumes show that Wilde saw childhood and adulthood as part of a continuum. The passage to adulthood is necessary but to become a truly whole and balanced individual, the adult needs to retain a childlike approach to others and to life itself. The adult needs to retain the capacity to see life through the eyes of a child and to experience its vicissitudes with childlike honesty. As Ian Small points out: 'Wilde's stories run directly counter to the nineteenth-century tradition of moral tales for children that emphasise the role of parents in educating recalcitrant children into the norms and values of *adult* culture'.¹⁹ Wilde's advocacy of the Blakean idea of the child educating the adult collapses the binary opposition between childhood and adulthood.

Within Wilde's fairy tales, in which literary and non-literary narrative traditions collide, other binary oppositions are collapsed to show that far from being diametrically opposed, a thing always partakes of, and reflects, its opposite so that both form part of a continuum. Guilt and innocence, art and life, self-sacrifice and self-realisation, pleasure and pain, are amongst the oppositions that Wilde explores in the fairy tales, showing that one is always dependent upon the other. The Young King's pleasure leads to a painful realisation of the misery it causes others and his guilt leads to his subsequent achievement of divinely approved innocence; the statue of the Happy Prince lives to see art assuage the miserable lives of the poor as his willing sacrifice leads to his self-realisation. By deconstructing the binaries, Wilde uncovers their underlying unity and shows how liberating collapsing boundaries can be.

¹⁹ Small, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

In 1885, Wilde declared: 'It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use of what he annexes, and he annexes everything'.²⁰ Wilde's annexation of an eclectic range of literary and narrative echoes within his fairy tales constitutes an assault on the mimetic function of art and goes some way towards elucidating his 1889 claim that 'in a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow not from life but from each other'.²¹ In both *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*, the fairy tale provides Wilde with a flexible, malleable form that enables him to collapse boundaries between a variety of literary and non-literary narrative traditions. In both volumes, the fairy tale represents a fertile space in which life and art, ethics and aesthetics can commingle and connect. Within that space, Wilde attains the summit of Parnassus and descends to the depths of human misery in the valleys below. Although his fairy tales may appeal to children, they engage with issues that are of ongoing concern to adults. This dissertation shows that his nine fairy tales are complex, carefully crafted works of art that amply repay the type of serious, comprehensive critical attention they have seldom attracted to date.

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'Olivia at the Lyceum', *Dramatic Review*, 30 May 1885, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, pp. 53-56, (p. 54).

²¹ Oscar Wilde, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison: A study in green', *Fortnightly Review*, January 1889, reprinted in *Selected Critical Prose*, pp. 193-212, (p. 203).

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