

Incorporeal Punishment

**Writing Masochism and the Cruel Woman in English Decadence,
1860-1900**

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I declare that all of the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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ABSTRACT

The cruel woman is a recurring trope in Decadent literature and visual art. She is symbolic of the primary Decadent anxieties about nature and male authorship, and, as this thesis aims to show, is distinct from the generic *femme fatale*, the subject of numerous studies of nineteenth-century literature, most notably by Rebecca Stott and Bram Dijkstra. This thesis is the first full consideration of the cruel woman in English Decadent literature, and comprises an investigation of her appearance in the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and Ernest Dowson (1867-1900), the principal proponents of English Decadence from 1860-1900. I use the theoretical writings of Gilles Deleuze on masochism to illuminate the control of the masochistic writer over the figure of the written tormentor. Comparing the creation of the Decadent cruel woman to Ovid's Pygmalion and his sculpture of his ideal female image, I analyse the power of the male masochist over the woman he creates and interrogate her supposed autonomy. In *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Swinburne's poems address a series of cruel women as masochistic fantasies formed according to the speaker's projected desires, whereas Wilde's *Salome* (1894) deviates from this masochistic model. Salome is rendered fragile and delicate through the use of symbolic language. The dancing girls of Symons's *Silhouettes* (1892, revised 1896) and *London Nights* (1895, revised 1897), have been miscast as *femmes fatales*. The dancer's body is anatomized, never fully realised for the reader. The same is true of Dowson's *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations* (1899), in which the cruel woman is diminished to a girl. Dowson's poetry represents both the attenuation and refinement of English Decadence. He is a 'reverse Pygmalion' whose female figures are either dead or frozen into a perfect yet unreachable state.

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INTRODUCTION

Defining the cruel woman and writing masochism

This thesis is a study of the figure of the cruel woman and the writing of masochism in English Decadence between 1860 and 1900, in selected works of Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and Ernest Dowson (1867-1900). In their writing, we encounter a complex engagement with the figure of the cruel woman, who, I argue, is distinct from the traditional model of the *femme fatale*. She is an incorporeal fantasy who enacts scenes of imaginary torment. In the ‘fleshly poetry’ of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866) the cruel woman is written from a masochistic perspective where pleasure and pain are bestowed by the woman. The cruel woman theme is continued in the Decadent microcosm of Wilde’s *Salome* (1894), although the eponymous character is a ghostly reimagining of the type, whose female body is no match for male authority. In Symons’s poetry, focus is diverted from the cruel woman towards the self that writes the woman. In *Silhouettes* (1892, revised 1896) and *London Nights* (1895, revised 1897), Symons exploits the position of woman in Decadence as a catalyst, a device for poetic self-exploration. The dancing girls in Symons’s writing are symbolic of the torment felt by the writer attempting to capture the fleeting moment in poetry. In Dowson’s two poetry collections *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899), the cruel woman is replaced with the image of a young girl. Rather than creating a sense of her life, vitality and dominance, he speaks of girls as ghostly shadows and cold dead bodies. The girl is a figure of tension for Dowson, an idealised image of youth and a reminder of the transience of youth. Dowson’s girls are tormenting figures, but unlike Swinburne’s sexualised and alluring cruel women, they offer little pleasure to the poet.

The Decadent themes of artifice, nature, and masochism originate from the figure of woman, in what Camille Paglia would describe as a return to a ‘primary and corrupt’ female centre.¹ The figure of woman is the focal point for my study of English Decadent writing. She is a paradoxical source of attraction and repulsion for Decadent men. She is both admonished for her connection with the forces of nature, and admired for the artifice of clothes and makeup associated with femininity. In their introduction to

¹ Paglia uses this phrase when referring to Swinburne’s use of language, and her criticism of his poetry will be examined in further detail in the next chapter. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 464.

Decadence: An Annotated Anthology (2012), Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick note that ‘Decadent authors expressed a horror of [women’s] reproductive capabilities and their sexual appetites; towards the ideal of womanhood, an ideal embodying beauty and femininity, they expressed fascination. This was a defining contradiction in the Decadent perception of women.’² The woman’s place in the masochistic scenario demonstrates the Decadent writer’s anxiety about female reproductive capability, but also his power as creator. The female image in Decadent fictions is a combination of the allure and threat of the woman.

The scope of my study excludes nineteenth-century female writers and their perspective on the cruel woman. The issue of whether we can consider women writers as part of the Decadent movement is a source of ongoing current debate, with interest in the subject having grown over the past few decades. For example, Elaine Showalter’s anthology *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (1993), Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham’s *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (2006), Marion Thain’s *‘Michael Field’: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (2007), and Melanie Hawthorne’s new research on French Decadent women including Rachilde and Renée Vivien.³ Since the cruel woman is, I argue, a reflection of male Decadent anxieties, I have chosen not to bring women writers into this preliminary exploration. My aim is to interrogate the cruel female figure within English Decadent texts, observing that it is inconsistent and in fact ‘fades out’ towards the end of the nineteenth century. I revisit the, at times misogynistic, conceptions of women in Decadent writing rather than considering the ways women wrote themselves. The male perception of women is a concern the New Woman writer George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne) raises in her short story ‘A Cross Line’, in *Keynotes* (1893). Her female protagonist laments that women exist as projections of male fantasies and are therefore prevented from showing their true selves. She explains to her lover, ‘the woman who tells the truth [...] is abhorrent to man, for he has fashioned a model on imaginary lines, and he has said, “so I would have you”, and every woman is an unconscious liar, for so man loves her.’⁴ This is an investigation of these mechanisms of projection. Insufficient attention

² Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (eds.), *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 6.

³ Hawthorne recently presented a paper entitled ‘Nice Smells: Renée Vivien and the Olfactory’ at *Decadence and the Senses: An Interdisciplinary Conference*, at *Decadence and the Senses: An Interdisciplinary Conference*, Goldsmiths, University of London, 10-11 April 2014.

⁴ George Egerton, ‘A Cross Line’ (1893) in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (1993; London: Virago, 2007), p. 60.

has been paid to the process of masochistically writing one's own tormentor. In addition, the inclusion of women in the Decadent tradition is somewhat problematical, as observed by Kirsten MacLeod and Talia Schaffer. In *Fictions of British Decadence* (2006), MacLeod notes that British 'women writers regarded [Decadence] as a hyper-male artistic discourse that excluded women.'⁵ Women were doubly denigrated by critics of Decadence who grouped them in with the 'degenerates' and by male Decadents who associated them with popular and sentimental fiction.⁶ Decadent writers achieved subversive status while retaining their masculine superiority by associating themselves with the weak and deficient, the female writer of populist 'romance', while simultaneously denigrating women for their connection with nature and sentimentality. Women, for Decadent writers, are not true artists.

In *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000), Schaffer studies women writers of the English *fin de siècle* in order to resituate them within the aesthetic movement from which they have been unfairly excluded because of their gender. She argues that

a critical history that valorizes 'decadence' has, unintentionally, skewed the movement away from female writers. Decadence was actually a brief defensive reaction of embattled elite male writers who perceived themselves to be losing status to popular women writers and consequently fetishized their own decay. In an era of journalistic writing and crass best-sellers, decadence commemorated a dying literary culture held by privileged men: esoteric scholarship, aristocratic affiliation, rarified taste. Decadents often contrasted themselves with women whom they viewed as crude, unthinking beings [...] Today, critics often conflate decadence with aestheticism, giving decadence's masculinist assumptions and male coterie a disproportionately large role in our critical consciousness.⁷

This thesis is written in awareness of this critical separation of Decadence from aestheticism and therefore concentrates on a selection of the 'embattled elite male writers' that constitute English Decadence. It is an androcentric literary tradition; in studying the nuances of the cruel woman in this tradition my aim is not to align myself

⁵ Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 84. Elaine Showalter has begun to redress the balance with her anthology *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (1993). In terms of French Decadence, Melanie Hawthorne's recent translations of Rachilde's (1860-1953) work have contributed to a renewed interest in her writing. Hawthorne is currently researching the life and work of Renée Vivien (1877-1909).

⁶ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 44.

⁷ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 6.

with the misogynistic and reductive attitude towards women, but to interrogate it.⁸ Further research on the cruel woman theme could focus on a comparison between male and female anxieties during the Decadent period and the way these are reflected in their writing.

In studying the image of the cruel woman in English Decadence I aim to provide a sustained exploration of the paradox of writing one's own imagined tormentor; to offer a reconsideration of the Decadent cruel woman; and to consider the 'refinement' of Decadent writing as the nineteenth century progresses. English Decadent writing at the *fin de siècle* corresponds with the ideals set out in Arthur Symons's definition of literary Decadence, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), in which he states it has 'all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity.'⁹ In 'Pale Imitations: Walter Pater's Decadent Historiography' (1999), Matthew Potolsky critiques the view of literary Decadence as a weak imitation of past classics. He mentions that 'The conventional notion of imitation informs the characterization of decadence as a "pale" imitation of some prior literary form: decadence is the false copy living off some original.'¹⁰ Decadence is a tradition of emulating and retelling. Symons refers to Decadent writing sharing qualities with ancient Greek and Roman classics. The *femme fatale* is one of the figures that is borrowed and reimagined. Salome as a prototypical 'fatal woman', for example, can be traced back to biblical origins. This 'type' does, however, become paler and more insubstantial within English Decadent writing. The direct precursor to the Decadent version, the Romantic *femme fatale*, is similarly vague, as observed by Heather Braun. She states in *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (2012) that 'The most compelling femmes fatales remain those that hearken back to the spectral figure of the early nineteenth-century fatal woman – a figure that embodies a complex ghost of the imagination – an impossible ideal doomed not only to disappoint

⁸ As Schaffer observes, 'Decadence, like naturalism, was constructed to exclude women writers. In the misogynist beliefs of Baudelaire and his followers, women were allied with unthinking nature, whereas men were the proponents of exquisitely artificial, if inherently corrupt, art.' Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, p. 45.

⁹ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (1893), pp. 858-9.

¹⁰ Matthew Potolsky, 'Pale Imitations: Walter Pater's Decadent Historiography', in Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds., *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 237.

but also to destroy those who dare to pursue it.’¹¹ This thesis charts the progression of the Decadent cruel woman as an impossible ideal. We can observe a movement from Swinburne to Dowson, who is eventually destroyed by his helpless pursuit of an impossible ideal. Swinburne replicates the pleasurable painful rhythms of whipping in his verse. Dowson, on the other hand, portrays surrender and despair, and in his poetry the figure of the cruel woman is refined into a ghostly fantasy.

I argue that there is a specifically Decadent type of cruel woman, which is different from other nineteenth-century literary representations of *femmes fatales*. The differences are slight, and have often gone unnoticed. Jess Sully points out that ‘not all artists intended their work to be regarded in the same manner, and, as a result, they did not depict the *femme fatale* in the same way. The nineteenth-century fatal woman, then, is a more complex archetype than has been suggested by previous scholars.’¹² The Decadent cruel woman is formed according to Decadent anxieties. I explain these differences in my examination of existing scholarship on the *femme fatale*. In Chapter 1 I will explore English Decadence in further detail, alongside an investigation of the cruel woman as a creation akin to Pygmalion’s statue. ‘Pygmalionism’ is a psychoanalytical concept and I give a brief account of the clinical context further on, as well as an explanation of the related phenomenon of agalmatophilia. I also define the masochistic process of creating one’s own torturer according to a projection of desire.

The *femme fatale*

Critical focus on the *femme fatale* has so far concentrated on the woman herself. She is usually examined in terms of nineteenth-century anxieties which extend beyond the distaste for nature. But this ignores the important other half in the scenario: the male, masochistic, creator. I refer to this as a masochistic process of creation because of the fatal woman’s specific connection with pleasure and pain. The *femme fatale* is a figure that is both alluring and threatening, a combination that is masochistically enjoyed. As I acknowledge further on, masochistic scenarios involve a process of creating one’s own tormentor. It is not my aim to philosophise on masochistic sexuality in general, but to think about its representation in writing within the very specific genre of Decadence in

¹¹ Heather Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), p. 144.

¹² Jess Sully, ‘Challenging the Stereotype: The *Femme Fatale* in *Fin-de-Siècle* Art and Early Cinema’, in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. by Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46-7.

England between 1860 and 1900. This will be explored within the five chapters of this thesis, which trace the development of the way in which women are written during the key moments of Decadence in England: Swinburne's poetry, influenced by Baudelaire's verse, which signalled the arrival of literary Decadence in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century; the writing of Wilde and Symonds during the most intense flourishing of English Decadence in the 1890s; and Dowson's poetry which reflects the exhausted end of the Decadent delight in decline.

The cruel woman is a recurring theme in nineteenth-century European Decadent writing. We can trace it back to Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du mal*, 1857, revised 1861) in which women are often compared to serpents, vampires, and monsters, and to the cruel mistress Wanda in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (*Venus im Pelz*, 1870). Jules Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly published a collection of six short stories, *The She-Devils* (*Les Diaboliques*, 1874), each of which features a cruel or vengeful woman. In Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1886) the sadistic Raoule inflicts torture upon the body of her feminised male lover. Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden* (*Le Jardin des supplices*, 1898) tells the story of a woman who becomes sexually excited by scenes of gruesome torture.¹³ The cruelty of these women is a source of both pain and pleasure to their male counterparts, who adopt a masochistic position in relation to the seemingly strong and dominant women.

The woman in Decadent writing represents a battle between contrary impulses towards bodily pleasures and the superior pleasure of artistry. Baudelaire makes dual statements about femininity being an inspiration to man, and woman causing his descent from an ordinary state, to the base, animalistic, and the underworld. In 'The Painter of Modern Life' ('*Le Peintre de la vie moderne*', 1863), he speaks of woman as 'a divinity, a star, which presides at all the conceptions of the brain of man'.¹⁴ However, in his confessional prose writings titled 'My Heart Laid Bare' ('*Mon coeur mis à nu*', 1864), a contradictory attitude is maintained. Baudelaire proclaims that

¹³ On another level, the novel is a protest against the scandal of the Dreyfus affair: the wrongful conviction of Alfred Dreyfus in 1894, for treason. Romana Byrne observes this in *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism*, in which she states, 'The influence of the Dreyfus affair can be clearly observed in the novel's caustic tone, and the preface, or "Frontispiece," immediately introduces the novel as a critique of corruption within the French political system.' Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 49.

¹⁴ Baudelaire 'The Painter of Modern Life', p. 30.

In every man, and at all times, there are two simultaneous yearnings – the one towards God, the other towards Satan. The invocation of God, or spirituality, is a desire to ascend a step; the invocation of Satan, or animality, is a delight in descending. To this latter one should relate one's enamourments with women, one's intimate conversations with animals – dogs, cats, etc.¹⁵

Woman is reduced to the position of an animal and she drags man down with her, though he enjoys this descent. She therefore paradoxically is also complicit in his 'sublime disgrace'; he achieves unworldly pleasure and ascends through his descent.

Masochism is about delighting in descent, and using this descent to obtain transcendence. In his essay "'Decadence" in Later Nineteenth-Century England' (1979), R. K. R. Thornton sets up a 'decadent dilemma', saying, 'The Decadent is a man caught between two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls: on the one hand he is drawn by the world, its necessities, and the attractive impressions he receives from it, while on the other hand he yearns towards the eternal, the ideal, and the unworldly.'¹⁶ Within Decadent poetry and prose, masochism is employed as a writing strategy to combine both impulses, towards the worldly and the unworldly, in order to reconcile beauty and nature. Anita Phillips, in *A Defence of Masochism* (1998), puts it perfectly: 'Masochism is a movement which integrates the lowest impulses with the highest; it is a story about falling in order to ascend.'¹⁷ In Decadent fiction, as Baudelaire suggests, the lower impulses are bodily, sexual, and natural, while the higher impulses involve refinement and a symbolic transcendence of the worldly to the artificial, the intellectual and the beautiful. The masochistic scenario raises sexuality to the level of beauty, by making it into art. Even though pain is described, it is done so in a beautiful, or beautifying, way. Phillips's and Baudelaire's statements about falling and ascending echo Christian mythology, and this is exploited in a subversive fashion by Decadent writers. Swinburne in particular combines the notion of devotional worship with masochistic submission. In 'Dolores' for example, the agony of submission is written within the constraints of lyric poetry, as a kind of prayer or invocation of a goddess figure. Swinburne's precise handling of rhyme scheme and metre work together in order to aestheticise the subject matter. The sentiment expressed in the poem is an impassioned plea for sexual gratification, and the pain it entails. The poet attempts to regain control,

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings* trans. Norman Cameron (London: Soho Book Company, 1986), p. 181, quoted in Marie Lathers, *Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist's Model* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 109.

¹⁶ R. K. R. Thornton, "'Decadence" in Later Nineteenth-Century England' in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 26.

¹⁷ Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 159.

through mastery of language and form, over the impulses that dominate him. He does so by invoking a ritualised submission and an address to a female authority.

This female authority could be considered a muse, the ‘divinity’ or ‘star’ as Baudelaire would have it. In *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889-1930* (2013), Sarah Parker has observed that the figure of the muse has been historically constructed as a specific female and feminine authority. She states,

As the Ancient Greek mythology shifted first into Roman and then Christian culture, the concept of a divine, inspiring feminine power lived on, but became corporealized and connected to an actual living woman. [...] In courtly tradition, the ‘divine’ and ‘erotic’ aspects of the female muse are collapsed together; the muse becomes an unattainable mistress whom the poet worships.¹⁸

Parker speaks of the transformation of the divine type of muse into the Romantic version of the woman as an emblem of nature: ‘The medieval idea of the muse as an actual, living woman and divine mediator – rooted in courtly love poetry – persisted into the Romantic tradition; but rather than being associated with the Virgin Mary, the muse became associated with the more secular (but no less sublime) natural world in the form of Mother Nature.’¹⁹

Similarly, Heather Braun acknowledges the *femme fatale* as an ethereal, indefinable type. She traces it back to Gothic ballads and the Romantic archetype as found, for instance, in Keats’s ‘La belle dame sans merci’ (1819). In this poem, the focus is on the effect that an encounter with a *femme fatale* has had on the knight, who is left ‘Alone and palely loitering’ on the cold hillside.²⁰ He is pale, ‘haggard’ and ‘woe begone’, and is feverish and enfeebled.²¹ The first speaker, addressing the knight, says,

I see a lilly on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too²²

¹⁸ Sarah Parker, *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889-1930* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), p. 8.

¹⁹ Parker, *The Lesbian Muse*, p. 9. Referencing Irene Tayler, *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 18-19.

²⁰ John Keats, ‘La belle dame sans merci’ (1819), in *John Keats: The Major Works*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 273.

²¹ Keats, ‘La belle dame sans merci’, p. 273.

²² Keats, ‘La belle dame sans merci’, p. 273.

The cause of his distress is the supernatural ‘faery’s child’, the ‘belle dame’ of the title, who has lured him by appearing helpless, allowing him to take the part of the chivalrous knight – ‘I set her on my pacing steed’ – adorn her with flowers and kiss her weeping eyes.²³ But she lulls him to sleep and disappears, leaving him enthralled by her and unable to escape the desire that traps him in the bleak landscape. The phantoms of his dreams whose ‘starv’d lips [...] with horrid warning gaped wide’, seem to be ghostly apparitions of her former lovers.²⁴ They have a similar deathly pallor: ‘I saw pale kings and Princes too / Pale warriors, death pale were they all’.²⁵ Here, we have a similar situation to the Decadent cruel woman scenario. A male speaker relates his experience of desire for a woman without giving her a voice. Her torments are envisaged as painfully affecting the bodies of the knight and his predecessors in ways that are masochistically enjoyed.

In *Angela Carter and Decadence* (2012), Maggie Tonkin has already begun questioning pre-existing perspectives on the *femme fatale*. Her research focuses on the twentieth-century author Angela Carter and her perspective on Decadence through her reimagining of Decadent texts. Tonkin asks an important question that lies at the heart of this thesis and shapes the direction of my textual analysis:

Just whose fantasy is the *femme fatale*? Is she an exclusively masculine, misogynistic fantasy utilized to justify the containment and destruction of the sexualized woman, or is she an image of a powerful, sexually free woman outside the law that can serve as a vehicle for female fantasy and as a figure for the inscription of female desires within texts?²⁶

It is the author of the *femme fatale* who defines who she is, and in male-authored *fin de siècle* texts, this is not a positive female stereotype.²⁷ However, the complexity of the stereotype of the *femme fatale* can lead to circles of paradoxical thinking. Tonkin does not resolve this conundrum. For example, in a chapter called ‘Whose Fantasy is the *Femme*’, Tonkin examines Carter’s opinions on Frank Wedekind’s character Lulu from *Earth Spirit* (*Erdgeist*, 1895), of whom Carter says, ‘Wedekind himself could not consult Lulu as to the nature of her own real wishes since she does not exist except as

²³ Keats, ‘La belle dame sans merci’, p. 273.

²⁴ Keats, ‘La belle dame sans merci’, p. 274.

²⁵ Keats, ‘La belle dame sans merci’, p. 274.

²⁶ Maggie Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence: Critical Fictions/Fictional Critiques* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 152.

²⁷ Dijkstra has exposed the misogyny behind nineteenth-century ‘fantasies of feminine evil’ in *Idols of Perversity*.

the furious shadow of his imaginings.’²⁸ Tonkin concludes that ‘Lulu, in other words, is a fiction of male desire’.²⁹ However, in the rest of this essay Carter sees Lulu as a kind of independently existing autonomous being, imagining that Wedekind ‘gives her credit for some kind of life beyond his imaginative grasp’ which is contradictory to the one presented in the text.³⁰

This emphasises the necessity of choosing a different term from ‘*femme fatale*’. When I use the term ‘cruel woman’ I recognise that the women in this investigation are purely fictional, and thus separate them from the confusions and contradictions that emanate from the phrase ‘*femme fatale*’. Tonkin observes that the *femme fatale* is a ‘fiction of male desire’. How can this supposed fatal woman have a life beyond the text if she is just a shadow of male imaginings? Tonkin reinforces this point with reference to the case of Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval, and Carter’s story ‘Black Venus’ (1985) which tells of their relationship from Duval’s imagined perspective. Even in this scenario, in which the textual cruel woman is derived from a living muse, the male poet’s fiction eclipses the reality of the woman’s self. As Tonkin explains, ‘Duval’s experience [...] has historically been overshadowed by that of the poet, whose “shadow made her blacker than she was, his shadow could eclipse her entirely”. Musedom robs the muse of her authority to ‘author’ herself. She is dependent on the poet to ‘author’ her.’³¹ In fictional accounts of cruel women we only encounter the male perspective. If the muse does not actually exist, this is even clearer. Rather than being eclipsed by the poet’s shadow, she is a shadowy form whose outline is no more than a projection of male fantasy.

The term ‘*femme fatale*’ was first used by Théophile Gautier in 1867, in his description of Bernardo Luini’s *Salome* (c.1500-30) in a guidebook to the Louvre: ‘she demonstrates the sweet cruelty of fatal women!’ (‘*comme elle exprime bien la cruauté douce des femmes fatales!*’) ³² The very term itself is the invention of a man; a man’s

²⁸ Angela Carter, ‘Femmes Fatales’ (1978), in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, ed. by Jenny Uglow (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 350.

²⁹ Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence*, p. 139.

³⁰ Carter, ‘Femmes Fatales’, p. 350.

³¹ Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence*, p. 127, quoting Angela Carter, ‘Black Venus’, in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 234.

³² Théophile Gautier, ‘Guide Louvre’, 1867, trans. F. C. De Sumichrast in *The Works of Théophile Gautier*, 24 Vols. (New York: The Jenson Society, 1906), Vol. 9, pp. 69-70. Cited in Jess Sully, ‘Challenging the Stereotype of the Femme Fatale in Art and Literature c.1850-1910’ (MPhil thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2005). Sully queries Gautier’s intention to create the term ‘*femme*

way of describing his perception of ‘fatal women’. The original ‘*femme fatale*’ is not even real, but an artistic representation of a female type. Murray G. H. Pittock refers to the ‘Gioconda’ passage in Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), and claims that it is the source of the popularity of the fatal woman in the nineteenth century. He observes in *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (1993), that ‘the icon of the Fatal Woman’ is ‘so tellingly outlined in Pater’s famous Gioconda passage. Though for Pater the power of such beauty was largely sexless.’³³ Pittock refers to the section in which Pater describes the ‘Mona Lisa’ as a timeless beauty, associated with fatal and holy women: ‘like the vampire she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; [...] as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary’.³⁴ Pittock comes to the conclusion that

the Fatal Woman was an image of both Good and Evil [...]. He expresses her transcendence without stressing her transgression: for she was ‘the fancy of a perpetual life’ in the beautiful, without morality. As a result of the ideas of both Pater and Swinburne, ‘in England ... Fatal Woman found its most complete form.’³⁵

However, the fatal woman does not maintain this form. Nor is it ‘complete’; it is nebulous, a paradox of two opposing ideals. Pater’s comments earlier in the passage on the painting reveal more about the female image as an image of male desire. Pater describes ‘Mona Lisa’ as a projection of Leonardo da Vinci’s fantasy. He considers that she was ‘Present from the first incorporeally in Leonardo’s thought’, and that she is ‘his ideal lady, embodied and beheld at last.’³⁶ Da Vinci has given the Mona Lisa form in the same way that Pygmalion formed his ideal from ivory. Since she is also timeless, good and evil, she is a blank figure on to which the viewer’s desire is projected. She is an incorporeal fantasy.

Critical material on the *femme fatale* has been plentiful in recent decades, and includes Braun’s study mentioned above. However, these studies typically either misinterpret the *femme fatale* by forgetting that she is the creation of a male mind and thus imagining

fatale’, therefore wonders whether the *Trésor de la Langue Française* is correct to cite him in their definition.

³³ Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 29.

³⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (1873; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 70.

³⁵ Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, p. 30, quoting Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson, ed. by Frank Kermode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 253ff.

³⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 70.

her to be a feminist icon, as proclaimed by Toni Bentley in *Sisters of Salome* (2002), or subscribe to a different definition of the stereotype, as in the case of Jennifer Hedgecock's *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature* (2008).³⁷ Rebecca Stott's *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (1992) exemplifies the tendency among critical works on the *femme fatale* to neglect the Decadent version of the type.³⁸ Stott's is an important study of the prevalence of the *femme fatale* figure in late nineteenth-century British literature, because she asks the question, 'Why is it that male authors of this period need to create a "type" of fictional female who is sexually assertive, a figure who stimulates male sexual anxieties and who brings moral atrophy, degeneration, or even death to the male protagonists?'³⁹ However, Stott seeks the answer to her question in fictions which are not typically considered Decadent, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891).⁴⁰ Stott acknowledges her exclusion of Decadent fictions, though in the omission of Decadent writing, she also avoids the problem of acknowledging the different Decadent attitudes towards the fatal woman.⁴¹ In Stott's analysis, the *femme fatale* 'emerges as a recurring figure in late nineteenth-century fiction alongside the emergence of degeneration discourses, invasion anxieties, and an increase in the classification of the abnormal and the pathological.'⁴² In the field of scientific anthropology, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) put forward groundbreaking theories of human and animal evolution. Such human achievements as the invention of machines, and progress in science, were held to be evidence of man's superior skill and intellect. However, they were also a cause for anxiety. If man had risen to such great heights, surely he could

³⁷ Hedgecock examines the *femme fatale* in mid-Victorian literature, and does not mention the Decadent version of the type. In her view, the *femme fatale* is desperately trying to escape the categories of 'fallen' or 'domestic' woman, and uses seduction or cruelty only to achieve her own independence. Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2008).

³⁸ For example, a recent 2010 collection of essays on the *femme fatale* contains only one essay dealing with the *fin de siècle femme fatale*. See Helen Henson and Catherine O'Rawe (eds.), *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³⁹ Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. ix.

⁴⁰ A recent *London Review of Books* review of Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and *She* by Katherine Rundall notes that Ayesha is disembodied and mysterious: 'The trouble with *She* is that it's structured around a blank face.' Ayesha's 'beauty is sketchily imagined, asserted but never depicted.' Katherine Rundall, 'Fashionable Gore', *London Review of Books*, 36 (3 April 2014), p. 34. As I demonstrate in this thesis, vague and intangible beauty and form are defining features of the Decadent cruel woman.

⁴¹ The Decadent *femme fatale* seems to have been omitted because of the limited scope of Stott's text, as she explains, 'The boundaries of the book have excluded many other important writers of the *femme fatale*, the writers of decadence, for instance.' Stott, *Fabrication*, p. xiii.

⁴² Stott, *Fabrication*, p. 30.

also fall. The *femme fatale* is representative of fear of human degeneration to more primitive forms. She also represents imperialist fear of the ‘other’. Woman, being ‘other’ to man, provided an ideal figure on to which such anxieties could be projected, and the texts Stott studies, particularly *She* and *Dracula*, demonstrate this concern about the foreign and unknown. The *femme fatale*, being female, also represents fear of the New Woman, a figure which stands for a dual threat to established social order. This is another reason why women writers have been omitted from this thesis. The New Woman was a figure of concern for those who wished to maintain conservative ideology, since she was proclaiming independence and intruding upon male dominance in literary and social spheres of life. In so doing, she was supposedly turning away from her maternal role, and thus threatening the human race with depopulation.⁴³

Decadent fiction exploits fears of degeneration, and is deliberately unwholesome and perverse. As Pittock observes, ‘For the self-styled Decadents, the decay of their civilization was part of their own growth as artists: they drew strength from what weakened their society, vampires of art sucking the life out of science, commerce and imperialism.’⁴⁴ There is, therefore, a difference between the cruel woman of Decadence, and the *femme fatale* type which is the focus of Stott’s examination. Decadent literature is concerned with the moods of the individual, rather than a community or humanity as a whole. The cruel woman of Decadence is conceived in terms of a personal battle between the artist and nature, commonly presented in terms of a single male protagonist overcome by the sensations derived from interaction with a fantasy woman whose sexuality is perceived as the source of his pleasure and pain. Woman is not necessarily condemned for bringing ‘moral atrophy’ or ‘degeneration’. The Decadent cruel woman, in fact, is appealing because of this. As Hustvedt explains, Decadent fictions are tales of the cruelty of love, celebrations of desire for the anti-natural and ‘the other side of love, its cruelty, duplicity, and sterility.’⁴⁵ It is precisely the notion that the protagonists of Decadent fictions take pleasure from the cruelties of women, that they deliberately create scenarios in which the man appears weak and degenerate in the face of the female monster, which sets the Decadent cruel woman, and the Decadent writer, apart from

⁴³ In Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for example, Count Dracula the vampire is an invader from overseas, who spreads vampirism like an infectious disease. When Lucy Westenra transforms into a vampire, she becomes a mother-figure in reverse, luring children away at night. She brings death rather than life.

⁴⁴ Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Asti Hustvedt, ‘The Art of Death: French Fiction at the Fin de Siècle’, in A. Hustvedt (ed.) *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Zone, 1998), p. 26.

other nineteenth-century fictional accounts of *femmes fatales*. The Decadent cruel woman is a figure engaged in cruelties with the Decadent only; theirs is a personal battle. A defining element of the Decadent cruel woman, I suggest, is that she is not just a generalised image of an anxiety-reflecting ‘*fatale*’ woman: she needs someone to be cruel to, in a person-to-person interaction. The cruel woman requires a masochistic male. In fact, the masochist is necessary for her existence.

Stott acknowledges the fictional nature of the *femme fatale* stereotype, as a textual representation of anxiety. The *femme fatale* ‘is a stereotype, and the origin of the stereotype is in the manufacture of texts.’⁴⁶ Stott’s location of the origin of the *femme fatale* in the creation of texts is crucial, since studies of the *femme fatale* tend to conflate the visual and literary, concentrating on the representation of woman in visual arts. For example, Elizabeth K. Menon’s *Evil by Design* (2006) documents the *femmes fatales* who appeared in French Salon paintings from 1885-1900, with examples from illustrations, posters and decorative art. She concentrates on the way the stereotype was ‘marketed’ through such images. Menon acknowledges these images are the creations of men, focusing her study on French visual arts, and acknowledging the role of artist as creator. Patrick Bade, in *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (1979) also concentrates on the image of the *femme fatale* in the nineteenth century. Bade is more convinced than Menon about the misogynistic attitudes behind the representation of woman as cruel, noting that ‘The belief was widespread that women sapped creativity and that they were incapable of elevated feelings or of understanding.’⁴⁷ There is a contradiction between the superior intellectual capacity of the male artist, and the female body; the female form in *femme fatale* images is representative of woman’s perceived existence as purely physical and natural. The *femme fatale* and masochistic male artist represent the destructive subjugation caused by sexual desire. Bade acknowledges that the *femme fatale* is woman seen through the eyes of man, pointing out that she is ‘conspicuously absent’ from the works of female artists.⁴⁸ She is equally absent from the work of female writers. While an image is clearly the work of an artist, literary *femmes fatales* are not always considered to be creations in the same way. It is

⁴⁶ Stott, *Fabrication*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (London: Ash & Grant, 1979), p. 6.

⁴⁸ Bade, *Femme Fatale*, p. 6. I will briefly explore an exception to the rule, the cruel woman in Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*, in Chapter 1.

necessary to acknowledge the writer as creator, as this is often overlooked in studies of literary *femmes fatales* and cruel women.

Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture* (1986) is a study of the means by which images of women in the nineteenth century evoke ideas of repression and vilification. Dijkstra views the *femme fatale* as a symptom of nineteenth-century misogyny. He explains,

the biologists, sociologists, and anthropologists who focused on the sex roles of the human species – these early ‘sexologists,’ who might actually best be given the generic title of ‘bio-sexists,’ were of crucial importance in building a pseudoscientific foundation for the antifeminine attitudes prevalent around 1900.⁴⁹

Examples of anti-feminist attitudes are taken from many different cultures, and many different sources, such as medical and psychological studies and evolutionary science. The problem with Dijkstra's study is that his *femmes fatales* also come from numerous sources, which are not necessarily credible examples of ‘high art’ of the period.⁵⁰ Decadent art and literature are also marginalised here, and when they are mentioned, Dijkstra does not take into account the problem that Decadent writers are not engaged in the same kind of anti-degenerationist discourse as the ‘bio-sexists’. Indeed, Decadence celebrates degeneration. Although Dijkstra does recognise the masochism inherent in the Decadent cruel woman, he misinterprets it. For example he assumes that ‘the decadents chose to wallow in agonized masochistic submission to the “unnatural acts” of the gynander in order to demonstrate their self-sacrificial virtue in the cause of masculine evolution.’⁵¹ On the contrary, Decadent writers make a spectacle of their own degeneracy, self-consciously adopting a pose of moral corruption rather than virtue. The dominant or fatal woman in non-Decadent texts such as those examined by Stott and Dijkstra, is representative of woman turning away from her maternal role, attempting to match male creativity, or using her sexuality for non-reproductive pleasure. She is a version of the New Woman as feared by male writers. Unlike the *femme fatale*, the Decadent cruel woman is not written as a woman in denial of her womanhood; her

⁴⁹ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, pp.163-4.

⁵⁰ According to Bernard Richards's review of *Idols of Perversity*, ‘Many of the poems and paintings cited have no merit; they are simply there as curious cultural phenomena [...] in many respects it would be better if they were forgotten and consigned to the vaults.’ Bernard Richards, review of Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* in *Review of English Studies*, 39 (1988), pp. 572-4. I disagree that the lack of merit is necessarily a problem. Rather, the problem for my study is that there is little recognition that the Decadent type of cruel woman is different to the other examples of ‘curious cultural phenomena’.

⁵¹ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 274.

seductiveness is part of her natural sexuality. The body that is celebrated and despised in Decadent writing is not just feminine but female, the matrix (womb) of life and death.

Silke Binias, in *Symbol and Symptom: The Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the Nineteenth Century and Feminist Criticism* (2007), is frustrated by the problems created by previous criticism. Particularly, she is concerned about the term '*femme fatale*' itself. The term, she points out, has been applied retrospectively, and therefore can be applied according to varying interpretations of texts. Pittock also addresses this problem, pointing out that the *femme fatale* has been appropriated to support both sides of the feminist debate:

In the field of sexual politics too, the Fatal Woman icon of the [Eighteen] Nineties has left a legacy both of caricature, distrust, and disapproval of women, and also a more positive reading of women as an independent, powerful, and controlling life-force. Both sides in the debate on feminism have borrowed the images of this era to defend their points of view.⁵²

Binias attributes the problem of fixing a description of the mysterious and dangerous muse to the 'uncritical employment of the term [*femme fatale*] as well as the widely accepted notion of fatal woman as female and fatal in many early explorations of the topic.'⁵³ Her textual analysis is, however, more weighted towards Romantic poetry and comes from a feminist perspective. Her intention is not to expose the masculine distaste behind literary images of the *femme fatale*. She has chosen texts for critical examination because they have been used by feminist critics as examples of misogyny.⁵⁴ Binias feels they have been 'misread'. The 'androcentric poems' she discusses, apparently 'clearly refute the charge of authorial machismo and disprove the radical male-misogynist equation.'⁵⁵ From the literary texts she examines, Binias derives the opinion that the *femme fatale* is an 'icon of feminine power' as well as an 'erotic icon'.⁵⁶ This study also aims to challenge accepted notions of femaleness and fatality in Decadent writing, but with the intention of refuting the notion that the *femme fatale* is intrinsically powerful. Although '*femme fatale*' is a term which has endured into the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, and is now applied to actual powerful women, this highlights the

⁵² Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, p. 188.

⁵³ Binias criticises Patrick Bade, among others, for this. Silke Binias, *Symbol and Symptom: The Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the Nineteenth Century and Feminist Criticism* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), p. 34.

⁵⁴ Binias analyses the poetry of Keats, Rossetti, Shelley, Browning, Swinburne and Symons in terms of feminist criticism of the *femme fatale* which has arisen after the nineteenth century.

⁵⁵ Binias, *Symbol and Symptom*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Binias, *Symbol and Symptom*, p. 39.

widespread and ‘uncritical employment’ of the term that Binias mentions. This is why I use different terminology – ‘cruel woman’ – in order to avoid the complications of the term *femme fatale*. A re-evaluation of the cruel woman figure in English Decadence will demonstrate that the stereotype is inconsistent, and establish that she is not in fact as powerful as she seems. An exploration of masochism exposes the equally deceptive and paradoxical power held by her masochist creator.

In masochism, the desire to be hurt leads to the fantastical construction of someone who wants to cause pain; hence Paglia’s reference to Swinburne’s women as ‘titanic projections’.⁵⁷ Projection is defined as ‘A mental process whereby a personally unacceptable impulse or idea is attributed to the external world. As a result of this defensive process, one’s own interests and desires are perceived as if they belong to others’.⁵⁸ As Tonkin demonstrates in her analysis of Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval, it is the woman who is a ‘diminished and weakened’ shadow while the poet remains the supreme authority, eclipsing the reality of her existence.

The cruel woman

‘Cruel woman’ is a term used by Suzanne R. Stewart in her study of nineteenth-century male masochism, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (1998). The cruel woman is not always acknowledged as a creation of the artist, or masochist. She may appear to be powerful, or representative of perceived power, but she is not. She is not independent, but is only a creation of the male mind. Stewart recognises the agency of the masochist in creating this cruel woman, explaining that, at the *fin de siècle*, there was a tendency for men to stage love as a war between the sexes, marriage as a trap, and children as a means by which women held dominance over men. Stewart locates the cruel woman centre-stage of this strategy: ‘Poised between the uterine, swamplike woman of nature, on the one hand, and the prostitute and voracious housewife, on the other, stands the product of such staging: the Cruel Woman.’⁵⁹ For Stewart, the cruel woman is an invention of the masochistic male mind. She imagines the cruel woman to exist at a distance from nature and the bonds of marriage. However, the cruel woman can also stand for these things, and nature especially is inescapable in the Decadent

⁵⁷ Camille A. Paglia, ‘Nature, Sex, and Decadence’ in *Pre-Raphaelite Poets*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 226.

⁵⁸ Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine (eds.), *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (New Haven and London: The American Psychoanalytic Association and Yale University Press, 1990), p. 149.

⁵⁹ Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 167.

cruel woman. Stewart realises that the cruel woman is not intended to represent female independence, and recognises that she is created in order to keep the fantasy woman under male control. However, she connects this to the dissolution of familial structures in the nineteenth century, and therefore imagines the cruel woman to be representative of a growing group of strong or nonconformist women.

The use of the term ‘cruel woman’ in this thesis differs from Stewart’s in a number of ways. She does not mention why she gives the woman this name, or whether it is significant. We are left wondering whether she deliberately sought to distance herself from any existing defining terms. Stewart’s examples of cruel women come from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* and the libretto and staging of Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882). She takes a psychoanalytical approach to these texts, discussing masochism in social and political terms, reading masochism according to a relationship between the masochist and forms of power, both parental and of the law. This thesis, by contrast, is focused on the cruel woman specific to English Decadence, and acknowledges and analyses the lack of independence of the *femme fatale*. ‘Cruel woman’ is arguably a more appropriate term than ‘*femme fatale*’ to describe the tormentor of the male masochist.

In Decadent fiction, the unattainable mistress is constructed through corporeal imagery, in terms of the apparent physicality of female body combined with elements of statue-worship. Women are imagined as cold, unmoving objects of devotion, and yet these statue-like fantasies appear to be brought to life when they are the subjects of poetic address or when their torments are imagined as leaving physical traces on male bodies. Braun comments on the difference between the Romantic version of the fatal woman and the early Decadent type that appears in Swinburne’s poetry. She states,

Unlike the mythical creatures evoked repeatedly in the Romantic ballad, Swinburne’s fatal women, through an excess of visual detail and deceptive beauty, begin to deplete creative energy rather than harness it. His ambivalence about the *femme fatale*’s vacancy and decay encouraged fin de siècle writers including Wilde to construct vividly the inevitable moment of her demise.⁶⁰

Rather than the male masochist being the ‘faded rose’ as Keats’s knight is, the Decadent cruel woman is herself a fading and declining image in the nineteenth century. Each of

⁶⁰ Braun, *Rise and Fall*, p. 116.

the writers discussed in this thesis orchestrate scenarios in which men appear to lack control at the hands of women. Their impotence is superficial, however, for they retain control and do not really submit to the cruel woman. I suggest that we might read them as Pygmalion-like artist figures, because they create images of their ideal female tormentors in a similar way to Pygmalion's fashioning of his ideal woman as a statue. In her survey of recent critical work on the Pygmalion myth, Amelia Yeats investigates the popularity of the term 'Pygmalionism', which is 'now so widely used as a metaphor for creating, fashioning and transforming that it has been applied to writers as well as artists and has therefore come to be understood as more than a sculptor's obsessive desire for his statue'.⁶¹ I am interested in the process of creating a female image through writing.

Pygmalionism

In Ovid's myth, Pygmalion carves a likeness of a woman (known as Galatea in later versions) in 'snow-white ivory', which is 'more beautiful / Than ever woman born'.⁶² He falls in love with the masterpiece, but it is not human. Since he has outdone nature, the statue is devoid of natural function: life. The art of nature and the art of artifice stand in opposition, 'such art his art concealed'.⁶³ This evokes the Decadent tension between artifice and nature; even when modelled on nature, art is considered superior and the two cannot be reconciled. The sculptor Pygmalion fantasises that his artificial creation is real, 'His heart desired the body he had formed.' and he enacts make-believe scenarios in which the statue is imagined to be real: 'Kisses he gives it and thinks they are returned; / He speaks to it, caresses it...'.⁶⁴ While Pygmalion creates a statue of his ideal woman which comes to life, Decadent writers create anti-ideals, cruel women, who represent the perceived cruelty of nature. They are paradoxical figures, which, since they are Decadent fantasies, are also 'sterile'; either marmoreal or ghostly imaginings of the female form.⁶⁵ However, their powerlessness is concealed by the dynamics of the Pygmalion-esque situation, which is connected with the masochistic

⁶¹ Amelia Yeats, 'Recent Work on Pygmalion in Nineteenth-Century Literature', *Literature Compass* 7 (2010), p. 586. For further evidence of the popularity of the Pygmalion myth in the nineteenth-century outside the boundaries of Decadence, see also Martin A. Danahay, 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation', *Victorian Poetry*, 32 (1994), pp. 35-54.

⁶² Ovid, 'Pygmalion', in *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 232.

⁶³ Ovid, 'Pygmalion', p. 233.

⁶⁴ Ovid, 'Pygmalion', p. 233.

⁶⁵ Swinburne's speaker refers to the 'splendid and sterile' Dolores. Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 124, line 71. Symons's 'Bianca', based on his lover Lydia, is a figure with whom his speaker experiences 'sterile ecstasies' which freeze her body in a rigid shiver; she is sterile, cold, transformed into a statue. Arthur Symons, 'Bianca: I. Bianca', in *London Nights*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. 92.

model I outline below. Fictional cruel women are created as embodiments of a sexual fantasy of submission, or the frustration of unfulfilled desire, and therefore they appear to be active participants in the torments of the artist. Of the Decadent Pygmalion model, Jennifer Birkett asserts that

The self-images mirrored in the looking-glass world of decadent art are those of distinct, solitary egos: male and female locked in heroic conflict. Woman is usually the dominant figure, the key to all vital energies [...]. Her counterpart is the Artist (always male), who casts himself in the role of Pygmalion, victim and creator of her beauty.⁶⁶

The first clinical definition of Pygmalionism was put forward by Havelock Ellis in Volume Four of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1906). He describes it thus:

Pygmalionism, or falling in love with statues, is a rare form of erotomania founded on the sense of vision and closely related to the allurements of beauty. (I here use “pygmalionism” as a general term for the sexual love of statues; it is sometimes restricted to cases in which a man requires of a prostitute that she shall assume the part of a statue which gradually comes to life, and finds sexual gratification in this performance alone).⁶⁷

Ellis lists ancient Greek accounts, and a contemporary example given by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, of people apparently falling in love with or becoming sexually excited by statues.⁶⁸ Ellis is careful to distinguish Pygmalionism from necrophilia; the statue is not a substitute for a dead body but an aesthetic object in itself.⁶⁹ Another important aspect of the Pygmalion myth that Ellis overlooks is that the statue is formed according to the desires of the sculptor himself. Ellis’s definition, which does not take account of this, seems in fact to be more consistent with the phenomenon of agalmatophilia.

It is important to make a distinction between Pygmalionism and agalmatophilia, a sexual desire for statues. Pygmalionism involves bringing statues to life or at least appearing to do so in the case of literary Pygmalionism. A. Scobie and J. W. Taylor assert that

⁶⁶ Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), p. 4.

⁶⁷ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 4 ‘Sexual Selection in Man’ (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1906), p. 188.

⁶⁸ ‘Krafft-Ebing quotes from a French newspaper the case which occurred in Paris during the spring of 1877 of a gardener who fell in love with a Venus in one of the parks.’ Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, p. 188.

⁶⁹ ‘Necrophily, or a sexual attraction for corpses, is sometimes regarded as related to pygmalionism. It is, however, a more profoundly morbid manifestation, and may perhaps be regarded as a kind of perverted sadism.’ Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, p. 188.

Agalmatophilia is the pathological condition in which some people establish sexual relationships with statues. The condition is neither to be confused with pygmalionism nor with fetishism [...] An agalmatophilic [...] establishes a personal relationship with a complete statue as a statue. He does not bring the statue alive in his fantasy as would a pygmalionist, and he does not use just a part of the statue as a symbolic substitute for an entire female as would a fetishist.⁷⁰

The process of creating and venerating artificial life has been explored in detail by George L. Hersey, in *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (2009). He examines statues as representations of ideals, as beautiful or divine images, and as replicas of real life. Most crucially for this thesis, he considers the tactility of statues and their ability to evoke a physical reaction in the viewer. He argues that 'Tactility is a work's ability to make the viewer feel in his or her own body what the portrayed figure would be feeling if it were real.'⁷¹ In a similar way, the cruel woman of Decadent fiction is not just a female image but an image that is imagined to inflict physical sensations on her male counterpart's body.

In 'Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture' (1992), Alex Potts explores the statue as a more ideal art form than painting since it is a physical object that attracts the viewer. Their fantasies (phantasies) can be projected on to its unresisting surface. Paradoxically however, for the same reason, it also resists the viewer's desire for unity with the ideal. Potts states,

The sculptural object within modern bourgeois aesthetics at one level suggests the possibility of an object in the external world that is entirely amenable to the spectator's projective phantasy, that offers nothing to resist its appropriation by the latter [...] At another level, the sculptural object is so literally separate and alien, an obdurate thing rather than amenable image or representation, that it cannot help but also present the flip-side of the phantasy of oneness with the external world – the experience of the latter as radically unassimilable to the self's desires, as hostile threat or barrier to these. In its inevitable failure as object of a narcissistic subject's projective phantasy, it provokes aggression and frustration.⁷²

The Pygmalion myth imagines a fantasy unity of the ideal object and the desiring self. In fiction it has become converted into a both a metaphor for creating an ideal and also

⁷⁰ A. Scobie and A. J. W. Taylor, 'Perversions Ancient and Modern: I. Agalmatophilia, the Statue Syndrome', in *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, XI (January 1975), p. 49.

⁷¹ George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 19.

⁷² Alex Potts, 'Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture', *The Oxford Art Journal* 15 (1992), pp. 47-8.

falling in love with an ideal, as Yeats observes. It has been the inspiration for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1771), a dramatic imagining of Pygmalion's statue as a reflection of his own desires on the one hand, and William Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* (1823) which describes a living woman as a statue on the other.

Potts evokes another Ovidian parallel in his description of Rousseau's *Pygmalion* as 'nothing if not narcissistic.'⁷³ In Ovid's version of the myth, Narcissus scorns Echo and other nymphs and men. One of these youths prays that he may love and never win the object of his affections. The prayer is granted by Nemesis, goddess of revenge. Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, a phantom love object that evades him every time he tries to embrace it, 'a phantom of a mirrored shape'.⁷⁴ He is enthralled by the reflection, 'Spellbound he saw himself, and motionless / Lay like a marble statue staring down.'⁷⁵ Narcissus, the object of his own desire, becomes like the marble statue typical of Pygmalionism. He is trapped by the ultimate futility of desiring his own image: 'Himself he longs for, longs unwittingly, / Praising is praised, desiring is desired, / And love he kindles while with love he burns.'⁷⁶ Finally realises he loves the image of himself, 'The image is my own; it's for myself / I burn with love; I fan the flames I feel.'⁷⁷ Consumed by love, he wastes away, leaving no body but a white flower in his place.⁷⁸

The implication of Potts's classification of Rousseau's *Pygmalion* as narcissistic is that, since Galatea is an image of Pygmalion's desires, she is an image of Pygmalion himself. As I explore in further detail in the next chapter, masochism is also a process of projection of self on to another. Jacques Lacan refers to this as a kind of narcissism. Rousseau's one act play was the inspiration for later Romantic versions of the myth. The significant 'narcissitic' moment in the play occurs when Galatea comes to life. She touches her body and declares '*C'est moi.*' ('This is me'), then another statue, '*Ce n'est plus moi*' ('This is not me'). Finally she places her hand on Pygmalion's heart, saying

⁷³ Potts, 'Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture', p. 38.

⁷⁴ Ovid, 'Narcissus and Echo', in *Metamorphoses*, p. 64.

⁷⁵ Ovid, 'Narcissus and Echo', p. 63.

⁷⁶ Ovid, 'Narcissus and Echo', p. 63.

⁷⁷ Ovid, 'Narcissus and Echo', p. 65.

⁷⁸ Today's clinical definition of narcissistic personality disorder bears little resemblance to this myth of literal self-love. The DSM-5 summary reads, 'The essential feature of narcissistic personality disorder is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.' *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), p. 670.

with a sigh, ‘*Ah! encore moi.*’ (Ah! me again.’). Galatea’s identification of her maker as herself is significant. Pygmalion describes her as ‘*chef-d’œuvre de mes mains, de mon cœur [...] je t’ai donné tout mon être*’ (‘masterpiece of my hands, my heart [...] I have given you my whole being’).⁷⁹ Rousseau draws attention to the fact that Galatea is an embodiment of her maker’s desires and of her maker himself.

In contrast, Hazlitt’s, *Liber Amoris, or The New Pygmalion* (1823) is not a narrative of building a woman, but a semi-autobiographical tale of unrequited love in which the elusive beloved is compared to a statue. The narrator ‘H’ tells, through fragments of dialogue and letters, of his love for the servant Sarah (‘S. L.’), based on Hazlitt’s real-life love Sarah Walker. H calls Sarah ‘the statue’ in his correspondence, and frequently compares her to a pale statue.⁸⁰ This image expresses both her ideal beauty and her distance from him. In one of their early dialogues, after she has refused his advances H tells Sarah, ‘You appear pale and dejected, as if your refusal of me had touched your own breast with pity. Cruel girl! you look at this moment heavenly-soft, saint-like, or resemble some graceful marble statue, in the moon’s pale ray!’⁸¹ This is similar to the way cruel women are imagined in Decadent fictions, as pale, statuesque figures who are also cruel. Sarah is a kind of prototypical Decadent beauty, whose own physical decline only enhances her appeal: ‘She was once ill, pale, and had lost all her freshness. I only adored her the more for it, and fell in love with the decay of her beauty.’⁸² She is also referred to as poisonous and punishing. H declares that ‘I have drank in poison from her lips too long!’⁸³ He describes her rejection as painful, having an impact on his flesh as well as his emotions: ‘I was stung with scorpions; my flesh crawled; I was choked with rage; her scorn scorched me like flames’.⁸⁴ The description of Sarah as a statue heightens her distance from H and her unattainability. Hazlitt’s narrative purports to be a Pygmalion story but a key element of the myth is that the statue is also created by Pygmalion himself as a perfect image of woman, a feature that I pick up in my discussion of Decadent cruel women as projections of their creators’ desires.

⁷⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Pygmalion: Scène Lyrique* (Kindle Edition), no pagination. My translation.

⁸⁰ William Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris, or The New Pygmalion* (1823; London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 50

⁸¹ Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*, p. 12.

⁸² Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*, p. 61.

⁸³ Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*, p. 55.

⁸⁴ Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*, p. 155.

Patricia Pulham has explored the tension between the real and the ideal in Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* and Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown* (1884).⁸⁵ Sarah is compared to a statue in Hazlitt's novel, since marble statuary was the art form best suited to depicting the ideal. For Hazlitt,

this ideal is represented by Greek statues that are "marble to the touch and to the heart", whose beauty raises them "above the frailties of passion or suffering", and seem "to have no sympathy with us, and not to want our admiration". S. L., the object of H-'s unrequited love, the "statue" in *Liber Amoris*, seems to possess precisely those properties that we might associate with this "ideal".⁸⁶

Pulham acknowledges that Hazlitt's story is a complex engagement with the Pygmalion myth; a 'parallel' rather than a reworking. Sarah is a projection of H's desiring self. As Pulham observes, she is a mirror reflecting his self-image according to his mood. She becomes the embodiment of his self-image. Her resistance to his advances means that the reflection becomes a negative version of H: 'the refusal to simply reflect, is accompanied by the "dissolution" and disillusionment of Pygmalion. In *Liber Amoris*, H- and S. L. are locked into a reciprocal framework in which each is dependent on H-'s will, or self-projection as embodied in S. L.'s image.'⁸⁷ Not only does H impose his own image on Sarah, he also speaks for her, by speaking *as* her in reported dialogue and in his letters. Sonia Hofkosh observes that Sarah Walker 'has no voice in her own story, except insofar as it is ventriloquized in the text to produce Hazlitt's effect.'⁸⁸ I examine the process of constructing the image of a beloved woman through ventriloquism further on, with particular reference to Swinburne's poetry. H tries to assume ownership of Sarah, and her figure in his fantasies is that of a flawless statue that has been created for him only, 'I have had her face constantly before me, looking so like some faultless marble statue, as cold, as fixed and graceful as ever statue did [...] I think she was made on purpose for me.'⁸⁹ However, the problem is that the fictional Sarah is a separate entity that cannot be formed to the will of her lover, just like the real Sarah Walker

⁸⁵ See Patricia Pulham, 'The New Pygmalions: Idealism and Disillusionment in Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* and Lee's *Miss Brown*', in Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell (eds.), *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 101-16.

⁸⁶ Pulham, 'The New Pygmalions', p. 105. Referencing William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1930-34), vol. 5, p. 11.

⁸⁷ Pulham, 'The New Pygmalions', p. 111. Referencing William Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris; or, the New Pygmalion* in *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. 7, p. 32.

⁸⁸ Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 111.

⁸⁹ Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*, p. 113.

refused him and remained, as Richard Le Gallienne observed in his 1893 introduction to *Liber Amoris*, ‘a Galatea no prayers could warm to life’.⁹⁰

In *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (1998), Gail Marshall acknowledges the problem of the transformation of living, or indeed marble, women into embodiments of male desire, as Galatea will always only be the living likeness of an ivory girl. Marshall observes, ‘she remains only and always the image of Pygmalion’s desire. Galatea literally bodies forth that desire, and the ultimate derivation of her being from Venus restricts her to a range of purely physical representations.’⁹¹ Since Marshall’s analysis is focused on living theatre actresses as Galatea-types in the nineteenth century her use of the Pygmalion analogy is not quite the same as the one made by this thesis. In Decadent fictions there is a complex interaction with the statue figure and the process of creating it. It is not agalmatophilia, or statue-worship, in its true form. Rather, it is a form of Pygmalionism in which the female figure is formed by the male mind, then worshipped as an ideal, often a statue-like figure that also unattainable like a statue. Therefore frustration arises because there can be no interaction between the masochist and his fantasy creation. She appears to be brought to life but this is also a fantasy – a form of ventriloquism. The statue therefore comes to symbolise the unattainable beloved as well as the ideal. This is most clear in Dowson’s poetry, but is also relevant to Wilde’s Salome who, in asking for the head of her beloved Iokanaan, simultaneously turns him into an object that she can possess, and negates any possibility of interacting with this object.

A Decadent (fictional) notion of ‘Pygmalionism’ emerges from J.-K. Huysmans’s *fin-de-siècle* novel of introspection and fascination with the sacrilegious, *Là-Bas* (1891). In this work, the character Durtal becomes interested in Satanism and transgressive acts, and claims to have invented a new sin. Durtal describes this sin as a kind of pure incest, in which the ‘Pygmalion’ figure dreams of copulating with his own artistic creation. He describes it thus:

Pygmalionism, which combines, at one and the same time, a kind of cerebral masturbation and incest. Imagine an artist falling in love with his creation, with his own work, let’s say a Herodias, a Judith, a Helen of Troy or a Joan of Arc which he has either described or painted, and that after evoking her he ends up

⁹⁰ Richard Le Gallienne, 1893 Introduction to Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*, p. 218.

⁹¹ Gail Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 18.

by possessing her in his dreams. Well, this love is worse than normal incest. [...] in Pygmalionism, the father violates the daughter of his soul, the only being he has been able to beget without the help of another's blood. The offence is thus entire and complete. Added to which, does it not also involve a contempt of nature, which is to say, of the divine order? Because the subject of the sin is no longer a palpable, living being, as it is even in bestiality, but rather it's something ideal that one defiles, a being created through the projection of one's talent, an almost celestial being, seeing as it's often rendered immortal either by the artist's genius or by his skill. Now, let's take it a step further, if you will. Suppose an artist paints a picture of a saint and he falls in love with it. That compounds a crime against nature with sacrilege. It would be too excessive!⁹²

There is more emphasis on fantasy in Huysmans's version than in Ovid's myth, because the 'incestuous' union takes place in dreams, rather than with a version of the artwork come to life. However, most of Ovid's tale is preoccupied with Pygmalion's fantasy of his statue, bringing it gifts and speaking to it as though it is a real girl, but this is a one-sided action. The statue remains ivory, so the fantasies of returned kisses remain fantasies until the intervention of Venus.

This version of Pygmalion's statue is created in a revolt against nature. The Decadent literary movement privileges artifice over nature, with the work of Decadent writers characterised by distaste for natural procreation. The womb and female reproductive system are the source of Decadent horror, which Roger L. Williams, writing about Charles Baudelaire, calls the 'horror of life'.⁹³ In *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995), David Weir expands upon this observation, claiming of the writers of the Decadent movement that 'most of them are misogynistic in the extreme. Indeed, what Roger Williams calls "the horror of life" is largely a horror of procreation, which inevitably entails the hatred of the woman who makes procreation possible.'⁹⁴ However, the means by which procreation comes about – heterosexual sex – is not horrifying, but desired, albeit in a tormented fashion. It is the outcome which is horrifying. Of course, this overlooks the fact that sexual acts do not have to result in procreation, nor is all desire heterosexual. Swinburne and Wilde both play subversively with gender-roles and consider same-sex attraction in their works, although Symons's and Dowson's poetry is far more heteronormative. However, since this study is an exploration of the cruel

⁹² J.-K. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, trans. Brendan King (1891; Sawtry: Dedalus, 2006), pp. 177-8.

⁹³ The title and theme of Williams's book are inspired by Baudelaire's confession to having a 'horror of life' in a letter to his mother. Roger L. Williams, *The Horror of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 19, with reference to Baudelaire's letter to Mme. Aupick, 10 August 1862, in *Correspondance générale*, ed. by Jacques Crépet, vol. 4 of 6 (Paris: Louis Conard, 1947-53), p. 99.

⁹⁴ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. xiv.

woman, focus remains on female sexuality and analysis of the Decadent conception of female dominance. In the case of Wilde, I will argue, the cruelty of Salome is representative of her unrefined and animalistic female nature which is at odds with her refined taste. Her sexuality and passion transcends the Decadent world of refined artifice that surrounds her; she rejects Herod's offers of jewels in her eagerness to possess the object of her affections. Woman's connection with nature is implicit in the cruel woman stereotype, and her connection with sexuality carries the double threat of procreation and venereal disease. Decadent writers struggle to reconcile the pleasure of sexuality with its 'naturalness', and woman is blamed for this. To take one example, Baudelaire describes a prostitute in 'You'd entertain the universe...' (*Tu mettrais l'univers entire...*) as a 'Blind, deaf machine, fertile in cruelties' with a sexuality so powerful that she would happily 'entertain' the entire universe in bed.⁹⁵ The woman and her sexuality are controlled by nature, and the poet asks whether the woman is ever ashamed or afraid 'When Nature, mighty in her secret plans, / Makes use of you, o woman! queen of sins! / –Of you, vile beast – to mould a genius?'⁹⁶ The poet himself is imagined under nature's control, he is the genius, manipulated by the woman's sins. The poem concludes with two exclamations: 'O filthy grandeur! o sublime disgrace!'.⁹⁷ These contradictory pairings exemplify the Decadent attitude to female sexuality. The speaker is drawn to the woman by his sexual desires, but he resents having to submit to these natural impulses. Since she inspires desire and resentment she is both bestial and sublime, regal and filthy. As previously mentioned, masochism involves both falling and lowering while paradoxically ascending through the fulfilment of desire.

Masochism

The representation of masochism in literature can be traced back to biblical devotion and religious Mariolatry, evoked by Swinburne in his masochistic poetry. It is also a feature of Medieval courtly love lyrics, explored in Chapter 1, and suggests the troubadour's assumed pose on bended knee before the object of his desire. However the 'prototypical' Decadent masochistic text is Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, whose protagonist Severin forms his lover Wanda into a cruel woman according to his desires. Physically, she is an embodiment of his desires, a 'Venus' who 'had come alive for me,

⁹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'You'd entertain the universe...', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (1861; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 53.

⁹⁶ Baudelaire, 'You'd entertain the universe...', p. 55.

⁹⁷ Baudelaire, 'You'd entertain the universe...', p. 55.

like the statue that had started breathing for her creator.’⁹⁸ Casting himself as Pygmalion, Severin begins to control Wanda’s behaviour, fashioning her into his cruel mistress, commanding to be whipped and tormented. The narrative of *Venus in Furs* demonstrates masochism from a Decadent perspective. Severin is determined to be subjected to the cruelties of a beautiful woman, and creates this torturer according to his fantasy. Sacher-Masoch’s novella provides the most formulaic model of the theatre in which the masochist and cruel woman participate. The scenario begins with fantasy, then the ‘creation’ of the cruel woman by dressing her up and entering into a contractual relationship of submission and domination, becoming excited by her cruelties, and finally ending in sexual intercourse.⁹⁹ Not only does Severin’s behaviour provide an illustration of masochism, his account is layered. The relationship with Wanda is told as a memoir framed by a conversation with the friend who narrates the tale, which exposes the anxieties which are the cause of such behaviour. The narrator dreams of meeting a Venus character, the ‘Goddess of Love’, who tells him that ‘To you Nature seems hostile, you have turned us laughing Greek deities into demons and me into a devil’, and admits that ‘I am *cruel* [...] Nature has put man at woman’s mercy through his passion, and woman is misguided if she fails to make him her subject, her slave’.¹⁰⁰ Severin explains to his friend that he had once dreamed the same dream, through ‘open eyes’, and thus the story of Wanda is told. The framing text of *Venus in Furs* makes reference to man’s anxieties about nature which are transferred on to woman, and which account for her cruelty. In the masochistic scenario, power is always held by the masochistic male, who sets the rules of the game, creates and controls her; Severin fails to realise his own power over Wanda even when he appears most weak. At the beginning of the narration of the frame text, Severin is reformed, and proves it by mistreating his maid. The novella thus begins and ends with affirmation of male control.

It is significant that a sexual preference which had existed long before the nineteenth century should be ‘diagnosed’ only after its literary exploration. It is also relevant to this study that the pioneering case study and definition should come from literature, and Decadent literature specifically. The invention of the term ‘masochism’ – from Sacher-Masoch’s name – and its earliest definition, is accredited to Professor Richard von

⁹⁸ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (1870; London: Penguin, 2000), p. 15.

⁹⁹ Decadent examples of masochism are not usually as formulaic as the dressing up – whipping – coitus model in *Venus in Furs*.

¹⁰⁰ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, pp. 5-6.

Krafft-Ebing, in his ‘medico-forensic study’ *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Krafft-Ebing explained, ‘I feel justified in calling this sexual anomaly “Masochism,” because the author *Sacher-Masoch* frequently made this perversion, which up to his time was quite unknown to the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings. I followed thereby the scientific formation of the term “Daltonism,” from *Dalton*, the discoverer of colour-blindness.’¹⁰¹ Similarly, sadism, the erotic infliction of cruelty, is named after the Marquis de Sade.¹⁰² The first edition of Krafft-Ebing’s study was published in 1886, and he continued to work on it, adding more and more case studies, until the final twelfth edition was published in 1903.¹⁰³ Krafft-Ebing himself saw male masochism as an anomaly, a perversion. His definition of masochism reads thus:

By masochism I understand a peculiar perversion of the psychical sexual life in which the individual affected, in sexual feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused. This idea is colored by lustful feeling; the masochist lives in fantasies, in which he creates situations of this kind and often attempts to realize them.¹⁰⁴

Krafft-Ebing cites thirty-three case-studies which describe the different masochistic fantasies of his patients. He also uses various literary texts, particularly Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782) and Sacher-Masoch’s works, as case-studies. Krafft-Ebing does not attempt to explain masochism other than as a perversion; an exaggerated desire for painful stimulus which often accompanies heightened emotional and lustful excitement. Krafft-Ebing’s concern is with establishing the existence of masochism, and thus he cites numerous and varied examples of masochistic behaviour from his case-studies. However, he does not provide a comprehensive reason *why* one should be a masochist; his discussion centres around physical sensations of pain, and the curious desire among men for subjection. It was only in the twentieth century that psychologists and scholars began to consider reasons other than Krafft-Ebing’s ideas about

¹⁰¹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 12th edition, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (1903; New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), p. 87.

¹⁰² I do not examine sadism or Sade; his women, cruel or otherwise, are outside the temporal and thematic scope of this thesis.

¹⁰³ Amber Jamilla Musser charts the publication and success of *Psychopathia Sexualis* in its different editions. The first edition published in 1886 was small, containing only fifty-one case studies, while the final twelfth edition of 1903 contained 300 case studies. Amber Jamilla Musser, ‘Reading, Writing, and the Whip’, *Literature and Medicine* 27 (2008), 204-22.

¹⁰⁴ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 86. I am aware that Krafft-Ebing’s conception of the torturer of masochism as ‘a person of the opposite sex’ is problematic, since it is the case that sadomasochistic relationships also exist between same-sex couples. The definition is dated in that respect. However, I do not plan to place undue emphasis on this matter, since my own investigation is related to literary examples of females tormenting males.

masochistic subjects bearing a ‘hereditary taint’ to explain why individuals are masochistic.

Theodor Reik’s work on masochism and anxiety provides more pertinent theory for the cruel woman in Decadent fiction. Reik was influenced by Freud’s work, particularly the essay ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924). Freud had observed that the masochistic feeling of pleasure in pain is manifested in theatrical ‘phantasies’. Masochism is a performance, which is either an end in itself or a precursor to heighten excitation and lead to the sexual act. ‘In both cases – for the performances are, after all, only a carrying-out of the phantasies in play – the manifest content is of being gagged, bound, painfully beaten, whipped, in some way maltreated, forced into unconditional obedience, dirtied and debased.’¹⁰⁵ In *Masochism in Modern Man* (1941), Reik elaborates upon the importance of phantasy and performance. He acknowledges that Freud’s works do not provide a solution to the problem of masochism, but have ‘shown us the way, although he himself has not taken it.’¹⁰⁶ Reik acknowledges that phantasy is essential to masochism. He gives the example of a masochistic man walking along the street being suddenly and unexpectedly beaten by a woman. This incident would not sexually stimulate him, even if being abused by a woman was a sexual fantasy of his, because there had been no time for preparatory phantasy. Reik explains of the scene ‘its immediate effect will not be [sexually stimulating] even though it exactly reproduces a desired situation. Nothing but the preparatory phantasy is lacking.’¹⁰⁷ The enactment of the phantasy itself, that is to say, the painful or humiliating scenario, is not the ultimate aim of masochism, according to Reik. The pain is not the desired end, rather, the masochist aims for the pleasure that follows. ‘The perversion meets punishment or discomfort in order to send the intruder about his business at once and – being freed from its threat – turns toward pleasure.’¹⁰⁸ Thus, Reik demonstrates that masochism is ‘anticipatory’, and that anxieties form the basis of masochistic scenarios which act out the anxiety-inducing situation in order to gain the pleasure which comes afterwards, a pleasure that the anxiety prevents. The Decadent cruel woman is a creation that anticipates the feeling of the writer’s powerlessness in the face of woman as nature, and as creator. The writer masters his anxiety by ‘getting there first’ and creating *her*. Reik’s

¹⁰⁵ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924), *Standard Edition XIX* trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 162.

¹⁰⁶ Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man* trans. Margaret H. Beigel and Gertrud M. Kuth (New York: Grove Press, 1941), p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, p. 71.

critical examination of masochism makes it clear that the masochist is the director of his own fantasies, establishing the way they are acted out. He believes it is erroneous to assume that the masochist is weak, dependent and subject to the will of his partner.¹⁰⁹ The masochist orchestrates a scenario in which he is in control of his own lack of control.

As mentioned above, Stewart's *Sublime Surrender* examines the psychology of male masochism in the nineteenth century, with reference to Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*. Stewart's study is of men and their masochism, rather than being a study of the women they create, offering an alternative to the studies of *femmes fatales* which dominate critical perspectives on the subject. Stewart notes that 'masochism denoted a particularly male affliction: it described the condition of those men who fantasized being either physically tortured or psychologically humiliated by a powerful, dominating woman.'¹¹⁰ Yet Stewart does not suppose that this was an attempt to empower women. She is aware of the attempted male control behind these narratives, which is both self-control and control of the woman. Stewart disagrees with psychoanalytical critics such as Leo Bersani who see masochism as a loss of the self, and loss of control.¹¹¹ On the contrary, she calls masochism 'a novel form of self-control' and asserts that 'I believe neither that the masochistic position has involved self-dissolution nor that such undoing of self or subjectivity is in some self-evident manner even politically desirable.'¹¹² Stewart's recognition of the problematic notion of masochistic self-effacement is important to this study of the writing of masochism, since, even when writing situations of surrender and apparent loss of the self, the writer in fact maintains self-control and self-awareness. However, as I will demonstrate in later chapters, masochism can in fact record a loss of control of the self. Dowson's poetry, for example, records the despair of unrequited love and the pure pain of the tormented individual who cannot escape his own desires. In his personal life he abandoned himself to drunkenness and degradation, but he retained a mastery over language. His poems control the cruel woman (or girl in his case) by killing her or freezing her into an ideal image, but he is still separate from his ideal, thus he creates a new kind of despair.

¹⁰⁹ Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, p. 368.

¹¹⁰ Stewart, *Sublime Surrender*, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Bersani speaks of a masochistic 'jouissance', a shattering of the self in sexual pleasure. Bersani's argument is however in the context of masochism in homosexuality. For an example of Bersani applying such thinking to the Decadent poetry of Baudelaire, see Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

¹¹² Stewart, *Sublime Surrender*, p. 10.

Stewart writes that ‘The masochist himself created this Cruel Woman as aesthetic object and in that move attempted to reassert control, both over the means of cultural production and over the woman’s body.’¹¹³ This is an ‘attempted’ control; as I will demonstrate in the case of Dowson, it is not always a satisfactory replacement for the control desired in real life. In Wilde’s *Salome*, female sexuality is presented as dangerous, and is destructive to male selfhood (Iokanaan is decapitated, or, in Freudian terms, we might say dis-membered) and can only be contained by being destroyed rather than being submitted to.

However, even when women are written into apparently powerful positions this does not equate them with sadists, since they embody the concerns of their creators and therefore enact the desires or fears of these individuals. Anita Phillips asserts that ‘The sadist and the masochist are an impossible couple.’¹¹⁴ The masochist ceases to be a masochist if they experience real cruelty at the hands of a sadist who has no investment in their pleasure. In *A Defence of Masochism*, Phillips combines her investigation of masochism with a personal account of her own experience as a masochist. She concentrates on the way masochism is understood in the late twentieth century, using varied examples from earlier literary sources to reinforce her argument about masochism as a sexual preference. She notes that masochism has become a ‘catch-all’ word that people use indiscriminately. Consequently, it has lost its value, so it is necessary to redefine what really constitutes masochism.¹¹⁵ Phillips re-evaluates the role of violence for masochism, claiming that the aim of the masochist is actually to avoid it. She speaks about the ‘mistaken belief that masochists enjoy and absorb violence, including intellectual violence. On the contrary, masochism flees violence and constructs an unusual and compelling scenario that needs to be understood in order to work. It is a very intelligent perversion.’¹¹⁶ This understanding can be found in Reik’s idea that, for the masochist, punishment is a step on the way to gratification, rather than providing gratification itself. It is enactment of displeasure – the perceived pain of loss of self, or the fear of the natural – in order to reach pleasure, particularly pleasure which should *not* come from the same source as pain.

¹¹³ Stewart, *Sublime Surrender*, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 11.

¹¹⁵ Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 2.

Phillips's analysis of masochism corresponds with Reik's awareness that masochism is dependent upon fiction and fantasy. Referring to Sacher-Masoch's personal masochism and his literature, Phillips acknowledges that

Sacher-Masoch, at every level, is about fiction [...] And masochistic experience, too, is a lived fiction, not a sexological case history: any reading of it as such misses its fictive core, is a misreading or literalization. The masochist is a conscious manipulator, not a victim.¹¹⁷

Phillips demonstrates that it is impossible to escape the correlation between fiction and masochistic sexuality. The masochistic sexual urge is not for immediate relief and gratification, but requires the setting-up or staging of an elaborate fictive scenario, of which sexual pleasure becomes a part. Masochism combines the cerebral and the libidinal. Phillips makes another crucial point about masochism: the masochist is not a victim, but controls their own torment. This control takes place through fiction, either in the creation of a fantasy literary narrative, or in the 'lived fiction', in the form of a theatrical staging.

Phillips emphasises that masochism is 'falling in order to ascend'. The fall she speaks of is physical. Using the example of a male masochist visiting a female prostitute, she makes reference to the debasement of both partners. Masochism, for Phillips, has a 'link to the literally sordid'.¹¹⁸ The masochist, in this case the male client, lowers both himself and the prostitute by going down on his knees in a parody of courtly love. According to Phillips, the masochist is dirtied by their lowering of themselves. She refers to the masochistic situation as 'a move in the human "game."' It contributes to a general lowering – there is no other way of putting it – to the level of filth.¹¹⁹ Some masochists do enjoy being involved in 'literally sordid' activities, and enacting their submission 'at the level of filth'. However, it seems Phillips equates what may only be a symbolic lowering, such as that which takes place 'beneath the whip' of the cruel mistress, with actually finding oneself on the dirty ground. The Decadent scenario, for example, may be a symbolic descent into the realm of the bestial, as Baudelaire's confessional writing suggests, but is not about literally dirtying oneself. It is about raising the sexual encounter to the level of beauty.¹²⁰ In Decadent masochism the man

¹¹⁷ Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 75.

¹¹⁹ Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 78.

¹²⁰ This is the case in *Venus in Furs*, for example, in which Severin dresses Wanda up and requires her to pose in aesthetic tableaux for his sexual gratification.

who appears on bended knee before his tormenting mistress seems to be making a parodic gesture – of courtly love and of his own sexual desire. He anticipates his own ‘fall’ towards the natural, and exposes the descent involved in lowering oneself to the level of nature and woman.

Other critics have also commented on the ‘lived fiction’ that masochism involves, with reference to the enactment of the phantasy in the masochistic scenario. Stewart makes reference to the theatrical nature of masochism: ‘Masochism, with its dependence on theatrical suspense and disavowal, radically externalize[s] the subjects’ most intimate passions and [does] this precisely as theater’.¹²¹ For Stewart, the theatre of masochism is a way of externalising one’s innermost desires. However, the desires take shape in a distorted form. The control man seeks to have over woman is manifested in narratives where woman has control. In *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (1997), John K. Noyes criticises Freud’s failure to take note of the masochist’s role as director of his own suffering:

Freud’s work on masochism is consistent in its disregard for the active role of the masochist [...] if the sadist is the only one who says ‘I torment,’ the masochist is not the one who says ‘I am tormented,’ but the one who says ‘I direct my own torment.’ [...] The masochist is not controlled by a dominant partner, he stages fantasies of control, and he controls this staging.¹²²

The analogy of the masochist as someone who ‘stages’ a theatrical torment of his own body, corresponds with the situation of the author writing fantasies of his own submission. The female figure thus emerges as a theatrical prop; a puppet, or a statue, which the writer manipulates according to his own fantasy. Noyes points out that even when the masochist’s scenarios echo the social balance of power, in other words, when he stages a fantasy which has its basis in ‘real life’ social situations, he maintains control. The scenario may imitate a wider social one in which he must submit to power, but because he stages this smaller fantasy, he is in control.¹²³ Amber Musser writes that the props employed in the theatrical masochistic scenario suggest the agency of the female tormentor, but actually are representative of the masochist’s desires. She asks,

¹²¹ Stewart, *Sublime Surrender*, p. 193.

¹²² John K. Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 157.

¹²³ Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission*, p. 160.

How should one understand the Ideal Mistress of masochism? Is she a sadist? If not, what is she? In many respects, she was a figment of the masochist's imagination. Her paraphernalia – furs, coldness, whips and high heels – implied domination. Her agency and desire for domination were actually the masochist's.¹²⁴

The masochist has agency and power over the whole scenario. In fact, the cruel woman may not actually exist. The female tormentor created in literary fictions is an imaginary one. We cannot speak of her agency, since her whole existence is called into being as part of a masochistic fantasy.

The critic who best addresses the above problems with an awareness of the importance of the fictional aspect of masochism, is Gilles Deleuze. His essay, 'Coldness and Cruelty' (1967) successfully bridges the gap between modern and nineteenth-century conceptions of masochism. He points out the flaws he perceives in early theories such as Freud's, particularly the notion that sadism and masochism coexist within the individual. Beginning his study, Deleuze observes, 'It has been stated so often that sadism and masochism are found in the same person that we have come to believe it. [...] We must take a completely different approach, the *literary approach*, since it is from literature that stem the original definitions of sadism and masochism.'¹²⁵ However, the current definition of masochism in the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases* does refer to the capability of an individual to be stimulated by both sadistic and masochistic activities.¹²⁶ It is more accurate to say that individuals cannot be sadistic and masochistic simultaneously. What is important is that Deleuze here emphasises the importance of literature for understanding masochism. It is Deleuze's view that the mechanisms of masochism can be articulated successfully through the process of writing, particularly the writing of Sacher-Masoch. Deleuze rejects any notion that the woman tormentor of masochism is an image of the punishing father.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Amber Musser, 'The Literary Symptom: Krafft-Ebing and the Invention of Masochism' in *Mediated Deviance and Social Otherness: Interrogating Influential Representations*, ed. by Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 290.

¹²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty' in *Masochism* trans. Jean McNeil (1967; New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 14. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁶ The current definition of 'Sadomasochism' within the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10) reads: 'A preference for sexual activity which involves the infliction of pain or humiliation, or bondage. If the subject prefers to be the recipient of such stimulation this is called masochism; if the provider, sadism. Often an individual obtains sexual excitement from both sadistic and masochistic activities.' *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 10th Revision (2007 Version) <<http://apps.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/>> [Accessed 26 April 2011.]

¹²⁷ Because the woman torturer is so clearly a mother image for Deleuze, he states, 'We must wonder all the more why so many psychoanalysts insist on discovering a disguised father-image in the masochistic

He believes that the masochist's tormentor is representative of a particular 'mother image', which corresponds with the notion of cruel female nature referred to earlier in this study. He posits that 'the specific element of masochism is the oral mother, the ideal of coldness, solicitude and death, between the uterine mother and the Oedipal mother.'¹²⁸ The woman, and maternity, are central to masochism. This is, of course, a problematic way of thinking about masochism generally, since it neglects the perspective of female masochists who enjoy being punished by male tormentors, not to mention gay and lesbian couples. However, this thesis is concerned with the male masochistic perspective, and Deleuze's commentary.

Deleuze's theory of masochism is influenced by Reik, and he also views the pain of masochism as anticipatory, a precursor to sexual gratification. Deleuze observes, 'the masochist is not a strange being who finds pleasure in pain, but [...] finds pleasure where others do, the simple difference being that for him pain, punishment or humiliation are necessary prerequisites to obtaining gratification.'¹²⁹ Deleuze theorises that the masochist enacts the anticipated punishment for breaking the law, in order to be able symbolically to break the law by experiencing the pleasure forbidden by it. In other words, the punishment precedes the crime, in order that the crime may take place. In Deleuze's words, 'once [the masochist] has undergone the punishment, he feels that he is allowed or indeed commanded to experience the pleasure that the law was supposed to forbid.'¹³⁰ The Decadent model is slightly different in that it is not some externally imposed 'law' which is being transgressed, but rather a self-imposed boundary between man and nature. The 'punishment' which is inflicted is the cruelty of nature, and the pleasure is sexual gratification.

Deleuze speaks of masochism as having a 'woman torturer'. However, he makes a crucial observation about this woman: she is not a sadist. Therefore, she is not as powerful as she seems. A true sadist is only powerful when their victim derives no pleasure from their torment. Deleuze states, 'The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is *in* the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy.' Therefore 'her "sadism" is of a kind never

ideal, and on detecting the presence of the father behind the woman torturer.' Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 55.

¹²⁸ Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 55.

¹²⁹ Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 71.

¹³⁰ Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 88.

found in the sadist; it is as it were the double or the reflection of masochism.¹³¹ This is not to say that the cruel woman is also a masochist, but that her actions reflect the attitudes of the masochist who enjoys them. She is acting as a reflection, or projection, of the masochist's own desires and anxieties. The cruel woman is fashioned into a despot according to the wishes of the masochist.¹³² Deleuze recognises the role of the masochist in creating his own torturer according to his own fantasy. Although it would appear that the dominant party, the punisher, is the woman, the punisher is actually the reflexive self. Masochism requires an agent in order to act out this self-punishment. Deleuze explains,

the process of turning round upon the self may be regarded as a *reflexive* stage, as in obsessional neurosis ('I punish myself'), but since masochism implies a passive stage ('I am punished, I am beaten'), we must infer the existence in masochism of a particular mechanism of projection through which an external agent is made to assume the role of the subject.¹³³

It is clear that Deleuze recognises the agency and control of the masochist, even when the masochist appears most passive and submissive. Noting the paradoxical nature of the language of masochism, he observes, 'It is the victim who speaks though the mouth of his torturer, without sparing himself.'¹³⁴ This is the same of the written cruel woman. Words are effectively put into her mouth by the writer, who is in control of the way her sexuality is presented. However, as the next chapter will establish, the female tormentors in English Decadence are often silent and still. Like Pygmalion's statue before it comes to life, they are unresponsive fantasies. The cruel woman is not given her own voice. Even Wilde's Salome, who does speak, does so from a disadvantaged female position, and her words do not have the same power as the speech of men. She, too, is called into being by male perception of her.

The 'cold and distant' mother figure that Deleuze considers central to masochism is also a feature of narcissistic-masochistic disorder. Edmund Bergler makes a distinction between psychic masochism (which is also termed 'moral masochism' by Arnold M. Cooper) and perversion masochism. In a discussion of the misunderstandings about psychic masochism, he describes the difference thus,

¹³¹ Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 41. Emphasis in original.

¹³² Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 41, p. 21.

¹³³ Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', pp. 105-6.

¹³⁴ Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 22.

Psychic masochism is confused with *perversion* masochism. The latter denotes pathologic pleasure – consciously experienced pleasure – derived from being beaten, stabbed, tortured. It starts with a game-like attitude, to progress to more dangerous escapades. The direct *bodily* pain is perceived by these strange human beings as pleasurable. In *psychic* masochism pain is consciously rejected, hence consciously avoided.¹³⁵

Cooper expands upon Bergler's (slightly prejudiced) observations to provide a detailed analysis of narcissistic-masochistic disorder. He observes that it is part of the process of separation-individuation, and the achievement of independent selfhood. The painful parts of this process are viewed as narcissistic injuries to the infant. Mastery is gained by the infant who converts the passively endured discomforts into actively sought ones, or salvages pleasure by equating these familiar sensations with the pleasurable. Narcissistic-masochistic disorder occurs where the humiliation from internal or external sources becomes excessive, and being disappointed or refused becomes the preferred mode of narcissistic assertion. The aim is not to be united with a caring mother, but to gain control over a cruel and damaging mother. This is not a sexual masochism, but is pre-Oedipal.

In 'The Narcissistic-masochistic Character' (2009), Cooper maintains the position that 'masochism and narcissism are developmentally, functionally, and clinically intertwined.'¹³⁶ He laments the exclusion of masochistic personality disorder from the DSM-IV.¹³⁷ He therefore uses the terminology of 'Self-Defeating Personality Disorder', listed as a proposed diagnostic category in the DSM-III-R but excluded from the DSM-IV. This involves a pattern of self-defeating behaviour in various contexts including pursuing victimisation and helplessness, accepting or pursuing pain, succumbing readily to guilt, and self-centeredness of feelings of suffering. According to Cooper, this self-centred suffering comprises the narcissistic component of masochism. The infant maintains a narcissistic omnipotence by controlling his own displeasure. 'He reproduces in his external world the disappointing, powerful, refusing pre-Oedipal mother of his inner world. At the same time, through the mechanism of pleasure-in-displeasure the masochistic individual is able, unconsciously, to extract some form of satisfaction or pleasure from his conscious pain.'¹³⁸ Narcissistic-masochistic disorder is, then, a

¹³⁵ Edmund Bergler, *The Basic Neurosis: Oral Regression and Psychic Masochism* (1949; New York: Grune & Stratton, 1977), p. 12. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁶ Arnold M. Cooper, 'The Narcissistic-masochistic Character', *Psychiatric Annals* 29 (2009), p. 904.

¹³⁷ It is also excluded from the DSM-5, published in 2013.

¹³⁸ Cooper, 'The Narcissistic-masochistic Character', p. 911.

process of trying to achieve pleasure by imagining oneself to be persistently victimised and establishing situations in which this victimhood is confirmed. It is a way to go back to the way parental care was once experienced. In sexual masochism there is a similar mechanism whereby pain is experienced as pleasurable. However, as Cooper maintains, there is a distinction between sexual (or ‘perversion’) masochism and the psychic masochism of which narcissistic-masochistic disorder is part. Both appear to be narcissistic processes in which self-images are projected outwards so that an external subject is imagined as a tormenting figure; the difference is the degree to which sexuality is involved. In the Decadent cruel woman fictions I examine, the focus is on scenarios in which a male subject engages in a fantasy in which they essentially torment themselves for personal pleasure. While acknowledging that the process of projection has narcissistic elements, I focus solely on masochistic scenarios rather than narcissistic-masochistic pathologies.

Writing is crucial to masochism, as Amber Musser asserts in ‘Reading, Writing, and the Whip’ (2008): ‘the late nineteenth-century version of masochism was a practice that relied on literature, aesthetics, self-fashioning, and confession.’¹³⁹ Literature offered Krafft-Ebing the ‘symptoms’ with which to diagnose masochism. For Musser, this exemplifies a strong link between masochism and writing. She observes in masochism an ‘intimate connection with literature and its attendant practices of reading and writing. Reading masochism as a literary phenomenon means exploring several layers of relationships – of literature and performance, of textuality and subjectivity’.¹⁴⁰ The connection between masochism and literature is similar to the performative mode noted above. Masochistic submission is dictated by the fantasy of the masochist. Because it is such an interior pathology, masochism requires literary self-confession. It involves commands, a dialogue with instructions to the tormentor on how to torment. ‘The connection between masochism and literacy is integral to the history of masochism’s practice.’¹⁴¹ Musser points out that the common use of symbols, such as the cruel mistress, is important to the understanding of masochism, by making it visible and recognisable, even diagnosable: ‘The formalization and visibility of masochism’s connection to the symbolic was translated into a medical discourse of the

¹³⁹ Musser, ‘Reading, Writing, and the Whip’, p. 206.

¹⁴⁰ Musser, ‘Reading, Writing, and the Whip’, p. 205.

¹⁴¹ Musser, ‘Reading, Writing, and the Whip’, p. 212.

symptomatic.¹⁴² As the translator of these symptoms, Krafft-Ebing is important not just for naming and recognising masochism as a form of sexual desire, but for highlighting the importance of literature for this desire, and sexuality in general.

Alison Moore's article 'Recovering Difference in the Deleuzian Dichotomy of Masochism-Without-Sadism' (2009) provides a counterargument to Musser's and Deleuze's critical opinions. Moore thinks 'Coldness and Cruelty' is a 'powerful work of literary analysis, but it is a poor tool for helping us to understand consensual relations of erotic power exchange other than Masoch's.'¹⁴³ According to Moore, Deleuze's differentiation of sadism and masochism 'comes at the cost of the difference between literary erotism and psychiatric pathology.'¹⁴⁴ By attributing the qualities of Krafft-Ebing's inventions to Sade and Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze imagines the authors as 'clinicians' who group together their own symptoms for diagnosis. This criticism ignores the fact that Krafft-Ebing also based his diagnosis on numerous case studies, and was aware of the different manifestations of sexual desire in different scenarios. Also, rather than using Sacher-Masoch to diagnose masochism, Deleuze uses his literary works to illustrate certain features of the masochistic tendency. The overriding message of Krafft-Ebing's study, including his case-studies, is that masochism is to do with the sexual fantasy of submission to another person. Of course there is a problem with his idea that the other person should be of the opposite sex, but apart from this, his identification of the key 'fact' of masochism can incorporate any number of different fantasies. The variation between case-studies is testament to this.

Moore critiques Deleuze for failing to separate Sade from sadism and Masoch from masochism. She warns against using their 'terms' to diagnose masochism and sadism since they are literary fantasises, and fantasies of male minds, and therefore they do not give a voice to female fantasy, or to the way masochism and sadism are conceived by those who do not have recourse to literature. Moore is also critical of Deleuze's attributions of sadism and masochism to Sade and Sacher-Masoch's symbols, 'fantasmagoric terms', which have been interpreted as pathologies and symptoms. She believes that these terms, taken from the work of male authors, exclude the female perspective: 'By taking the two male authors as representative of the pathologies named

¹⁴² Musser, 'Reading, Writing, and the Whip', pp. 214-5.

¹⁴³ Alison Moore, 'Recovering Difference in the Deleuzian Dichotomy of Masochism-Without-Sadism', *Angelaki*, 14 (2009), p. 28.

¹⁴⁴ Moore, 'Recovering Difference', p. 28.

after them, Deleuze elides the possibility of either term being applied to women since the only women in either Sade's or Masoch's imagination are the symbolic ideals they construct.¹⁴⁵ In her criticism, Moore makes reference to the problem this thesis is trying to address. The observation that women exist only in the fantasies of these two male authors does not invalidate the definition of masochism, it adds weight to the role of fantasy within it.

Moore uses the example of contemporary sadomasochism ('SM') to demonstrate that Deleuze's perspectives are incompatible with this lifestyle.¹⁴⁶ Writing by contemporary SM practitioners shows the sadist and masochist coexisting in a shared desiring field. However, SM is not the same as the 'masochism-without-sadism' that Deleuze attempts to define, and even in the SM relationship there must be some level of denial, of the masochist's power and the sadist's dependence on the masochist's concealment of their enjoyment. This is exposed in Lynn S. Chancer's *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (1992), which contextualises sadomasochism in late twentieth-century America in socio-political terms. Sadomasochism, as perceived by Chancer, is dialectical. The sadist and masochist each have the potential to be the other. In her examination, Chancer views sadism and masochism as unquestioningly complementary. However, she actually exposes the problems this thesis investigates. Chancer comments on the symbiotic relationship of the sadist and masochist, acknowledging that each is dependent on the other. Her reading of *Venus in Furs* is constructed according to her theory that, in the sadomasochistic relationship, when boredom with the established scenario sets in, the roles will reverse. Based on this idea of boredom within established sadomasochistic relationships, Chancer imagines that the partnership must always be innovative. The sadist must invent new methods of torture and the masochist, whose role is predicated on a 'tendency toward escape',¹⁴⁷ must find new ways to resist the sadist, paradoxically exerting power.¹⁴⁸ This is an important observation, a recognition that the apparently submissive partner does actually hold power in the exchange. Chancer even thinks that the sadistic role is based on an 'extreme need' for the

¹⁴⁵ Moore, 'Recovering Difference', p. 34.

¹⁴⁶ The 'roles of sadist/masochist, top/bottom, dominant/submission etc [...] that exist within desiring communities cannot be kept radically apart in the way Deleuze suggests is appropriate for sadism and masochism, since these roles both interchange and depend on one another in SM scenarios.' Moore, 'Recovering Difference', p. 28.

¹⁴⁷ Lynn S. Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 67.

¹⁴⁸ Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*, p. 63.

subordinate masochist, thus the sadist actually ‘embodies precisely the opposite of what his or her situation on its face appears to imply.’¹⁴⁹ The sadist is in fact more insecure and dependent than the masochist. Hence, the masochist paradoxically has power over the sadist: ‘the masochist’s analogous secret is far greater relative strength and independence than he or she perceives, hidden behind a front of apparent and extreme dependency.’¹⁵⁰ However, Chancer believes the masochist does not want to concede to their own strength, and therefore a sadist and a masochist, when interacting with one another, have a relationship based on mutual denial, of inappropriate weakness and inappropriate strength respectively. Each partner has to be able to forget the power the masochist holds over the sadist. They must also forget that they are engaged in a ‘game’ with rules, such as the common use of a ‘safe word’ which ends the scenario if either party, particularly the masochist, feels uncomfortable.

That the masochistic scenario is a ‘game’ is one of the defining features which has been established by twentieth- and twenty-first century criticism. The rules of the game, set by the masochist, reveal the masochist’s paradoxical power, since the tormentor is formed according to the desires of the tormented. Although this important feature is missing from early sexological and psychological explanations, it has been observed more frequently in subsequent accounts of masochism, particularly in Deleuze’s study. The fact that Krafft-Ebing often makes reference to masochism as a ‘perversion’ based upon fantasies, including literary fantasies, whether realised or not, is significant. Masochism is cerebral, a sexual preference based upon fantasy scenarios. In many ways the fantasy is as important as the pain itself. Thus it makes sense that these fantasies should manifest themselves in writing. There is something about masochism that is best expressed through the medium of literature, as Krafft-Ebing and scholars such as Musser have acknowledged. The ‘real life’ model of masochism as a sexual game can be applied to writing, and through writing it is best exposed for what it is. The masochist’s control in the sexual scenario is analogous to the writer’s control. In the following chapters of this thesis, I shall examine such masochistic authorial control in the writing of cruel women by Swinburne, Wilde, and Symons, and use Dowson as an example of ceding control when faced with the unattainable ideal of the young girl.

The cruel woman in Decadent fictions

¹⁴⁹ Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*, p. 49.

¹⁵⁰ Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*, p. 59.

In my first chapter, I consider the Pygmalion-esque control of the fantasy woman in English Decadence, which Kirsten MacLeod denigrates as ‘only Huysmans “and water”’.¹⁵¹ English Decadent writing has suffered in critical studies from being seen as a shadow of French Decadence, because of a thematic move away from perversity towards artifice at the end of the nineteenth century. English Decadent writing is shadowy and secretive when compared to the sustained and self-conscious perversity in French Decadent works throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁵² English Decadent writers are, however, more subtle in depicting perversity. James Willsher observes that ‘the English decadent of the 1890s sinned with subtlety, and took some care to guard himself’.¹⁵³ In this chapter, I return to the Pygmalion myth to illustrate that the woman in English Decadence is, like a statue, a surface for the projection of male fantasies. With reference to Edward Burne-Jones’s depiction of Pygmalion kneeling before his living statue, I acknowledge that the masochistic writer imagines his ideal tormentor and then depicts himself as submissive before her. This symbolic kneeling pose is reminiscent of the Medieval courtly love tradition of a male poet submitting to an idealised, superior Lady. Slavoj Žižek acknowledges that the Lady is a cold and distant figure, and Jacques Lacan observes that she is insubstantial, nothing more than a projection of male desire. These observations inform my examination of the cruel woman as an ‘incorporeal’ punishing figure. She appears in Decadent writing as a white and cold, sometimes ethereal, figure, and this is emblematic of her existence as fantasy. In order to show how this fantasy is created through writing I turn to ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (1849) and ‘My Last Duchess’ (1842), two dramatic monologues by Robert Browning which conjure the image of woman through an address to a silent auditor. Although these are not Decadent poems, Browning’s work was an influence on Swinburne and Symons, and, crucially, is a pioneer of a particular style of dramatic monologue in which images of women are conjured by male speakers. The female image is created and controlled by the speaker’s words. In *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (2001), Catherine Maxwell makes a connection between Browning and Pygmalion, acknowledging that both create idealised images of

¹⁵¹ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 16.

¹⁵² Perversity is consistent in French Decadent works from the gender-swapping of Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Baudelaire’s poems with themes of sadism and masochism, Huysmans’s prototypical Decadent *Des Esseintes* and his delight in the morbid and anti-natural, to Mirbeau’s grotesque *Torture Garden* at the end of the century, which depicts cruel female sexuality in gruesome detail.

¹⁵³ James Willsher, *The Dedalus Book of English Decadence: Vile Emperors and Elegant Degenerates* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2004), p. 29.

women which are superior to their living counterparts. However, Browning's speakers have killed their beloved women in an attempt to control them. These women reflect the insecurities of the speakers. The silent (or silenced) cruel woman of English Decadent fictions is called into existence by a male voice. She may not be killed as Browning's women are, but she is an example of Asti Hustvedt's claim that Decadent writers attempt to immobilise women into the perfect artificial feminine image. I demonstrate in the following chapters the various ways in which cruel women are formed – as statuesque beauties or haunting ethereal phantoms – according to the masochistic model in English Decadent writing.

In Chapter 2 the focus is on selected poems from Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, in which the cruel woman appears as both an 'algolagnic phantasm' and a statue.¹⁵⁴ The cruelty of the Decadent woman is a device through which feelings of powerlessness and anxiety are articulated, as observed by Camille Paglia in her work on Swinburne in *Sexual Personae*. The anxiety is related to female nature and the threat it poses to the male artistic domain. Swinburne's poetry exemplifies the writing of masochism in English Decadence, and he is the first example of the masochistic model which Wilde, Symons and Dowson deviate from in different ways. In this chapter I argue that the illusion of female activity and cruelty is created by Swinburne in his poems in which a single speaker addresses a silent female auditor. This is reminiscent of Browning's strategy in his dramatic monologues. Women such as Dolores in Swinburne's poetry are called into being by being spoken to. With reference to Helen Davies's *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (2012), and Nina Conti's twenty-first-century deconstruction of the ventriloquist's act, I explain that cruel women are fantastical ventriloquist's dummies which do not actually exist. Their status as masochistic fantasies is exposed by repeated reference to coldness, passivity, immobility. Yet this is juxtaposed with imagery of torment, pain, and sexual desire. As Maxwell observes, Swinburne's own masochism informs his subject-matter. He replicates the sensations of being beaten in such poems as 'Faustine' and 'Anactoria'. Maxwell considers Swinburne to be a feminised poet, whose fictional women are active and dominant. In contrast, I focus on the way in which he retains his masculine power by forming images of women to his desire. For example, in 'Anactoria', Swinburne

¹⁵⁴ Jerry Palmer, 'Fierce Midnights: Algolagniac Fantasy and the Literature of the Decadence', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), p. 101.

ventriloquises Sappho by adopting her as his mouthpiece. He therefore imposes his image over hers, and the voice we hear is the poet's own.

Having established that a male masochist creator who takes pleasure from female cruelty is crucial to the understanding of the cruel woman, Chapter 3 demonstrates how Wilde deviates from this model in his play *Salome*. In Swinburne's poetry the writer adopts the position of masochist. The first-person poetic voice gives the impression that the cruel woman's torments really are being bestowed upon him, and that he derives pleasure and pain from them. However, in Wilde's *Salome* there is no evidence of authorial pleasure in torment. Salome herself is a work of art, an artificial woman inspired by the Salome iconography of the nineteenth century. In *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (2011), Petra Dierkes-Thrun refers to Salome as a *femme fatale*. However, I argue that her presence in the play as an ethereal 'shadow of a white rose' is representative of her lack of power. In *Salome*, Wilde deprives the cruel woman of a bodily form as she is rendered insubstantial and incorporeal by the symbolic language of the characters who describe her. Charles Bernheimer comments on this disconnected dialogue in *Decadent Subjects* (2002). Salome, as imagined by Wilde, is a deviation from the established cruel woman type. The language Wilde uses to describe Salome and her body suggests a change in English Decadence from the fleshly eroticism of Swinburne, to the pared-down artificiality characteristic of the 1890s. Beardsley's images complement Wilde's text in their refinement of Salome's bodily form, through the use of fine line and black and white space. Critics such as Amanda Fernbach and Elliot L. Gilbert have suggested that Salome's gender can be called into question in Wilde's text and Beardsley's images. However, I maintain that Salome is representative of female nature, and is subject to male control. As with masochistic writing in which the male masochist maintains control of the cruel woman contrary to appearances, Wilde does not allow Salome to have ultimate power. I consider the division in the play between the body and the word, which Amy Koritz points out in *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art* (1995). Salome attempts to assert her power through speech, but ultimately she fails because she is female, and driven by her bodily desires. Wilde's strategy is different to the masochist's strategy. He is fighting, rather than submitting to, the power of nature throughout the play. *Salome* is interpreted as an attempt to deny nature, which Wilde achieves by emptying the text of the cruel woman altogether, as Salome is executed at the drama's conclusion.

In Chapter 4, the woman is examined as a recurring figure in Symons's early erotic poems from the mid to late 1890s. *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* are Symons's most Decadent collections and represent his experiments with form, synaesthesia and symbols. The woman in Symons's work is frequently depicted as a dancing girl. In *Arthur Symons: A Life* (1987), Karl Beckson refers to these women as *femmes fatales*.¹⁵⁵ However, they are inconsistent with the stereotype, as they are not imagined as fatal and there is little reference to sexual cruelty. Instead, the dancer represents the poet's divided self: she is a screen for the poet's self-projection as artist or lover. In 'The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons' *London Nights*' (1971), Jan B. Gordon suggests that Symons's women are mirrors for his own self-image. In the 'Prologue' to *London Nights*, for example, Symons captures the problem of the reflexive masochistic model. The speaker encounters a reflection of himself instead of the dancer he is trying to write about. The dancer is symbolic of the agony of trying to capture the fleeting moment in poetry. Her body's movement awakens the writer's poetic consciousness, while simultaneously existing as something outside his consciousness which he can never reach because it is obscured by his own image. Behind the cruel woman of masochism, male control is revealed. Symons's writing about women, though not overtly masochistic, exposes his own authorial control as something inescapable. The dancing girls of Symons's poetry are described as fleeting shadows: female incorporeality remains. Similarly, lovers such as 'Bianca' feature as white and cold Pygmalion's statues, which are anatomized by the speaker. As Joseph Bristow observes in "'Sterile Ecstasies": The Perversity of the Decadent Movement' (1995), this makes the female figure seem elusive to both speaker and reader.

My fifth chapter focuses on the figure of the little girl in the poetry of Ernest Dowson in his two collections *Verses* and *Decorations*. The girl was an ideal Dowson tormented himself with, and in his poetry she is cold, silent, shadowy and insubstantial, like the cruel woman. However, she is lacking in cruelty and agency. Dowson is recognised by critics such as Jad Adams and R. K. R. Thornton as a figurehead of the Decadent movement in England. His 'Cynara poem' is frequently anthologised in Decadent collections, but there are few studies devoted to Dowson. I argue that in the 'Cynara poem' and throughout Dowson's poetry he signifies the decline of English Decadence.

¹⁵⁵ Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 117, p. 118.

The figure of the girl in his poetry is a representation of this decline, an infantilised pale reflection of the cruel woman. Dowson's verses are characterised by ennui, unsatisfied desire, and an exhausted resignation to the passing of time. Dowson does not celebrate perversity as Swinburne, Wilde and Symons do. The girl symbolises these fears and embodies the impossible ideal of youth, since childhood is transient and innocence will be violated. With reference to Dowson's beloved Adelaide Foltinowicz, who in real life was the embodiment of his desires, Christine Roth explores the paradoxical position of the girl in her essay 'Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: "Her Double Perversity"' (2002). I build upon Roth's argument to demonstrate that the fantasy girl of Dowson's poetry is a spectral fantasy which represents the agony of desire. I return to Thornton's idea of the 'decadent dilemma'. Dowson experiences contradictory pulls between love for the innocent girl and his own adult desires. The poetry which emerges from such tension is not masochistic. There is no sense of pleasure in pain, only pure pain. In order to preserve his ideal, Dowson metaphorically 'kills' her into art. Chris Snodgrass comments upon the isolation of the artist from his ideal when she is transformed into an art object. The girl appears as a cold statue figure, sometimes dead; a mute figure frozen in time, but also distanced from the adoring speaker. Dowson casts himself as a reverse Pygmalion, whose fantasy does not come to life, and who instead is fated to solitude in the face of her coldness.

The female figure connects the Decadent output of Swinburne, Wilde, Symons and Dowson, and offers a distinctive perspective on the English literary tradition of Decadence in the nineteenth century. The cruel woman motif is the focus of the critical examination of each writer's work, and, by paying attention to her changing form, it is possible to observe important changes in English Decadent writing. I consider the transformation of the cruel woman during the key moments of English Decadence: from Swinburne's writing in the mid-nineteenth century to Symons's verse, which is imbued with symbolism, and self-consciously refined, and Dowson's writing in which decline is fatal and the cruel woman refined out of existence. A trend in critical thought, that English Decadence is a 'pale shadow' of its French counterpart, persists in spite of the fact that dedication to artifice is in fact a crystallisation of the Decadent ideal.¹⁵⁶ For this reason, the present thesis concentrates on the representation of one particular artificial

¹⁵⁶ Brian Stableford, 'Introduction' to *The Dedalus Book of Decadence: Moral Ruins* (Cambridgeshire: Dedalus, 1993), p. 51.

'Idol of Perversity' in English Decadence: the cruel woman. Her transformation in English Decadent writing is representative of the transformation of Decadence itself.

CHAPTER ONE

English Decadence and Pygmalionism

Definitions of English Decadence

Any study of literary Decadence must confront the issue of definition of the term 'Decadence' itself. Much like *'femme fatale'*, the word seems to elude meaning, because it carries so many associations. In the Introduction I mentioned Binias's criticism of the ambiguity resulting from the 'uncritical employment' of the term *'femme fatale'*.¹ Similarly, 'Decadence' is used in the expression of intangible concepts, social behaviour and literary style, in praise and in criticism, and ultimately appears to remain elusive. It has become, in Richard Gilman's terms, a 'portmanteau stuffed with emptiness.'² In *The Decadent Dilemma* (1983), R. K. R. Thornton acknowledges the indefinable nature of Decadence as one of its key characteristics, calling it a 'literature of failure'. He regards failure as the crucial element of Decadence, and explains that 'Attempts to define Decadence, like Decadence itself, must end in failure. Only partial and necessarily flawed definitions can be made of a movement which was so amorphous that some would question whether it was a movement at all.'³ However, there is substance to the portmanteau: those nineteenth-century literary works which have been collectively defined as Decadent. David Weir's study of the tradition, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, counters the viewpoints of Gilman and Thornton by explaining that vagueness and indeterminacy are in fact defining features of Decadence. Weir acknowledges that 'the very elusiveness of the notion of decadence is significant; that is, elusiveness signifies meaning.'⁴ The 'amorphous' nature of the Decadent tradition is one of its noteworthy attributes.

French Decadent writing has been the subject of an extensive range of scholarship, while there are few studies which focus on English Decadence alone.⁵ In anthologies of

¹ Binias, *Symbol and Symptom*, p. 34.

² Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 180.

³ R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 188.

⁴ Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, p. 10.

⁵ Works on Decadence generally define the movement in terms of its key authors and works, and often take the form of a collection of essays on different authors and works. For example, George C. Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion 1884-1927* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003); Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds., *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Ian Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980). Useful

Decadent writing, French material dominates.⁶ Recent studies, such as MacLeod's *Fictions of British Decadence*, and *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle* (2013) edited by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray, have begun to redress the balance by offering insights into a range of British texts. Studies of English Decadence are predominantly confined to the 1890s in a fashion consistent with Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), a directory of the celebrities and personalities of the period. As the twentieth century approached its own *fin de siècle*, a renewed interest in English Decadence saw the publication of several full-length critical studies of the subject, such as Matthew Sturgis's *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (1995), and Thornton's, *The Decadent Dilemma*. Thornton regards Decadence as an 1890s phenomenon, and subscribes to the notion that it died with the 'Tragic Generation':

The rise and fall of the Decadent movement in England was in the main confined to the years from 1889 to 1897; it was certainly over by the end of the century. Some of the chief figures of the movement died with the century, setting a permanent seal on that sense of an ending: Dowson, Wilde, Johnson, Crackanthorpe, Beardsley. Beerbohm retired from the struggle, and even Symons renounced the name. The novelty of Decadence had worn off, and Symbolism took its place.⁷

Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick's, *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (2012), refers to Decadence as a tradition bifurcated into 'relatively distinct French and English versions.'⁸ Perhaps because of this approach, critics seem to view the differences between French and English Decadent writing as a weakness on the part of English authors.

Brian Stableford, editor of two anthologies of French and English Decadent texts, considers French Decadence superior for its perversity and horror, therefore: 'What passed for Decadence in England was but a pale shadow of French Decadence.'⁹ And 'The only possible conclusion which the modern commentator can come to, in looking back at the English Decadents, is that they were not nearly Decadent enough.'¹⁰ On the

investigations by individual scholars include Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*; Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900* trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁶ For example, Hustvedt's *Decadent Reader* consists entirely of French literary works. French works usually dominate anthologies and collections of essays, such as the *Dedalus* series of 'Books of Decadence' edited by Brian Stableford.

⁷ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 69.

⁸ Desmarais and Baldick, *Decadence*, p. 1.

⁹ Stableford, *The Dedalus Book of Decadence: Moral Ruins*, p. 51.

¹⁰ Stableford, *The Dedalus Book of Decadence: Moral Ruins*, p. 65.

whole it may be said that English Decadent writers were more grounded in the formalities of critical thinking, particularly Walter Pater's theories of art – tellingly referred to by Holbrook Jackson as 'austere' and Murray G. H. Pittock as 'serious' – while the French were more accomplished at practicing deviance in their writing.¹¹ In 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' Symons refers to Pater as an English Decadent, whose refined style, 'that morbid subtlety of analysis, that morbid curiosity of form,' is shared with his French counterparts.¹² Mallarmé's and Baudelaire's experiments with form and content were influential for later English Decadents, whose own works are more considered and self-conscious.

English Decadence is described by Jackson as 'an echo of the French movement', suggesting that it is a fainter version of an original tendency.¹³ Gilman perceives English Decadence to be shrouded in mystery, because it is so difficult to characterise. According to Gilman, it is 'Thinner than its French counterpart' but equally 'marked by many of the same aspirations and by much the same confusion and cloudiness surrounding its governing idea and word.'¹⁴ English Decadence lacks definition. It is also occupies an inferior position in critical studies. MacLeod regrets that British Decadence has become surrounded by contradictory meanings throughout critical studies, which has 'rendered it highly intangible and seemingly undefinable.'¹⁵ Again we encounter the problem of Decadence as a movement which is difficult to define. MacLeod's concern is with class and the social aspects of Decadence, and with late nineteenth-century personalities such as George Moore and Arthur Machen whose names can be added to the list of Decadent writers.

The writers of English Decadence treat their subject-matter with an increasing amount of reticence as the nineteenth century progresses. Swinburne's poetry is fairly explicit in its perversity, but at the end of the century, with Dowson, we are left with a pale reflection of French Decadence. Caroline Dowson notes that

[Dowson's] version of English decadence has been given grudging praise as a technically-proficient but pale imitation of French precursors. Nowhere in

¹¹ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (1913; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), p. 53; Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, p. 24.

¹² Symons, 'Decadent Movement', p. 867.

¹³ Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p. 53.

¹⁴ Gilman, *Decadence*, p. 109.

¹⁵ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 19.

Dowson [...] do we find the moral and spiritual perversity which characterises French decadence.¹⁶

As MacLeod observes, Wilde takes more care to disguise perverse and sexualised material in his writing. This ‘veiling’ is reflected in the elusiveness of the figure of the cruel woman. MacLeod’s study begins with the central, yet neglected, question of whether there even was a Decadent movement in Britain. In providing an answer to this question, she refers to the Anglophone version of Decadence as a diluted version of the French movement, a watering-down which she attributes to the necessity of disguising the more salacious aspects of Decadent works in order to make them publishable. She takes the 1890 *Lippincott’s* version of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an example. According to MacLeod its deliberate vagueness allowed the story to be published in a family magazine, and also implicates the reader in any accusations of indecency, since they must imagine Dorian’s sins for themselves. This analysis of *Dorian Gray* illustrates MacLeod’s observations about English Decadence, ‘Vagueness and indeterminacy were important features of Decadence, then, not only in their capacity for embodying cultural anxieties of the period, [...] but also as part of a strategic effort to publish ‘advanced’ material in a hostile climate.’¹⁷ In spite of this, she argues that however diluted the English version of Decadence, it was definitely recognised as a literary phenomenon.

MacLeod is confident that ‘*Fin-de-siècle* Britain had its own Decadence’, albeit with French origins.¹⁸ She makes the same distinction between the studied aestheticism of English Decadence and the more perverse French Decadence, noting the influence of French Decadents on Wilde, which marks the transformation of Aestheticism into Decadence in Britain:

Even Oscar Wilde, Aestheticism’s most high-profile proponent, abandoned the movement after coming under the influence of French Decadents in Paris in 1883. Soon his idealistic Aestheticism shaded over into the darker Aestheticism of Decadence and, rather than promoting the cult of beauty, he interested himself in the artificial, the perverse, and the exotic.¹⁹

¹⁶ Caroline Dowson, ‘Ernest Dowson: The Language of Poetry at the Victorian Fin de Siècle’, (PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 1998), p. 33.

¹⁷ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 126.

¹⁸ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 16.

¹⁹ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, pp. 58-9.

Despite MacLeod's efforts to re-imagine British Decadence, the problem of definition still remains. She concludes her study by admitting that the challenge still exists,

Ultimately the problem of Decadents is the problem of Decadence itself – a problem of definition. Where Decadence has a variety of meanings, often contradictory, the Decadents themselves defy classification by the standards of traditional literary history. [...] Decadence still often figures as 'the weak other of some "strong" literary movement'.²⁰

While MacLeod's analysis of the personalities and works which have previously been omitted from scholarship on British Decadence is a valuable reconsideration of the field, it also creates new concerns rather than re-addressing and resolving the existing misconceptions about writers we already accept as Decadent. My study concentrates on reconceptualising the theory of English Decadence through an analysis of the key writers recognised as Decadent in their own times and afterwards. Critical discourse on Decadence cannot avoid the popular names associated with Decadent fiction. For example, in spite of a claim to wish to decentralise Oscar Wilde from the Decadent debate, MacLeod's investigation is structured around his work.²¹ Frequent comparisons are made between the novels she examines and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the Decadent Movement is thought to have 'died in 1895' after Wilde's trial.²²

The present study does not attempt to reconsider which writers should be considered Decadent, but connects four of the most well-known writers of Decadence in England: the English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, Irish but Oxford educated and based in London and Paris at the height of English Decadence, Arthur Symons, a Cornish-born Briton whose work is influenced by city spaces such as the music-halls of London and Paris, and Ernest Dowson who was born and died in South East London. Swinburne is often omitted from studies of English Decadence because he was writing earlier than the 1890s. Swinburne did not use the word 'decadent' himself, which Thornton sees as reason enough to exclude him from the movement.²³ MacLeod's concern with temporally compartmentalising Decadence in the 1890s relegates Swinburne to the position of Aesthete, rather than naming him as one of the original

²⁰ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 170, quoting Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, 'Introduction' to *Perennial Decay*, p. 7.

²¹ 'The first sense in which this study reads *à rebours* received understandings of Decadence is by decentralizing Wilde, who has remained a dominant presence in scholarship as a figurehead for Decadence.' MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 17.

²² MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 138.

²³ 'Swinburne and other Francophiles would have been familiar with the beliefs and names of French groups, but I know of no reference to Decadence in Swinburne.' Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 38.

Decadent poets. In fact, Swinburne is a connecting figure between the earlier Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite movements and Decadence, and was an influence on the later English Decadents.

Amorphousness and the ‘intangibility’ MacLeod records as a defining feature of English Decadence are also key concepts for my understanding of the cruel woman. From Swinburne to Dowson she is described in ambivalent terms as white, cold, and ghostly. These features are transformed according to the different perspectives of the Decadents writing her. The female figure appears to be cruel and punishing in Swinburne’s poetry, disembodied in Wilde’s *Salome*, a fleeting reflection of the poet’s desire in Symons’s verse, and finally killed into ghostly form in Dowson’s poems. The ‘dilution’ of English Decadence is reflected in the figure of the cruel woman, which becomes less cruel, more pale and ghostly as the century progresses. The cruel woman is, however, always an artificial figure constructed according to the writer’s projected desires.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the way the image of the cruel woman is created in English Decadent writing, in terms of an analogy with the Pygmalion story. Although the cruel woman becomes an increasingly ghostly and elusive figure, paradoxically she is also rendered frozen like a statue, an idealised surface for the projection of male fantasy. Edward Burne-Jones’s four paintings of Pygmalion portray the statue and sculpture mirroring one another; the woman is a reflection of male desire. Burne-Jones depicts Pygmalion as submissive before his ideal woman, in an image which evokes the Medieval tradition of courtly love in which the male poet adopts a masochistic position, symbolically kneeling before an idealised, superior Lady. I consider Slavoj Žižek’s perspective on the female object of courtly love as a cold and distant image, and his reference to Jacques Lacan’s observation that the Lady is nothing more than an insubstantial projection of male desire. However, the act of addressing the Lady makes her appear real. Courtly love poetry features a single voice addressing a silent female auditor; this technique is also used by Robert Browning in his dramatic monologue poems. Catherine Maxwell connects Browning and Pygmalion, observing that both create images of women which are superior to living women. Browning’s women reflect the insecurities of his poems’ speakers, who kill the women into art in an attempt to control them. The silent (or silenced) woman of Decadent fictions is called into existence by a male voice. As observed by Asti Hustvedt, French Decadent fictions

offer examples of attempts to create the perfect artificial feminine image in sculptures and corpses, in a reversal of the Pygmalion model in which the ideal image is brought to life.

Pale roses and statuesque beauties

One of the first to examine the Decadent masochistic preoccupation with female tormentors was Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* (1933). Commenting on Baudelaire's influence on later Decadent writers, Praz refers to his use of the rose as metaphor for the *femme fatale* in the poem 'The Ideal' ('*L'Idéal*'), in which he favours the red rose over her anaemic counterpart:

Baudelaire merely sowed the seed of the tropical flora of fleshy, monstrous, putrescent plants which were destined to spring up in the hothouses of the *fin de siècle*; but of these 'flowers of evil' there now remains, among many withered orchids, nothing more than, here and there, a magnificent thorny rose – a rose of the kind that will always smell sweet.²⁴

For Baudelaire's speaker, the ideal is a Lady Macbeth figure with a 'soul confirmed in crime'.²⁵ He rejects the conventional 'beauties of vignettes', preferring instead the allure of a cruel mistress who is sanguine and bloodthirsty, not a pale and weak beauty.²⁶ He is disdainful of such frivolous women admired by others, such as the contemporary nineteenth-century caricaturist Gavarni:

That poet of chlorosis, Gavarni,
Can keep his twittering troupe of sickly queens,
Since these pale roses do not let me see
My red ideal, the flower of my dreams.²⁷

The ideal is alluring and deadly; the redness of the flower which represents her indicates an association with bloodshed. The pale rose is a symbol for the uninspiring mass of fragile 'twittering' and 'sickly' women who are no match for the criminal ideal. In his reference to the 'withered orchids' of later Decadent writing Praz notes the persistence of the flower as a symbol for women in Decadence, and indeed, women in English Decadent writing are part of the 'language-of-flowers' tradition. However Baudelaire's red ideal is replaced with the pale figure he derides. The writers I examine refer to

²⁴ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (1933; Oxford: Fontana Library, 1962), p. 170.

²⁵ Baudelaire, 'The Ideal', in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 39.

²⁶ Baudelaire, 'The Ideal', p. 39.

²⁷ Baudelaire, 'The Ideal', p. 39.

(cruel) women as pale flowers, often roses. Swinburne's 'Dolores' is 'mystical rose of the mire', favoured over the languorous pale lilies of virtue and consistent with the ideal red rose of the cruel woman.²⁸ However, she is also a pale and unresponsive statue figure. Wilde's Salome is a 'shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver'.²⁹ She is a pale reflection of the stereotypical *femme fatale*, and exists in a diminished form in Wilde's play. Symons's dancing girls are frequently described as roses. In Dowson's poetry, the rose is a symbol for Decadence, and in his 'Cynara poem' the ideal woman is a pale lily who is favoured over the artificial rouged mouth of the sexual woman and the roses of Decadence. The cruel female figure is 'diluted' in English Decadence as the century progresses, and the figures I examine all fall short of being true *femmes fatales*, as I will establish in detail in the following chapters.

The female figure is white and cold and distant; these are three features which form the predominant impression left by the cruel women in English Decadence. The whiteness of the woman in English Decadence is also significant because of the similarity between the fantasy cruel woman and Pygmalion's statue. Even Baudelaire's speaker in 'The Ideal' admires another specimen of the powerful woman, the 'great Night of Michelangelo's', a marble sculpture, on to which he projects his impression of her as a powerful sexual being based on her 'exotic pose'.³⁰ As well as being a female image formed according to the will of the sculptor, the statue is an ideal surface for the reflection of male fantasy. 'Beauty' (*La Beauté*) is the poem immediately preceding 'The Ideal' in *The Flowers of Evil*, and here Baudelaire celebrates beauty as a stone dream image. The poem is spoken from the perspective of 'the finest of statues' which has been created as a perfect representation of woman:

I am lovely, o mortals, a stone-fashioned dream,
And my breast, where you bruise yourselves all in your turn,
Is made so that love will be born in the poet –
Eternal, and silent as matter is timeless.³¹

Having been fashioned according to the sculptor's dream, this stone woman is an inspirational muse for successive generations of artists. Metaphorically she is a cruel woman. Men are bruised at the sight of her breast; her perfection hurts them. The

²⁸ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 123, line 21.

²⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (London: Elkin Matthews & John Lane: 1894), p. 3.

³⁰ Baudelaire, 'The Ideal' in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 41. 'Night' (1526-1531) is a sculpture of the mother of the Titans which forms part of the decoration of a tomb in the *Sagrestia Nuova*, a Medici Chapel in Florence.

³¹ Baudelaire, 'Beauty' in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 39.

hardness of the stone does have the capacity to bruise, for example if the statue were embraced with forceful passion. She is elevated to the position of a lofty queen, 'I reign in the air like a puzzling sphinx; / My heart is of snow and is pure as the swans.'³² Her eyes are 'Pure mirrors, which transform beauty to all things'.³³ This is significant, because those who look at her will see themselves reflected. Again, this silent and still passive female form, which 'never will cry, nor will ever show smile', is a surface on to which personal fantasies can be projected.³⁴ However, Baudelaire's poem differs from the examples of cruel women I shall be discussing, since he gives the statue a voice. She is talking back to the poets who look into the mirrors of her eyes. A typical cruel-woman scenario in English Decadence envisions a male speaker delivering a monologue addressed to a stone-like beauty which does not respond. I will discuss this with reference to Robert Browning further on. Notable examples include 'Dolores' by Swinburne, 'Morbidezza' by Symons, and the dead girls which haunt Dowson's poetry. These are variations of Pygmalion's statue, masochistic fantasies through which the writers externalise their own perceived weakness or lack of control.

Thornton refers to the Pygmalion scenario in the nineteenth century as a way for artists to give a symbolic 'new life' to their artworks: 'The preserving ability of art, giving life to things no longer living of themselves [...] that Pygmalion situation in which the artist is involved in a new relationship with his work of art.'³⁵ However, this life is not real, but an illusion. The Decadent 'Pygmalion' figure is the artist who gives an illusion of life to his desires, but is ultimately unable to achieve union with the artwork. Thornton illustrates some of the signifiers of the artificial creation which I associate with the Decadent cruel woman:

the artificial is at the base of a construction of associated ideas which reach from morality and religion, to the theatre, ballet, make-up, the mask, dance, the creation of the self, and the relationship of man and art. The images end as both artificial and vital.³⁶

He refers to the images as simultaneously artificial and living. However as I shall demonstrate, the images may appear vital but the artifice of the female figure persists.

³² Baudelaire, 'Beauty', p. 39.

³³ Baudelaire, 'Beauty', p. 39.

³⁴ Baudelaire, 'Beauty', p. 39.

³⁵ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 194.

³⁶ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 195.

In his study of Victorian visual culture *Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance* (1991), Richard Jenkyns comments on the popularity of the Pygmalion myth as an analogy for the way Victorian men create their perfect woman who could not otherwise exist, since she would have to possess two contradictory natures.

Dominance and veneration; we seem to be back once more with Pygmalion and Galatea. And perhaps it is reasonable to think that this myth had an especial appeal to the Victorian situation. [...] Men wanted their wives to be angels, but angels are pure spirit, and men wanted the solid pleasures of the flesh as well. Angel and mistress, passionate and passionless, a personality wholly conformable to another's will – what woman could incarnate all these things? In reality, none; but in the imagination, a woman who was also a statue.³⁷

The Pygmalion scenario had a particular appeal to Decadents and their Romantic predecessors. Jenkyns acknowledges that the sculpture of a fantasy woman is a means of wish-fulfilment. He raises the importance of dominance and veneration, the positions which are adopted in the masochistic model, in which the cruel woman is elevated according to a fantasy of her domination. The cruel woman is a projection of male desire, and is therefore an unreal image. In the Pygmalion scenario the problem is exposed: one cannot be simultaneously a woman and a statue. The statue is a substitute for reality, which can outdo reality but which will never be real. The Decadent version of the Pygmalion situation reflects different concerns to the Angel/mistress paradox articulated by Jenkyns. As Asti Hustvedt has suggested, it is often an attempt to create a being which is feminine and artificial, without being female and natural.³⁸ It is also about control, being able to create the ideal torturer for the masochist.

The creation of Pygmalion's statue was depicted by Edward Burne-Jones in his *Pygmalion and the Image* series (1878) [Figs. 1-4]. This series of four oil paintings illustrates the typical complexities of the Pygmalion scenario for the Victorian male artist. Thornton comments that the images express 'yearning for involvement in art'.³⁹ In the second of the paintings, 'The Hand Refrains' [Fig. 2], the sculptor and statue are mirror images of one another. The sculptor reflects himself in his fantasy woman. Caroline Arscott recognises this in her essay 'Venus as dominatrix: nineteenth-century

³⁷ Richard Jenkyns, *Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 141.

³⁸ Hustvedt, 'The Art of Death', p. 20.

³⁹ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 196.

Edward Burne-Jones, *Pygmalion and the Image* (1878)



Fig. 1. 'The Heart Desires' (1878), oil on canvas, 990 x 163 mm.



Fig. 2. 'The Hand Refrains' (1878), oil on canvas, 987 x 763 mm.



Fig. 3. 'The Godhead Fires' (1878), oil on canvas, 1437 x 1168 mm.

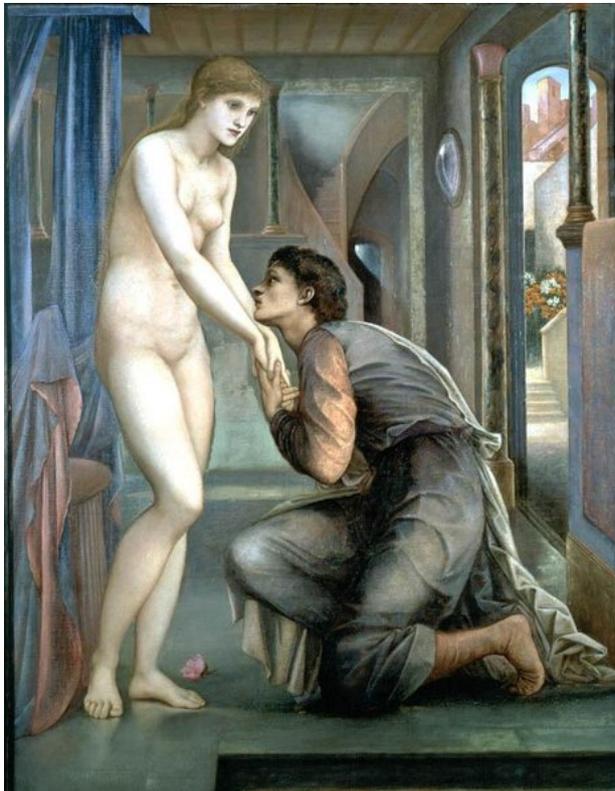


Fig. 4. 'The Soul Attains' (1878), oil on canvas, 994 x 766 mm.

artists and their creations' (2000). She states that 'the figure of the sculptor and that of the sculpture mirror each other, their eyes almost meet in the second canvas. [...] We have a love of self which verges on narcissism, androgyny which does not necessarily move into homoeroticism.'⁴⁰ Arscott acknowledges that in Burne-Jones's series the fantasy woman reflects the artist because she is created solely by him. She is his symbolic daughter and object of his desire:

The art object is identified both with the object of passion: the sexual partner, and with the result of passion: the new life engendered. [...] He does not love anything that represents an other because the object of his passion, though gendered female is something that derives only from him, all his own work.⁴¹

The artist's sculpture is the sculptor's own image, his lover and his child. It is the product of the kind of cerebral masturbation which Durtal speaks of in *Là-Bas*.

Arscott points out that the first canvas displays signs of difference and disorder around the contemplative sculptor, in passing women in the background and the cluster of statues on the right which cast fragmented shadows on the marble floor, but that in the subsequent pieces 'the emphasis is on perfect mirroring and homogeneity.'⁴² Arscott interprets this as a comforting reassurance against the idea of the castrating female. The statue is not 'different' from the male creator, and therefore does not challenge his potency. As Jane Desmarais notes, 'She is simply perceived, created, and then she "becomes", that is, comes into being as a possession for the artist but not for herself. She is a mirror for the artist's skill'.⁴³

However, the artist's potency is called into question in the final image, 'The Soul Attains', [Fig. 4] in which he kneels before the now living woman in a position of apparent submission. When she was a stone image they were equals and their gazes met. Now that she has been brought to life, the woman stands over the man, the subject of his imploring upward gaze. As Jenkyns observes, in Burne-Jones's representation, 'Pygmalion has made the statue himself, and he owns the thing that he has made; yet he

⁴⁰ Caroline Arscott, 'Venus as dominatrix: nineteenth-century artists and their creations', in *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality* ed. by Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 118.

⁴¹ Arscott, 'Venus as dominatrix', p. 117.

⁴² Arscott, 'Venus as dominatrix', p. 117.

⁴³ Jane Desmarais, 'The model on the writers' block: the model in fiction from Balzac to du Maurier', in *Model and Supermodel: The artist's model in British art and culture*, ed. by J. Desmarais, Martin Postle and William Vaughan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 49.

kneels before her. The idea of the creator or possessor as worshipper is one that we shall find in Victorian literature, often in connexion with the Pygmalion myth'.⁴⁴ Jenkyns does not consider the masochistic implications of this scenario, but they are clear, both in terms of the ownership of the ideal and the apparent submission before it. Positioning oneself symbolically beneath another person in a position of apparent submission is one of the strategies of the masochist, and is reminiscent of Catholic worship and Medieval courtly love, both of which are evoked in the Decadent masochistic scenario. The genuflecting posture is adopted as another method of subversive control, since it elevates the woman to a seemingly powerful level. In fact she is forced into the position by the other's (symbolic) actions.

Courtly love

The symbolic kneeling pose can be traced back to the Medieval courtly love poets. The courtly love tradition dates from the late eleventh century in France, and involves a troubadour poet 'converting sexual desire from a degrading necessity of physical life into a spiritually ennobling emotion [...] An elaborate code of behaviour evolved around the tormented male lover's abject obedience to a disdainful, idealized lady, who was usually his social superior.'⁴⁵ It is this position of submissive obeisance which is frequently adopted in Decadent poetry. Joan M. Ferrante, in *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* (1975), proposes that the beloved women of courtly love literature 'personify cosmological forces that govern man's life; in lyric and romance they represent his ideals, his aspirations, the values of his society.'⁴⁶ The woman is a personification, thus a representation, of male ideals and desires. She is not designed to be 'real', but a vessel through which to channel other ideas.

As discussed in my introduction, Anita Phillips describes masochism as a 'parody of courtly love'. However it would appear that courtly love involves an element of masochism, with the male poet deliberately debasing himself before his beloved. In his philosophical and psychoanalytical text, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (1994), Slavoj Žižek makes a connection between masochism and courtly love. Contrary to Phillips, Žižek believes that masochism in fact provides the key to

⁴⁴ Jenkyns, *Dignity and Decadence*, p. 133.

⁴⁵ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 72.

⁴⁶ Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature: From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York, 1975), p. 1, quoted in Antony H. Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 29.

understanding courtly love, claiming that ‘It is only with the emergence of masochism, of the masochist couple, towards the end of the last century that we can now grasp the libidinal economy of courtly love.’⁴⁷ Discussing what he refers to as ‘the masochistic theatre of courtly love’, Žižek refutes the idea that the Lady of courtly love is a sublime object. She is an abstract ideal, but, he warns, ‘this abstract character of the Lady has nothing to do with spiritual purification; rather, it points towards the abstraction that pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner – the Lady is by no means a warm, compassionate, understanding fellow-creature’.⁴⁸ Coldness, cruelty and distance are characteristics of the female tormentor as imagined by the masochist theorised by Deleuze, who also remarks upon the masochist’s power over his tormentor. The abstracted and distant Lady of courtly love therefore shares qualities with the cruel woman of masochism, including the masochist creator. The question of the abstraction of the Lady relates to some brief comments made by Jacques Lacan in his discussion of courtly love.

Lacan’s chapter ‘Courtly Love as Anamorphosis’ (1960) from *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is the basis for Žižek’s theory. Lacan provides a socio-historical account of the courtly love tradition in European poetry around the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and its relevance to modern ideals and expectations of love. Undertaking textual analysis and analysis of the poetic conventions of courtly love, Lacan explores the relationship between subject and object, and anamorphosis. Anamorphosis is an ideal symbol for the cruel woman, as it is a distorted image which appears normal when viewed from a particular point or in a suitable mirror [OED]. The cruel woman is a distortion of an image of woman, a representation rather than a reality. Both Žižek and Lacan make important observations relating to the woman as a mirror for the masculine poet’s narcissistic self-projection, and further, they both make the crucial observation that the woman, presented as the Lady in the courtly love poetic tradition, is not real. The first step to understanding the unreality of the Lady-as-love-object is to acknowledge that ‘she’ is a convention. She is female because tradition dictates that she should be so, and is merely a device for the poet to display his own skill in creating the elaborate terms of address which constitute his poem. Lacan points out that the Lady, when addressed by the troubadour poet as one of the ideals of the courtly love tradition,

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (1994; London: Verso, 2005), p. 89.

⁴⁸ Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 89.

is generic and insubstantial: ‘this Lady is presented with depersonalized characteristics. As a result, writers have noted that all the poets seem to be addressing the same person. [...] In this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance.’⁴⁹

When we think we see the Lady in such poems, what we are really seeing is the poet in the act of projecting himself on to an imaginary, but supposedly female, form which acts as a mirror for his own narcissistic image of himself. Because, as Lacan explains, ‘the element of idealising exaltation that is expressly sought out in the ideology of courtly love [...] is fundamentally narcissistic in character.’⁵⁰ Žižek expands upon Lacan’s observation, explaining that the Lady is part of a process of narcissistic projection, and that paradoxically, ‘the elevation of woman to the sublime object of love equals her debasement into the passive stuff or screen for the narcissistic projection of the male ego-ideal’.⁵¹ Deleuze refers to projection as one of the mechanisms of masochism, and acknowledges that the cruel woman is the ‘double or the reflection of masochism’, since she reflects the masochist’s own desires back to him.⁵² In masochistic poetry with a cruel female object, a pre-existing ideal is relied upon to act as a kind of reflective screen.

Žižek’s observation that the Lady is deprived of real substance is also true of the masochist’s cruel woman, but this is disguised because in the masochistic scenario the traumatic dimension of woman is not ‘rendered invisible’ but enhanced and made excessively visible. This is where the cruel woman type differs from the Lady. The troubadour of courtly love makes a show of symbolically appearing on bended knee before an abstract ideal of beauty and femininity, while the masochist who addresses the apparently cruel woman makes more of a show of her torments. Both paradoxically seem to direct attention away from themselves and on to an ideal (or anti-ideal) but in fact they are subtly drawing attention to themselves. What they appear to reveal to the reader cannot actually be seen.

Courtly love poetry features a single voice speaking to a silent auditor. We also find this technique in Victorian poetry, particularly in the work of Robert Browning (1812-1889)

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 184.

⁵⁰ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 186.

⁵¹ Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 108.

⁵² Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’, p. 41.

who was an influence on the Decadents. Symons wrote *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* (1886) and Dowson praised Browning's 'My Last Duchess' in a letter to Arthur Moore, in which he stated that Browning 'reeks' of morbidezza.⁵³ Dowson associates the poet with the painterly term for creating extreme softness and delicacy in representation of flesh. Browning is Pygmalion-esque, a poet sculptor.

Catherine Maxwell observes that the misogyny of Ovid's Pygmalion is exposed by considering the male subjects of Browning's poems. In her study of the presentation of female subjects in the work of male poets, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (2001), Maxwell recognises that living women are not good enough for both Pygmalion and Browning's speakers. While Pygmalion creates a new female form to match his ideal, Browning's subjects replace living women with copies of themselves. 'Browning's male speakers typically invert Ovid's myth, reducing a woman, even through her death, to a composition of their own creating. They desire feminine simulacra, static art-objects, whose fixed value will reflect their self-estimation.'⁵⁴ Maxwell takes 'Porphyria's Lover' (1849) as an example of such narcissistic control, observing that the dramatic monologue presents the narrative according to the speaker's perspective: 'we see Porphyria only through his eyes.'⁵⁵ Maxwell suggests that the neat symmetry of the poem's action is similarly composed according to his perception. Porphyria appears first to be the active partner, arranging the speaker's position:

She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And stooping, made my cheek lie there⁵⁶

Having strangled her with her own hair, he proceeds to explain how he has arranged her lifeless body to mimic the passive pose she humiliatingly put him in:

I propped her head up as before,

⁵³ Of 'My Last Duchess' Dowson states 'I must have read it a dozen times before to-day: but I have only just appreciated the full subtilty of it. It is wonderful.' Ernest Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, date uncertain (March 1890 or 1891), in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson* collected and edited by Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (London: Cassell & Company, 1967), p. 146.

⁵⁴ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 153.

⁵⁵ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 154.

⁵⁶ Robert Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover' (first published as 'Porphyria' 1836, published as 'Porphyria's Lover' in *Poems*, 1849), in *Selected Poems* ed. by Daniel Karlin (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 17, lines 16-9.

Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still⁵⁷

The speaker's final posing of Porphyria's corpse is an apparent mirroring of her earlier movements. But in fact, he has worked backwards, retrospectively forming her into an image of himself as a creator, albeit one who creates by destroying. Maxwell stresses the importance of reading backwards, acknowledging

the speaker's retrospective reading of Porphyria as his attempt to rationalise, to recast her as a reflection of himself. Porphyria's lover is a Pygmalion who thus continues to work his designs on the body of his beloved long after he has achieved his end [...] while she features as his dead Galatea, he makes her also a version of himself, a lesser Pygmalion.⁵⁸

Not only does he make Porphyria into his image, he imagines he can read her thoughts, that her corpse is now 'glad it has its utmost will'.⁵⁹ He is now imposing his own fantasy on to a dead body. U. C. Knoepfmacher questions whether the body even exists in his investigation of the mechanisms of projection in the dramatic monologue. He asks 'Has this speaker, whose very identity depends on his act of projection, truly killed Porphyria? Indeed, does a "Porphyria" really exist in a shape other than his mind?'⁶⁰ Porphyria is a doomed version of the Lady of courtly love who Žižek and Lacan acknowledge as a nonexistent projection.

Another example Maxwell gives of Browning's Pygmalion figures is the speaker of 'My Last Duchess' (1842). In this poem, we are not privy to the act of murder, since it is only hinted at by the Duke's sinister confession 'I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.'⁶¹ Both the living and the dead body of the Duchess are replaced with her painted image. Maxwell's reading is based on the 'spot / Of joy' in the cheek of the painted Duchess which represents, for the Duke, her infidelity.⁶² It is a reminder of her previous vitality, an involuntary response which he could not control. Now he controls the viewing of the portrait – he can decide who looks at her and for how long, without having to worry that she will betray him. But he is still jealous of her blush, 'Although

⁵⁷ Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover', p. 18, lines 49-51.

⁵⁸ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 154.

⁵⁹ Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover', p. 18, line 53. Maxwell points out that at this point in the poem Porphyria is reduced to 'a doll with a painted face [...] represented by a neuter pronoun.' Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 155. 'She' becomes 'it', an object which he can manipulate and project on to.

⁶⁰ U. C. Knoepfmacher, 'Projection and the Female Other: Romanticism, Browning, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue', *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), p. 152.

⁶¹ Browning, 'My Last Duchess' (1842), in *Selected Poems*, p. 25, lines 45-6.

⁶² Browning, 'My Last Duchess', p. 25, lines 14-5.

painted, the spot defies the Duke's control or suppression, betokening an uncanny animation.'⁶³ The Duchess takes revenge through the jealousy the spot conjures up in the Duke. Maxwell explains, 'The Duke is also Pygmalion in that he animates the portrait. [...] the difference with the Duke is that Browning plays the joke against him; this animation is unwilling and, as such, is the revenge of Galatea.'⁶⁴ However, the animation is also a projection of the Duke's insecurities. The Duchess is a Galatea who reflects his insecure self-perception. She cannot be active and vengeful since she has no corporeal self. Since she is unable to respond and all that is left is her painted likeness, all her actions are viewed through the perspective of the Duke. Was she really flattered by the painter Frà Pandolf, or is this mere speculation from her jealous husband? He gives himself away by overjustifying himself; since we hear neither a reproachful voice from the Duchess, nor from the implied auditor of the Duke's monologue, he is projecting their responses on to both of them. The auditor does not even ask the question which leads to the tale, but the Duke presumes he is thinking it, as he has presumed all prior visitors have. They 'seemed as they would ask me, if they durst, / How such a glance came there'.⁶⁵ The information he volunteers about the glance tells us more about the Duke than it does about the true character of the Duchess.

Fixing the female image

Browning's subjects are different to the masochists of English Decadence as they are desperate for control and derive no pleasure from submitting to women's (perceived) dominance. They also speak *about* women rather than addressing their monologues to them. Browning's monologues exemplify the idea put forward by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) that women are 'killed into art'. Gilbert and Gubar view the fictional woman as 'Authored by a male God and by a godlike male, killed into the "perfect" image of herself'.⁶⁶ To illustrate, they quote Norman O. Brown's comparison of poetry with sexual reproduction: 'Poetry, the creative act, the act of life, the archetypal sexual act. Sexuality is poetry. The lady is our creation, or Pygmalion's statue.'⁶⁷ Brown maintains the notion of male control over women but simultaneously he is trapped in a narcissistic circle. The woman is poetry,

⁶³ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 158.

⁶⁴ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, pp. 157-8.

⁶⁵ Browning, 'My Last Duchess', p. 25, lines 11-12.

⁶⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 15.

⁶⁷ Norman O. Brown, 'Daphne.' In Joseph Campbell, ed., *Mysteries, Dreams, and Religion* (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 93, quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, p. 13.

and she reflects the creator back to himself. Gilbert and Gubar preface their exploration of women writers' attempts to escape male control and speak for themselves with examples of male writers and theorists – both male and female – who view writing as a 'literary paternity' which controls women. The term 'paternity' is loaded with connotations of reproduction and parenting, but in the sexual masochistic model the victim creates his torturer and speaks for her. It is important to remember that in Decadent art male artists attempt to match and even exceed the female capacity for reproduction, but they do so in an artificial way.⁶⁸

As the nineteenth century progresses the presentation of cruel women changes in English Decadent writing. Swinburne's speakers disguise male control and present themselves as helpless, and Dowson's speakers at the end of the century conjure up images of girls who are as cold and helpless as he seemed to feel in life. He 'kills' girls into art where they remain dead and unreachable. All these writers, using various methods, disguise the fact that their female figures represent their own desires and anxieties. Through this we see the problems inherent in the act of creation, in which the male writer becomes trapped in a circle of self-consciousness. English Decadent writing such as Symonds's in fact reveals dissatisfaction with the inanimate ideal and the persistence of the poet's image in the figure of woman. As Glennis Byron observes, 'Most Victorian dramatic monologues feature an auditor who must, in order for the monologue not to slide into dialogue, remain silent, or at least unheard by the reader, since interventions and responses from the auditor are sometimes implied by the speaker's words.'⁶⁹ The 'auditor' remains voiceless, which allows the speaker to control their presentation. If the cruel woman auditor is silent then all we hear is the male voice, and she is effectively spoken into existence according to his masochistic desires.

⁶⁸ Consider for example Des Esseintes's opinion of Nature in *Against Nature*, which is that she has 'had her day', and can be matched and excelled by male creativity, 'After all, to take what among all her works is considered to be the most exquisite, what among all her creations is deemed to possess the most perfect and original beauty – to wit, woman – has not man for his part, by his own efforts, produced as animate yet artificial creature that is every bit as good from the point of view of plastic beauty? Does there exist, anywhere on this earth, a being conceived in the joys of fornication and born in the throes of motherhood who is more dazzlingly, more outstandingly beautiful than the two locomotives recently put into service on the Northern Railway?' Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A rebours)* trans. Robert Baldick (1884; London: Penguin, 2003), p. 23.

⁶⁹ Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 20. Speaking of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's dramatic monologue 'Jenny' (1870) as an example, she observes, 'Jenny, as is usual with the auditor, has no voice...' p. 65.

Maxwell has observed that the artificial or dead female form in Browning's poetry reflects the male speaker back to himself in a narcissistic image. His speakers kill the woman in an attempt to fix her place in their own artwork. This is something we encounter in certain French Decadent texts. In Decadent writing, as Hustvedt has acknowledged, the artificial woman is considered a superior replacement for the natural woman. Hustvedt illustrates her observation of the Decadent divide between the female/natural and the feminine/artificial with reference to the female figures in Huysmans's *A rebours*, in which Des Esseintes'

nightmare vision of an embodied, roving, and female syphilis is countered by Gustave Moreau's adorned and immobile figure of Salome. [...] women in their natural state are festering wounds, graphic symbols of castration, but once rendered 'feminine,' their threat is neutralized through hollowness, and they become ideal, static figures.⁷⁰

Hustvedt focuses on the woman as a castration threat, and she is figured symbolically as such in Huysmans's novel. However, whether the tormenting woman is designed to represent a direct or symbolic castration threat is not the subject under consideration here. What is of interest is the paradox inherent in subduing female energy into a corpse or statue-like figure, while also creating the illusion of female dominance. Hustvedt is aware of the problem of killing woman into art. The Decadent 'desire for an empty, blank feminine body results both logically and paradoxically in the decadent fascination with the corpse.'⁷¹ In the Decadent texts that make up *The Decadent Reader*, 'The inevitable disintegration of the perfect, frozen corpse is solved in a number of these fictions by corpse-copies: paintings, dolls, androids, and wax figures.'⁷²

This is particularly clear in the French text *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) by Rachilde. Her novel can be viewed as a subversive rewriting of the Pygmalion myth, in which the sexes are reversed, and which reveals the Decadent strategy of immobilising the object of desire in an effort to overcome nature. Raoule de Vénérande, the Pygmalion figure, makes herself into a man, having fallen in love with the effeminate Jacques Silvert, who

⁷⁰ Hustvedt, 'The Art of Death' p. 20.

⁷¹ Hustvedt, 'The Art of Death' p. 21. Elisabeth Bronfen also attributes the male fascination with the female corpse to a desire to overcome the problem of the female body and its association with nature. She does not consider Decadent writers in *Over Her Dead Body*, but she acknowledges the divide between the female and the feminine, and regards the corpse as 'an arbitrary, empty, interchangeable sign, an interminable surface for projections.' The corpse is gendered female because of the association of femininity with artifice. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 64.

⁷² Hustvedt, 'The Art of Death', p. 21.

she transforms into a woman and her lover. As Melanie Hawthorne observes in the introduction to her 2004 translation, ‘Raoule is a female Pygmalion who fashions from Jacques a corporeal ideal of male beauty after her own desire’.⁷³ Raoule begins her project before Jacques’s death, but the artifice of clothing cannot completely conceal their physical bodies; nature betrays them. Dorothy Kelly’s examination of gender in the novel also acknowledges Raoule’s narcissistic project of forming Jacques to her desire, in her image. Jacques must remain a man because he can reflect Raoule’s masculine nature back to her, in a narcissistic image. ‘The two members of the couple therefore reflect each other in a reversed mirror image and permit a paradoxical narcissistic object love.’⁷⁴ She is a ‘male’ artist figure, whose creation is a reflection of her fantasy. It is not a perfect mirror image however, as Raoule has a different physical body to her lover. Kelly’s analysis of *Monsieur Vénus* exposes the problem inherent in the Pygmalion model – the fantasy, even when projected on a living body, is not real and cannot be sustained. In this case, the anatomically male Jacques reflects Raoule’s projected sense of self, but she retains female sex characteristics and he remains male; this spoils the fantasy for both of them. When Raoule removes her clothes to reveal her breasts Jacques cries out in disappointment, “‘Raoule, you just aren’t a man! You just can’t be a man!’” And the sob of lost illusions, forever dead, rose from his sides to his throat.’⁷⁵ Therefore she kills him into art.

Like Pygmalion Raoule turns her ideal into a statue, but this statue is made from the body parts of her lover’s corpse, rather than marble. It is ‘a wax figure covered with transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that ornament the mouth, the nails on the hands and feet were torn from a corpse.’⁷⁶ For Kelly, this is a formulaic inversion of the literary devices belonging to the patriarchal system of creation. She reads Raoule as an artist at the expense of being a mother, who sculpts Jacques into the object of her own desire first metaphorically then literally. She is a woman acting out the role of the male artist.⁷⁷ This is more than a simple inversion of the male artist/female mother roles, although

⁷³ Melanie Hawthorne, ‘Introduction, Rachilde: A Decadent Woman Rewriting Women in Decadence’, in Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, trans. by M. Hawthorne (1884; New York, Modern Language Association of America, 2004), p. xxiii.

⁷⁴ Dorothy Kelly, *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 147.

⁷⁵ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 183.

⁷⁶ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 208.

⁷⁷ Kelly, *Fictional Genders*, p.154.

this does make it another fine example of the Decadent attitude to sex and gender roles. It is also an exploration of the control held by the artist. Hawthorne explains, with reference to her revision of the 1929 translation by Madeline Boyd, that she has reinstated the phrase in which the spring in the flanks of the mannequin-Jacques allows him to be penetrated. ‘The hidden spring spreads Jacques’s legs apart; it does not give him an erection. The suppressed phrase makes it clear that Raoule’s relationship with the effigy involves her penetration of him.’⁷⁸ The statue now corresponds with what Raoule wants him to be. She visits him sometimes as a man, sometimes as a woman: ‘At night, a woman dressed in mourning, sometimes a young man in evening clothes’.⁷⁹ The statue is the perfect figure for her to control, a figure of multiple potential genders and sexualities which she can interact with as she desires.

The Pygmalion model is actually reversed: the beloved is killed rather than brought to life as in the original myth. English Decadent writers use similar strategies, but instead of writing about literal artificial figures, they invoke women as Pygmalion’s statues by using imagery of whiteness, coldness, and death. In English Decadent writing we encounter more ambivalence about the statue form. It is not quite the ideal it promises to be. The problem is that women are either alive and natural (and therefore distasteful) or cold, artificial, and unreachable. Decadent writers are genuflecting helplessly beneath the ‘images [their] dreams have wrought’ to escape but not satisfy their desire.⁸⁰ Rather than treating static copies of women, they create the illusion of life. Women are often presented as ‘sadistic’, controlling, and active. According to Maxwell, the problem for Browning is that the art object is not fixed in meaning, it is always in a state of contextual flux.⁸¹ Therefore the female ideals still elude his speakers. It is almost the reverse in Decadence; the cruel woman as artificial creation appears to be vital and alive, but is actually cold and unreachable.

The female tormentor is ‘brought to life’ in Swinburne’s work in a ventriloquist’s performance. As Deleuze observes, in the masochistic scenario the ‘victim speaks through the mouth of his torturer’. The masochist makes his tormentor appear powerful

⁷⁸ Hawthorne, ‘Introduction’, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. xxix.

⁷⁹ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 209.

⁸⁰ This quote comes from Dowson’s poem ‘Epigram’ which turns the Pygmalion myth on its head. It will be discussed more fully in the chapter on Dowson. Ernest Dowson, ‘Epigram’, in *Verses* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 54.

⁸¹ ‘Art-objects cannot be fixed any more than human beings; contexts change them, and no artist or owner can control the divergent responses they may arouse in the viewer.’ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 153.

by making her enact his fantasy.⁸² The cruel woman as Pygmalion's statue is also a kind of ventriloquist's dummy which is 'animated' as the auditor of the poetic monologue. In the next chapter I examine the figure of the cruel woman in selected poems from Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*. Seemingly powerful tormentors like Dolores are called into being by the poet, who speaks to them, making it seem that they exist. I analyse the presentation of Dolores, whose physical description is evocative of a statue. She is cold and immobile, a passive figure at whose feet the speaker symbolically worships. This image is created ventriloquially; her presence is suggested by the poetic voice. I demonstrate this through a comparison with a contemporary twenty-first-century ventriloquist act by Nina Conti. Masochism is a projection of negative feelings on to another person. In Swinburne's poetry his speakers project on to a series of phantasmal female figures. Swinburne makes such women appear vigorous and cruel. The metre of 'Faustine', for example, imitates the physical sensation of being whipped. 'Anactoria' imagines erotic desire as a form of violence which tears apart the lover's body. I return to the ventriloquial model once again to consider Swinburne's use of Sappho as a mouthpiece for his masochistic desires in 'Anactoria'. Cruel women in all these poems are fantasies conjured into being by the poet, a situation which is disguised by addressing them as apparently active and tormenting.

⁸² This very scene is acted out in Huysmans's *Against Nature* in an episode recalled by Des Esseintes in which he had a love affair with a ventriloquist. He would control the fantasies that she would act out for him by throwing her voice: 'With strange intonations that he had made her rehearse beforehand for hours, she gave life and voice to the monsters [statues of mythical beasts Des Esseintes has placed in the room]'. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 100.

CHAPTER TWO

'The raptures and roses of vice'

A. C. Swinburne and the cruel woman in *Poems and Ballads*

Swinburne and the 'fleshly school'

The Decadent masochist is a Pygmalion type, who creates or forms his ideal tormentor according to his will. The cruel women of A. C. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866) are fantasy constructs, rather than *femmes fatales* with independent agency.¹ The *femme fatale* is often described in critical discourse as a female figure which really does exist, is truly powerful, and is a consistent 'type'. Swinburne's women are often described as *femmes fatales*, a misleading term which is applied too generously. For example Mario Praz asserts that Swinburne gave the type of the *femme fatale* its most complete form.² He traces the emergence of the fatal woman type, 'more highly penetrated with aestheticism and exoticism', which arose with Gautier and Flaubert, and 'had its full development in Swinburne' then passed to Wilde and Pater.³ However the so-called '*femme fatale*' is not totally a fatal woman, as I will aim to show.

Maggie Tonkin's chapter on the *femme fatale* in *Angela Carter and Decadence* interrogates the authority of the *femme fatale* figure, calling her a 'fiction of male desire'.⁴ Tonkin's observation informs my own investigation into the way Swinburne presents cruel women in his poetry, as fictions of his own desire. This chapter examines the ways in which Swinburne conjures up images of women through poems that address supposedly cruel women. I return to Browning's dramatic monologues in order to illustrate the way in which Swinburne creates such images. This is essentially a process of ventriloquisation, as the single-sided address creates the impression of another entity who is being spoken to. Helen Davies's work on Victorian ventriloquism supports my analysis of Swinburne's female figures as illusory. Davies acknowledges that there is only ever one person and one voice in the ventriloquist's act, and the audience (or reader) must deny their knowledge of this in order for the illusion to work. For example, 'Dolores' is a Pygmalion's statue called into being by the poet, and she appears real to the reader. Like Pygmalion's ivory-white statue, Dolores has 'heavy

¹ *Poems and Ballads* is dedicated to Edward Burne-Jones.

² 'It was not in France, however, but in England, that this type of Fatal Woman found its most complete form, thanks to the particular sensibility of one who was a partial disciple of Gautier (but in many ways superior to his master) – Algernon Charles Swinburne.' Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 239.

³ Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 226.

⁴ Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence*, p. 139.

white limbs'.⁵ The poem's speaker addresses Dolores and imagines the reciprocation of kisses. However, since she is an idol figure called into being as an embodiment of his fantasy, the speaker is left unfulfilled since the statue remains unresponsive. Cruel women in Swinburne's poems appear to be active but are really mirrors for the projection of masculine desire. Swinburne is able to evoke violence through language and enact it on the reader. We encounter this in 'Faustine', in which the metre replicates the rhythm of being whipped. Catherine Maxwell considers Swinburne to be a feminised poet whose own masochism works in harmony with the subject-matter of cruel women. In 'Anactoria' Swinburne speaks in the guise of Sappho, ventriloquising her and envisaging desire as painful torment. Yopie Prins argues that Swinburne imposes his own image over Sappho's, appropriating her voice and obscuring her identity. Although here he takes the role of a female speaker and projects an image of lesbian desire, the subject-matter of the sadomasochistic relationship with Anactoria, is no departure from the relationship model he uses throughout *Poems and Ballads*, in which apparent submission disguises the control of the ventriloquist poet. The cruel woman of Decadent fictions is an illusion, and masochism is a theatrical process of denial; of the masochist's power and the tormentor's need for the masochist's apparent submission respectively. The mechanisms of the apparent victim's control in the masochistic scenario are subtle, because their control is well hidden by the adopted pose of submission and helplessness.

Such a pose is assumed in Swinburne's 'The Leper' which is similar to Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover' in its disturbing power dynamic. The masochistic experience of love as painful, and the manipulation of the body of the lover, is a literalisation of the dynamics of the masochistic model in which the cruel woman is a screen for the projection of the masochist's perception of his own desires. The speaker in Swinburne's poem delivers his address to the reader from beside the leprous corpse of his beloved, who has been dead for six months:

Six months, and I sit still and hold
 In two cold palms her cold two feet.
 Her hair, half grey half ruined gold,
 Thrills me and burns me in kissing it.⁶

⁵ A. C. Swinburne, 'Dolores', in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (1866; London: Penguin, 2000), p. 122, line 3.

⁶ Swinburne, 'The Leper', in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 98, lines 101-4.

Her corpse can be manipulated now that she is dead. The power dynamic between the two is reversed; when she was alive and well he ‘served her in a royal house’ and she was scornful of him.⁷ Her disease and death have brought her to him; he has sequestered her away to hide her shame and continued to serve her until her death. He is now able to arrange her hair and kiss her as he could not while she was living, ‘I can kiss / Her eyes, plait up her hair’.⁸ She has become a macabre doll whose form he uses to fulfil the fantasies he had while she was alive. This is a courtly romance turned sinister. The speaker remembers that when she was well, ‘For will to kiss between her brows, / I had no heart to sleep or eat. / Mere scorn God knows she had of me’.⁹ The speaker is a would-be troubadour who initially abased himself before the disdainful lady and now has control. Nevertheless he still imagines himself abused by love. His love is painful; the sight of her hair ‘thrills’ and ‘burns’ him. Her decaying corpse has the same effect as her beautiful body did when she was alive: ‘Love bites and stings me through, to see / Her keen face made of sunken bones. / Her worn-off eyelids madden me’.¹⁰ The speaker masochistically indulges in the pain of desire. However, unlike Browning’s speaker he maintains awareness of his lowly situation and imagines that his beloved lady maintained her scorn for him and love with her old paramour, a knight who ‘found her a plague to spurn away’ when she became infected.¹¹ He projects his fantasy of her thoughts on to her, but not in a delusional fashion. ‘Yea, all this while I tended her, / I know the old love held fast his part: / I know the old scorn waxed heavier’.¹² The beloved still occupies the position of the disdainful Lady of courtly love. She appears to dominate him even while he has complete power over her physical form.

Swinburne, along with his contemporary Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who published *Poems* in 1870, was condemned by Robert Buchanan for being part of the ‘Fleshly School of Poetry’. J. B. Bullen explains of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite painters that

It would be difficult to find a place in nineteenth-century culture where the struggle between fear and desire was more acute than in the representation of the sexualized woman, but it was through that representation that both the ‘fleshly school of poetry’ and the ‘fleshly school of painting’ came into being.¹³

⁷ Swinburne, ‘The Leper’, p. 95, line 5.

⁸ Swinburne, ‘The Leper’, p. 96, lines 15-6.

⁹ Swinburne, ‘The Leper’, pp. 95-6, lines 7-9.

¹⁰ Swinburne, ‘The Leper’, p. 99, lines 105-7.

¹¹ Swinburne, ‘The Leper’, p. 97, line 68.

¹² Swinburne, ‘The Leper’, p. 99, lines 125-7.

¹³ J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 49.

Here, Bullen explicitly connects the particular emphasis on the flesh and the (female) figure with the tension caused by ambivalent male feeling towards women. Pre-Raphaelite art was poorly received; as noted by Bullen, it was critically derided for portraying ugly, sexual, androgynous figures. It also drew criticism for the type of woman portrayed – the ‘fallen’ prostitute, or the fantasy fatal woman.¹⁴ Swinburne was also singled out for criticism by Buchanan, who heard echoes of Baudelaire in his work. As Buchanan complained in his 1872 attack on the ‘Fleshly School’, Swinburne’s blasphemy is ‘an importation transplanted from the French Scrofulous School, and conveyed, with no explanation of its origin, at second hand.’¹⁵ The female body was the focus of much criticism. The female figures in Swinburne were condemned as icons of a dangerous ideology, as Bullen points out:

Swinburne’s females stand against the idealization of femininity, the sentimentalizing of love, against the orthodox division of flesh and spirit; they reject the denial of the body, and the Manichaeian division of heaven and hell, and they question the dogmas of Christianity, particularly its submissiveness and self-abnegation. In their outrageous assault on so much that the mid-century held dear, Swinburne’s women have no interest in the franchise, in reforming the divorce laws, or in female education.¹⁶

Bullen is articulating the fears of the Victorian audience and the perceived threat posed by the apparently cruel woman. Swinburne does create female figures which, in combination with the submissive male who accompanies them, appear to be powerful and intimidating. His poems often adopt the formula of a male voice speaking to a silent female; a masochistic address to a cruel woman. This is the case in ‘Dolores’, ‘Faustine’, and ‘Satia Te Sanguine’. ‘Anactoria’ is also an address to a silent female, but through the adopted persona of Sappho. However, speaking of these women, as Bullen does, as though they have personalities and agency outside of the text does not take into account the mechanics of the situation, and this is the focus of this chapter. It is not a woman’s assault which is portrayed – as though Dolores could walk off the page and ‘tramp[le] male history beneath her feet’ as Paglia has suggested – but Swinburne’s attempt to form the female image to his will.¹⁷ His agency is hidden behind the apparently fierce and destructive characters of the women he projects into his work. The

¹⁴ Bullen, *Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 49.

¹⁵ Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry, and Other Phenomena of the Day* (London: Strahan & Co., 1872), p. 28.

¹⁶ J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 168-169.

¹⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 463, quoted in Bullen, *Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 168.

‘fleshly’ female figures that haunt Swinburne’s work are not physical beings at all; they are not as fleshly as they seem. As Bullen elsewhere remarks about Rossetti’s female figures, referring to ‘recent feminist criticism [which] has stressed the absence of agency in the female in Rossetti’s work’ they are ‘spectres which haunt the mind of their creator.’¹⁸ Such imagined fatal women are in fact ethereal phantoms, a paradox considering their supposed ‘fleshliness’.

Kathy Alexis Psomiades makes reference to this problem of a real-seeming yet somehow inaccessible cruel woman. She has observed that ‘What Swinburne’s poetry does, even in the most sensational poems of *Poems and Ballads First Series*, is to provide a version of Beauty that resists visual appropriation.’ Psomiades also notes, ‘Swinburne creates women who are looked at yet somehow not seen’.¹⁹ It is challenging to define exactly how this is the case, since it is such a subtle manoeuvre. The tactic of the male voice speaking to and for a silent female auditor creates the illusion that there is another figure present, when in fact she is a reflection or projection of a male ideal. Buchanan is critical of Swinburne’s imitation of Baudelaire, who ‘had a mad pleasure in considering the world a charnel-house, and in posing the figures of Love and Beauty in the agonies of disease and the ghastly stillness of death.’²⁰ Although Buchanan’s piece is a histrionic attack on the supposed amorality of Swinburne’s and Baudelaire’s verse, this idea of ‘posing figures’ is significant; it echoes the masochistic theatre in which the tormentor is posed according to the will of the masochist. That the figures are of the abstract ideals of ‘Love’ and ‘Beauty’ is also significant, since it substitutes the representations of individual female bodies for the ideals that they are thought to represent, thus dehumanising them. All that is really revealed is the poet; the image of the female object reflects no more than masculine desire, and the female image is formed by the masculine voice. Chris Snodgrass comments on the passivity of such women in Swinburne’s poetry, which is disguised by their description as active: ‘As

¹⁸ Bullen, *Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 147, p. 148. In terms of recent feminist criticism Bullen refers in particular to Amanda Anderson’s view of Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’ as ‘not [...] an acting, conscious subject’, in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), p. 151, and Griselda Pollock’s observation that the female figure is only a visual image, a signifier, in the paintings, in ‘Woman as Sign: Psychological Readings’, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London, 1988), p. 113. However, Bullen argues with this, stating that ‘Though both these views are true, what they omit is that within that discourse on masculinity the female is envisaged as significantly, if damagingly, empowered.’ Bullen, p. 147.

¹⁹ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 59, p. 90, quoted in Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 193.

²⁰ Buchanan, *The Fleshly School*, p. 27.

devouring as his *femmes fatales* often seem, they are fundamentally passive. The lover feels the need to gain access; he pleads for his beloved to respond to his passion.²¹ Snodgrass places the emphasis on the ‘lover’s’ voice, speaking aloud to passive women, who are inaccessible because they are merely fantasies. They exist only in so far as they are described by the poetic voice, and are rarely given their own voices. For example, in ‘Satia Te Sanguine’, the poetic voice tells the vampiric woman ‘you thrill as his pulses dwindle’, but the whole poem is a monologue directed towards this figure whose voice we never hear.²² The poetic voice betrays a masochistic excitement at the notion that a woman could be thrilled by such a thing, but the excitement and thrill is, in fact, all his. This is also the case in ‘Dolores’, in which the masochist imagines the cruel woman to have ‘ravenous teeth that have smitten / Through the kisses that blossom and bud’, but is unable to actually experience these things because Dolores is an imaginary goddess-figure.²³ He pleads ‘I adjure thee, respond from thine altars’, but there is no response – this is an unheard plea because its object does not exist.²⁴ She is, instead, a kind of Pygmalion’s statue, called into being by the poet. Of course, Pygmalion’s artistic creation, Galatea, is meek compared to the kind of women Swinburne imagines.

The statuesque Dolores

In her study of the *femme fatale*, Virginia M. Allen states that ‘Swinburne had in fact described Dolores as though he were gazing on an enamelled altarpiece that, Pygmalion-like, he had called into life.’²⁵ Elements of the description of Dolores invoke images of an immobile, statuesque figure, particularly the opening lines:

Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
 Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
 The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
 Red mouth like a venomous flower [...].²⁶

These cold eyelids, hard eyes like jewels, and heavy white limbs are all indicative of something not living, not quite real. In her essay ‘Nature, Sex, and Decadence’ from *Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (1986), Camille Paglia has suggested that Swinburne’s cruel women are ‘titanic projections of female hierarchical authority over male

²¹ Chris Snodgrass, ‘Swinburne’s Circle of Desire: A Decadent Theme’, in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher, p. 73.

²² Swinburne, ‘Satia Te Sanguine’, in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 72, line 61.

²³ Swinburne, ‘Dolores’, p. 126, lines 12-3.

²⁴ Swinburne, ‘Dolores’, p. 12, line 119.

²⁵ Allen, *Femme Fatale*, p. 118.

²⁶ Swinburne, ‘Dolores’, p. 122, lines 1-4.

imagination'.²⁷ The 'female authority' she describes is connected with woman's powerful place in the reproductive system and the threat this poses to male creativity. 'Dolores' depicts the image of a man in submission to an apparently threatening female figure. As Allen has observed, Dolores appears to be an 'enamelled altarpiece', which suggests that the speaker of the poem is on bended knee before her, like the troubadour of courtly love.

Swinburne was influenced by medieval literary tradition, as documented by Antony H. Harrison in *Swinburne's Medievalism*.²⁸ Harrison connects Swinburne's passionate love poetry with courtly love, stating that 'Swinburne's mythology of passion is derived primarily from courtly love literature.'²⁹ The 'bended knee' stance which the masochist adopts, whether in reality or only symbolically, is ambiguous. It is an image which suggests genuflection, humble supplication, or enforced subjugation. 'Dolores' deliberately combines the notion of worship, of a figure which is at once holy and devilish, with submission. Dolores is considered to be an altarpiece, rather than just a marble statue, for example, because of the religious symbolism which runs throughout the poem. She is paradoxically both a 'high', virtuous, and 'low', sinful icon. She is called 'Our Lady' like the Catholic Virgin, but she is also nurtured on sin – 'What sins gave thee suck?' – and associated with hell and the devil.³⁰ This devilish goddess figure is a concept rather than a depiction of a real woman. Through the male poetic voice which speaks her into being, Swinburne creates a scenario in which he symbolically adopts poses of masochistic submission and of worship, both of which posit the object of worship as something more powerful than the worshipper. The poetic voice assumes a position of masochistic submission by imagining a cruel and powerful female entity to which he must submit.

The perverse sinfulness of the masochist's relationship with Dolores, who is an image he himself has created, can again be connected with Huysmans's Durtal in *Là-Bas* and his celebratory idea of the ultimate transgression of the 'Pygmalionist', who creates an image of a saint, then falls in love with it, thus committing the double perversity of incest and soiling the purity of a devout figure. That this all takes place in the mind of

²⁷ Paglia, 'Nature, Sex, and Decadence', p. 226.

²⁸ 'Swinburne's frequent use of the Middle Ages and its literature as a frame of reference when evaluating literary developments in his own era makes clear that the impact of medieval literature and values upon the poet was enormous.' Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism*, p. 5.

²⁹ Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism*, p. 20.

³⁰ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 123, line 48.

the projecting artist does not hinder Durtal's enjoyment of the sinful notion. The fantasy aspect does not negate the reality of the perversion, for him. This cerebral masturbation is conceived of in interpersonal terms, with two figures – the artist and the creation, or in place of the creation, a succubus which assumes its shape during the night – even though it is entirely the product of a single mind.³¹

'Dolores' is spoken entirely by the voice of a male lover. This poem is written in a regular rhyme scheme and metre, and returns, like an incantation, to the refrain 'Our Lady of Pain' which ends every second stanza. It is predictably, unmistakably, a cry directed towards a female. However, the female centre of this poem is an imaginary one. As Jerry Palmer argues, 'Dolores is less a person than an idea – precisely the algolagniac phantasm.'³² Rather than being a single, identifiable, human figure, Dolores is conceived as a kind of 'everywoman', whose 'skin changes country and colour'.³³ She is a universal type which is ageless and timeless, the poetic voice tells her that 'Loves die, and we know thee immortal'.³⁴ She is also referred to as 'my sister, my spouse, and my mother' – a female type encompassing several of the possible facets of female identity.³⁵ Obviously this is an impossible set of positions to inhabit in relation to one man; rather 'Our Lady of Pain' is a phantasmagorical figure, representative of these values, but not a true embodiment of them. She is also a representation of sex and death, a Paglia-esque 'womb-tomb' She is a myth born of myths, described as the child of an ancient Greek fertility god and Roman goddess of funerals, 'Libitina thy mother, Priapus / Thy father, a Tuscan and Greek.'³⁶ Dolores is therefore similar to the beloved woman of the courtly love tradition, who is not a real person but representative of the ideals of the male who addresses 'her'. At no point is she allowed to intervene in the monologue by which she is addressed – she has no voice, no suggestion of an actual or stable identity.

Dolores is conceived of in terms of coldness and immobility, adding to her passivity. The male voice is a Pygmalion-masochist type, and the tormenting woman is formed according to his desires. These are Decadent desires. I have already mentioned the deliberate subversion of religious imagery in the description of Dolores. Similarly, the

³¹ Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, p. 178.

³² Palmer, 'Fierce Midnights', p. 101.

³³ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 131, line 289.

³⁴ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 124, line 55.

³⁵ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 127, line 151.

³⁶ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 124, lines 51-2.

floral imagery which is associated with Dolores, and representative of her femininity, is inverted to suggest negative qualities. This is a typically Decadent trope, originating with Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*. Dolores has a 'Red mouth like a venomous flower', and is addressed as a 'mystical rose of the mire'.³⁷ This sinful red rose is an exciting antidote to the dull and colourless languor of virtue. At the mere touch of Dolores's lips, men are said to 'change in a trice / The lilies and languors of virtue / For the raptures and roses of vice'.³⁸ In 'Dolores', sin is a comfort, as is masochism – the pleasure and pain being representative of vitality, which is the opposite of mortality. The turn towards vice through a sexual encounter with a cruel woman is a brief antidote to thoughts of human mortality; an attempt to escape the knowledge that love and beauty will turn to decay. In the following stanzas, the poetic ideal represented by Dolores is exemplary of men turning to some universal timeless ideal of beauty for reassurance.

No thorns go as deep as a rose's,
 And love is more cruel than lust.
 Time turns the old days to derision,
 Our loves into corpses or wives;
 And marriage and death and division
 Make barren our lives.

And pale from the past we draw nigh thee,
 And satiate with comfortless hours;
 And we know thee, how all men belie thee,
 And we gather the fruit of thy flowers;
 The passion that slays and recovers,
 The pangs and the kisses that rain
 On the lips and the limbs of thy lovers,
 Our Lady of Pain.³⁹

The imagined cruelty of nature is connected with the natural cycle: as flowers bloom and die, time causes people to grow old and die. Dolores's floral charms provide brief comfort against these thoughts. The pain of the rose's thorns signifies beauty and the pain caused by appreciation of this beauty. As the 'fruits of Dolores's flowers' are gathered, a painful yet pleasurable sexual experience, with 'pangs and kisses' is imagined, which may satiate but does not bring comfort. Here again Dolores is a universal female type. She cannot possibly be satisfying 'all men', so she stands in for the concept of femaleness. It is worth noting that 'all men belie' Dolores. Men give a false impression of Dolores, so she, and therefore the concept of woman which she

³⁷ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 123, line 21.

³⁸ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 124, lines 65-8.

³⁹ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 127, lines 155-68.

stands for, is misrepresented in accounts of her. She is also drawn forth in fantasy ‘pale from the past’, as though she is a pale statue or ghostly figure which is not real.

Camille Paglia also describes Swinburne’s presentation of Dolores as that of a statue, this time a fragmented one. She notes that in the poem, ‘The erotic object disintegrates into parts. Dolores’ “heavy white limbs” float surreally into view between eyes and red mouth, as if she were a broken statue.’⁴⁰ Paglia here acknowledges the fragmentary presentation of Dolores. She is described in parts which do not make up a tangible whole. Tonkin’s observation of Baudelaire’s use of synecdoche when representing Jeanne Duval in poetry is a study of such anatomisation. Describing the woman in fragmented parts becomes a means of ensuring the poet’s superiority, making the poem more valuable than the muse, because the poem remains immortal. Tonkin theorises that

Baudelaire, for example, represents Duval in terms of her jewels, her hair, her exotic perfume, her black thighs, rather than giving a comprehensive description of her person. The poet’s words, his synecdoches, outlive both the body of the muse he extols and the poet himself. The synecdoche is thus invested with greater value than the person for whom it stands, because the poem, hypothetically at least, is immortal.⁴¹

In the case of ‘Dolores’, the woman’s immortality matches the poem’s. Dolores is the poem, she is what the poet has created. Linda Saladin acknowledges that this strategy does not empower the woman. The anatomisation of the female body subordinates the feminine to the masculine creative power of the poet. Again in reference to Baudelaire and the synecdochal technique, she observes that he strips feminine power by controlling her figuration: ‘In elevating the adornment, Baudelaire detaches and figuratively castrates the feminine by breaking it up synecdochally and thereby dismantling its power. His poems tend to dwell on women, but only on one element of their power – hair, lips, isolated movement.’⁴² She is fragmented, distanced, ‘rendered sterile and useless.’⁴³

If Dolores is to be conceived of as an immortal fantasy, a statue, a surface, or a concept which is not quite real, then the image of her vampirically ‘feeding’ from the male who speaks her into being, with her synecdochally disembodied ‘lips that no bloodshed

⁴⁰ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 461.

⁴¹ Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence*, pp. 132-3.

⁴² Linda A. Saladin, *Fetishism and Fatal Women: Gender, Power, and Reflexive Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 71.

⁴³ Saladin, *Fetishism and Fatal Women*, p. 72.

could satiate' may be a symbolic representation of the sexual act exhausting or draining him, but is also suggestive of the energy required to create the image of her from nothing.⁴⁴ The more alive she seems, the more she appears to be a genuine aggressor, biting and sucking his blood, the more the poet becomes obscured. This suggests that he has been successful in his project. For example, Paglia thinks Dolores is a drain on the poet. She hypothesises that Swinburne becomes a Tiresias figure inviting Dolores to feed from his breast; though she is vampiric she is not nourished, 'for male breasts are eternally dry, an archetypal creative curse. Man is no Muse.'⁴⁵ Despite the physiological accuracy of Paglia's statement I would argue from the opposite perspective. As Tonkin points out, it is the muse who is diminished by the poetic process of writing. Dolores is conceived and called into being precisely by the poet and his creative powers. The poetic process is tormenting, and the relationship with women is tormenting – they become analogous for one another.

The cruel woman as ventriloquist's illusion

Pygmalionism is a projection of the self into one's own artwork, and in the case of Ovid's myth and Huysmans's version in *Là-Bas*, Pygmalion's creation is a physical one, a statue or a painted image. In the case of Swinburne's 'Dolores', the ideal is an image created ventriloquially through words. Ventriloquism is a process of projecting one's voice through an object external to the self, presenting it with the characteristics of an independent being yet all the while speaking for it. In the nineteenth century, as Helen Davies points out, ventriloquism was becoming a popular form of music hall entertainment. In *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (2012), Davies explores ventriloquism, both as an analogy for the process of re-imagining Victorian fictions and histories in Neo-Victorian literature, and as a trope in nineteenth-century fictions. Citing Janet Beizer (among others), Davies argues that being ventriloquised, during that era, was considered to be a female condition. The role of medium was predominantly taken by women; women were more frequently thought to be possessed, or to be hysterical. Thus 'The state of being "ventriloquized", of having the voice suppressed or appropriated by external forces

⁴⁴ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 130, line 263.

⁴⁵ Paglia, 'Nature, Sex, and Decadence', p. 226. Paglia's argument is similar to that of Catherine Maxwell that the male poet attempts to feminise himself (in this case, take on the reproductive and nurturing ability of women) through his writing.

repeatedly manifests as a feminized condition.’⁴⁶ The cruel woman is a female figure without a voice of her own; she is spoken into being and spoken for, as the victim adopts the voice of his tormentor. She is a kind of ventriloquist’s performance.

In the nineteenth century, women were frequently denied a voice in public discourse; they were spoken about but discouraged from speaking. Janet Beizer’s study *Ventriloquized Bodies* (1994) explores the way in which the bodies of female hysterics were ventriloquised by the male doctors who pathologised and narrated their condition. Beizer explains,

Female bodily discourse, an illusionist’s work, turns out to be a ventriloquist’s hoax. [...] I intend [ventriloquism] as a metaphor to evoke the narrative process whereby woman’s speech is repressed in order to be expressed as inarticulate body language, which must then be dubbed by a male narrator.⁴⁷

In this case, it is the physical body of the hysteric, whose ability to speak for herself has been denied her, which is translated and spoken for by the men who diagnose her. Beizer also investigates the practice of dermatographism – writing on the skin – which would literally impose words upon the body of the hysterical patient. Beizer’s idea of the ‘ventriloquised body’ is, however, both useful and misleading for this thesis. While it articulates the idea of speaking for a female figure by describing her physical attributes and actions, it also suggests that the ‘body’ is physically present – and in the case of Beizer’s hysterics, it is. As Psomiades has pointed out, and I demonstrate, Swinburne’s cruel women are fantasies without bodies. However, he creates the impression of a physical presence by appearing to address such female figures.

In *fin-de-siècle* fiction, male writers explored the notion of appropriating the female voice. George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894) tells the story of Trilby’s ‘possession’ by the hypnotist Svengali, who manipulates her mind, body, and voice, so that she becomes an accomplished singer. Male writers themselves also acted as ventriloquists, and Swinburne was one of several poets who reappropriated the figure of Sappho, using her as a mouthpiece for their own words. Yopie Prins explores this in depth in *Victorian Sappho* (1999). ‘Anactoria’ is consistent with the male voice speaking ‘through’ the figure of Sappho. My use of the ventriloquism analogy in relation to Swinburne’s work

⁴⁶ Helen Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 22.

⁴⁷ Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 9.

differs slightly. In many of Swinburne's monologue poems such as 'Dolores', the 'dummy' does not exist. The female figure is the imagined subject of the address. 'She' is spoken to and is conjured up in this way, as the image of a mute, female figure who seems to have agency. Readers of the poem accept the illusion and 'see' a woman being addressed by the male speaker, and therefore put words in her mouth, by imagining there is a mouth for words to be put into. Instead of calling Dolores into a real existence, it seems that Swinburne is gazing at something lifeless; if not literally an altarpiece, then a fantasy image of woman, which he is trying to invest with vitality. As the ventriloquist animates the dummy by talking *through* it, Swinburne makes Dolores seem alive by talking *to* her, or rather to his fantasy of her. The poem begins with lines which suggest the object of the poem is cold and immovable. This initial suggestion means that the rest of the poem in which she is attributed with more 'life', is just a fantasy.

Swinburne creates the illusion of the image of another person, as ventriloquists do with their actual dummies. It is the talking to, rather than the talking through, which is important in this dynamic. To illustrate, I turn briefly to a contemporary twenty-first-century ventriloquist, Nina Conti, and her 2011 stage show *Talk to the Hand*. Conti's trademark act is an interaction with a monkey puppet called Monkey, which she uses to deconstruct the act of ventriloquism for comic effect. At the end of the show, Conti stages this deconstruction by putting the puppet away and continuing to speak in 'his' voice, eventually even moving her mouth as she does so, yet still managing to maintain the illusion that the puppet character is speaking, having taken possession of her body. Of course, we know that the ventriloquist's act is an illusion in which one person creates the appearance of two characters. In Conti's case, there is the Monkey character, who is rude, abusive, and crude – he is especially disparaging of Conti's profession as a ventriloquist – and the 'Nina Conti' character, which is the persona she adopts on stage. The illusion is aided by the contrast between the two characters: the brash Monkey seems to have a completely different personality from Nina, who plays the innocent, shocked counterpart.⁴⁸ These characters seem to talk to one another, appearing to be a double act, rather than a single person acting both. Even when Monkey 'says' something which deconstructs the act, for example, that Nina's other puppets are 'all

⁴⁸ Though Monkey does deconstruct this as well: 'I don't know why you act so shocked, it comes from your sick mind!' Nina Conti, *Talk to the Hand*, ©Beyond Home Entertainment, 2011, broadcast on BBC4, Sunday 26 May 2013.

shit ‘cause they’re all you’, the illusion necessarily has to be maintained for the exchange to continue.⁴⁹ Nina asks Monkey, ‘can you not deconstruct the act so early on?’, to which Monkey responds ‘do you reckon they think you’re talking to a real monkey?’ Thus, the deconstruction and the act can paradoxically coexist and reinforce one another in parallel. Even though the words that are spoken clearly refer to the fact that ventriloquism is a trick, and that everything which is said is said by Nina, the fact that the words are spoken in different voices, which replicate an interaction between two independent speakers, maintains the illusion of a two-person conversation. It is easy for the audience to accept the illusion that Monkey is an independent character talking back to Nina. This has to do with the terms of address used throughout; it is difficult not to suspend disbelief when Nina and the puppet ‘character’ address one another as ‘you’, and she refers to herself as ‘I’. The very act of creating another entity who is referred to as something external to the self, with its own personality, makes the act compelling and believable, at least to the extent that the act works, the audience can enjoy surrendering to the illusion to the extent that knowledge of the illusion is not an obstacle to its effectiveness.

As Davies acknowledges,

in the specific context of the dummy/vent performance, ventriloquism is an *illusion* of abnegated autonomy on the part of the ventriloquist as s/he orchestrates his/her own lack of control. The audience also engages in a willing self-deception as, although the personality of the dummy is often captivating, we still know that it is just a puppet animated by the hand and voice of the ventriloquist. The ‘origin’ of voice is never seriously in doubt.⁵⁰

Orchestrating one’s own lack of control is evocative of the masochistic scenario, which is also an illusion of subjection. Swinburne achieves this when his speakers address a female other in his monologue poems. However, there is a difference because Swinburne’s cruel women often do not have voices, and because he does manage to maintain a sense of distance between himself as the origin of the woman’s cruelties. There is therefore a sense of doubt about the origin of the voice.

‘Satia Te Sanguine’ laments the pain inflicted by a cruel woman. The title translates from Latin to ‘glut thyself with blood’, and comes from the Latin version of a Greek

⁴⁹ Conti, *Talk to the Hand*.

⁵⁰ Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism*, p. 18.

account by Herodotus of the Persian king Cyrus. It was spoken by Queen Tomyris whose son had been killed by Cyrus, as she dropped the severed head of Cyrus into a bowl of human blood. Apart from the title, Swinburne's poem does not invoke the story at all. He thus turns the phrase from an address by a vengeful woman seeking to take revenge for her son's death, to a command directed towards the cruel woman, which both implies that she is a vampire type, and takes away her agency as a man appropriates a woman's words. As with 'Dolores', this poem begins with an address to a cruel woman who does not have a voice in the poem, and who is nameless in this case. She is identified as tormenting the poetic voice by holding him in bondage, but is not initially identified as female:

If you loved me ever so little,
I could bear the bonds that gall,
I could dream the bonds were brittle;
You do not love me at all.⁵¹

The words seem to come from a spurned lover, although it is not clear who he is addressing. Nor is it clear what the bonds are or where they come from. They may be literal, imposed by a tormenting woman. However, it seems more likely that the bonds are metaphysical, representing the feeling of being chained to life and imprisoned by his own feelings. The pain of love hurts the spirit more than the flesh, the poetic voice laments that 'In the heart is the prey for gods, / Who crucify hearts, not hands.'⁵² The poem thus moves from a musing on love in the form of an address to the cruel woman, evolving into more abstract thoughts about the cruelty of the gods, who are attributed with the responsibility for his own tormented soul. The pain of loving and living is more spiritual than fleshly:

Where, when the gods would be cruel,
Do they go for a torture? where
Plant thorns, set pain like a jewel?
Ah, not in the flesh, not there!⁵³

The body is mortal, so physical torment is transient but 'In the infinite spirit is room / For the pulse of an infinite pain.'⁵⁴ His pain is imagined as being controlled by something external (the gods) but actually this is an internal impulse, he is doing battle

⁵¹ Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 70, lines 1-4.

⁵² Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 71, lines 27-8.

⁵³ Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 71, lines 21-5.

⁵⁴ Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 71, lines 31-2.

with his own feelings. Like the imaginary gods who crucify his heart, the figure of woman is accused of being cruel because she is loved.

You are crueller, you that we love,
 Than hatred, hunger, or death;
 You have eyes and breasts like a dove,
 And you kill men's hearts with a breath.⁵⁵

The use of 'we' in this stanza creates an ambiguity about whether the pronoun 'you' is singular or plural to match 'we'. Is one woman with multiple lovers being addressed here, or is the female object of the poem representative of many women? This calls into question whether we could speak of a single cruel woman being the focus of this poem. Even if she is a single entity, as Dolores is supposed to be, she is described very impersonally, with generic feminine characteristics, not a fully-formed personality. The femininity of the object of 'Satia Te Sanguine' becomes evident from the second stanza onward, which refers to her female body parts, 'O beautiful lips, O bosom / More white than the moon's and warm'.⁵⁶ Like Dolores, this female entity is white, pure and beautiful, but is invested with a warmth that is lacking in the description of Dolores. She is no more real than Dolores though; she is still a projection of male fantasy. This can be explained by considering the personification of love in the poem.

Love is personified so that 'he' becomes a character in the drama, separating the poet's own feelings from himself and making them assume human form. This is what Swinburne does with the female figure, too. He is really talking in the abstract about love and desire, but the way he personifies woman can be taken as a representative of a real person whereas it is obvious there is no real human 'love' figure. As with 'Dolores', in which a scene is set with 'Low fires that love sits by and forges / Fresh heads for his arrows and thine',⁵⁷ the woman is portrayed as a conspirator with and corruptor of love. In 'Satia Te Sanguine', love is imagined as more of a masochistic figure than the forger of arrow-heads he is in 'Dolores'. Of love, the female figure is told,

As a tame beast writhes and wheedles,
 He fawns to be fed with wiles;
 You carve him a cross of needles,
 And whet them sharp as your smiles.

⁵⁵ Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 72, lines 45-8.

⁵⁶ Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 70, lines 5-6.

⁵⁷ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 131, lines 285-6.

He is patient of thorn and whip,
 He is dumb under axe or dart;
 You suck with a sleepy red lip
 The wet red wounds in his heart.

You thrill as his pulses dwindle,
 You brighten and warm as he bleeds,
 With insatiable eyes that kindle
 And insatiable mouth that feeds.⁵⁸

Here, again, the woman is imagined as a vampire figure who saps energy and lifeblood. However, rather than being the poet's own, in this case it is 'love's', another invented character in an invented scenario. Thus, the vampirism, and therefore the torture and torment, is exposed as a figment of the poet's imagination, not something which can be said to have taken place.

In spite of this alleged conspiracy with love, it does not seem as though the female object of the address really has agency. She simply exists as the beloved. It is the man's feelings, which in this poem are externalised and attributed to the gods as well as to the woman, which are really 'cruel' here, and they are uncontrollable, intangible. The personification of love is an ideal means to illustrate how the woman is also a personification of 'cruel feelings'; love as a character is a complementary unreal entity to the cruel woman. In this poem (and in 'Dolores') they interact with one another, enacting the private drama which takes place in the consciousness of the male troubadour, lover, or masochist who speaks them into being.

In her reading of Wilde's prison letter *De Profundis* (1897) Davies offers an account of a similar technique of the speaker of a monologue to a silent auditor, which ventriloquises the beloved addressee without giving them a voice. Davies acknowledges that, because the letter is an address to an individual – in this case Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie) – it is a way of extending agency over that individual, inviting him to speak but also speaking for him. The imprisoned Wilde is able to recover some control over his situation by initiating a dialogue in the form of a monologue to his former lover. Davies writes,

Wilde asserts his agency as a ventriloquist in another way in the course of *De Profundis*, as the letter is explicitly motivated by the absence of Bosie's voice.

⁵⁸ Swinburne, 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 72, lines 53-64.

He begins by stating that he is writing to Bosie because he has heard no word from him. The letter is therefore not only a response to Wilde's own literal and symbolic silencing but also to Douglas's 'silence'. The letter functions as an incitement to dialogue and Wilde ostensibly expects a reply⁵⁹

It is the absent voice of the addressee combined with the implication of a reply which is the technique for Wilde's ventriloquisation of Bosie. As Davies notes, with reference to the work of Melissa Knox, '*De Profundis* conjures the figure of Bosie making his responses and the form of this ostensible dialogue has a distinctly ventriloquial feel as Wilde constructs the voice of the respondent and imposes it upon him.'⁶⁰ The idea of 'conjuring the figure' of another person is what I argue Swinburne achieves in his poetic monologues. It is this 'speaking for' the imaginary subject of the address, which is the key technique for making the presence of the fantasy other seem more genuine.

Faustine as fantasy

'Faustine' is a poem about a beautiful woman, won by the devil in a game of dice with God, who delights in mortal man's agonies. The agency of the masochistic speaker is disguised by the content of the poem, which speaks of Faustine's cruel vices and occasionally takes the form of an address to Faustine. The speaker exerts ventriloquial agency over the fantasy woman by constructing an imagined response, imposing it on to 'her'. The poem's formal characteristics also contribute to a sense of being beaten and tormented. The speaker claims of Faustine that

She loved the games men played with death,
Where death must win;
As though the slain man's blood and breath
Revived Faustine.⁶¹

Faustine appears to be a deadly female character, who gains vitality from the destruction of men. She is also beautiful; even though she has been lost to the devil by God, the voice tells Faustine he 'left you fair'.⁶² Faustine's 'bright heavy brows', 'shapely silver shoulder', and 'splendid hair', are some of the 'good gifts / That crown you queen'.⁶³ Her beautiful attributes contribute to a sense of her authority. She is beautiful, yet threatening. Heather L. Braun mentions this in her study *The Rise and Fall of the*

⁵⁹ Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism*, p. 109. With reference to Melissa Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 115.

⁶¹ Swinburne, 'Faustine', in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 88, lines 65-8.

⁶² Swinburne, 'Faustine', p. 87, line 39.

⁶³ Swinburne, 'Faustine', p. 86, lines 13, 5, 7, 9-10.

Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910 (2012). Braun claims that ‘Fear and desire become inextricable in “Faustine” (1862), the archetypal poem of Swinburne’s cruel beauties.’⁶⁴

Faustine is an eternal, timeless spirit. In ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’ (1866) Swinburne describes the poem as reflecting ‘the transmigration of a single soul, doomed as though by accident from the first to all evil and no good, through many ages and forms, but clad always in the same type of fleshly beauty.’⁶⁵ This image of an enduring soul suggests a multiplicity of identities, rather than an address to a single woman as the title and consistent reference to a single name would imply. Braun seems to imagine Faustine to be a single female entity, who ‘sells her soul for power and earthly pleasure’.⁶⁶ However, it is questionable whether Faustine has that much agency. She is won by the devil – ‘the devil’s die [...] won Faustine’ – rather than actively selling her soul.⁶⁷ Here is another instance of assuming action on the part of the fictional cruel woman. Faustine is not truly a representation of a person or personality, so it seems erroneous to speak of her as though she has or has not committed certain actions.

The whole idea of Faustine, as Swinburne admits, is a fantasy. The fantasy, according to Swinburne, was caused by a glimpse of a woman’s face which recalled the image of Faustina on Roman coinage. He explains that

The chance which suggested to me this poem was one which may happen any day to any man – the sudden sight of a living face which recalled the well-known likeness of another dead for centuries: in this instance, the noble and faultless type of the elder Faustina, as seen in coin and bust. Out of that casual glimpse and sudden recollection these verses sprang and grew.⁶⁸

Incidentally, this is very similar to the way in which Wilde chanced upon inspiration for his version of Salome – on a visit to Lord Francis Hope he happened to see an engraving of Salome dancing on her hands, which he proclaimed to be ‘*La bella donna della mia mente* (the beautiful woman of my mind).’⁶⁹ Gustave Flaubert was also

⁶⁴ Heather L. Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), p. 115.

⁶⁵ Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’ (1866), in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 410.

⁶⁶ Braun, *Rise and Fall*, p. 115.

⁶⁷ Swinburne, ‘Faustine’, p. 87, lines 35-6.

⁶⁸ Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, p. 410.

⁶⁹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 321. Ellmann names the dancing figure as ‘Herodias’, but I have used the name Salome since that is the name she is most commonly known by, and

inspired by a carving of Salome dancing in this fashion at Rouen Cathedral. These examples exemplify the process of projection of male imagination on to an image of a woman. The 'Faustine' of Swinburne's poem is entirely an invention of the poet. Because the poem takes the form of an address to Faustine, it appears to be directed at a real being, emphasising her physical beauty. However, she has no chance to respond, even though she is questioned, and the poem ends on an unanswered question: 'You'd give him – poison shall we say? / Or what, Faustine?'⁷⁰ This leaves the poetic voice speaking into a void which the nonexistent voice of the cruel woman cannot fill.

'Faustine' is a poem about women, the concept of femaleness, but not about a single woman. Paglia imagines that Faustine is a representation of the idea of woman as nature's womb and tomb. She observes the repeated return to the female in this poem: 'Each stanza is a paradigm of Decadence, a decline or "falling away," for the lines rise up only to fall back with fatigue [...] Language is a burden taken up and dropped again and again. All things return mechanically, compulsively, to one female center, primary and corrupt.'⁷¹ The mechanical returning not only emphasises the negative female centre, but also echoes the rhythm of being beaten. Again the physicality of the encounter with the cruel woman is emphasised, although it is paradoxically not physical at all, since she is fleshly only in fantasy. There is emptiness, rather than femaleness, at the centre. In *Victorian Sappho*, Yopie Prins connects Swinburne's accomplished use of metrics with his own experience of being beaten while studying Classics. She explains,

[Swinburne] attributes his metrical virtuosity to the time in his youth when Classical meters were literally beaten into his body [...] the tutor, playing on the boy like an instrument, has taught him a masochistic relation to language: through rhythmic beating Swinburne learns to internalize the beat of poetry.⁷²

This masochistic memory seems to have endured with Swinburne, who wrote poems in the Classical style. Swinburne's poems often display a complex rhyme scheme and regular metre, so that lines or stanzas fall like blows upon the reader who endures the metric masochism alongside the speaker. For example, 'Faustine' has a regular ABAB rhyme scheme and iambic metre, each four line stanza ending with a repetition of Faustine's name. Swinburne manages to find forty-one words to rhyme with Faustine,

the name she is given in Flaubert's version of the story, 'Hérodiades' (1877), in which she also dances on her hands.

⁷⁰ Swinburne, 'Faustine', p. 91, lines 163-4.

⁷¹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 464.

⁷² Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 122.

with the result that there is a regular sound pattern in these rhymes which return every second line, with the same effect as a blow landing again and again. The inevitability of the 'Faustine' at the end of every stanza means that the blow is anticipated and inevitable as it falls upon the reader. The 'whipping' metre demonstrates the poet's skill at merging the address to the cruel woman with the sensory impression of being whipped. This intensifies the subject matter, a fantasy of a cruel and dominant beautiful woman.

Prins notes Wilde's opinion of Swinburne as appearing to be dominated by language – he seems to be able to manipulate words, which of course are spoken by him, in order to obscure and efface himself from the picture he creates through these words. Prins explains,

Oscar Wilde is interested in 'the masterly experiments' of Swinburne's poetry precisely because he seems to have relinquished mastery; 'It has been said of him, and with truth, that he is a master of language, but with still greater truth it may be said that Language is his master. Words seem to dominate him' [...] Swinburne's claim to lyricism can only be the surrendering of that lyric persona. 'He is the first lyric poet who has tried to make an absolute surrender of his own personality, and he has succeeded,' Wilde writes, not without ambivalence; 'We hear the song, but we never know the singer. We never even get near him'.⁷³

Wilde's description of Swinburne as a 'singer' who can disconnect his voice from his own body and self is a ventriloquial image, which can be used to explain the characteristic feature of the cruel women in his poetry: that they are fantasy beings with implied agency. As demonstrated above, the apparent vitality of Dolores obscures the agency of the poet. That Swinburne's project of surrendering his own personality (according to Wilde) is so successful is perhaps attributable to his use of the cruel woman as an object to which he appears to surrender, create an image of the poet as a less powerful being. This demonstrates Swinburne's success as a masochistic poet. Even his verse at the level of language gives the illusion that he is being dominated, while he is actually in control. The surrender is orchestrated and performed by him in both the language and subject-matter. He manipulates words so well that he even manages to disguise his own manipulation. Here he is close to achieving the masochistic denial of the victim's own control.

⁷³ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 156, quoting Oscar Wilde, 'Mr Swinburne's Last Volume' (1889), in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 146, p. 148.

Masochism and self-defence

Examining the mechanisms behind the act of the ‘surrender of his own personality’ is of interest here. It is in part a masochistic strategy. As explained in the Introduction, masochism can be a way of dealing with negative thoughts about oneself, by projecting these negative attitudes so that they appear to come from elsewhere. The projection is usually on to another person, real or fictional, who is required to become a punishing, cruel figure. This allows the masochist to manage their own negative feelings, since they can be enacted and ‘worked through’ in the interaction with the other. The blame for these negative attitudes can also be removed from the self and become attached to the other, which is a way of exonerating the self. It can also be a way of pre-empting one’s own fears, for example the fear of pain, of punishment, of verbal or physical abuse. If the real or fantasy other enacts the feared situation, the masochist is able to anticipate it, experience it, and deal with it, as observed by Reik. This strategy can be observed in Nina Conti’s ventriloquism act with Monkey, in which the puppet appears to direct misogynist abuse at her and is very critical of her act.⁷⁴ This seems to be a protective strategy, both allowing Conti to overcome negative feelings she has about herself, since she is the one directing the abuse at herself through the puppet, and protecting herself from the audience’s potential negative criticism. Monkey has already enacted the negative response to Conti, and she has dealt with it in her interaction with ‘him’ – actually her own fantasy – thus softening the blow of the feared negativity if it is encountered in reality. This strategy can also be linked to Pygmalionism, as in the work of Martin A. Danahay who also makes a connection to masochism and projection. Considering the popularity of the Pygmalion myth for Victorian men, Danahay acknowledges that fictional representations of women were created according to male desire: ‘As a mirror for masculine desire, Victorian representations of women record the Victorian male’s divided subjectivity. Women are the objects of both fear and desire for Victorian males.’⁷⁵ Although Danahay’s work is on Victorian sexual morality and the common angel/whore dichotomy in representations of women, his term ‘mirror for

⁷⁴ For example, in the *Talk to the Hand* show Monkey calls Nina ‘shit’, ‘lonely’, ‘a loser’, ‘sick’, ‘bitch’. Conti has also made a documentary called *Her Master’s Voice* (2012) about her path to becoming a ventriloquist, in which she refers (through a ‘conversation’ with a puppet of her late mentor Ken Campbell’s head, whose voice she is providing) to the Monkey character having been born seven months after she had an abortion, which makes him her son. The Pygmalion model comes into play here. Monkey is ‘born’, as Conti’s child, and is also Conti herself – a kind of incest. In fact, this issue comes up in *Talk to the Hand*. Monkey jokes about the dynamic between the two, in which Nina looks like she is listening when she is really talking, as being the same as the dynamic of a married couple. Nina points out that the two are not married, to which Monkey complains that Nina ‘denies’ him her hand in marriage. Nina responds ‘No I don’t – you’re me!’, to which Monkey retorts ‘I know, it’s worse than incest!’.

⁷⁵ Danahay, ‘Mirrors of Masculine Desire’, p. 46.

masculine desire' is important. It neatly summarises the problem of women in Swinburne's masochistic poems: where there appears to be a woman, there is actually a reflection of male desire. The imaginary female body is a surface upon which male desire is projected. Thus, what is 'reflected' back is not really a female body but an image of femaleness according to masculine desire; it is a false image which actually represents the poet himself. The cruel woman is an image which allows the poet to feel the thrill of submitting to his masochistic ideal.

Danahay reaches similar conclusions about masochism, which he sees as a process of externalising one's internal desires, through projection of internal pain or confusion, so that they appear to come from elsewhere. Danahay observes that, in the place of self-repression and self-inflicted pain, the masochist's negative feelings can be managed by projection.⁷⁶ This becomes part of identity formation for the writers Danahay examines, to defend them from their own insecurities. He explains, 'The masochistic mechanism is a defence mechanism, one of disavowal that makes pain appear to come from somewhere else. The pain that could not be recognised directly is externalised onto an idealised image of the other, whether a racial, gendered or class other.'⁷⁷

It is important to acknowledge the process of externalisation but this investigation is less focused on disavowal than on celebration of pain. Rather than self-defence, Swinburne's poetry is a delight in his own perversity and desire for pain. It is a deliberate and self-aware masochistic writing strategy. Danahay claims that masochism is connected with an aversion to acknowledging one's own desires, arguing that 'Victorian male masochism was marked by a sublimated anxiety that made it impossible for the male subject to recognize his complicity in his self-inflicted pain.'⁷⁸ However, I would argue that the issue at the heart of Swinburne's masochism is that it is easy *not* to recognise the poet's complicity in his pain and in the formation of the image of the cruel woman.

⁷⁶ Martin Danahay, 'Male Masochism: A Model of Victorian Identity Formation', in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, ed. by Davis Amigoni (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 87-104. Though he focuses on the work of authors not relevant to this thesis, Thomas Carlyle, J. S. Mill and Arthur Munby, Danahay makes important points about the attitudes conveyed in nineteenth-century masochism. He thinks that it is anxiety which is sublimated.

⁷⁷ Danahay, 'Male Masochism', p. 102.

⁷⁸ Danahay, 'Male Masochism', p. 87.

Catherine Maxwell considers the confusion of gender identity in Swinburne's poetry. Rather than seeing female power being diminished in the figure of the cruel woman, she envisages the tormenting women of Swinburne's poetry as dominant and energetic. Maxwell states that 'Swinburne's women are voracious aggressors, who revel in their sexuality and their erotic dominance and control. The poems are a provocative, histrionic and excessive celebration of castrating female energies.'⁷⁹ Maxwell examines Victorian poetry in terms of a crisis of gender identity, in which male poets are feminised through their artistic endeavours. The English poetic tradition 'has kept as its cryptic secret the knowledge that the successful lyrical poet must endure a symbolic castration in order to achieve inner vision.' Therefore Maxwell argues 'for a new understanding of the lyric poet's relation to a disfiguring sublime, imagined as an aggressive female force which feminises the male in an act that simultaneously deprives and energises him.'⁸⁰ The male poet, according to Maxwell, is compelled towards self-feminisation to achieve vision. Swinburne is one of her examples of the feminised male poet; she believes the trend among male Victorian poets to display pleasure in being dominated by female power is most overtly present in Swinburne's poetry because of his openness to masochism. The Freudian position on masochism is that the male is feminised by adopting a submissive position, since the female is thought to be submissive by default. However, my investigation is less concerned with the issue of Swinburne symbolically adopting a 'female' identity in his poetry; rather I examine the ways in which he retains his male and therefore masculine power in terms of the control he has over the images of femininity which are formed according to his desire. The striking factor in Maxwell's analysis is the activity of the projected female figure. Since this is a fantasy created by the process of Pygmalionism and ventriloquism, the male poet is still dominant, but in a more subtle manner than simply silencing and controlling her. The control is less obvious, because of the illusion of activity on the part of the woman, which gives the impression of independence.

Swinburne's aggressive cruel women such as Dolores and Faustine, are often connected to the poet's own masochism; he is often treated as a case study. It is thought that his own taste for being flogged (incidentally, in the classroom setting rather than by a cruel mistress) informs his masochistic poetry. Maxwell considers Swinburne's own

⁷⁹ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 182.

⁸⁰ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 1.

masochism and his poetic self-feminisation which works in connection with the cruel women who appear in his poetry. She proposes that

Swinburne offers a particularly interesting case of the feminised male poet in that the symbolic sacrifice of masculinity and the submission to female power are so conspicuously treated in his work. As Camille Paglia rightly observes: 'he is the least ambivalent of poets toward female dominance'. In Swinburne we have an especially vivid example of how personal pathology, the poet's masochism, a topic which critics have not always known how to treat, works absolutely harmoniously with poetic and literary requirements.⁸¹

With Paglia's comment on Swinburne's ambivalence toward female dominance in mind, it is worth noting here that perhaps Swinburne's Decadent attitude towards women is different to the type mentioned in my Introduction. He seems to display less distaste for the natural female body than we find, for example, in the poetry of Baudelaire which influenced him. Baudelaire's verse and prose writing imagines women dragging men downwards; they are connected with the earthly, the natural, and the underworld. In Swinburne's poems, women can be elevated to divine positions, such as Dolores, 'Our Lady of Pain'. In these instances they seem to represent perfection rather than betraying an ambivalent attitude in terms of desire and distaste. Even Faustine of the underworld is a 'queen'. However, there is ambivalence in Swinburne's attitude towards women, as he faces the contradictory pulls between aspiring to become a master of poetry, and thus immortal, and desire for the love of a woman.⁸² The two are ultimately incompatible unless reconciled in a form of poetry in which masochism (and therefore woman) becomes an integral part of the poetic form and of the subject matter. It is particularly relevant to 'Anactoria', in which Swinburne speaks, in the guise of Sappho, about elevating poetry above love. As Maxwell has observed, masochism and literary requirements work 'harmoniously' in Swinburne's poems.

Sappho, Swinburne's mouthpiece

Prins discusses Swinburne's use of Sappho as a mouthpiece for his feelings of suffering. He borrows Sappho as his ventriloquist's dummy in 'Anactoria', though he also appropriates some of Sappho's words himself, speaking her words through his own mouth. He is both artist and dummy. Swinburne again creates a dramatic monologue to a silent auditor, describing the cruel woman in terms of fragmented body parts and

⁸¹ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 190 quoting Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 471.

⁸² Some critics have connected this with Swinburne's own relationship with his cousin Mary Gordon which he sacrificed for his poetry but which tormented him through his life, especially when she married.

sadomasochistic imagery, and considering human mortality. Swinburne adopts the persona of Sappho, the ‘supreme poet’.⁸³ Sappho is said to have loved Anactoria, of whom in fragment 16 (according to the Lobel-Page numbering system) it is declared:

she’s not here, and I’d rather see her lovely
step, her sparkling glance and her face than gaze on
all the troops in Lydia in their chariots and
glittering armor.⁸⁴

Swinburne’s poem takes the form of an address to Sappho’s beloved Anactoria, who is silent throughout, though in contrast to Dolores, Faustine, and the female object of ‘*Satia Te Sanguine*’, Anactoria is instructed to remain mute: ‘I pray thee sigh not, speak not, draw not breath’.⁸⁵ The cruel woman is the source of the poet’s torment. This is clear in the plea from Sappho to Anactoria to cease her infidelities and return to her. In this poem, the masochistic theatre is complicated by Swinburne – speaking as Sappho – adopting the role of another cruel woman. Anactoria is addressed as the potential victim of the poet’s tortures:

Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch
Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright
Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?
Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,
Catch the sob’s middle music in thy throat,
Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these
A lyre of many faultless agonies?⁸⁶

Even though Sappho the Greek poet is a real historical figure, Swinburne’s use of her identity does not make her any more of a real female character in the poem she supposedly ‘speaks’. Yopie Prins comments on the numerous Victorian revisions and rewritings of the Sappho fragments, explaining that Sappho herself is negated by this appropriation of her identity. Prins explains, ‘in the proliferation of many Sapphic versions, new visions and revisions, Sappho emerges as an imitation for which there is no original. Sapphic imitations are a product of their own historical moment’.⁸⁷ Like the Lady figure of the courtly love tradition, Sappho is widely drawn upon yet ultimately does not seem to exist. Prins’s theory of Sappho being an ‘imitation for which there is no original’ informs the way Swinburne’s Sappho in ‘Anactoria’ is to be understood in

⁸³ Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, p. 406.

⁸⁴ Sappho, fragment 16, *The Poetry of Sappho*, trans. Jim Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7. (Powell retains the Lobel-Page numbering system in his updated translation).

⁸⁵ Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 47, line 5.

⁸⁶ Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 51, lines 134-140.

⁸⁷ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, pp. 13-4.

this thesis. Swinburne imitates the poet he admires above all others, but in doing so he imposes his own image over hers; his own words stand in for her voice, and Sappho, like the cruel woman, does not have a true identity in this poem.

Prins's description of the reading of Sappho in the Victorian era resonates with the central argument of this chapter:

The projected fantasy of a female body and a feminine voice through linguistic scattering, grammatical dismemberment, rhetorical contradiction – as well as other forms of disjunction, hiatus, and ellipsis – suggests why Sappho became exemplary of lyric in its irreducibly textual embodiment, and exemplary of lyric reading as well, in its desire to hypothesize a whole from dead letters.⁸⁸

Sappho and her works are used by Victorian writers as part of a project to imagine and reconstruct the living poet from her words. Words have the power to invoke the image of a real person, although the speculation about Sappho is less a fantasy than that about the cruel woman, since Sappho really did exist. However, Prins's observations about the invocation of Sappho as a 'female persona' or 'feminine voice', rather than just a name attached to a collection of fragments, are similar to the anatomized cruel woman. The 'scattering, dismemberment, rhetorical contradiction' Prins speaks of also occur in Swinburne's presentation of the cruel woman. Like those who imagine the whole personality and body of Sappho from her poetic fragments, so the cruel woman is remembered, put together, imagined as an active, living body by critics. Prins speaks of Sappho as a figure 'whose texts are made to exemplify the formal mechanism through which a body, person, subjectivity, and voice can be imagined as prior to, yet also produced by, a history of fragmentation.'⁸⁹ Prins argues that Swinburne's invocation of Sappho's name 'turns Sappho into a figure for decadence and decline: a descending cadence that is heard only as an echoing rhythm, memorized by Swinburne and recorded in the writing of his own Sapphic imitations.'⁹⁰ Sappho is nothing more than an echo in Swinburne's writing, just as the cruel woman is only a reflection of his projected fantasy. As Maxwell puts it, 'Sappho in 'Anactoria' is merely the mouthpiece of Swinburne'.⁹¹ The word 'mouthpiece' is a significant one, as it links to the idea of

⁸⁸ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 4. The fragmentation and reconstruction is complicated, Prins points out, by the issue of translation 'even today, Mary Barnard's Sappho is read as if it *is* the voice of Sappho', p. 5.

⁹⁰ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 17.

⁹¹ Catherine Maxwell, *Swinburne* (Devon: Northcote House, 2006), p. 17.

the isolated female body part, as well as the artificial performance of the poet as ventriloquist.⁹²

The figure of Sappho provides Swinburne with a mouthpiece through which he can demonstrate his own skilful manipulation of the ideal language of masochism, using the ‘supreme poet’ as a mouthpiece for his own ‘supreme words’. Swinburne himself thought that the complex subject matter of masochism needed to be expressed in masterly poetry. In his 1862 essay on Baudelaire, he praises the poet’s skill in his handling of morbidity, pleasure and pain:

The matters treated of will bear no rough or hasty handling. Only supreme excellence of words will suffice to grapple with and fitly render the effects of such material. Not the luxuries of pleasure in their simple first form, but the sharp and cruel enjoyments of pain, the acrid relish of suffering felt or inflicted, the sides on which nature looks unnatural, go to make up the stuff and substance of this poetry. Very good material they make, too; but evidently such things are unfit for rapid or careless treatment.⁹³

This suggests that when Swinburne treats similar material in his own poetry, he consciously strives for ‘supreme excellence of words’. Masochism in poetry allows the poet to display his skill, but can also be used as a device to contribute to his apparent domination.

Swinburne’s poetry can also be read according to the idea that words may possess the same effect as the violence they are being used to convey. Lady Wariston, a character in Swinburne’s fragmentary novel *Lesbia Brandon*, unfinished at the time of his death, declares,

Things in verse hurt one, don’t they? hit and sting like a cut. [...] It’s odd that words should change so just by being put into rhyme. They get teeth and bite; they take fire and burn. I wonder who first thought of tying words up and twisting them back to make verses, and hurt and delight all people in the world for ever. [...] It was an odd device: one can’t see why this ringing and rhyming of words should make all the difference in them: one can’t tell where the pain or the pleasure ends or begins.⁹⁴

⁹² Nina Conti also performs an act in which she places a mouthpiece over an audience member’s face, and then operates the mouthpiece while speaking for them, making them appear to say embarrassing things; the ‘victim’s’ discomfort only adds to the comic effect of the performance. For example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EADGMYpUa6I> [accessed 7 July 2014]

⁹³ Swinburne, ‘Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*’, in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 30.

⁹⁴ Swinburne, *Lesbia Brandon, With a Commentary by Randolph Hughes* (London: The Falcon Press, 1952)

Lady Wariston's confusion about the ability of poetry to provoke an emotional reaction is expressed in terms of being tormented in an enjoyable way. Maxwell compares Swinburne's poems to violent entities with 'teeth' in a similar way to the fictional Lady Wariston: 'Swinburne sees the transmutative activity of form as a liberating violence, binding and disciplining language and yet also releasing its energy. Form gives language its teeth so that the finished poem is itself a pleasurable violence exerted on the sensibility of the reader.'⁹⁵ Thus, reading and writing become a circle of pain and pleasure.

John Vincent also addresses this notion in his essay 'Flogging is Fundamental: Applications of Birch in Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*' (1997). Vincent is concerned with Swinburne's presentation of bodies and bodily sensation, noting the correlation between pleasure and pain in that both have an impact on the body and are thus communicated through the language of violence. Speaking about the 'primacy of pain language' in Swinburne's novel, Vincent acknowledges that 'Pleasure and pain are both made up of what is "striking," what "hits on the nerves," and what "tells." Pleasure and pain are both experienced when something violently collides with the body.'⁹⁶ Pleasure affects the body with the same intensity as violence. Conveying the feeling of being overwhelmed, by pain or by pleasure, is effectively done by using language associated with violence, as Swinburne does in his poems. It is this explicit language of violence, such as 'beauty! like a beast it bites' ('Anactoria'), 'cruel / Red mouth like a venomous flower' ('Dolores'), 'insatiable mouth that feeds' ('Satia Te Sanguine'), which seems to give his cruel women active and physical bodies, while also disguising the ventriloquial illusion which is taking place.⁹⁷

Singing and striking

Using the language of pain and pleasure affecting the body, Swinburne presents love and desire as a violent undoing. Echoes of Sappho's fragment 31 can be found in 'Anactoria'. Sappho's fragment refers to the feeling of being consumed by desire and rendered mute, such is the power of erotic desire for the beloved:

⁹⁵ Catherine Maxwell, *Swinburne* (Devon: Northcote House, 2006), p. 21.

⁹⁶ John Vincent, 'Flogging is Fundamental: Applications of Birch in Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*', in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 275.

⁹⁷ Swinburne, 'Anactoria', p. 50, line 115; 'Dolores', p. 122 lines 3-4; 'Satia Te Sanguine', p. 72, line 64.

[...] once I look at you for a moment, I can't
speak any longer,

but my tongue breaks down, and then all at once a
subtle fire races inside my skin, my
eyes can't see a thing and a whirring whistle
thrums at my hearing [...].⁹⁸

This is comparable with the opening lines of 'Anactoria', which also speak of desire as an emotion which burns the lover, sets their heart racing:

My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound
And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound.⁹⁹

Paradoxically Sappho's mute, blinded, tormented lover must regain the power of speech in order to articulate the feeling of being overwhelmed by love. Once again the impression of the speaker taking a submissive position is achieved, while in fact they are in charge of their own words. The power of desire in 'Anactoria' is also inspired by Sappho's fragment 130, which Jim Powell translates as: 'Eros limbslackener shakes me again – / that sweet, bitter, impossible creature'.¹⁰⁰ Other translators such as Prins, Lobel and Page, and Aaron Poochigan refer instead to the 'loosener of limbs' (or a variation thereon), which is more suggestive of dismemberment than 'limbslackener', as it suggests both relaxation and a violent shaking of the body which in fact tears limb from limb.¹⁰¹ This relates to Swinburne's notion of eroticism. Prins explains, 'His reading of Sappho derives from fragment 130, which dramatizes the effects of eros on a body that trembles in violent contradiction, at the moment of coming apart'.¹⁰² So, the very act of writing about the tremors and burning in the 'undone' body of the lover in fact create a picture of this body. Attention is drawn to the physical effects of desire, and thus the body is brought into focus. It can 'emerge' in the mind of the reader at the same time as the poem records the feeling of being broken down. This is subtly

⁹⁸ Sappho, fragment 31, in *The Poetry of Sappho*, p. 11.

⁹⁹ Swinburne, 'Anactoria', p. 47, lines 1-4.

¹⁰⁰ Sappho, fragment 130, in *The Poetry of Sappho*, p. 32.

¹⁰¹ The Aaron Poochigan translation, which refers to 'Eros the Limb-Loosener', appears in *Stung With Love: Poems and Fragments*, a recent collection of Sappho's fragments in modern translation. Poochigan refers in the accompanying notes to the Homeric tradition of a hero's limbs being loosened in battle when he loses consciousness or dies. Therefore the word, when used in translation of Sappho, implies a combination of violent dismemberment and eroticism. See Sappho, *Stung With Love: Poems and Fragments* trans. Aaron Poochigan (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 20-1.

¹⁰² Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 113.

different from the anatomisation of the female body, in which the cruel woman appears as a series of fragmented body parts. Here, the emphasis is on the erotic sensations in the body of the poet which is being symbolically pulled apart by pleasure, rather than the disembodied woman whose presentation is dictated by the poet.

As I have noted, in ‘Anactoria’ Swinburne, using Sappho as mouthpiece, is both ventriloquist and dummy. Thus Sappho appears as simultaneously the abuser and the abused. Prins states that ‘Swinburne turns Sappho into a *figure for* the figure of abuse, a double catachresis that makes her both cause and effect of a rhetorical violence that forcefully scatters the body.’¹⁰³ She is therefore both the cruel woman and the poet undone by cruelty. Swinburne acts upon both ‘characters’ of Sappho and Anactoria as he does upon the idea of the cruel woman, dismembering them, speaking for and to them, but ultimately reflecting only himself. Anactoria and Sappho are, in effect, both cruel women, both conceived of as enacting typical feminine cruelties upon one another. Their relationship seems to be one of mutual pleasure and pain:

I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain
Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein stings vein.
Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on flower,
Breast kindle breast, and either burn one hour.¹⁰⁴

This repetition of words creates a sense of doubling which emphasises that both lovers are female, they are flowers pressed against one another. It also gives the impression of a blow falling twice. Like the repetition in ‘Faustine’, there is a metrical suggestion of whipping or beating as the words fall again and again on the senses of the reader. Similarly, further on, Swinburne uses alliteration to emphasise the ‘amorous agonies’ which he imagines Sappho wishes to inflict upon Anactoria.¹⁰⁵ ‘Sappho’ speaks of ‘Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill; / Relapse and reluctance of the breath, / Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death.’¹⁰⁶ Again, this creates a rhythmic impression of being struck in a violent sense, but also suggests a more eroticised rhythm. As Thais E. Morgan explains, Swinburne uses Sappho as ‘an embodiment of the rhythm of eros itself, a scattering movement too diffuse to be contained within any single body, and

¹⁰³ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 116.

¹⁰⁴ Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 47, lines 11-4.

¹⁰⁵ Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 48, line 29.

¹⁰⁶ Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 48, lines 32-4.

increasingly formalized by Swinburne into a metrical pattern.¹⁰⁷ Swinburne skilfully incorporates these rhythms of eros and of pain into ‘Anactoria’.

As well as its obvious similarity to Sappho’s fragment 31, ‘Anactoria’ bears a distinct similarity to the biblical ‘Song of Songs’, which emphasises the fleshly pleasure and pain of consumption and love. For example, Anactoria is told ‘I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat / Thy breasts like honey!’¹⁰⁸ Glennis Byron makes a comparison between ‘Anactoria’ and the ‘Song of Songs’, but acknowledges the problematical position of the women in the poem, which actually confirms, rather than subverts, the notion that the male voice is superior:

Clearly echoing the biblical ‘Song of Songs’, Swinburne strikes a direct and blasphemous hit at Christianity by exposing its underlying sadism and sexuality, but at the same time he appears to reinstate the dominant cultural position of the female subject by having Sappho vocalise desire in terms of an ecstatic vision of violent physical penetration. Women remain identified primarily with the body: Christian ideology may be challenged, but gender ideology is simultaneously confirmed. Furthermore, it might be argued, in the hands of a male Victorian poet cross-gendered verse may not so much give the silent other a voice as simply perpetuate the process of appropriation. Male translations or appropriations of such poets as Sappho, some have argued, demonstrate just one more instance of revising the woman writer into silence.¹⁰⁹

For Byron, the traditional separation between the poet’s ‘I’ and the speaker’s persona in the dramatic monologue is troubled in Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria’. She struggles to define the poem, since it is not entirely clear, even in spite of the cross-gendered and trans-historical persona, that it is not Swinburne speaking: ‘Even with such monologues as ‘Anactoria’, spoken by Greek poetess Sappho, the suspicion that it is *really* Swinburne speaking persists.’¹¹⁰ Swinburne speaks both for and as Sappho, in adopting her persona and apparently speaking through her mouth, thus actually condemning her to silence and ventriloquising her. He interposes himself between Sappho as historical figure and the audience; the claims to greatness he articulates towards the end of the poem therefore seem to be his own.

Anactoria is given the role of the muse who inspires the poet but who is secondary to his own skill, which allows him to become immortal. Anactoria is told ‘thy body is the

¹⁰⁷ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 112-3.

¹⁰⁸ Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 50, lines 111-2.

¹⁰⁹ Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 76.

¹¹⁰ Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 108.

song / Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I, / Though my voice die not till the whole world die'.¹¹¹ Though Anactoria is 'more than I', because she is the love object and the inspiration for the poet, she is just a body, which is mortal. The poet, in the guise of Sappho, is the actual voice, which will live on through the ages. This poem displays the poet's struggle between contrary desires to possess the superior ability to transcend the body, and to give in to bodily desires by connecting with the body of the beloved. For a brief moment, it appears the poet wishes to be free of the skill, in exchange for the attainment of the love object, 'Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed / To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!'¹¹² However, as the poem progresses, this desire gives way to the acknowledgement of the poet's own ability to become immortal through verse:

Yea, they shall say, earth's womb has borne in vain
New things, and never this best thing again;
Borne days and men, borne fruits and wars and wine,
Seasons and songs, but no song more like mine.
[...]
Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die.¹¹³

This mention of the earth's womb suggests that poetic ability can outdo the natural creativity associated with the female body. Here the poet has overcome nature. Thaïs E. Morgan refers to Kerry McSweeney's demonstration that the main theme of 'Anactoria' is to 'show the poetess transcending her sensuality in a triumph of the spirit: "her initial, almost total submersion in her compulsive love gradually gives way before and increasingly exultant realization of her poetic powers."¹¹⁴ This is the case, but there is an issue with the gendering of the 'poetess' as female. This is Swinburne's voice ultimately, and the male poet's realisation of his own poetic power.

Swinburne creates images of women as 'algolagnic phantasms'. His speakers speak to and through women, thus creating the impression of cruel women acting violently upon them. He uses the language of the body both to form fantasy images of sexually alluring female figures, and to imitate violence and enact it on the reader. However, his figures are not as 'fleshly' as they seem. The cruel woman is a projection of masochistic desires

¹¹¹ Swinburne, 'Anactoria', p. 49, lines 74-6.

¹¹² Swinburne, 'Anactoria', p. 50, lines 105-6.

¹¹³ Swinburne, 'Anactoria', pp. 54-55, lines 281-4, 290.

¹¹⁴ Thaïs E. Morgan, 'Swinburne's Dramatic Monologues: Sex and Ideology', *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), p. 182, quoting Kerry McSweeney, *Tennyson and Swinburne as Romantic Naturalists* (University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 129.

rather than an entity with real power or independence. Even with the complication of the poetic voice being supposedly female, in the case of Sappho, in Swinburne's poetry, the female image is formed by the poet and reveals only male desire. In the following chapter I consider the divide between the word and the body in Wilde's *Salome*. The male characters in the play form the impression of Salome's body through dialogue, but as an insubstantial, delicate being. Wilde disembodies Salome rather than making her appear fleshly. My study complicates readings of Salome as a *femme fatale*. I argue that the anatomisation of Salome by the male characters diminishes her apparent power and sex appeal. With reference to Beardsley's playful and androgynous illustrations I consider whether Wilde intended Salome's gender to be called into question. She appears to appropriate male power over language when she echoes male speech. However, she cannot transcend her female and natural body to the world of male artifice. Unlike Swinburne's poetry, pleasure and pain do not correspond in *Salome*. There is no masochistic surrender to female cruelty. This, I argue, is suggestive of Wilde altering the cruel woman figure, symbolically putting her to death at the play's conclusion.

CHAPTER THREE

‘The shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver’ Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*

Reconsidering *Salome*

Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* (1894) represents one of the many incarnations of the biblical figure who became the archetypal nineteenth-century fatal woman.¹ But Wilde’s *Salome* is inconsistent with the *femme fatale* stereotype.² Her presence in the text suggests something other than the bodily and embodied beauty of previous nineteenth-century *femmes fatales*. Wilde’s *Salome* needs to be reconsidered; critics are too keen to categorise her as yet another *femme fatale*, a position which she currently occupies in literary critical studies.³ In Petra Dierkes-Thrun’s recent study, *Salome’s Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (2011), she refers to *Salome* as a *femme fatale*, calling upon the term as a universal type of which the reader is already aware, in order to describe *Salome*’s attributes. According to Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome* possesses ‘strong *femme fatale* traits inspired by Huysmans’s decadent imagination’ and ‘asserts self-confidence and independence’.⁴ She reads *Salome* in metaphysical terms as a modernist narrative of secularity and individuality.

My study is focused primarily on *Salome*’s body, her physicality – or lack thereof – in Wilde’s play, and the implications of her disembodiment. Her shadowy bodily presence in the text, I argue, complicates readings of *Salome* as an authoritative or powerful figure. It is easy to overlook the fact, as many critics have done already, that in the textual version of the drama *Salome*’s body is nowhere to be seen at the moment the threat of her power is traditionally located: the moment of the dance. The reader does not know what they are supposed to envisage when *Salome* ‘dances the dance of the

¹ A note on the spelling of *Salome*: I refer to the 1894 edition of the text, and therefore use its spellings of *Salome* and *Iokanaan*. In subsequent editions these characters’ names are often spelled ‘*Salomé*’ and ‘*Jokanaan*’. In the case of critical quotations I have left the spelling consistent with the original.

² Certain elements of the *femme fatale* are recognisable in Wilde’s *Salome*, such as her beauty, her unity with nature, and the inevitable fatal request for *Iokanaan*’s head. However, elements are also lacking: the masochistic ‘game’ structure, and the body of the princess.

³ As a *femme fatale* in critical thought, *Salome* is either imagined to be a misogynistic creation calling for an ‘understanding of the need for woman’s immediate physical destruction’ (Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 396) or a feminist icon. An extreme version of the feminist argument comes from Toni Bentley: ‘*Salome* became feminist through Wilde, achieving her emancipation by embracing her own exploitation.’ Toni Bentley, *Sisters of Salome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 30.

⁴ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome’s Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 35-6, p. 42.

seven veils', because Wilde has provided no description of the movements of Salome's body as she dances, nor of what the seven veils are supposed to represent. Because of the lack of emphasis on her body and what it can do, and because of an absence of masochistic submission on the part of the drama's male characters, Wilde's Salome needs to be repositioned outside the boundaries of the *femme fatale* type. However, this is not to say that she should be considered to be the same kind of Decadent cruel woman as we find in the poetry of Swinburne. This exploration of Wilde's Salome is less concerned with repositioning her as a cruel woman (since she lacks an accompanying masochistic creator figure) than with arguing against her conception as a *femme fatale*.

The text of *Salome* is being studied separately from the rest of Wilde's work because it is an example of cruel female sexuality written by one of the figureheads of the Decadent movement. Wilde also published a novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), poetry, and a series of society comedies including *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893). *Salome* is the clearest instance of a Decadent cruel woman in Wilde's work; the comedies are characterised by their light-hearted epigrammatic wit, and although *Dorian Gray* is a Decadent novel it centres around the relationships between men. It is shrouded in 'vagueness and indeterminacy' as Kirsten MacLeod points out, so Dorian's hedonistic and decadent lifestyle is largely hidden from the reader.⁵ There are few female characters in the novel, and the most noteworthy of them, Sibyl Vane, is killed off half way through. I examine the significance of Sibyl's death in connection with Salome's femaleness and the imagery of mirrors and roses, but I do not explore the work in any further detail. This investigation focuses on *Salome* in textual form, in its English translation of Wilde's original French (1893), as illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley.⁶ The English-language version is under examination because this is a study of English Decadence, and because

⁵ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 126.

⁶ The translation of *Salome* was originally supposed to be undertaken by Lord Alfred Douglas, but Richard Ellmann considers that Wilde disliked Douglas's translation so much that he undertook the task himself, settling instead for a dedication to Douglas as 'the translator of my play'. The title page of the 1894 edition of *Salome* makes no reference to Douglas, but reads '*Salome, A Tragedy in One Act: Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde: Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley*'. For documentation of the quarrel between Douglas and Wilde on the matter of translation, see Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 379-81. Wilde himself recalls the translation debacle in *De Profundis* (1897), his letter to Douglas from Reading Gaol. Here he states that they had 'not unnaturally indeed, differed on the question of the artistic value of your translation of *Salome*', and refers to 'my pointing out the schoolboy faults of your attempted translation of *Salome*. You must by this time be a fair enough French scholar to know that the translation was as unworthy of you, as an ordinary Oxonian, as it was of the work it sought to render.' Oscar Wilde, Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas (January-March 1897) in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962) p. 426, p. 432.

this was the version which was accompanied by Beardsley's illustrations which bring an added dimension to the question of gender in the play.

I begin this chapter by considering the misinterpretation of Salome as a *femme fatale*, addressing the issue of her disembodiment in the play. Wilde diminishes the power and sex appeal of the 'typical' *femme fatale* by diminishing the power of her body. She is anatomized by the male characters in their descriptions of her body parts as delicate and natural. This is similar to the strategy used by Swinburne in his masochistic monologue poems in which the female image is conjured into being as a series of disconnected fragments which do not form a substantial whole. Many male voices describe Salome in the play, and, as Charles Bernheimer points out, their dialogue is disconnected. As a result, Salome's body is abstracted. Any power inherent in her female nature is transposed on to the moon, an image Helen Tookey considers to be an emblem of dangerous female sexuality. The moon is blood-red and seemingly more fatal than the white and delicate Salome. The disembodied Salome reflects Wilde's different attitude to the typical Decadent masochistic ambivalence. Pleasure and pain are mutually exclusive in *Salome*; there is none of the voluptuous surrender to sexualised female cruelty that we find in Swinburne's poems. Wilde does not play by the rules of the masochistic 'game'.

Salome's power traditionally comes from her body and her sexualised dance. Wilde does not provide a full description of this dance, thereby intensifying her disembodiment. However, I maintain that Salome is intended to be a distinctly female presence in the play even if we do not get a sense of her physical form. Eliot L. Gilbert comments upon the sense of female nature in the play as animalistic and dangerous. I consider various critical responses to the ambiguity of gender in *Salome*, particularly Amanda Fernbach's notion that Wilde allows for the destabilisation of heteronormativity and the enactment of homosexual desire in Salome's dance. I also examine several of Beardsley's illustrations which depict androgynous, shapeshifting characters, and Wilde as 'The Woman in the Moon'. Analysis of the text of the play provides further evidence that Salome's gender may be questioned. She uses language in the same way as the male characters do, echoing their male, if not masculine, discourse. She describes Iokanaan in the same way that the characters speak of her, anatomising *his* body. However, Salome ultimately lacks the power that the male characters possess. She is unable to entice Iokanaan to look at her, nor can she

ventriloquise his decapitated head once he is dead. Amy Koritz analyses the play in terms of a division between body and spirit. Salome is female, driven by her animal urges, and cannot transcend the realm of the body. This is a body that is definitely female; Salome's sexuality is destructive but she is ultimately destroyed as male power is restored.

Salome: Wilde's femme fatale?

Salome, as one of the most popular nineteenth-century *femmes fatales*, was adopted from the biblical Gospels of Matthew 6. 21-29 and Mark 14. 6-11.⁷ The 'daughter of Herodias', named as Salome by Flavius Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* (A.D. 93-4), but not mentioned in this text as responsible for the death of John the Baptist, is a girl whose dance pleases her stepfather (and uncle) Herod Antipas so much that he promises her whatever she desires.⁸ On her mother's advice, she requests the head of John the Baptist. From these short biblical and historical passages a whole host of Salomes emerged in visual art and literature. In the nineteenth century, Salome attained the characteristics of the Decadent *femme fatale*, becoming the emblem of female nature in its most fearful and appealing state. Her dance became the dance of a sexually alluring woman, and the fatal request for John the Baptist's head was reinterpreted according the stereotype of fatal female sexuality. The fact that this is a holy man's head only intensifies the Decadent perversity of the tale.

Patrick Bade, in *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (1979) acknowledges the recurrence of images of Salome during the 1800s to the point where she has become a universal female figure whose connotations are instantly recognisable at the sight of an image or the sound of her name. He observes, 'Salome exercised the most powerful attraction of all [...] in the second half of the nineteenth century she was elevated to the status of an archetype.'⁹ Wilde provides an exception to this rule, but paradoxically his exceptional text proves to be the most enduring literary version of the fatal princess. As Dierkes-Thrun demonstrates, Wilde's version of the myth was the inspiration for numerous twentieth-century reworkings, such as Richard Strauss's opera,

⁷ Charles Bernheimer calls Salome 'the favourite femme fatale of the *fin de siècle*' in *Decadent Subjects*, p. 104.

⁸ Sections 136 – 137 mention Herodias' marriage to Herod Antipas and Salome as Herodias' daughter. Sections 116 – 117 mention that Herod slew John the Baptist because he was afraid of his power and influence. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* trans. William Whiston (A.D. 93-4; Ware: Wordsworth, 2006), pp. 786-8.

⁹ Bade, *Femme Fatale*, p. 7.

and performed interpretations of the Dance of the Seven Veils. Later Wilde's Salome was committed to film, for example *Salomé* (1923) directed by Charles Bryant and starring Alla Nazimova, and *Salome's Last Dance* (1988) directed by Ken Russell, in which the play is performed in front of actors playing Wilde and Douglas. It is therefore Wilde's *Salome* which is called to mind, even indirectly, when the princess's name is mentioned. This is possibly because of the 'celebrity' of the text; *Salome* caused controversy from the moment it was published.¹⁰ Dierkes-Thrun believes the popularity of Wilde's play is related to what she sees as its forward-looking modernity. She therefore attempts to distance it from readings which exclusively examine it in terms of nineteenth-century socio-historic context.¹¹ However, it is still necessary to re-examine the original English version, rather than concentrating on the versions it inspired. It is important to revisit the play as a product of the Decadent *fin de siècle*, looking at the text itself, in order to understand how Wilde really presents Salome.

Modern ideas of Salome as *femme fatale* are based on Wilde's play, but revisiting the text itself will help to disprove this notion. Karl Toepfer notes the difference between the dramatic text and the text embodied by actors: 'With drama, it is never entirely clear if the linguistic signifier is the image of the word on the page or the voicing of the word in performance. The dramatic text "writes" the body as another text called "performance", which one "reads" according to different rules than [those which] prevail in the reading of image linguistic signifiers.'¹² In the case of *Salome*, according to the interpretation of the princess's 'disembodied' presence within the text, there is a problem of staging the play, which means that Salome must be embodied by the actor playing her. There is obvious potential for variations between directors' interpretations of the play. However, it is common for directors to emphasise the '*femme fatale*' elements of Salome, transforming her into a character at odds with the similes used to describe her within the text.¹³ In spite of her delicacy and disembodiedness in the text, Wilde's Salome has frequently been made into a dominant presence on stage or screen.

¹⁰ Anecdotally it was banned because of excessive focus on (female) sexuality, but the 'official' reason was that the presentation of biblical figures on stage was considered blasphemous.

¹¹ Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, p. 2.

¹² Karl Toepfer, *The Voice of Rapture: A Symbolist System of Ecstatic Speech in Oscar Wilde's Salome* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 39.

¹³ For example, *Salomé* directed by Jamie Lloyd at the Hampstead Theatre (22nd June – 17th July 2010) emphasised all the dialogue by having characters shouting the lines rather than speaking them, particularly in the case of Salome herself, played by Zawe Ashton, who was imagined as a wilful and domineering adolescent girl, shouting at her stepfather until her demands were met. See also the filmic adaptation by Ken Russell, *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), in which Salome is a coquettish and dominant figure.

Salome is amplified on stage where she is silenced in text. Subsequent critical interpretations have been influenced by performances that include interpretations of the invisible dance. Indeed, the dance itself took on a life of its own in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with performances by Loïe Fuller and Maud Allan achieving notoriety.¹⁴ Before Wilde's trial in 1895 *Salome* was only realised visually and attenuatedly in Beardsley's illustrations. The play was banned from performance by the censors and only performed after the trial and Wilde's subsequent disgrace.¹⁵

In Wilde's play, Salome is elusive from the moment we are introduced to her. The Young Syrian describes her as being 'like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver'.¹⁶ This phrase is an example of Wilde's use of highly refined, artificial symbols in simile. This imagery suggests more than it reveals.¹⁷ The 'white rose' is a misleading image, since it suggests a delicate, pure beauty. However, Salome is not compared to the rose, but its shadow. No matter what colour the rose, the shadow would remain the same in its blankness. The 'silver mirror' is similarly confusing; is the silver descriptive of the reflective surface of the glass, or of the mirror's frame? Like Salome herself, whose bodily form is not revealed to the reader in spite of numerous references through simile, the shadow is secondary to the description of artifice surrounding it. Yet even though Salome is a shadow, the association of the purity, coldness, and refinement of the white rose and the silver mirror are relevant to her; she is associated with whiteness and fragility, and remains just as shadowy throughout the drama. In contrast to the apparently embodied 'fleshly' cruel women such as those who appear in the poetry of Swinburne, Salome is figured as an incorporeal and therefore insubstantial being, nothing more than a reflection of the darkness cast by a rose in the way of the light. Wilde's Salome exists as an image of something fragile, which can be destroyed as easily as it is created. She has little hands which are 'just like white butterflies'.¹⁸ These fluttering, trembling appendages are not consistent with the bodily powers traditionally

¹⁴ Allan's dance in particular achieved notoriety, and she was tried for lesbianism in the Pemberton-Billing trial of 1918, a trial reminiscent of Wilde's own.

¹⁵ The play was produced by Aurélien-François Lugné-Poë at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris on 11th February 1896. Source: Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 466.

¹⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 3.

¹⁷ The 'shadow of a white rose...' is a simile also used by Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (which will be examined further on) and in his short story 'The Nightingale and the Rose' (1888), to describe the paleness and fragility of the rose, which the nightingale feeds with her life-blood: 'Pale it was, at first [...] As the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver'. Oscar Wilde, 'The Nightingale and the Rose' in *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 28-9. In all three instances, the phrase connotes paleness, beauty, and fragility.

¹⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 8.

placed in the hands of the *femme fatale*. Dierkes-Thrun acknowledges that the similes Wilde uses to describe Salome are, in fact, more consistent with the opposite nineteenth-century stereotype, the *femme fragile*. She observes that ‘Throughout Wilde’s play, Salomé is presented in symbolic terms that indicate fragility, vulnerability, and preciousness [...] these are also typical traits of the *femme fragile*, another popular stereotype of femininity during the period.’¹⁹ But neither the fragility nor the stereotyping interfere with her interpretation of Wilde’s Salome as a dramatic heroine of modern individualism. However, I read these similes as suggestive of a disengagement between the author and his supposed ‘heroine’.

The traditional image of the *femme fatale* locates her allure and her power in her body, for which she is celebrated but figured as cruel because of the power of nature within her form. Writing a *femme fatale* requires an engagement with this body. Wilde, however, disengages from Salome by disembodiment and eventually destroying her. Salome’s white delicateness finds its contrary in the imagery of rapacious, heated desire in the vampiric woman of Swinburne’s ‘Satia Te Sanguine’: ‘You thrill as his pulses dwindle, / You brighten and warm as he bleeds’.²⁰ Salome’s beauty is cold, she is colourless, and does not create the impression of a ‘flesh-and-blood’ creation. The vampire-like woman seems to gain vitality according to Swinburne’s use of imagery of consuming a victim’s blood according to a simile which exemplifies the pleasurable agony of submission. The dislocating effects Wilde creates in his characters’ verbal descriptions of Salome contribute to her existence as a distortion of the *femme fatale* stereotype. The fatality of her female nature, for instance, is removed from her figure and transposed on to the moon. And more than this, her diminished presence in the text is indicative of Wilde writing her out of the text, and changing her form.

Salome’s body is the focus of numerous nineteenth-century painterly depictions, as catalogued in Dijkstra’s study, which emphasise her sexuality through her physicality. But rather than sexualising the supposed connection between fatality and female nature, Wilde diminishes the power and the sex appeal of the *femme fatale*. He achieves this by diminishing her body within the text, the body being the source of female power and threat. Salome is said to have a beauty which enthralls the male characters: she is the object of the male gaze in the play. One of the repeated textual motifs is ‘you look at her

¹⁹ Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome’s Modernity*, p. 24.

²⁰ Swinburne, ‘Satia te Sanguine’, p. 72, lines 61-2.

too much', or a variation thereon.²¹ Yet her beauty is delicate and distant; it is unclear exactly what the men see when they are looking at Salome. Through the dialogue of the men, Salome is anatomized. She is described in terms of her component parts, rather than being referred to as a whole body. Such descriptions of Salome are incongruent with her supposed threat. Similes for her beauty are typically white, delicate and natural. Her first admirer, the Young Syrian, expounds on her beauty using simile after simile: 'She is like a dove that has strayed ... She is like a narcissus trembling in the wind ... She is like a silver flower.'²² When Herod sees that Salome will dance for him with bare feet, he recalls the dove and flower imagery from the Syrian's speech, 'Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees'.²³ Wilde's Salome is belittled, rather than aggrandized as other cruel women are. Camille Paglia refers to Swinburne's women as 'titanic projections' which represent the attractiveness of woman in terms of female authority over the male imagination.²⁴ Rather than exaggerating her presence and emphasising her threat, descriptions of Salome make her seem diminutive and delicate. As well as 'little white hands' and 'little feet', she has 'little red lips' and 'little teeth'.²⁵ Like the image of a Victorian porcelain doll (or even a ventriloquist's dummy) she is small, fragile, chaste, and ethereal. The dialogue of Wilde's characters creates an image of Salome which is very different from the *femme fatale* stereotype she has come to represent, to the extent that it is almost impossible to reconcile such a delicate creature with the virago Salome-stereotype of the *fin de siècle*. Wilde creates a new image of the Decadent cruel woman. As the 'shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver', Salome is a shadow or faint reflection of herself in her previous visual and textual incarnations. Eventually she suffers the ultimate punishment of death, which is not typical of the *femme fatale* stereotype. Salome is not only removed from the text by her death; Wilde's strategies for writing her out can be detected throughout the play, where she exists as a faded version of the *femme fatale*.

Shadow and rose: the faded *femme fatale*

Textually, Salome is disconnected through the dialogue of the other characters. An example of disconnected dialogue occurs in Salome's introduction in the very first lines

²¹ Wilde, *Salome*, pp. 2-3.

²² Wilde, *Salome*, p. 10.

²³ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 53.

²⁴ Paglia, 'Nature, Sex, and Decadence', p. 226.

²⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 32.

of the play, during which time she is offstage, and invisible to the audience or reader. The Young Syrian delivers the opening line ‘How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight!’²⁶ But the next lines, spoken by the Page about the moon, abstract their dialogue. He says ‘Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems!’ and the Syrian responds, ‘She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet.’²⁷ It is unclear whether the Syrian is responding to the Page’s comments about the moon, or continuing his own train of thought about Salome. If he is talking about the moon, which is celestial and mysterious, the connection with Salome makes her similarly strange and distant. The correspondence between the moon and Salome becomes clear when she is described in almost identical similes further on. The Syrian’s comments about Salome’s pallor are the most important for our understanding of her insubstantiality. ‘How pale the Princess is! Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver.’²⁸ White and silver are words which have just been used to speak about the moon. Salome’s lunar pallor is mentioned repeatedly throughout the text. Not only is she insubstantial, she is sickly and weak. Herod tells his wife that ‘It is your daughter who is sick to death. Never have I seen her so pale.’²⁹ Further on Herod again implores Herodias to notice her daughter’s pallor, repeating his own words: ‘Do you not see your daughter, how pale she is? [...] Never have I seen her so pale.’³⁰ Salome is paling before their very eyes.

Salome fades in and out of view during the play, growing more sickly (and sickening) towards the drama’s conclusion. Salome is the ghost at the feast; the ghost of the *femme fatale* with a ghostly terror and insubstantiality. She is disconnected from the dialogue even though she is objectified by its speakers: she haunts the text as she drifts in and out of the characters’ consciousnesses. Speeches about her appear in the middle of other dialogues, often followed by a warning about looking at her. For example, the Soldiers, the Page, Syrian and Cappadocian are discussing Iokanaan, when the Syrian is distracted by Salome:

THE CAPPADOCIAN. May one see him?
FIRST SOLDIER. No. The Tetrarch has forbidden it.

²⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 1.

²⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 1.

²⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 3.

²⁹ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 31.

³⁰ Wilde, *Salome*, pp. 43-4.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. The Princess has hidden her face behind her fan! Her little white hands are fluttering like doves that fly to their dove-cots. They are like white butterflies. They are just like white butterflies.

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. What is that to you? Why do you look at her? You must not look at her ...³¹

Charles Bernheimer comments on this disconnectedness of dialogue in *Salome*. Its style is such that ‘The sentences are short. There are no connectives between them to indicate logical relation. Each paratactic sentence has a kind of declarative autonomy, as if it were a talking head without a body.’³² Not only does this lack of connection in the dialogue emphasise Salome’s presence as a distraction, it also presents her as a vague character. She herself is ‘without a body’. As Dierkes-Thrun comments regarding the presentation of Salome through the eyes of the male characters, ‘The other characters approach Salomé as a looking glass for their own narcissistic desires and needs, and yet they do not truly see her: Salomé is simultaneously the center of attention and completely alone.’³³ What Dierkes-Thrun interprets as Salome’s solitude is also indicative of her shadowy existence in the play. What the reader ‘sees’ when Salome is described by these narcissistic male characters is not Salome at all, but a reflection of male desire. Her actual female body is diminished in favour of male self-consciousness, and she is a woman seen through male eyes, just as the female tormentor of the masochistic scenario is invented as a projection of male anxiety. But while the female tormentor is physically exaggerated and supposedly powerful, Salome’s body is minimized and destroyed. The disembodiedness of Salome is significant, for it demonstrates a diminution of the cruel woman figure.

Wilde’s attitude towards the cruel woman, represented by the disembodied Salome, is different to the masochistic ambivalence typical of Decadent writers. However, although *Salome* is representative of a different attitude towards woman, this is not to be confused with Wilde’s own sexuality. It is common for critics to imagine that Wilde’s sexual preference for men informs his literary presentation of women.³⁴ The present

³¹ Wilde, *Salome*, pp. 7-8.

³² Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, p.122.

³³ Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome’s Modernity*, p. 20.

³⁴ Alan Sinfield makes the valuable comment that Wilde’s writings look queer to those reading after his trial because of our retrospective knowledge of his sexuality. Of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he says ‘once Wilde enters the dock and his relations with Alfred Douglas are invoked, the book is deafeningly queer’. Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 105.

Critical responses to *Salome* which interpret it according to its author’s homosexuality include Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1991; London: Virago, 1999), Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century*

study is not concerned with Wilde's sexuality, but rather with his Decadent attitude and the position of woman within the Decadent world he creates in *Salome*. However, one particular critic makes an important point alongside a theory about Wilde's sexuality. Analysing the women in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), George C. Schoolfield notes that the female presences within the novel are brief and inconsequential. He suggests that 'the reader may connect the very shadowy presence of the girls with Wilde's homosexuality.'³⁵ Thus shadowiness is associated with nothingness, and a denial of the female body. The key notion to be taken from Schoolfield's brief observation is that he believes the 'shadowiness' of the female presences to be a deliberate strategy on Wilde's part. There is a strong link between the shadowy presences of Sybil Vane and Salome. Salome, as already mentioned, is described as 'the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver'. Sybil, who is killed off altogether less than halfway through the novel, is described in terms which Wilde echoes in Salome's description. She has a blush 'like the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver.'³⁶ This strengthens the argument for Salome's femaleness; she is described in the same way as another character who is wholly female and also, as an actress, a screen for the enactment of other people's fantasies.

Sibyl Vane is initially attractive to Dorian because of her lack of personality and her ability to appear on stage and act any part: male or female. She is alluring when disguised, but when the mask is removed, once she is 'natural' and no longer acting, she is revealed to be nothing but a girl in love with a boy. When love of Dorian reveals Sybil to herself, she becomes unable to perform the part of the Shakespearean lover. She can no longer transcend reality to artifice, and is proud of the power of her natural emotions. She tells Dorian, 'I have grown sick of shadows [...] I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire.'³⁷ Sibyl's outburst alludes to Alfred Lord Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, who is cursed never to look at Camelot, but can only weave representations of the world as it appears in the shadows of her mirror. But she grows weary of this artificial life, uttering the lament 'I am half sick of shadows', and the vision of Sir Lancelot inspires her fatal journey to the

(Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), and Amanda Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism: From Decadence to the Post-Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

³⁵ Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence*, p. 70.

³⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 94.

³⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 99.

reality of Camelot.³⁸ Similarly Sibyl's abandonment of art is fatal to her. The truth of Sibyl's nature is repulsive to Dorian, who prefers artificial mimicry to nature. He tells her, 'I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid.'³⁹ Sibyl wants to emerge from the shadows of art, but in doing so she reveals herself to be insubstantial, shallow and stupid. She is a blank and vacuous shadow herself. Like Salome she is delicate because of her female nature, which, once revealed, leaves her incompatible with artifice: Dorian leaves her on the floor 'like a trampled flower'.⁴⁰ And Salome, like Sibyl, is merely a girl in love once all seven veils have fallen away. Although Salome is less (over)shadowed than the women in *Dorian Gray*, since she takes centre stage in the narrative, she is surrounded by ambiguous linguistic symbols. Both of these 'shadows of roses' reveal female nature beneath the mask of artifice. Salome is definitely female, and her femaleness is her undoing.

In contrast to the masochistic Decadent, however, Wilde does not use the figure of woman to represent an inner struggle between disdain and admiration for nature. For him, the natural can exist purely as enemy, and *Salome* reflects distrust for female nature. Wilde does create objective scenarios of admiration in the characters of the Syrian and Herod. However, these characters do not seem to struggle with their own appreciation for Salome, and thus Wilde's text is missing the integral feature of the Decadent cruel woman narrative, which is the product of a tension between desire and repulsion towards woman. The cruel woman must have an alluring pleasure and sexuality surrounding her fatality. There is no voluptuous surrender to the pleasures of agony in Wilde's play. Pleasure and agony are mutually exclusive. And rather than being aesthetic spectacles of destruction, the deaths in the play are swift, silent, and concealed, with the exception of the Syrian's suicide in front of Salome.

The masochist creator is another of the defining features of the Decadent cruel woman. The element of control crucial to the masochistic model is missing from *Salome*. Wilde has not written her into the masochistic 'game'; Salome and the characters who interact with her are not playing by the rules specific to the masochistic situation. It may seem

³⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott', in *Selected Poems* ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 10, line 71.

³⁹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 99.

⁴⁰ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 100.

that Narraboth and Herod are masochistic characters, since they lust after Salome and are manipulated by her. However, this is why they cannot be classified as masochists. There is no evidence of pleasure in torment. Salome acts according to her own desires, which were her mother's in the original biblical source. Here she acts for herself, and though Herodias is pleased by Salome's request for the beheading, this is a matter of no importance to Salome, who ignores her mother throughout the play. Salome is independent in longing for Iokanaan and exacting the promise from Herod. None of the characters is in control of her torments, and she brings real destruction rather than pleasure. Narraboth actually dies, rather than playing at submission. Herod's promise is made involuntarily, under the intoxication of Salome's beauty, and he is forced to fulfil his oath with utmost reluctance.

Those who bend to Salome's will do so out of a trance-like compulsion, in contrast to the tableaux of masochistic surrender orchestrated by the masochist-artist who controls his own domination.⁴¹ The male characters in *Salome* do not take pleasure in female cruelty. Instead, Salome has an almost hypnotic control over those who look at her; she persuades the Syrian to let Iokanaan out of the cistern by enticing him to 'Look at me, Narraboth, look at me. Ah! thou knowest that thou wilt do what I ask of thee.'⁴² Herod, later in the play, makes his reckless promise to Salome after looking at her; the stage directions prior to this read: 'From this point [Herod] looks all the while at Salome.'⁴³ Norbert Kohl, speaking about the components of *Salome* as a Decadent classic, mentions that the play contains 'puppet-like characters each with their own fixation'.⁴⁴ They are like ventriloquist's dummies, so single-mindedly fixated on the objects of their desire that they cannot communicate with one another. This obsession has its macabre conclusion in Salome's monologue to Iokanaan's severed head, in which she briefly becomes like the fatal Pygmalion type who kills the object of his desire in order to control it. This will be explored in further detail below. The characters barely interact with each other, so focused are they on their own desires. Herod, especially, keeps

⁴¹ Aesthetic tableaux are listed as a key feature of the masochistic scenario by Deleuze in 'Coldness and Cruelty'.

⁴² Wilde, *Salome*, p. 16.

⁴³ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ Other components he lists are: 'atmosphere [...] rich imagery and iterative exoticism of the language, and the evocative motifs of sex, death, fate, incest and sterility.' Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* trans. David Henry Wilson (1980; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 193.

forgetting himself because he is looking at Salome. The stage directions tell us that Herod is looking at her during the following exchange:

HEROD. Tigellinus, when you were at Rome of late, did the Emperor speak with you on the subject of ...?

TIGELLINUS. On what subject, my Lord?

HEROD. On what subject? Ah! I asked you a question, did I not? I have forgotten what I would have asked you.

HERODIAS. You are looking again at my daughter.⁴⁵

Once Salome has danced, and Herod has agreed to fulfil his oath and have Iokanaan beheaded, he comes to, as though he had been in a trance, unable to remember what has just happened: ‘Who has taken my ring? [...] Who has drunk my wine? [...] Ah! Wherefore did I give my oath?’⁴⁶ He removed the ring and drank the wine himself moments ago. Salome herself is also puppet-like in her request for Iokanaan’s head, which she demands with one repeated sentence, ‘Give me the head of Iokanaan’.⁴⁷ She gives no reason why she should desire this above all else, even Herod’s increasingly lavish offers of jewels and wealth. Having achieved the object of her desire, Salome is torn between lamenting the death of her love, and mocking him in death. In her final long speech she oscillates between the two attitudes: ‘I still live, but thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me [...] Ah, Iokanaan, thou wert the man that I loved alone among all men’.⁴⁸ Salome’s request for the prophet’s head is inevitable, because this is the infamous ending of the story. However, Wilde leaves her motives ambiguous, and finally leaves his authorial mark on the legend by adding the death of Salome to the plot.

The disembodied dancer

Prior to Wilde’s version, Salome was the subject of many Decadent visual and literary studies as an alluring deadly female typical of the masochistic Decadent imagination. As Bram Dijkstra notes, ‘Salome became the true centerpiece of male masochistic fantasies. What better source for the fruitful conjunction of the period’s numerous libidinous fetishes than this virginal adolescent with a viraginous mother, a penchant for exotic dances, and a hunger for man’s holy head?’⁴⁹ Dijkstra reads the Salome ‘type’ through the lens of nineteenth-century art. He seems to forget that the sexual, fetishistic

⁴⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, pp. 62-3.

⁴⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, pp. 64-5.

⁴⁹ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 379.

‘hunger’ of Salome is absent from the original biblical accounts, and is itself a feature of the myth which has been imposed upon her centuries later in an age as obsessed with looking backwards as forwards. Salome’s perversity has been decadently ‘sexed-up’, adding an atmosphere of lasciviousness to her dance, and a sexual hunger to her wish for John the Baptist’s head.⁵⁰ She has been formed to the male fantasy of strong female desire. She is powerful because she is desired, and she is threatening to male authority and sexuality. The dance is a perfect medium for the expression of female allure. Salome is repeatedly portrayed as a beautiful and semi-naked figure, suggesting that her *body*, so frequently put on show, is what is most desirable; her power comes from her female form.⁵¹

Salome was made to dance her deadly dance again and again in the literature and art of the nineteenth century, appearing in the literary works of Heinrich Heine, Gustave Flaubert, Jules Laforgue, and Stéphane Mallarmé, and in Gustave Moreau’s paintings. Joris-Karl Huysmans makes reference to these images in *Against Nature*, in which Des Esseintes stands in rapt admiration of Moreau’s *Salomé Dancing Before Herod* (*Salomé dansant devant Hérode* 1874-6)⁵² and thinks to himself that

neither St Matthew, nor St Mark, nor St Luke, nor any of the other sacred writers had enlarged on the maddening charm and potent depravity of the dancer. She had always remained a dim and distant figure, lost in a mysterious ecstasy far off in the mists of time, beyond the reach of punctilious, pedestrian minds, and accessible only to brains shaken and sharpened and rendered almost clairvoyant by neurosis [...] In Gustave Moreau’s work, which in conception went far beyond the data supplied by the New Testament, Des Esseintes saw realized at long last the weird and superhuman Salome of his dreams. Here she was no longer just the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs. She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Idols of Perversity* has been subject to critique for Dijkstra’s reading of *Salome*. Karl Toepfer critiques Dijkstra for ‘sermonizing’ about the play’s antifeminism and for seeing it only as a product of its time. Toepfer, *Voice of Rapture*, p. 11.

⁵¹ See Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* and Bade’s *Femme Fatale* for examples of Salome’s body on display in nineteenth-century visual arts.

⁵² Gustave Moreau, *Salomé Dancing Before Herod*, 1874-76, oil on canvas, 1435 x 1043 mm.

⁵³ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, pp. 52-3.

Des Esseintes speaks about Salome's body, as it has existed in previous renditions of her, in terms of its sexual movement, life, allure. Hustvedt has made reference to the image itself as an 'adorned and immobile' depiction of woman having been frozen into art in order to mitigate male castration anxiety.⁵⁴ However, the surface of the image can still be projected upon, making it appear to come to life according to the fantasy of the viewer. In the imaginings of Huysmans's fictional Decadent, Moreau adds to this vision of Salome so that she comes to embody the notions of the masochist, with power, threat and desire emanating from her natural female form. In the above passage we see Salome being crystallised into the archetype we now recognise, as Moreau expands upon the 'data' of the New Testament. Huysmans locates the transition from the biblical to Decadent Salome in Moreau's imagery, and provides a literary definition of the new stereotype. Salome is poisonous, and her feminine qualities make her all the more deadly. There is a foreshadowing of Wilde's Salome in Des Esseintes's description of Moreau's painting.⁵⁵ Portraying her as a mysterious 'dim and distant' figure, he imagines Salome to be a ghost who can only be conjured up by neurotic, Decadent, minds. The figure Des Esseintes sees in Moreau's painting is also intangible. But she represents a symbolic crystallisation of the abstract concepts of Lust and Beauty in her literal body, and she is eternal rather than fleeting. She is 'undying, immortal'. While Moreau's Salome is intangible because she embodies unachievable ideals, Wilde's is so because she is the anti-ideal, she represents an attempt to do away with, rather than capture, feminine energy in its most beautiful and monstrous forms.

As observed by Des Esseintes, Salome's power typically comes from her body and what she is able to do with it. Wilde diminishes her body's power. He abbreviates her moment in the spotlight; he does not provide the reader with an indication about what Salome's whole body looks like in the rest of the text. In his version the oath is sworn before Salome dances. In the biblical myth and subsequent versions the oath is sworn retrospectively, because the dance reveals Salome's body to be completely irresistible. In Wilde's version the promise of the spectacle is more tantalising than the spectacle itself; Salome's dance – whether it culminates with the spectacle of her nudity or not – exposes more than the female form stripped bare; it reveals the disappointment, the

⁵⁴ Hustvedt, 'The Art of Death', p. 20.

⁵⁵ Ellmann documents that, though Wilde was aware of the numerous versions of the legend in prose and visual art, Moreau's depiction of Salome was Wilde's favourite: 'Wilde's knowledge of the iconography of Salome was immense. [...] Only Moreau satisfied him, and he like to quote Huysmans's description of the Moreau paintings.' Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 323.

threat, the chthonian forces inherent in female nature.⁵⁶ Wilde's *Salome* thus occupies a conflicting space where two phenomena coincide: her status as the favourite *femme fatale* of the later nineteenth century, and Wilde having written her in such a way that she does not seem to be a *femme fatale* at all. She is transformed away from the stereotype into something new – a shadowy and ethereal female figure. This change suggests that Wilde is writing the cruel woman out of the Decadent tradition.

Salome as (cruel) woman

Though incongruent with the status of '*fatale*', since she is physically reduced and delicate, Wilde's *Salome* is definitely a '*femme*'. The dialogue reinforces *Salome*'s femaleness and its threat to the world of Decadent luxury surrounding her. The request for Iokanaan's head – the defining element of the archetypal *Salome* plot – is altered by Wilde who makes the request come from *Salome* herself. Wilde also dramatises the initial meeting between *Salome* and Iokanaan during which she develops a desire, a 'hunger' for his body. Speaking to the decapitated head of Iokanaan, *Salome* admits the desire which has taken hold of her since their encounter. She says 'I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire.'⁵⁷ Though the request also comes from a woman in the biblical version of the tale, Wilde makes implicit the notion that female sexuality is responsible for the destruction of the prophet. As Elliot L. Gilbert observes, *Salome*'s desire for Iokanaan's head 'for mine own pleasure'⁵⁸ is part of her base, animalistic natural instinct, 'a simple gratification of appetite accomplished with all the naive, dangerous self-absorption of an animal, terrible but natural: terrible *because* natural.'⁵⁹ *Salome* is driven to destruction by her desires. These are animal drives which she cannot control.

The representative symbol of destructive female energy throughout the plot of *Salome* is not the princess herself but the moon. The moon serves to exemplify female destructiveness, whilst also separating this power from *Salome*. The power of female nature is presented as the possession of the moon which in reality has no gender. The moon is surrounded by imagery of bloodshed and eventually becomes 'red as blood'.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Paglia speaks of the chthonian forces of female nature in *Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art* (London: Penguin, 1995).

⁵⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 56.

⁵⁹ Elliot L. Gilbert, "'Tumult of Images": Wilde, Beardsley and *Salome*', *Victorian Studies* 26 (1983), p. 152.

⁶⁰ Wilde *Salome*, p. 53.

It is also connected to death, ‘a dead woman [...] looking for dead things’.⁶¹ These associations reinforce the notion that woman’s reproductivity is connected with destruction. Thus Salome’s association with the moon indicates her female sexuality, inextricably linked with her menstrual cycle and reproductive capacity. She is like Mirbeau’s matrix of life and death. Helen Tookey refers to the moon and blood as menstrual signifiers in her essay “‘The fiend that smites with a look’: The monstrous/monstrous woman and the danger of the gaze in Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*’ (2004). Wilde’s presentation of female nature as threatening and deadly could be interpreted as an attribution of power to woman, since Salome’s sexuality is threatening to those who look upon her. Tookey says that there is ‘throughout the play an emphasis on the danger for the male characters of their looking at her; she is dangerous as an object.’⁶² However, the danger of looking at Salome is frequently projected on to the moon, which is female and deadly, and searching for dead things. The moon is active, and looks out upon the characters in the drama, while Salome is passive, looked at as an object. When the Syrian kills himself, the Page laments, ‘Well I knew that the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom she sought. Ah! why did I not hide him from the moon?’⁶³ The Syrian’s death is attributed to the power of the moon rather than to Salome herself, even though his suicide is provoked by Salome diverting her attention from him. The way Wilde writes Salome suggests that she is not really in control of her female power, or her own capacity for fatality.

Similarly, Wilde’s characterisation of Salome takes place primarily through the eyes of the other characters. She is called into being by their voices, and their descriptions shape the reader’s impressions of her. She is significant to each character in different ways, which become obvious through the similes they use to describe her, or, if they are not speaking about her directly, the way they describe the moon. The moon becomes a signifier of the atmosphere at different moments of the play, and a parallel to Salome’s deadliness. Gilbert suggests that the moon also only exists as the characters perceive it, just as Salome is called into being as a shadowy presence by those who talk about her. Gilbert notes that there is a ‘theme of self-created reality in the play [...] Clearly the moon exists in the play only to the extent – and in the form – that it is perceived by the

⁶¹ Wilde *Salome*, p. 1.

⁶² Helen Tookey, “‘The fiend that smites with a look’: The monstrous/monstrous woman and the danger of the gaze in Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*”, *Literature and Theology*, 18 (2004), p. 30.

⁶³ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 25.

various characters.’⁶⁴ For example, when Iokanaan is summoned from the cistern after Salome has enticed the Syrian to command he be brought forth, the moon is eerily described by the Page as being ‘Like the hand of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud.’⁶⁵ To the Syrian, she is more like a princess, smiling at him through a veil of clouds: ‘Through the clouds of muslin she is smiling like a little princess.’⁶⁶ Both are projecting: the Syrian sees the approval of the princess in the moon, and the Page sees the deadly consequences he fears. However, even if both the moon and Salome are called into being by other characters, it is clear that the moon is attributed with a more active power. This occurs without negating the idea that female sexuality is dangerous. After all, the request for Iokanaan’s death comes from Salome’s sexual desire for him. Herod invests a great deal in the symbolism of the moon, and as Salome prepares to dance he is disturbed to find that ‘she [the moon] has become red as blood’.⁶⁷ Even at this point the moon presides over the drama, casting the blood-red shadow of fatality over Herod’s court.

Kohl also makes reference to the moon as representative of a fatal atmosphere and of other characters’ desires towards Salome. He explains,

The central symbol for this atmosphere of fatality and also for the characters’ changing moods and visions of Salome is the moon. As an image and as a theme it links together all the main motifs of sex, death and fate [...] For the young Syrian and for Herod the moon crystallises all their dreams and erotic desires directed towards Salome.⁶⁸

Salome also sees herself in the moon. Early in the play she says of the moon, ‘She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself.’⁶⁹ By repeating the imagery of coldness, silver, and flowers, Salome unwittingly describes the moon as the Syrian and Page have been describing her. Herod’s lecherous eyes, on the other hand, do not see a virgin. Upon his entrance, he immediately remarks upon the ‘strange look’ of the moon which for him resembles ‘a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too [...] The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken

⁶⁴ Gilbert, ‘Tumult of Images’, p. 145.

⁶⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 53.

⁶⁸ Kohl, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 184-5.

⁶⁹ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 11.

woman'.⁷⁰ Herod's perception of the moon is more congruent with previous incarnations of Salome, a woman driven by passion who displays her naked body as the source of her power. The moon is more of a *femme fatale* than the delicate, white and virginal princess.

Aubrey Beardsley's black and white illustrations for *Salome* provide another dimension to the characterisation of the moon. He takes the moon's power a step further, giving it the authority of Wilde himself presiding over his drama. In the illustration *The Woman in the Moon* [Fig. 5], a caricature of Wilde's face appears in the centre of the moon, along with a flower which is a possible allusion to Wilde's famous green carnation. The moon is watching over a naked male and an androgynous second character. The androgynous figure in the image could be female; the body is draped in fabrics without any definition, and therefore it is not clear exactly who the two are supposed to be. The title only refers to the moon, suggesting that she is the most important character in the scenario. Since the naked male seems to be shielding the other figure from the moon, extending an arm as if to hold him back, it seems that the second figure is the Syrian being protected by the Page; this is reinforced by the fact that the image appears before Salome (or any other female character) comes into the text. The imposition of Wilde's face on to the moon complicates the notion of the moon being entirely female, though Beardsley does maintain the femaleness of the moon in the title of the first image, the '*Woman in the Moon*'.⁷¹

The Wilde-faced moon recurs in less prominent form in a further illustration later in the text entitled *A Platonic Lament* [Fig. 6], in which the naked figure reappears, again next to a shrouded figure. This is the Page lamenting the death of the Syrian who has just slain himself. The moon is departing from the picture in the upper right-hand corner amid a trail of clouds. The carnation has been dropped and is falling towards the Syrian's head. Is this an allusion to homosexual love between these two characters? The Page describes the Syrian as having been 'nearer to me than a brother [...] In the evening we were wont to walk by the river [...] The sound of his voice was like the sound of the flute, of one who playeth upon the flute.'⁷² We have just cause to interpret this relationship as more than 'brotherly', though characteristically of Wilde's style the

⁷⁰ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 28.

⁷¹ Gilbert does note that Beardsley originally called the image 'The Man in the Moon' and changed the name. 'Tumult of Images', p. 153.

⁷² Wilde, *Salome*, pp. 26-7.

relationship is described by implication rather than direct reference. Wilde reappears in the next image. He moves out of the background location of the passive spectator, and takes up a position at the forefront of the drama as the master of ceremonies in *Enter Herodias* [Fig. 7]. He holds a copy of the play and gestures towards the figure of Herodias who appears to be on a stage. This coincides with Wilde's control of the narrative, it is from this point on that he makes his most major alterations to the Salome myth: the request for Iokanaan's head coming from Salome, and the death of Salome.

The *Woman in the Moon* image is representative of the fluidity of gender in Beardsley's entire set of illustrations. Gilbert connects Beardsley's androgynous and grotesquely perverse illustrated figures with the perverse sexuality of Salome which leads to her desire to possess the dead body of the man she loves. For this reason, Gilbert imagines that the images and text should be considered as one, maintaining the 'complex and ambivalent revolutionary vision of the collaborative project.'⁷³ Gilbert sees this 'vision' as an anarchistic revolt, in which Wilde and Beardsley use the figure of Salome to attack the patriarchal norms of nineteenth-century society. However, according to Gilbert, they are horrified by the very means by which they make the attack: 'Beardsley and Wilde, through a notable representation of perverse sexuality in their work, participate in a devastating *fin-de-siècle* attack on the conventions of patriarchal culture even as they express their horror at the threatening female energy which is the instrument of that attack.'⁷⁴ Woman can be used subversively as a threatening figure, but she should not be afforded too much power because her natural energy is threatening even to those who use it as an attack. Even if it is decadently appealing to write or illustrate a scenario in which patriarchal authority, such as the dominion of Herod or the religious authority of Iokanaan, is threatened, it is terrifying to imagine that this threat is posed by a woman's animalistic desire. Thus, the desire, and woman

⁷³ Gilbert, 'Tumult of Images', p. 133.

⁷⁴ Gilbert, 'Tumult of Images', pp. 133-4.

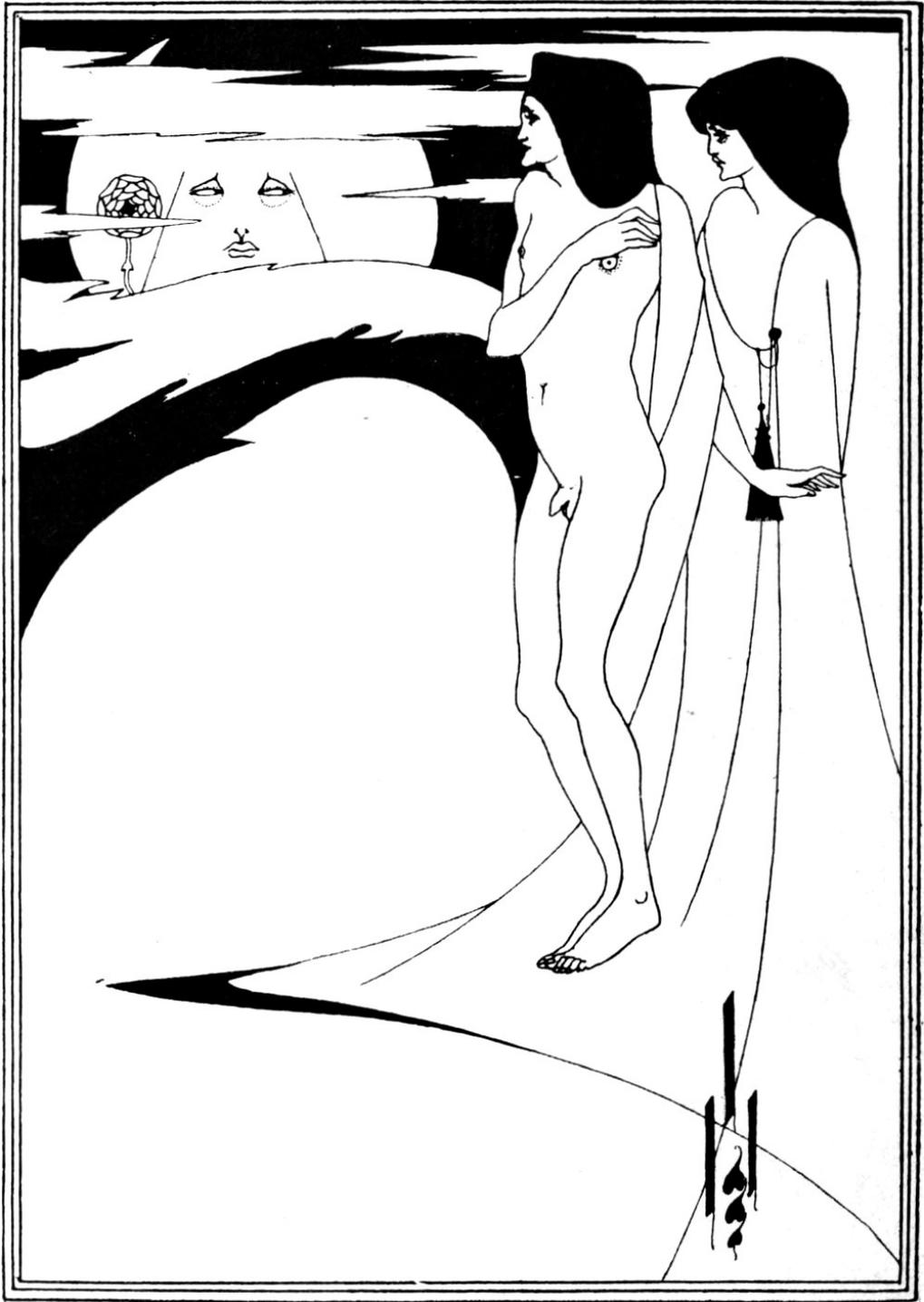


Fig. 5. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Woman in the Moon* (1894), line block print on Japanese vellum, 225 x 157 mm.



Fig. 6. Aubrey Beardsley, *A Platonic Lament* (1894), line block print on Japanese vellum, 226 x 161 mm.

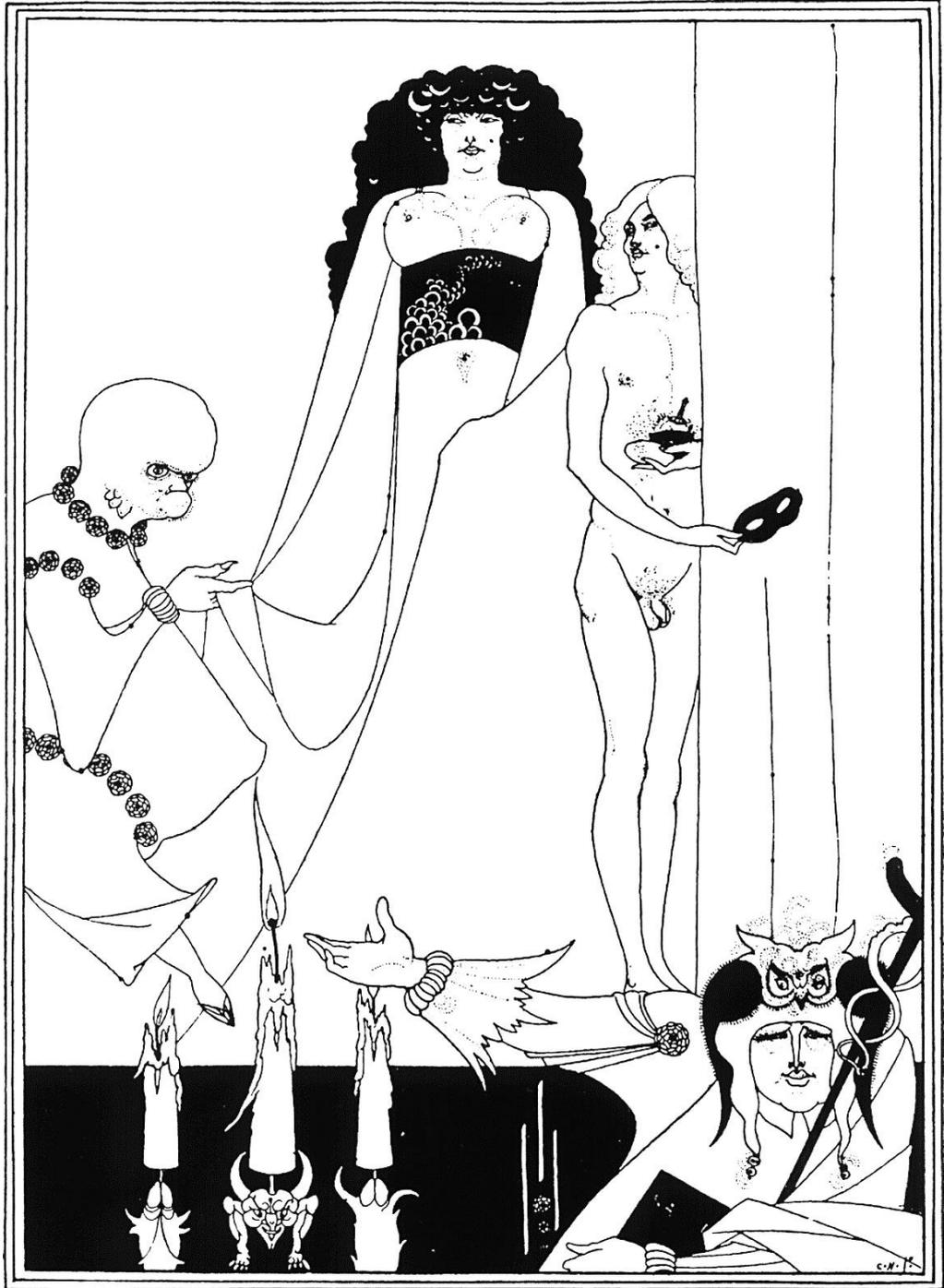


Fig. 7. Aubrey Beardsley, *Enter Herodias* (1894), line block print on Japanese vellum, 221 x 161 mm.

herself, must be brought under control. Man must be able to defend himself against his own female creation.

Beardsley's illustrations provide the only clue to Salome's appearance in her new decadent incarnation. In his black and white drawings she looks very different to previous artistic imaginings. Beardsley himself refined his image of Salome, to make her as simple, and therefore visually arresting, as possible. His first illustration of Salome, entitled *J'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan* (1893), is filled with flourishes: fine lines sweep across the page, and Salome is decorated with peacock feathers [Fig. 8]. The second version of this image, which appears as *The Climax* [Fig. 9] in the illustrated edition of *Salome*, is much simpler. Beardsley has reduced the image to the bare minimum of fine lines, opening up the blank space behind Salome and emphasising the distinction between black and white. The result is a much cleaner image of Salome, levitating, ghostlike, and clutching Iokanaan's head. Chris Snodgrass, in *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (1995), comments on this transformation:

The purging of complicating details also softens the picture in another sense: it makes slightly more apparent certain droll Beardsleyan ironies, such as chaste lilies feeding on the blood of murder, or lustful Salomé being transported in the manner of angels [...] While it is still extremely powerful, the scene in *The Climax* is nevertheless calmer and more abstract, even if more 'beautiful,' than its earlier counterpart, the evil more contained within a distanced elegance.⁷⁵

This notion of 'distancing' corresponds with the strategies employed by Wilde in his writing of *Salome*. By reducing her bodily impact through the use of delicate and disembodied similes, Wilde abstracts her. Beardsley depicts her in fine line, in 'Japonesque' style which Desmarais compares with a musical impression; something intangible and fleeting.⁷⁶ Although black and white, Beardsley's illustrations complement Wilde's own vision of his play as a 'beautiful coloured, musical thing'.⁷⁷ Beardsley's Salome is different to the full-bodied woman in the paintings of Moreau.

⁷⁵ Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 147.

⁷⁶ Desmarais explains that Symons used a musical metaphor to describe Beardsley's drawings and their formal harmony. Of the *Salome* designs, she notes, 'Haldane MacFall continued in the same vein as Symons, and asserted that Beardsley was 'wholly concerned with decorative schemes as a musician might create impressions in sound as stirred in his imagination by the suggestion of the play'. Jane Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France 1893-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), quoting Haldane MacFall, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Man and His Work* (London: John Lane, 1928), p. 49.

⁷⁷ Wilde, Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas (January-March 1897) in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 492.



Fig. 8. Aubrey Beardsley, *J'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan* (1893), line block print, 228 x 127 mm.



Fig. 9. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax* (1894), line block print on Japanese vellum, 343 x 273 mm (sheet).

Compared to Moreau's renditions, Beardsley's are much more two-dimensional. The abundance of blank space constitutes the emptiness of the images, and of the princess herself. They therefore serve to illustrate Salome as she appears in Wilde's text. Both writer and artist refine Salome; the cruel woman is moving in a new direction away from the bodily towards the insubstantial and the ethereal.

Wilde approved of Beardsley's illustrations initially, at least to the extent that he allowed them to be published alongside his words. The copy of *Salome* Wilde sent to Beardsley before the illustrations were made is inscribed: 'March '93. For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance. Oscar.'⁷⁸ Since Beardsley was supposedly the only one who could see Salome's dance, it is fair to assume that his envisioning of Salome corresponds with the way she appears in Wilde's text. Beardsley's depictions of Salome complement Wilde's text as they depict her, in linear form, as transient, ethereal and shapeshifting. Beardsley's images represent a subversion of, traditional representations of cruel women in the nineteenth century. They correspond with Wilde's rupture with the stereotypical *femme fatale* as he writes her out of Decadence. In Beardsley's images, Salome's appearance changes; her form is inconsistent between the various representations of her. It is clear that the *femme fatale* has been transformed in both text and image. However, importantly, her gender is not transformed by Wilde, although certain critics imagine that this is also called into question by the text in the same way as Beardsley's androgynous images suggest it is.

Beardsley's illustrations are more overtly sexualised than Wilde's text, and provide more obvious references to the fluidity of gender, since most of the figures, including Salome herself, are depicted as androgynous. Beardsley's images are much more outrageous than Wilde's text. Although Wilde's play was received as a threat and banned from being performed for the presentation of female sexuality and biblical profanation, the text of the drama is not nearly as grotesque and sexually suggestive as Beardsley's images. Wilde was aware of this, and, according to Ellmann, he lamented the lack of abstract mysticism and symbolism in the illustrations. Ellmann remarks that '[Salome's] dance was more metaphysical than physical. [Wilde] deprecated

⁷⁸ Hart-Davis, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, notes, p. 348.

Beardsley's naughtiness'.⁷⁹ Beardsley adds mischief to the subtle undertones of Wilde's play. Amanda Fernbach imagines that Wilde intended to call gender norms into question. In *Fantasies of Fetishism: From Decadence to the Post-Human* (2002), Fernbach coins the term 'Decadent fetishism'. This term refers both to Decadent fetishistic ideals and their recurrence in modern fetishes which involve a use of artifice and surface to (re)define the self, destroying absolutes in the presentation of gender and sexuality, and allowing people to 'fantasize and perform new hybrid subjectivities'.⁸⁰ Her example from Decadent fiction is Wilde's *Salome*. In her view Wilde undertakes a similar fetishistic project, and she proposes that gender and desire are shifting, rather than fixed, in the text of *Salome*. Fernbach explains, 'because of the fluidity of gender and sexualities within *Salomé*, its fetishistic imagery generates a plurality of erotic meanings and fantasies that are not limited to the framework of male heterosexual desire.'⁸¹

Wilde has created a scenario in which male heterosexual desire is exposed as flawed, as dangerously leading men astray. The primacy of heterosexual desire is threatened, since his men allow the chaotic sexuality of woman to throw them into chaos alongside her. Despite the play's lack of stable heteronormativity, Fernbach recognises that order is restored at the play's conclusion. Although she imagines that *Salome* makes use of the Decadent castration fantasy, she acknowledges that the castrating woman cannot be allowed to dominate.⁸² The threat of castration

ultimately proves too great to bear and is warded off by the death of this castrated and castrating woman. When Herod commands that *Salomé* be killed, the multiple erotic possibilities generated by the imagery and discourse are "cut off" and reduced to a single ultimate signified. In *Salomé* the phallogocentric order is threatened only so that it may ultimately be reinstated; this is the conservative dynamic of the play.⁸³

Though Fernbach argues that the death of *Salome* reinstates patriarchal order, she does not see this as incongruent with the exploration of erotic possibilities in the preceding text. The world of *Salome* is a world in which Decadent fetishes can break the

⁷⁹ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 355.

⁸⁰ Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 42, p. 45.

⁸¹ Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 48.

⁸² However, Fernbach refutes Bernheimer's claim that castration is central to Decadence and argues that it should not be taken as the singular, phallic Decadent fantasy. Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 46.

⁸³ Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 48.

boundaries of gender and sexuality, only to rebuild these boundaries when the curtain falls or the book is closed.

A problem arises when we try to locate the ‘multiple erotic possibilities’ in the text. In the case of Salome’s character, Fernbach locates them outside the text, in the dance, which affords the reader an opportunity to question Salome’s gender. She believes the imagery of the veil suggested by the ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ is connected with Salome’s mysterious textual presence. The veil is thought to be representative of gender transgressions, thus Salome is veiled not to cover her corrupt femininity and her female nothingness, but to conceal *something*: her maleness. Fernbach argues that ‘the veil becomes a prop to fantasize Salome as a male transvestite. Her dance signifies gender undecidability and subsequently allows for the masked expression of gay erotics’.⁸⁴ One assumes that these ‘gay erotics’ are expressed in Salome’s longing for Iokanaan – which becomes a man’s longing for another man – and in Herod’s desire to see Salome dance, which would make the dance a homoerotic spectacle. There is no more than speculative evidence for this, since there are no explicit references to Salome’s maleness in the text. However, the fact that such a conclusion can be reached does raise the important point that, though Salome is treated as a woman throughout, the characters never make reference to her body in terms of physical female sex characteristics. In the Decadent poetry of Swinburne or Baudelaire, for example, woman is represented in terms of her female physicality: breasts, long hair, references to ‘ideal’ female beauty. In contrast Wilde’s depiction of Salome is extremely chaste. But this chastity also leads to ambiguity, which accounts for readings of Salome having a male body. Such readings as Fernbach’s ignore the fact that Salome’s dance is not represented to the reader; Wilde withholds all details apart from its name. For Fernbach, this is reason enough to interpret it as a representation of ‘forbidden’ homosexual love. But we do not have to go as far as Fernbach. The dance does not actually exist in the text. Therefore, by using it to strengthen her hypothesis, she actually weakens her argument. There is a stronger argument to be made about gender with reference to textual evidence.

Within the text, Salome’s gender may be called into question, not in terms of her appearance, but by her use of language. She attempts to gain power by adopting masculine discourse, which she undertakes during her speeches to Iokanaan. This is a

⁸⁴ Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 54.

textual example of ‘gender undecidability’.⁸⁵ Salome’s speeches of admiration for Iokanaan indicate a woman taking control over language and possessing an independent sexuality. However, her words have no effect on the prophet, who refuses her attempts to seduce him, and will not interact with her, saying, ‘I will not look at thee. Thou art accursed’.⁸⁶ In addition, Salome’s terms of endearment are repetitions of the words used to describe her. This is evident in the linguistic strategies of the text, in terms of repeated phrases and mirroring images. Fernbach imagines that this is indicative of the characters’ unstable gender identities. She argues, ‘In the many distorting mirrors of the text’s metaphoric displacements, identities are not fixed by gender or sexuality but are instead depicted as doubled, multiple and shifting.’⁸⁷ In Salome’s initial expressions of admiration for Iokanaan, she speaks of him exactly as she has just been spoken of: ‘He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste, as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver.’⁸⁸ She does eventually break away from the mirror image as she begins to admire different parts of Iokanaan’s body, in similes more vibrant than those used towards her, such as ‘thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory’.⁸⁹ Even though her similes become increasingly lavish, Salome breaks Iokanaan’s body into parts (eyes, body, hair, mouth) rather than admiring him as a whole, just as she is anatomized by the characters who describe her.

The body and the word

In the previous chapter I explored Maggie Tonkin’s theory that the use of synecdoche is a way of fragmenting and subordinating the female image to male creative power. Here, Salome attempts to bring Iokanaan under her control, but she fails in her endeavour. She speaks from the position of the body, and lacks power over words. Her power comes from her bodily form, but she cannot make Iokanaan look at her or desire her. Her lengthy speeches form a more coherent visual whole than the mysterious isolated phrases which describe her. Another instance of Salome mirroring her male counterparts occurs when Iokanaan objects to her looking at him. Defiantly evading the role of object that Salome attempts to impose on him, Iokanaan speaks of her gaze as Salome has spoken of Herod’s. Iokanaan says, ‘I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she

⁸⁵ Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 54.

⁸⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 26.

⁸⁷ Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, p. 46.

⁸⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 19.

⁸⁹ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 23.

look at me with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids [...] Bid her begone.’⁹⁰ Salome’s golden eyes and eyelids recall Herod’s ‘mole’s eyes’ and ‘shaking eyelids’. The fact that male voices are the first to speak these words indicates male primacy and authority, and Salome merely provides an echo of this. She adopts the language of men, but cannot change speech into action; she cannot speak from a fully male position.

Bernheimer also hypothesises that Salome is actually a homosexual male because of the way she speaks to the male object of her desire. He compares her looking at Iokanaan and creating metaphors to describe his beauty with the Renaissance ‘blazon’ tradition of the male poet gazing on a woman and trying to evoke her qualities through images. According to Bernheimer, ‘As the subject of the gaze and the creator of metaphors, Salome takes over this male position. Thus gender identities are detached from essentialist definitions, and Salome, the archetypal *femme fatale*, becomes “like” a man, a homosexual in love with a man who rejects his passion.’⁹¹ In this reading Wilde is projecting himself on to Salome who becomes a representation of his forbidden passion for men. When imagined as male she becomes like the male artist and Iokanaan stands in for the female form on to which his ideals are projected. Salome formulates an image of Iokanaan through poetic language and similes, as for example Swinburne does with his women. However she transgresses the boundaries of the projection, and wants physical contact. She is like Raoule of *Monsieur Vénus*, in which the female ‘artist’ has to kill the male object of her affection in order to possess him entirely.⁹² Of course the Salome story has to end with the beheading of Iokanaan, but it is significant that in both stories the female attempt to control a man ends with a fatality. This reinforces the notion of the danger of female sexuality.

Gail Finney also sees Salome as a failed ‘blasonneur’.⁹³ In Finney’s argument, Salome’s failure is due to her wish to accompany her words with physical contact. ‘In exposing her desire to touch the admired object, however, Salome oversteps the bounds of the virtuoso poet and reveals not power but weakness’.⁹⁴ Salome remains in the realm of the

⁹⁰ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 20.

⁹¹ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, p. 125.

⁹² Dierkes-Thrun presented new research suggesting that Wilde was influenced by *Monsieur Vénus* when he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in a paper entitled ‘Oscar Wilde and French Decadence: Rachilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Salomé*’ at *Decadence and the Senses: An Interdisciplinary Conference*, Goldsmiths, University of London, 10-11 April 2014.

⁹³ Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, p. 63.

⁹⁴ Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, p. 65.

body, as opposed to the 'superior' realm of the mind. This is an important contrast between Salome and Herod; he wants to see her perform, while she wants to possess the body of her beloved. In *Women in Modern Drama* (1989), Finney offers a feminist reading of Salome which, paradoxically, rests on the notion that Salome is male. Finney begins with the statement that she wants to 'demythologize Salomé as a fatal woman'.⁹⁵ But rather than question Salome's 'fatality', Finney questions her gender, saying that 'on a disguised, symbolic level she is not a woman at all, but a man. As the one who looks at and admires, as spectator, Salomé assumes vis-à-vis Jokanaan a traditionally male role.'⁹⁶ As in Bernheimer's argument, Salome's encounter with Iokanaan is presumed to be homosexual, Salome becoming male by implication. Finney maintains that, if she is a man, 'Wilde's *Salomé* emerges less as a misogynistic denunciation of the *femme fatale* than as a masked depiction of one man's prohibited longing for another.'⁹⁷ However, even when imitating masculine discourse, Salome cannot become fully integrated into the male world of artifice. Her 'natural' sexuality is her undoing; she is driven by a bestial hunger for Iokanaan. She rejects Herod's offers of jewels and material goods for the head of the man she desires, choosing the natural (and forbidden) body over artificial beauty.

Finney's argument rests on the false premises of Wilde's sympathy and Salome's masculinity. In fact, she negates her own argument by referring to Salome as female, empowered temporarily by her body as Herod's fetish:

just as Jokanaan is feminized in his status as object, the man whose presumed power was so great that he thought himself able to forbid Messiah from raising the dead finds himself subjugated to a woman's will. But Salome's power over Herod is only temporary, since she is empowered merely as a fetish, as a beautiful female body; once the beautiful woman becomes monstrous [...] she is destroyed.⁹⁸

Salome is 'empowered' by Herod, who bestows this power upon her by making her his fetish, just as the masochist writes the cruel woman into her apparent dominance. Herod is not subjugated to woman's will; instead he is subjugated by his own word. It is Herod who really holds the power in the scenario. Bernheimer also accepts the idea that Salome is able to use language to become male and transcend her female status.

⁹⁵ Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, p. 62.

⁹⁶ Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, p. 62.

⁹⁷ Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, p. 65.

⁹⁸ Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, p. 77.

However, she is confined to the position of the body, not the word, because of Iokanaan's refusal to listen when she speaks. Iokanaan's rebukes of Salome as an impure *woman* confirm her lower position. Iokanaan responds negatively to Salome as a woman, and, by distancing himself from her, marking her as 'other', he indicates his own maleness and superiority.

The relationship between Iokanaan and Salome reveals a difference in power between male and female, which is to do with the ability to command language. Iokanaan is heard before being seen, while Salome is seen before being heard. Iokanaan therefore exists initially as a voice, while Salome is an object. What first attracts Salome to Iokanaan is his voice, which she wants to match with her own: 'What a strange voice! I would speak with him.'⁹⁹ She responds to the characters who love her, but whose love she has no investment in, by asking them to look at her. She knows the affecting power of her beauty. But rather than imploring Iokanaan to look at her, she asks him to speak to her: 'Speak again, Iokanaan. Thy voice is as music to mine ear.'¹⁰⁰ She relates to him as a thinking, speaking being. Amy Koritz observes that

The play's action is carefully patterned around an opposition between the visible and the audible [...] This pattern expresses the opposition between the Word, that audible manifestation of the spirit, and the Body, that visible manifestation of the material, the sexual, and the 'natural.'¹⁰¹

It is clear that these distinctions are made according to gender: language is the male, 'spiritual', domain, while woman occupies the natural space of the body. Koritz imagines that the problem of Salome, and the reason for her death, is that she tries to occupy the position of both body and spirit simultaneously. Her behaviour is threatening because it disrupts the distinction between the object of the gaze and the voice: 'the female body, ideally a mute object of the male gaze and male desire, attempts to usurp the male prerogative of the voice and use it from her own position (that of the body) for her own ends.'¹⁰² This is why she must be killed in the end, because the destruction of her body will put an end to its vocalisations, and thus restore the gender roles which have been temporarily disrupted.

⁹⁹ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Amy Koritz, *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 79.

¹⁰² Koritz, *Gendering Bodies*, p. 80.

Other critics believe that Salome's attempt to adopt the masculine 'voice' is a mark of her strength as a character. This is thought to be reason enough to consider her an independent character, breaking free from the stereotype of woman as a figure who remains passive while men speak poetically about her beauty. Kohl, for example, thinks that Salome gains power as a result of her vocalised attraction to Iokanaan. He contends that 'Her courtship of Iokanaan totally reverses the traditional nineteenth-century concept of the submissive woman'.¹⁰³ However, we must also consider Iokanaan's response to Salome's words. Kohl does not acknowledge the implications of Iokanaan's imperviousness to Salome's courtship, which betrays her female status. She can neither maintain the masculine subject-position, nor can she exploit her own object status, since Iokanaan refuses to look at her and refuses to be seduced. He cries out in response to her advances, 'Never! daughter of Babylon! Daughter of Sodom! Never.'¹⁰⁴ Iokanaan certainly sees his objectifier as a woman, since he makes direct reference to her femaleness, repeatedly calling her 'daughter' in his rejection. Salome attributes Iokanaan's rejection to his failure to look at her, lamenting, 'If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me'.¹⁰⁵ In so doing, Salome ultimately reinforces her existence as a female object.

Salome is trapped between attempting to be the one who looks, and needing to be looked at in order to achieve her own empowerment. Finney has compared Salome to a failed blazon poet, whose desire to touch the object reflects her weakness. In the courtly love model the 'kneeling' stance is ultimately achieved by using language to create the impression of abasement. Like the literary masochistic model this pose is created by words, not actions. Interestingly Salome manages something similar in her final monologue at the end of the play. Addressing Iokanaan's head, she refers to him having raped and defiled her even though he has never touched her or even looked at her. As a dead body he becomes the ideal surface for projection. Salome can address him in a way that makes him seem active; a strategy adopted by Swinburne in his poems with a single speaker supposedly addressing a silent female auditor. As Iokanaan is murdered there is 'a silence, a terrible silence'. He does not even satisfy Salome by crying out.¹⁰⁶ But as the head of a corpse Iokanaan is also too cold, unmoving, unfeeling. He will never respond to her. In this speech she oscillates between the masochistic (abused, defiled)

¹⁰³ Kohl, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 192.

¹⁰⁴ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 63.

and the sadistic position (kissing his mouth, tasting his blood, taunting him for being dead). She is both the cruel woman and the masochist-Pygmalion type. But her project fails because she reverts back to her body and physical desires. Salome exposes the corpse as a dissatisfactory replacement for the living lover. To have the dead lover's head is still the only way for her to achieve her desire to kiss him – but not to have him acknowledge her. This is a one-sided relationship of the kind we find in Dowson's poetry, in which the speaker fixes the image of the beloved into a dead or cold object, but is frustrated by the inaccessibility of the object of his desire.

Wilde disempowers Salome by disembodiment. She is a shadowy presence in the drama, so although her body is the source of her femaleness it is not given a proper outline or form in the text. It could be argued that Iokanaan also occupies a 'disembodied' position in the text, since most of his words are spoken while he is concealed within the cistern. But this ability to speak and be heard and heeded even when unseen indicates his verbal power. The authority of Iokanaan's voice endures even after his death, as his prophecies come true one by one. The death he foresees is his own, but he also commands Salome's death before she has danced, in a speech delivered from the cistern which is interrupted at intervals by the voices of Herod and Herodias, Herodias mistakenly believing Iokanaan is talking about her. Leaving out the interruptions, Iokanaan's speech reads as follows:

Ah! the wanton one! The harlot! Ah! the daughter of Babylon with her golden eyes and her gilded eyelids! Thus saith the Lord God, Let there come up against her a multitude of men. Let the people take stones and stone her [...] Let the captains of the hosts pierce her with their swords, let them crush her beneath their shields [...] It is thus that I will wipe out all wickedness from the earth, and that all women shall learn not to imitate her abominations.¹⁰⁷

This has implications relating to the notion of female impurity. If Salome is killed in accordance with Iokanaan's word, whether or not we take this as a fulfilment of scripture, she is killed for the abomination of her femaleness. Iokanaan accuses her of being a desiring female, and she cannot be allowed to live because of this. This absolute 'wiping out' of female wickedness could be interpreted as a 'wiping out' of the cruel woman. As the play ends, male power conspires to overcome female nature. Man has

¹⁰⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 42. Iokanaan continues to prophesy the blood-red moon, darkened sky, and Herod's fear, which foreshadow his and Salome's deaths: 'In that day the sun shall become black like sackcloth of hair, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars of the heaven shall fall upon the earth like unripe figs that fall from the fig-tree, and the kings of the earth shall be afraid', *Salome*, p. 44.

the power to define woman through language, and he likewise has the power to destroy her.

Herod has ultimate control over language, since he can affect nature with his word. When he commands, 'Hide the moon! Hide the stars!' the stage directions tell us that his word has been obeyed, as 'The stars disappear. A great cloud crosses the moon and conceals it completely.'¹⁰⁸ Gilbert imagines that when Herod commands that the stars and moon be put out his action 'as a defender of patriarchal culture, is to reject unmediated nature and to suppress the female energy which is its most dangerous manifestation.'¹⁰⁹ Gilbert sees Herod as a successful patriarch and is aware of the Decadent stance against nature maintained by Wilde in the play. That Wilde was writing against nature is implicit in the death of Salome. Herod's power over nature comes from language. He has the power to put out the stars and moon, and to order the deaths of Iokanaan and Salome. Salome's death is the result of the command, 'Kill that woman!'¹¹⁰ Iokanaan is killed because the power of Herod's word is so strong that he dare not disobey himself. Rather than command the prophet's death directly, he emphasises that the perverse and deadly desire is Salome's: 'Let her be given what she asks!'¹¹¹ This phrase reminds us that Salome's only ability is to ask; she cannot act for herself, and is at the mercy of the men whose words will lead to actions. The tragedy of *Salome* arises because Herod is bound to his word: 'I am the slave of my word, and my word is the word of a king.'¹¹² Herod must keep his promise to fulfil Salome's deadly wish.

In the text of *Salome* Wilde enacts a fantasy of female destructiveness followed by her destruction. However, within the text we can see that this subversive fantasy is limited by its terms of expression. Wilde painstakingly tries to deny and control nature through the use of refined language. But he cannot create an entirely artificial or beautiful scenario because the play's language is infected with references to nature. This complicates the male linguistic refinement/female chaotic nature dichotomy. Wilde draws our attention to the power of words in *Salome*, even to the point of acknowledging the inferiority of language in the face of nature. Nature in *Salome* is represented by the moon, and by

¹⁰⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁹ Gilbert, 'Tumult of Images', p. 157.

¹¹⁰ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 67.

¹¹¹ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 62.

¹¹² Wilde, *Salome*, p. 52.

Salome's monstrous female desires. Although these things are referred to in the characters' speech, both are pushed outside the decadent world of Herod's court; the moon is seen, but it is distant, Salome is deadly but disembodied. Yet the more Salome's terrible female nature comes to influence the direction of the action, the more nature comes into the world, and into the language which makes up the world. Herod's fear of nature coincides with his fear of death. After he has sworn the fatal oath to Salome, he hears the beating of wings in the air, which Iokanaan has identified as the wings of the angel of death. He also feels stifled by his garland of roses: 'It is my garland that hurts me, my garland of roses. The flowers are like fire. They have burned my forehead.' When he tears the wreath from his head, he says,

I can breathe now. How red those petals are! They are like stains of blood on the cloth. That does not matter. It is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees [...] It were better to say that stains of blood are as lovely as rose petals.¹¹³

Metaphors are exposed as reversible in Herod's chiasmic speech about rose petals. Bernheimer makes reference to the Decadent paradox that language contains the nature it tries to deny. He thinks that Herod's correction of himself is an exposure of the incorrectness of the preceding metaphors which favourably compare Salome's beauty to that of flowers. His words will later be replaced by action when he orders the death of Salome, finally removing woman and nature from the Decadent world altogether. Bernheimer argues that '[Herod's] order of execution sets to right the patriarchal order of nature: women are not as lovely as petals; the fact of the matter is that they stain cloths with blood.'¹¹⁴ The bloody truth is exposed, and blood will soon be shed to prove it. In the play's final stage direction Salome is crushed to death, and blood is shed from a female body. As Fernbach has observed, order is restored at the play's conclusion, and this rests on the assignment of gender to the correct bodies. Even Beardsley makes it clear that Salome is female at her death: the image *Cul de Lampe* [Fig. 10], which provides the tailpiece to the text, is the most recognizably female rendition of Salome. Her naked body, being lowered into a giant powder-puff coffin, is anatomically proportional, the least abstracted depiction of a woman in the whole series of illustrations. Herod's final command, 'Kill that woman!', ends the play with the destruction of Salome's definitively female form.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 51.

¹¹⁴ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, p. 128.

¹¹⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, p. 67.



Fig. 10. Aubrey Beardsley, *Cul de Lampe* (1894), line block print on Japanese vellum, 137 x 155 mm.

The cruel woman returns as a spectral and haunting figure in the poetry of Symons and Dowson. Female figures appear as dancing girls in Symons's poetry, particularly in the collection *London Nights* (1895). These figures can be seen as examples of what Symons termed the 'refinement' of English Decadent writing. Referring to the self-reflexivity of Decadent writing, Karl Beckson has observed that 'The simultaneous involvement and detachment of the writer, characteristic of the self-reflexive art of Decadence, is also evident [...] in the theatrical poems of *London Nights*'.¹¹⁶ This self-reflexivity is not such an obvious strategy in Wilde's play, but one might conclude that the text is also self-aware in its Decadence. Wilde gives his characters dialogue which echoes his own famous epigrams. He is involved in this way, as Beardsley makes clear by putting Wilde in the illustrations. He is also detached, since he does not actually appear in the drama, in contrast to Symons's apparent insertion of himself in his poems as a narrator 'I'. Wilde is further disconnected from *Salome* because he is not the true author of the myth. He puts his authorial mark on the story by killing the protagonist and altering the cruel woman stereotype in the process. When Symons takes up the Salome theme, Wilde's fated princess is transformed into a symbolist female figure. He writes Salome into his own poetic image of the dancing girl, a recurring motif throughout his work. In 'The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias' she is pale and shadowy, an 'eternal enemy' with 'eternal, white, unfaltering feet'.¹¹⁷ Salome and the other dancing girls of Symons's poetry are frequently described as shadows. But these shadows are difficult to capture, and represent the challenge of trying to capture the fleeting moment. The women are pale and insubstantial, like Salome, and they reflect the speaker's desires. The dancer is both a catalyst for the poetic exploration of the fleeting moment, and a distraction from it. As I will show in the following chapter, although Symons's women are not as overtly cruel as the cruel woman type, they are representative of masochistic torment. Beckson calls Symons's dancing girls '*femmes fatales*', but they are not fatal women.¹¹⁸ However, the masochistic model can be noted in Symons's poems that feature women as mirrors reflecting male desire. I consider the two male images reflected in these mirrors: the artist and the lover. In the 'Prologue' to *London Nights* Symons captures the reflexivity of the masochistic model, as his speaker encounters a reflection of himself instead of the dancer he is trying to represent. In Symons's erotic poems that feature speakers reminiscing about past loves, women are

¹¹⁶ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 150.

¹¹⁷ Arthur Symons, 'The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias' (1897), from *Images of Good and Evil*, in *Collected Works, Volume 2* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), p. 38.

¹¹⁸ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 117, p. 118.

anatomized, and appear as pale, ghostly figures. Although not overtly masochistic, Symons's *fin-de-siècle* poetry similarly exposes authorial control, and contributes to the sense of the cruel woman being diminished in English Decadent writing at the century's end.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘The perfect rose of lights and sounds’ Arthur Symons and the dancer in *London Nights* and *Silhouettes*

A divided self: artist and lover

Arthur Symons (1865-1945) was fascinated by the figure of the dancer. Like Wilde’s Salome, she is a ghostly and faint figure who haunts his two principal poetry collections, *Silhouettes* (1892, revised 1896) and *London Nights* (1895, revised 1897). The challenging process of capturing the image of a woman, along with the tension between animal sexuality and artifice, are the sources of the poet’s masochism. This chapter demonstrates Symons’s use of the masochistic model, by examining the various incarnations of women as projections of male desire in Symons’s Decadent poetry according to these two modes: artist and lover. Dancers exist in his poetry as they appear to his senses, thus the reader encounters flashes of features, costumes, twirling body parts, but the whole body is elusive. When Symons writes about women as lovers, his speakers are not passive spectators but involved with the bodies of the women. However these bodies convey the typical features of the Pygmalion’s statue which is evoked by the desire of her creator. They are anatomized, cold, or ghostly. Women in Symons’s poetry are far from the fleshly *femme fatale* type. They are created according to male fantasy, like the cruel woman of the masochistic model.

The motif of the cruel woman in English Decadence is, I have argued, a figure which reflects the artist who creates her. As projections of male ambivalence, Symons’s women represent a Decadent ‘splitting’ of the self along the lines of nature and artifice, so that the male writer holds the position of artist and woman represents sexuality. John Stokes notes Symons’s ‘divided self’ in *In The Nineties* (1989), commenting that ‘The Symons who was eager to subject dance to an aesthetic enquiry vied with the Symons who was willing prey to its charms.’¹ The dancer represents both the sexualised female body and the artist in Symons’s poetry; she is a masochistic screen on which his speakers project sexual desire and their own image as artists.

In Symons’s early verse, the dancer represents the perfect fusion of artist and artwork. The female dancer is the subject of several poems in *Silhouettes*, most notably

¹ John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 81.

‘Javanese Dancers’. But it is in *London Nights* that the dancer becomes a motif, and is addressed more personally than in this impressionistic poem. She is idealised from a distance, from the position of the male spectator in the audience. As Matthew Sturgis comments, Symons is the ‘decadent laureate’ of the music hall which he controls like a ‘toy world’.² The woman as sexual partner, another female type in the erotic poems, is not always such a distant figure. She is more consistent with the cruel woman stereotype and written about in masochistic terms of pleasure and pain. Both are projections of male desire, of the poet’s conception of himself as artist, and of his enjoyment of bodily pleasures.

Silhouettes and *London Nights* are Symons’s most widely-read Decadent collections. His first poetry collection *Days and Nights* (1889) consists of dramatic situations imagined in verse; the death of a singer’s daughter in ‘A Café Singer’, or a husband’s murder of his unfaithful wife in ‘An Act of Mercy’, for example. Symons writes more cruel-woman types from a masochistic perspective in his later collections, such as *Amoris Victima* (1897), a psychological study in ‘love, as it might affect the emotions and sensations of a typical modern man, to whom emotions and sensations represent the whole of life.’³ This collection is based on Symons’s own doomed affair with a dancer, Lydia, who appears in *London Nights* as ‘Bianca’.⁴ Symons intended it to be read as a single poem, and therefore requires a longer more focused study than is possible here.⁵ *London Nights* and *Silhouettes* are Symons’s first experiments in the modern man’s ‘emotions and sensations’.

The composition of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* coincides with the period during which Symons believed ‘Decadence’ to be the appropriate representative term for the most innovative literature of the time; although by 1899 he altered his terminology and transformed his article on the ‘Decadent Movement’ into a monograph entitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. In *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* Symons attempts to develop a style with which to capture and represent fleeting moments and sensations.

² Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 102.

³ Arthur Symons, preface to *Amoris Victima* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. vii.

⁴ Beckson notes that Lydia’s surname remains unknown, as Symons never revealed it and she was not a leading dancer, so her name is undocumented. Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 100.

⁵ ‘I wish this book to be read as a single poem, not as a collection of miscellaneous pieces. [...] It is a study, under the conditions of many moods, of a particular kind of personality, as it might be acted upon by the travail, exultation, and disaster of the only kind of passion which could be conceived as obtaining persistent dominance over it.’ Symons, preface to *Amoris Victima*, p. vii.

He endeavours to capture the visual in his poems. Flashes of colour and movement recall the brushstrokes of Impressionist painting. He anatomizes dancers' bodies by representing isolated body parts, disembodying the dancer in a contrasting fashion to Wilde's attenuation of Salome's physical form and Beardsley's controlled representation of her in black and white fine line.

In this chapter I concentrate on the various incarnations of the female figure in Symons's Decadent poetry: dancer, fatalised mistress, flower, animal, and phantom. I argue that each of these female types represents an attempt by Symons to capture experiences and sensations. I begin by considering Symons's use of the dancer as a cruel woman figure. In 'The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias' (1897), women are fatal and narcissistic, but they are also pale and insubstantial projections of male desire. The influence of Browning's dramatic monologues can be felt in 'Variations Upon Love' (*London Nights*). The speaker here envisages himself as a degraded martyr, addressing a silent woman who is an example of the fatalised female type in Symons's work. Silke Binias acknowledges that 'fatalising' the woman is different from presenting her as inherently fatal. In *Arthur Symons: A Life* (1987), women are miscast as *femmes fatales* by Karl Beckson. He pronounces of *London Nights* that 'Prominent in the volume are poems depicting *femmes fatales* and sexual love', and speaks of the dancing girls of Symons's poetry 'as *femmes fatales*, central to Symons's imagination'.⁶ This classification is problematical, since they are not consistent with the stereotype of the fatal woman. There is little impression that they are sexually cruel; the pain associated with women in the poems is the pain of unrequited love, of fantasies unfulfilled, or of jealousy towards the other partners of his lovers. Women are not violent, but Symons's male speakers abase themselves before them. The dancer represents the unattainable, reflecting his despair and frustration back to him. This is unlike Swinburne's poetic masochism which replicates pleasurable violence, and distinct from Wilde's presentation of dangerous female sexuality. Symons's frustration comes from the attempts to capture the fleeting moment.

In his 1898 essay 'The World as Ballet' Symons uses the Pygmalion analogy to represent the artist's struggle to create a true representation of their impression of the world. The resulting lifeless 'cold statue' is a disappointing externalisation of the artist's

⁶ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 117, p. 118.

fantasy.⁷ I observe, however, that women in Symons's poems are less marmoreal than ghostly. Jan B. Gordon compares the haunting phantom-woman in 'Stella Maris' to the dancer figure which eludes the speaker in the music-hall poems. The dancer in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', for example, is a shadow dancing with her mirror image; using repetition and rhyme Symons creates a dynamic sense of movement in this poem but the dancer remains intangible and ghostly.

In *London Nights* and *Silhouettes* the figure of woman as dancer is a clear projection of the poet's desires. As Joseph Bristow notes in "'Sterile Ecstasies": The Perversity of the Decadent Movement' (1995), in *London Nights* 'Repeatedly, the female body acts as a screen on which Symons's male persona witnesses the perverse patternings of what he wants to possess.'⁸ There is a recurring theme of the idealised artist self and the dancer as mirror for this self, a kind of masochistic model which lacks the sexualisation of pain. Bristow connects Symons's ideal of the 'disembodied voice' in Decadent writing with the lack of male physicality in his poetry. His speakers are tormented by their own sexuality and desire, and project this desire outwards to create ghostly images of dancers or prostitutes that 'are forever evanescing among the "dance of shadows" that tantalize the man's projection of what he might himself become.'⁹ In the 'Prologue' to *London Nights* Symons captures the problem of the self-reflexivity of the masochistic model, as his speaker encounters a reflection of himself instead of the image of the dancer he is trying to capture.

In the second half of this chapter, I turn to Symons's *Memoirs* which were written after his mental breakdown in Italy in 1908 and which were unpublished during his lifetime. They present a different picture of the individual dancers with whom he associated. He describes them as natural, bodily, unsophisticated, and the music hall as an invitingly chaotic 'animalistic' place. However, the image of woman in his poems, even 'Bianca' whose sexuality is described as bestial by Symons, is white, cold, delicate and ghostly. The female body is anatomized by Symons as it is by Swinburne and Wilde. As Bristow suggests, the anatomization of the lover's body in verse leaves the reader without an impression of her whole body, and it seems even to elude the speaker as it fades out of

⁷ Arthur Symons, 'The World as Ballet' (1898), *Studies in Seven Arts*, ed. by Ian Fletcher and John Stokes (1906; New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), p. 390.

⁸ Joseph Bristow, "'Sterile Ecstasies": The Perversity of the Decadent Movement', in *Essays and Studies 1995: The Endings of Epochs*, ed. by Laurel Brake (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), p. 80.

⁹ Bristow, 'Sterile Ecstasies', p. 81.

view. The final images of women which I examine in this chapter are phantoms evoked by synaesthetic correspondences. With reference to Catherine Maxwell's work on fragrance in Decadent literature, I consider two further examples of women who correspond with the ghostly and disembodied type which emerges in English Decadent writing at the end of the nineteenth century. In 'Perfume' (*Silhouettes*) and 'White Heliotrope' (*London Nights*) the poetic image of the lover in Symons's work is intangible, unreal, defined by the empty space left by her absence, in which only her perfume lingers.

Salome returns: the cruel woman as dancer

Beckson, along with Frank Kermode in *Romantic Image* (1957) who discusses the isolated artist and the creation of an image, connects the dancer with nineteenth-century Aestheticism.¹⁰ As Beckson states,

Such an organic conception of art, associated with late nineteenth-century Aestheticism, has its sources in such major writers as Coleridge, Blake, and Pater, as well as Gautier, Baudelaire, and Flaubert, and was developed by the later Symbolists, who had, particularly in the figure of Salomé, envisioned a perverse, self-obsessed, decadent dancer, emblematic of the isolated, narcissistic artist.¹¹

The dancer as a figure in the writing of Symbolists and Decadents is 'emblematic' of the artist. Indeed, she is a metaphor for the artist himself. Narcissistic and self-obsessed, she represents a projection of the artist's own self-obsession. This is particularly clear in Symons's work, in which the dancer is envisioned as more mysterious than cruel. The mechanics of the masochistic model alter, I suggest, bringing the focus back to the artist and his anxiety. Symons does not disguise his own control behind an image of apparent submission to a cruel female entity. Rather, he superimposes himself over the image of the dancer, as we see most clearly in the 'Prologue' to *London Nights*, examined below.

The female dancers in Symons's poetry are distinctly of his time. As he writes of 'Nini Patte-en-l'Air' (1892), the dancer is 'Part lewd, aesthetical in part / And *fin de siècle*

¹⁰ Kermode's *Romantic Image* contains a theoretical consideration of the poetic 'Image' and its creation by Modernist and Symbolist writers. His analysis of Symons is chiefly devoted to his use of the dancer as a magical and mystical Symbolist figure, and is therefore not particularly relevant to this thesis. I concentrate on more recent critical analysis of Symons's work, and on the dancer as a specifically female image.

¹¹ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 76.

essentially.¹² In contrast, Swinburne looks to the past, to Sappho, to mythical or biblical figures, presenting the archetype of the cruel woman as a fantasy figure. Wilde's use of the nineteenth century's favourite *femme fatale* in his rewriting of the legend of Salome is also a return to a myth, albeit one which, at the time, provided a contemporary masochistic fascination. Both writers create cruel women drawn forth 'pale from the past'.¹³ Symons's work is set in his present, and reflects what he defines as the main aims of Decadence: to reveal 'not general truth merely, but la vérité vraie, the very essence of truth – the truth of appearances to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it: and the truth of spiritual things to the spiritual vision'.¹⁴ In *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* Symons attempts to achieve this ideal of Truth, as he explores ways of creating impressions that convey the Truth through poetry.

Symons unites the traditional trope of cruel woman with the dancer in his later long poem 'The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias' which was published in *Images of Good and Evil* in 1899. Here Symons revisits the Salome-theme, imagining all women as embodiments of the fatal princess. 'They dance, the daughters of Herodias, / Everywhere in the world'.¹⁵ They are compared to rose petals as in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' from *London Nights*, but they do not form a perfect rose, rather they are scattered and blown by the wind. 'Is it the petals falling from the rose?' asks the speaker in the opening line of the poem.¹⁶ The rest of his monologue answers his question by describing the faint and distant sound of the dancers as they dance. The speaker addresses the reader as silent auditor until a shift in the last few lines which address the ghostly women of his fantasy. The 'daughters of Herodias' are intangible women, conjured up by the speaker's dreamlike projection:

I see a pale and windy multitude
 Beaten about the air, as if the smoke
 Of incense kindled into visible life
 Shadowy and invisible presences [...].¹⁷

These women with 'thin white feet' are dancing through the speaker's vision. They are consistent with the image of Salome which Wilde creates in his play, pale and insubstantial, as intangible as a cloud of smoke.

¹² Arthur Symons, 'Nini Patte-en-l'Air' (1892), in Desmarais and Baldick, *Decadence*, p. 139.

¹³ Swinburne, 'Dolores', p. 127, line 161.

¹⁴ Symons, 'Decadent Movement', p.859.

¹⁵ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 39.

¹⁶ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 36.

¹⁷ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 36.

Salome herself appears to be separated from this rose-petal drift of dancing women. She is introduced as ‘a young tree / Swaying in the wind’.¹⁸ She is rooted to the spot but she is still moving, like the immobile motion of the dancers in ‘Javanese Dancers’. Symons here imagines Salome’s dance as exotic and sensual. Though her ‘narrow feet are rooted in the ground’, she sways backwards and forwards as if blown in the wind.¹⁹

Symons decorates Salome in a Wildean list of exotic jewels. She is adorned with artifice which embellishes her organic tree-like body:

The eyes of the blue-lidded turquoises,
The astonished rubies, waked from dreams of fire,
The emeralds coloured like the under-sea,
Pale chrysoprase and flaming chrysolite,
The topaz twofold, twofold sardonyx,
Open, from sleeping long between her breasts [...].²⁰

Symons’s daughters of Herodias are all bearing men’s heads on platters; they are all fatal to men because of their desirability. But they are ignorant of their power and the implications of their fatal effects on men. Each is ‘Smiling as innocently as if she carried / A wet red quartered melon on a dish. / For they are stupid [...]’.²¹ It is implied that love is always fatal for men, ‘Always a man’s head falls because of them.’²² These fatal women are ghostly and insubstantial, gentle rose petals blown on a breeze, but they are also deadly. Symons follows the tradition in English Decadence for writing cruel women as delicate and ghostly. Their fatality is caused by their simple wish to be loved. They are reluctantly cruel, not actively murderous: ‘they desire not death, they would not slay / Body or soul [...] They desire love, and the desire of men; / And they are the eternal enemy.’²³ Symons here removes the dancer from the ideal image of artist, and treats her instead as an enemy to be feared. Desire for women is fatal, and all women are enemies. The reason for their fatality is their ignorance and self-absorption. They lack the intellectual refinement of men, and they are narcissistic and narrow-minded.

They do not understand that in the world
There grows between the sunlight and the grass

¹⁸ Symons, ‘Daughters of Herodias’, p. 36.

¹⁹ Symons, ‘Daughters of Herodias’, p. 36.

²⁰ Symons, ‘Daughters of Herodias’, p. 37.

²¹ Symons, ‘Daughters of Herodias’, p. 36.

²² Symons, ‘Daughters of Herodias’, p. 38.

²³ Symons, ‘Daughters of Herodias’, p. 38.

Anything save themselves desirable.
 It seems to them that the swift eyes of men
 Are made to be but mirrors [...].²⁴

These women wish to see themselves reflected in the eyes of the men who love them. Not only do they exist as projected fantasies of the speaker's 'eternal enemy', but they are imagined to seek the same blank screen in the eyes of men, to reflect them back to themselves. Symons as the artist represents the power women have over him by imagining a scenario in which they ask him to be Pygmalion and to create representations of them. He ventriloquises the women, making them voice his own desire: 'Why will you follow after wandering dreams / When we await you? And you can but dream / Of us, and in our image fashion them!'²⁵ This is like a double-projection; first the creation of the image of fantasy woman and then giving her a voice which echoes the artist's experience of feeling compelled to write about his ideal. Women are blamed for his desire. They distract him from his artistic pursuits in the world between the sunlight and the grass, and they dismiss his pursuits as fruitless dream-chasing. However, the speaker acknowledges, as Symons does in his essay 'The World as Ballet', that the world itself is made of shadows, and that the dreams of the artist are 'fairer and more real' than are the daughters of Herodias.²⁶ Dorian Gray laments of Sybil Vane that she no longer embodies the shadows of art once she has fallen in love and forsaken artifice. Human beings exist like shadows in the Lady of Shalott's mirror, but we must deny the knowledge of the fleeting and insubstantial nature of life, 'It may behold itself as in a mirror. / Shapes on a mirror, perishable shapes, [...] Let us dream on, forgetting that we dream!'²⁷ The final few lines of the poem describe the women as having been fantasised into being. The speaker addresses the dancing women, telling them to go on dancing for eternity. He also acknowledges that they are formed by desire and therefore exist only as long as the fantasy is maintained. 'Yours is the beauty of your own desire, / And it shall wither only with that love / Which gave it being.'²⁸ The cruel women who symbolically kill the men who desire them, are in reality the fantasies of these men's desire.

The dramatic monologue and the fatalised mistress

²⁴ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 38.

²⁵ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 39.

²⁶ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 39.

²⁷ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 39.

²⁸ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 40.

Unlike Browning's dramatic monologues where the details build into something fairly discernible and physical in terms of character, Symons's figures seem to haunt and disappear, leaving us with the solitary poet and his swirling thoughts. The dancers in 'The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias' drift into the speaker's consciousness like petals on the breeze, causing him to ruminate on the danger of female sexuality and male desire. The poem ends with the fatal dancing girls fading into the background again, as the speaker instructs them to

Dance always, daughters of Herodias,
With your eternal, white, unfaltering feet,
But dance, I pray you, so that I from far
May hear your dancing fainter than the drift
Of the last petals falling from the rose.²⁹

Their dance and their existence is reduced to almost-silence and near-nothingness. The dancers are still dancing, but they are reduced to a faint sound in the background of the speaker's perception.

The death of Browning on 12 December 1889 marked a significant change in Symons's poetic life, as Karl Beckson acknowledges. According to Beckson,

[Symons's] view of poetry had already been undergoing change since publication of *Days and Nights* [in 1889], and while he was indebted to Browning for the manner in which the 'human soul' might be revealed by striking dramatic moments, he proceeded to develop his view of an autonomous art that would embrace aesthetic concern with intense personal experience, French Decadence, and Symbolist transcendentalism.³⁰

Beckson regards *Silhouettes* as Symons's first Decadent collection, acknowledging Baudelairean correspondences between images such as lilies and the moon, his celebration of make-up, and his use of London as a setting for poems which record his individual impressions and adventures. He states that 'In *Silhouettes*, poems influenced by Symons's reading of the French Symbolists and Decadents, particularly Baudelaire, make their first appearance.'³¹ However, Browning's influence can still be observed in the four dramatic monologues of 'Variations Upon Love' from *London Nights*

²⁹ Symons, 'Daughters of Herodias', p. 40.

³⁰ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 52.

³¹ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 88.

In Silke Binias's analysis of 'Variations Upon Love' she claims that she does not wish to dismiss Symons as 'yet another misogynist poet supporting the view of woman as destructive'.³² She argues that the mistress is not 'fatal' but 'fatalised', since the persona in these sonnets seems convinced women are *femmes fatales*, and this legitimises his jealousy. The notion of the woman being 'fatalised' is key – the agency lies with the poet who imagines her to be fatal, rather than with any actual qualities inherent in the female figure. The speaker seems to reject the typical troubadour position of self-sacrifice before his fatalised mistress. In the first monologue, the lines 'I'll not say that I / In many several deaths for you would die' negate this cliché.³³ The lover refuses to subscribe to the typical narrative of being prepared to die for his lover. Should we therefore imagine that the female recipient of the address is fatal at all, or that the speaker is convinced women are *femmes fatales*? There is no hint that the woman is physically or even intentionally tormenting him. He seems to be working himself up into a frenzy of jealousy and projecting this jealousy on to the woman. 'Variations Upon Love, III' is the most masochistic poem, reminiscent of troubadour poetry as the persona describes himself symbolically kneeling, 'a beggar, to implore / The broken crumbs that from your table fall, / Freely, in your indifference, on all.'³⁴ This is the sonnet in which it is acknowledged that the beloved is a prostitute, 'I know your lips are bought like any fruit'.³⁵ She is therefore probably not actually in love with the speaker. Hence, he has invented the narrative in which they are lovers – his (emotional, not financial) investment in her is to his own detriment, and is a projection on to an image of woman rather than a real connection. The crumbs from her table (and her sexual favours) are given indiscriminately, he is not special. The speaker describes himself as 'degraded for your sake' and as a martyr, implying that he is also tortured for her sake: 'I come / Delighted to my daily martyrdom.'³⁶ But he comes to this martyrdom of his own will, although it could be argued that he is guided by his sexual desire and that the kneeling position exemplifies the humiliating position that his own desires put him in.

The legitimising of the speaker's jealousy is similar to the self-delusion of the speaker of Browning's 'My Last Duchess'. Poem II of Symons's sequence opens with an expression of jealous obsession with the woman, 'O woman! I am jealous of the eyes /

³² Binias, *Symbol and Symptom*, p. 175.

³³ Arthur Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, I', in *London Nights*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. 80.

³⁴ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, III', in *London Nights*, p. 82.

³⁵ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, III', p. 82.

³⁶ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, III', p. 82.

That look upon you; all my looks are spies / That do but lurk and follow you about'.³⁷ The speaker feels threatened by the idea that other men may look at the woman he loves, and tries to impose his possession of the woman using the power of his gaze. The Duke keeps the image of his Duchess for his eyes only, having been overwhelmed with jealousy towards the painter who looked at her in order to paint her portrait. The Duke also describes his annoyance at her perceived use of the gaze to seduce the painter, and every other man she looked at, 'she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere'.³⁸ The narrator of 'Variations' is similarly suspicious of his lover's gaze falling on another man:

Daily I search your baffling eyes to see
 Who knows what new admitted company?
 And, sick with dread to find the thing I seek,
 I tremble at the name you do not speak.³⁹

The woman's silence, initially commanded by the speaker, now becomes a source of suspicion and jealousy. He is desperately looking, tormenting himself with a search even though he fears what he might find. This sonnet ends on silence as does the first, which concludes with the sentiment that love does not need to be articulated by the couple: 'Leave words to them whom words, not doings, move, / And let our silence answer for our love.'⁴⁰ Here silence is more positively regarded as a sign of true feeling, but in ending thus the poem undoes itself. There are no more words, no need for words, or, by implication the words of the poem itself. We have only the male voice and his opinion on which to base our ideas of the supposed recipient of the address. Like Swinburne's 'Anactoria', the poem begins with a command for the woman to be silent: 'For God's sake, let me love you, and give over / These tedious protestations of a lover'.⁴¹ The reader does not 'hear' these protests, the female voice is always silent. The woman is a voiceless screen on to which male desire is projected. However, women in Symons's poems lack the sexual cruelty characteristic of masochism. The masochistic model is at work in Symons's poems in terms of anxiety and frustration rather than pleasure in pain.

³⁷ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, II', in *London Nights*, p. 81.

³⁸ Browning, 'My Last Duchess', p. 25, lines 23-4.

³⁹ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, II', p. 81.

⁴⁰ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, I', p. 80.

⁴¹ Symons, 'Variations Upon Love, I', p. 80.

Beckson considers that the *femme fatale* makes her first appearance in *Silhouettes*. In Beckson's view, 'Poems on the *femme fatale*, another of the Decadents' leading motifs, make their first appearance in 'In an Omnibus' and 'On the Heath'.⁴² He cites these two examples from Symons's poetry to further strengthen the assertion that he was producing self-consciously Decadent poems. However, the poems which Beckson selects as examples bear few traces of the *femme fatale*, and he does not expand upon this assertion with further analysis of the poems. The speaker of 'In an Omnibus' considers the sight of a woman on an omnibus, and wonders what she is thinking about. There are allusions to female cruelty, as the speaker notices the 'treachery adorable' and the 'fine malice of your smile'.⁴³ Symons also refers back to legendary cruel female figures, as the woman's smile is compared to that of a siren: 'So smiles the siren [...]'.⁴⁴ However, she is not engaged in active cruelty or fatal behaviour. There is an implication that she has the potential to be cruel, but this is a projection of the poet's fantasy on to her. She does not speak or make any gestures apart from the smile, and it is he who interprets this as hinting at treachery. He supposes that the woman is lost in a daydream about the fashionable delights of Paris. Her thoughts are imagined to be 'Of Paris robes, and when to wear / The latest bonnet you have bought'.⁴⁵ However, he also fantasizes that there is some other secret she is pondering, which is hinted at by her features: 'Close lips that keep the secret in, / half spoken by the stealthy eyes'.⁴⁶ Communication through the returned gaze becomes a key theme in *London Nights*. As to what the woman's secret might be, the reader is left wondering. It may be that he is projecting his sexual desire on to her, imagining that it is reciprocated. But neither the reader nor the speaker can escape the frustration of not knowing. We are unable to escape the paradox of 'lips and lids that feign to hide / That which they feign to render up'.⁴⁷

Similarly, the anonymous woman of 'On the Heath' does not fit with the trope of the *femme fatale*. This speaker narrates another brief glimpse of a woman, as 'Her face's wilful flash and glow / Turned all its light upon my face / One bright delirious moment's space'.⁴⁸ Though the woman has a 'wilful' face and 'fateful beauty', this is

⁴² Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 89.

⁴³ Arthur Symons, 'In an Omnibus', in *Silhouettes*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 21.

⁴⁴ Symons, 'In an Omnibus', p. 21.

⁴⁵ Symons, 'In an Omnibus', p. 21.

⁴⁶ Symons, 'In an Omnibus', p. 21.

⁴⁷ Symons, 'In an Omnibus', p. 21.

⁴⁸ Symons, 'On the Heath', in *Silhouettes*, p. 18.

almost incidental to the poet's musing about the sunset, 'the splendid death of day', as he wanders after her on the heath.⁴⁹ The final stanza speaks of the revelation he finds in her beauty, of

The fierce wild beauty of the light
That startles twilight on the hills,
And lightens all the mountain rills,
And flames before the feet of night.⁵⁰

The poem reveals the poet himself, and the skill with which he transforms his aesthetic impression into a set of images within a constrained rhyme scheme. Inspiration comes from the glimpse of a woman's face. It is not suggestive of his masochism or her cruelty; it is a comparison between a woman and a sunset. The idea of women as mysterious and therefore dangerous is suggested in both 'In an Omnibus' and 'On the Heath', but neither woman is actually fatal. We only hear the voice of the persona in each poem. Each encounter is presented as one-sided, as a glimpse of a woman leads to a poetic fantasy.

The dancer and the artist

Symons later uses the dancer as a female image on to which he can project his fantasies. In the essay 'The World as Ballet' (1898) Symons speaks of the artistic representation of the female figure as a dissatisfying 'cold statue' which is vague and shadowy. Using the Pygmalion analogy to describe the struggles of the artist, he considers that

The artist, it is indeed true, is never quite satisfied with his statue which remains cold, does not come to life. In every art men are pressing forward, more and more eagerly, farther and farther beyond the limits of their art, in the desire to do the impossible: to create life. Realising all humanity to be but a masque of shadows, and this solid world an impromptu stage as temporary as they, it is with a pathetic desire of some last illusion, which shall deceive even ourselves, that we are consumed with this hunger to create, to make something for ourselves, of at least the same shadowy reality as that about us.⁵¹

The representation of life in an artwork, which Symons personifies by making an indirect comparison to Pygmalion's statue, can never be a true representation of the real thing, since it is distorted in the mirror of the artist's perception. Furthermore, according to Symons, the world itself is comprised of shadows. Symons's 'cold statue' is unsatisfactory because it is lifeless and unreal. It cannot capture the nuances of the

⁴⁹ Symons, 'On the Heath', p. 18.

⁵⁰ Symons, 'On the Heath', p. 18.

⁵¹ Symons, 'The World as Ballet', p. 390.

shadows which Symons perceives as constituting reality in the ‘theatre’ of life, and it is an inadequate realisation of his fantasies. The fantasy remains something which can only be accessed by the fantasist. The poetic ‘Prologue’ which begins *London Nights* demonstrates this, introducing the collection by placing the poet in a position from which he is both watching and participating in the fantasy of the dance. The poetic voice reports that he sees only himself as he tries to capture the image of the dancer. He is seated – in fact, rooted to the spot, ‘chained by enchantment to my stall’ – in the music-hall watching the dancers, but as he watches, he is aware only of watching himself.⁵² While lounging and smoking in the audience, he also confronts his own image on the stage, ‘I see myself upon the stage / Dance to amuse a music-hall’.⁵³ Here, Symons is not simply identifying himself as poet with the dancer as artist, suggesting that they both present their art to an audience. He acknowledges the dancer as himself. His perception of the dancer is formed by his own consciousness, therefore in place of the dancer it is ‘My very self that turns and trips’.⁵⁴ The masochistic model is exemplified in this poem, even though the speaker takes no pleasure in his own torment. The female figure exists as a projection of male fantasy which seems to be external but in fact represents his own desires.

Asti Hustvedt describes the Decadent attempt to create a female image which is ‘perfectly artificial and completely external’.⁵⁵ This would seem to be the ideal ‘Pygmalion’s statue’, free of the trappings of female nature. In the real-life space of the dance hall, the dancer is external to the writer. Her body’s movement awakens his poetic consciousness, while simultaneously existing as something outside his consciousness, which he can never reach. But when captured in poetry she signifies something internal, an extension of the poet himself. As Beckson notes, ‘The simultaneous involvement and detachment of the writer, characteristic of the self-reflexive art of Decadence, is [...] evident [...] in the theatrical poems of *London Nights*’.⁵⁶ When Symons comes to write the dancer, to ‘capture’ her, she is never completely external or ‘other’. She is at once too distant, too separated from the poet by the stage between them, and too close, since his perception of her which makes the material of the poem comes from within himself. He will never be free of himself. In

⁵² Symons, ‘Prologue’, in *London Nights*, p. 3.

⁵³ Symons, ‘Prologue’, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Symons, ‘Prologue’, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Hustvedt, ‘The Art of Death’, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 150.

the 'Prologue', the dancer is so close to the poet that in fact, she is obscured by the poet's consciousness of himself: his awareness that he is aware of watching her. The attempt to escape himself, to transcend his own body, is impossible. The girl is a reflecting surface – a mirror – and the image of the dancer is a reflection of his own desire. The 'Prologue' ends with the same line with which it begins, 'My life is like a music-hall'.⁵⁷ The poem comes full-circle to the poet as the point of its origin. The dancer as she appears in the poem is written according to his perception of her. Yet, since she is a projection, she is also part of the poet's self. Her dance is a fantasy dance which he himself dances.

In Symons's work it is explicit that the woman reflects his own torment and pleasure, since he self-consciously and masochistically returns to himself in so many of his poems. In 'The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons' *London Nights*' (1971), Gordon suggests that in the poems of *London Nights* Symons comes to recognise that 'the woman of his dreams is precisely that – a self-reflexive product of an artistic imagination that lives his own tortured life and mirrors his own despair.'⁵⁸ The dancing girls of Symons's poetry represent his dream women – 'dream' functioning both as a synonym for 'ideal', and as an indicator of fantasy. Their presentation suggests more about Symons than it does about the real women who inspire his poetry (both the dancers viewed from the audience and those who Symons came to know more intimately). When Gordon refers to the female dancer living Symons's own 'tortured life', he uses an image similar to the Pygmalion's statue figure. The dancer in the poems seems animated enough to be considered 'living', yet she is animated by her creator, and exists only as part of his fantasy, mirroring his own inner conflict. In the 'Prologue' the poetic voice is frustrated to encounter himself as he tries to articulate the experience of watching the dancer on stage. He is met by his own image across the smoke of his cigarette:

'Tis I that smoke this cigarette,
Lounge here, and laugh for vacancy,
And watch the dancers turn; and yet
It is my very self I see
Across the cloudy cigarette.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Symons, 'Prologue', p. 3.

⁵⁸ Jan B. Gordon, 'The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons' *London Nights*', *Victorian Poetry*, 9 (1971), p. 440.

⁵⁹ Symons, 'Prologue', p. 3.

When Symons compares his life to a music-hall, Gordon suggests, ‘In an attempt to immortalize the moment and so escape from a stifling corporeality, the poet participates totally in the fantasies of his own creation.’⁶⁰ However, in trying to avoid ‘stifling corporeality’, he is caught in a different trap, in a self-reflexive circle. This is recognised by Symons and is one of the effects created by the poem. Symons uses the technique of ending the first and last lines of the stanza with the same word – he is on both sides of the cigarette, an impossible position. The poem returns to its creator as point of origin.

The fantasy never comes to life, and he can never fully capture the essence of the distant dancer on the stage. In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* Symons describes the poetic quest to represent the essence of experience rather than material reality:

after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and the re-arrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul; and with it comes the literature of which I write in this volume, a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world is no longer a dream.⁶¹

Carol T. Christ refers to Pater’s doctrine that experience is made up of an individual’s feelings or impressions, and is the most important aspect to capture in an artwork. She considers the fear, arising from this idea, that the self actually stands in the way of the true expression of experience in poetry:

If man can know nothing but his own experience, if personality composes a barrier between the self and the world, the very self-consciousness which had been for the Romantics the source of poetry’s divine truth became for later poets the burden which limited its significance to incommunicable personal impressions.⁶²

The process of formulating a verbal or visual artistic response already interrupts the experience of the moment’s impression. As Petra Dierkes-Thrun puts it, ‘the “English Symbolist” Arthur Symons saw art and language intercepting the direct access of consciousness to reality, like a dividing screen or hymen that signifies the double desire for penetration on the one hand, and the impossibility of it on the other.’⁶³ The dancer occupies an important place in the Symbolist tradition, as the dancer, while dancing, is

⁶⁰ Gordon, ‘Danse Macabre’, p. 430.

⁶¹ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), pp. 2-3.

⁶² Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 30-1.

⁶³ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, ‘The Salome Theme in the Wake of Oscar Wilde: Transformative Aesthetics of Sexuality in Modernity’ (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2003), p. 121.

at once the artist and the work of art, a perfect fusion of two ideals.⁶⁴ However, the dancer is also an object to be observed, to stir the consciousness of the artist who watches her. Symons attempts to capture the fleeting moment in his verses. In 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' Symons praises Pater as a Decadent writer. In the 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* Pater states that

While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems, by a lifted horizon, to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours [...].⁶⁵

Symons undertakes his Paterian exploration of moods and senses using the poetic image of woman, particularly as a dancer. The woman appears to stir all his senses; as I shall demonstrate she is associated with exotic colours, flowers, and perfume.

Both *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* were republished with a defensive preface from Symons. *London Nights* was poorly received by the critical press when it was published in 1895, which Beckson suggests may have been due to the socially conservative atmosphere following Wilde's trial and imprisonment.⁶⁶ In the preface to *London Nights* Symons argues against those who believe the collection to be 'immoral', asserting that 'the principles of art are eternal, while the principles of morality fluctuate'.⁶⁷ He defends his poetry as an exploration of moods, which he has tried to capture and present faithfully as they occurred to him. He declares that 'every poem is the sincere attempt to render a particular mood which has once been mine [...] I have rendered, well or ill, many moods, and without disguise or preference.'⁶⁸

'Javanese Dancers', is an early example of Symons's experimental dancer poems in which he attempts to capture the movement of the dancer as she dances. According to Beckson, it 'embodies insinuating rhythms, alluring artifice, onomatopoeic effects, and the nineteenth century's obsession with the *femme fatale*, then associated with Decadence'.⁶⁹ But the '*femme fatale*' of this poem does not actually seem to possess the

⁶⁴ In the often-quoted words of Yeats, 'how can we know the dancer from the dance?' William Butler Yeats, 'Among School Children', from *The Tower* (1928), in *W. B. Yeats* (London: Everyman, 1997), p. 58.

⁶⁵ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 120.

⁶⁶ Symons's preface to the 1897 edition laments that 'The publication of this book was received by the English press with a singular unanimity of abuse.', Symons, 'Preface' to *London Nights*, p. xiii.

⁶⁷ Symons, 'Preface' to *London Nights*, p. xiv.

⁶⁸ Symons, 'Preface' to *London Nights*, p. xv.

⁶⁹ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 76.

qualities of a fatal woman. Like Wilde's Salome, she is a ghostly being, 'With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill'.⁷⁰ She is 'stealthy', 'unintelligible', moves 'Delicately and imperceptibly' and 'Mysteriously'.⁷¹ She is vague. Symons does celebrate the mysterious eroticism (and exoticism) of the Javanese dancers, but theirs does not seem to be a fatal sexual display. The speaker does not seem to be enjoying it from a masochistic viewpoint. On the contrary, the dance motif creates the gentle rhythm of the poem. The dancers seem neither threatening nor dangerous:

One, two, three, four step forth, and, to and fro,
Delicately and imperceptibly,
Now swaying gently in a row,
Now interthreading slow and rhythmically [...].⁷²

This description of the dance stands in contrast to the jarring images from the opening lines, 'Twitched strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums, / Dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting', which onomatopoeically suggest a cacophony of noise, against which the delicate and stealthy dancer creeps 'cat-like' on to the stage.⁷³ The immediate evocation of the auditory, followed by a list of unconnected adjectives in the second line, is contradicted by the very calm, composed, measured rhythm of the poetry that follows. Symons creates a sense of languorous movement as the dancers glide to and fro. The dancer who is singled out twines scarves between her fingers, and her feet 'undulate'. The regular ABAB CDDC rhyme scheme repeats then changes almost imperceptibly, imitating the slow subtlety of the dance. However, Symons counteracts this movement by describing the dancer as immobile. In the second stanza, she is 'Motionless', though twining scarves between her fingers, and in the fourth stanza the dancers are 'Still with fixed eyes, monotonously still, / Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate'.⁷⁴ The 'inanimate' dancer is reminiscent of the ventriloquist's dummy, which is animated by the puppeteer. The dancers seem to be animated by the perception of the viewer, who interprets their movements as sexual. The final lines describe the dancers as 'painted figures' and shadowy phantoms:

The little amber-coloured dancers move,
Like little painted figures on a screen,
Or phantom-dancers haply seen

⁷⁰Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', in *Silhouettes*, p. 33.

⁷¹Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', p. 33.

⁷²Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', p. 33.

⁷³Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', p. 33.

⁷⁴Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', p. 33.

Among the shadows of a magic grove.⁷⁵

‘Javanese Dancers’ was revised for the second edition of *Silhouettes*. In the first version, composed in 1889, the final lines differ, describing the dancers ‘Like painted idols seen to stir / By the idolators in a magic grove’.⁷⁶ This is even more indicative of the dancers being animated by the imagination of the viewer. The dancers are ‘idols’, like Swinburne’s ‘Dolores’. Like Wilde’s Salome, these dancers seem delicate and insubstantial. They are more exquisite than fatal. They are phantoms that dance according to the poet’s fantasy.

In ‘Stella Maris’ the memory of a lover is imagined as a ghostly haunting figure, ‘Why is it I remember yet, / You, of all women one has met[?]’.⁷⁷ Gordon draws a parallel between ‘Stella Maris’ and Symons’s poems about dancers. This poem appears in revised form in the second edition of *London Nights*, and was published in the first issue of the *Yellow Book* in April 1894. Though ‘Stella Maris’ is predominantly set in a coastal location, with a view of sea and lighthouse, rather than within the walls of the urban music hall, Gordon argues that the ‘landscape reflects the dialectic involved in Symons’s dance.’⁷⁸ This is because Symons is detached from the scenes he creates in his poetry, since ‘He can only anticipate or recollect the erotic involvement with an idealised partner who exists across an expanse of sea or some crowded floor.’⁷⁹ So he is separated from the dancer too,

Indeed, it is this impossible isolation from love, by the past and future spatialized as some giant floor, which obstructs all of Symons’s hopes for losing his selfhood in the art of the dance. The realization that the partner herself may well be but part of the workings of the imagination implies, of course, that all of her unfavourable qualities are also part and parcel of the poet’s make-up.⁸⁰

Gordon acknowledges that the ghostly woman is nothing but an idealised figure who reflects the desires of the poet himself. It is in the theatre-based poems of *London Nights* that the ‘smoke and mirrors’ of the masochistic scenario are exposed.

In many of the *London Nights* poems Symons turns his focus away from the natural landscape and directs it towards the alluringly ‘impure’ world of the music hall. Natural

⁷⁵ Symons, ‘Javanese Dancers’, p. 33.

⁷⁶ Symons, ‘Javanese Dancers’, p. 125.

⁷⁷ Symons, ‘Stella Maris’, in *London Nights*, p. 40.

⁷⁸ Gordon, ‘Danse Macabre’, p. 436.

⁷⁹ Gordon, ‘Danse Macabre’, p. 436.

⁸⁰ Gordon, ‘Danse Macabre’, p. 436.

scenes feature in the ‘Intermezzos’, but they are incidental interludes. In the ‘Décor de Théâtre’ sequence, the dancers are represented as artificial versions of flowers and birds. ‘The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’ from this sequence is dedicated to Minnie Cunningham, a ‘serio-comic’ singer and dancer at the London music halls.⁸¹ She was painted in a distinctive red dress by Walter Sickert in 1892 after Symons took him to see her dance at the Tivoli theatre.⁸² In Symons’s poem she appears as an artificial imitation of the figures of bird and flower. She is

A rhythmic flower whose petals pirouette
 In delicate circles, fain to follow
 The vague aerial minuet,
 The mazy dancing of the swallow [...].⁸³

Once again the dancer is compared to a flower, particularly when turning in circles. But the flower is only an illusion caused by the whirling of her skirts, and the rosy blush of her face which is probably also artificial. The dancer is the closest thing to the mysterious and alluring power of the free and natural world outside the music hall and the city: ‘A flower’s caprice, a bird’s command [...] The wonder-haunted loneliness of sky’.⁸⁴ Within the enclosed theatre, the dancer is a representation of these things:

So, in the smoke-polluted place,
 Where bird or flower might never be,
 With glimmering feet, with flower-like face,
 She dances at the Tivoli.⁸⁵

This dancer seems trapped in the oppressive, smoky atmosphere of the music hall. Her dancing is compared to the flight of the swallow, as though she is a bird which cannot get free. There is a melancholic sense of loss of the natural in this poem, a feeling that the pastoral cannot fully be left behind and forgotten: the artificial flowers of the hothouse have their roots in nature. The structure of ‘The Primrose Dance’ reflects the

⁸¹ Symons mentions Minnie Cunningham in an 1892 letter to Ernest Rhys, ‘I need scarcely say I have fallen in love with a new dancer. This time it is Minnie Cunningham. She is very pretty, very nice, very young, and *has a Mamma*.’ Arthur Symons, letter to Ernest Rhys (17 February 1892), in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, ed. by Karl Beckson and John M. Munro (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 95. Cunningham and Symons spent time in each other’s company; she is mentioned in subsequent letters to Rhys and to Herbert Horne. See Arthur Symons, letter to Ernest Rhys (4 March 1892), and letter to Herbert Horne (c. March 1893) in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, p. 97, 101.

⁸² Walter Sickert, *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford* (1892), oil on canvas, 765 x 638mm. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-minnie-cunningham-at-the-old-bedford-t02039>> [accessed 12 July 2014].

⁸³ Symons, ‘Décor de Théâtre II. The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’, in *London Nights*, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Symons, ‘The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’, p. 22.

⁸⁵ Symons, ‘The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’, p. 22.

structure of *London Nights* as a collection in which the urban music hall poems are interrupted by an Intermezzo of pastoral poems.

Matthew Sturgis claims, with echoes of Pater's 'Conclusion', 'The music hall provided Symons with a toy decadent world of which he could become the toy decadent laureate. It was artificial, it was perverse, it was sexually charged, it was overflowing with "curious and strange and beautiful sensations"'.⁸⁶ The music-hall setting was important for Symons, because it was a space in he was entertained but could also participate in the entertainment. It was common for the audience to participate in the shows at music halls, singing along with the songs, creating a collaborative raucous spectacle.⁸⁷ Symons records in his memoirs that he enjoyed adopting the passive position of flâneur in the streets of London, where he claims to have 'devoutly practised' a 'religion of the eyes'.⁸⁸ In the music hall setting he also turns the gaze on to himself as part of the crowd, and his poetry reflects this introspection. His poems of urban aestheticism are reflexive responses to what he sees and hears. *London Nights* is an exploration of subjectivity as well as a record of the sensory impressions of the urban music hall. Dancers in *London Nights* are more distant figures, watched by the speaker as they dance on a stage. Like Swinburne's monologue poems, speakers address the dancer while she remains mute. Symons's poems record the process of watching the dancer's body as a catalyst for his own imagination. He was acquainted with several dancers, including 'Lilian' described in 'On the Stage'. This poem records a feeling of a secret connection between the viewer and the dance: 'Her cheeks, across the rouge, and in her eyes / I know what memories, / What memories and messages for me.'⁸⁹ Symons's prior sexual connection with the dancer makes him feel a more privileged spectator, a singular entity in a crowd of many. But there is still a distance between them; he is in the audience and she is on the stage. Their only connection is through the memories

⁸⁶ Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes*, p. 102.

⁸⁷ The music halls were places where crowds would gather to watch 'a miscellaneous revue of art and amusements, a night of music hall could feature song, dance, comic routine, acrobats, and animal acts.' Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 1.

⁸⁸ As a young man in London, he says, 'When I found myself alone, and in the midst of a crowd, I began to be astonishingly happy. [...] here, in the "motley" Strand, among these hurrying people, under the smoky sky, I could walk and yet watch. If there ever was a religion of the eyes, I have devoutly practised that religion.', Symons, 'A Prelude to Life' (from *Spiritual Adventures*, London, 1905), in *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. by Karl Beckson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p. 23.

⁸⁹ Symons, 'Lilian VI. On the Stage', in *London Nights*, p. 15.

which he imagines she is sharing with him at that moment, but which in fact he is projecting on to her.

Sturgis's description of the music hall as a 'toy world', implies that the figures within it are puppets or dolls which Symons could manipulate like a child playing with a doll's house. Oscar Wilde's 1885 poem 'The Harlot's House' imagines a similar scene, describing a glimpse into a music hall as a vision of a macabre puppet show:

Like strange mechanical grotesques,
Making fantastic arabesques,
The shadows raced across the blind.

We watched the ghostly dancers spin,
To sound of horn and violin,
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

Like wire-pulled Automatons,
Slim silhouetted skeletons
Went sidling through the slow quadrille

[...]

Sometimes a clock-work puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try and sing.⁹⁰

Wilde's 'Harlot's House' is a portrayal of the music hall as a place of sin, a brothel. In the late nineteenth century music halls were frequented by prostitutes and the dancers themselves were often 'fallen women'. Alexandra Carter notes in her study of nineteenth-century music-hall ballet that 'prostitution was manifest in the promenades of the Alhambra and the Empire [two London music halls].'⁹¹ Symons also recounts his sexual experiences with dancing girls in his *Memoirs*, and his impressions of famous dancers from London and Paris, such as Jane Avril and Minnie Cunningham.

While Wilde's concern is with the morality of the music hall, Symons is more concerned with artifice and performance. However both Wilde and Symons envisage dancers as ghostly figures, projecting their own desires on to them and thus assigning them the role of mute ventriloquist's dummies. Operating the invisible puppet-strings of the fantasy dancer, Symons creates a sense of the kinaesthetic vitality of the dancer. He

⁹⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Harlot's House' (1885) in Desmarais and Baldick, *Decadence*, pp. 118-9.

⁹¹ Alexandra Carter, *Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 121.

creates the illusion of life by capturing a sense of dancers' movement and vivacity in the *London Nights* poems. In 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', according to Gordon, 'the consciousness of the poet [...] is isolated at the center of a maelstrom of the senses'.⁹² The circularity which represents the poet being trapped within an artistic vision which begins and ends with himself, is also a strategy used for a more dynamic effect, to capture the movement of the dance. In 'La Mélinite', echoes of words create the sense of the whirling dancers, turning, returning: a sense of circularity. Within each stanza, the end words of the first and second lines are repeated in the fourth and fifth lines, with a rhyme for the second line occurring at the end of the third. Symons creates a 'rhythmic shower', with the incantatory repetition of words and images which give the impression of the 'dance returning / [which] Rounds the full circle.'⁹³ The sensations of sight, sound, and music are brought together by correspondences. First, the music is imagined as a shower of rose petals:

Olivier Metra's Waltz of Roses
Sheds in a rhythmic shower
The very petals of the flower;
And all is roses [...].⁹⁴

The rose in turn becomes an analogy for the dancers as they dance, in union with the lighting and music, which all combine to form 'The perfect rose of lights and sounds'.⁹⁵ The isolated poetic consciousness finds a counterpart in the one dancer who is 'alone, apart'.⁹⁶ She is the element of this whole which is singled out to represent the dance as it seems to the poet. She is engaged in 'a dance of shadows' with her own shadow in the mirror.⁹⁷ This recalls Birkett's description of the 'looking-glass world of decadence', in which the Decadent artist reflects himself back to himself by projecting his fantasy outwards on to an external figure (in this case, the dancer), which then comes to represent this ideal.⁹⁸ It is also an illustration of Liz Constable's 'two-way mirror' of Decadence, in which the reader is frustrated as they examine a work which suggests it will reveal something, but which confronts them instead with their own reflection.⁹⁹ The

⁹² Gordon, 'Danse Macabre', p. 433.

⁹³ Symons, 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', in *London Nights*, p. 24.

⁹⁴ Symons, 'La Mélinite', p. 24.

⁹⁵ Symons, 'La Mélinite', p. 24.

⁹⁶ Symons, 'La Mélinite', p. 24.

⁹⁷ Symons, 'La Mélinite', p. 24.

⁹⁸ Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Constable et al refer to Baudelaire's 'To the Reader' ('*Au lecteur*') which exemplifies the two-way mirror theory by personifying Ennui then making the reader recognize it in themselves: 'The decadent text here becomes something like a two-way mirror, in which the reader's effort to see through the glass –

Decadent artist reflects himself back to himself by projecting his fantasy outwards on to an external figure. As Gordon observes,

Like the decadent poet, with his vision focused upon the mirror of the imagination, the dancer in “La Mélinite” performs in “morbid grace; / Before the mirror, face to face”. The poet strives to achieve the synthesis of art and life, the real and the artificial, artist and creation, which the dancer embodies.¹⁰⁰

The dancer before the mirror becomes one with her reflection, and the poem ends as she smiles at her mirror image: ‘A shadow smiling / Back to a shadow in the night’.¹⁰¹ The dancer is in communion with her own image; she has achieved the ‘synthesis of art and life’ from which the speaker is excluded.

Though Symons manages to create an impression of movement in ‘La Mélinite’, he is left with an intangible shadow at the end. Her reflection is a shadow, but so is she. This evokes Wilde’s image of Salome as the ‘shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver’. Imagining the dancer as a shadow makes her an immaterial presence. She is a negative image, like the woman’s absence in ‘Perfume’, which I analyse later. La Mélinite and her reflection in the mirror are ‘Alike the shadows of a dream’; both she and the reflection are dreamlike fantasies.¹⁰² The dancer is reflected in the mirror, and this reflection is reflected again in the poem, in a recursive image. Within the poem we find mirroring of words, sounds, and rhymes. The poem does not dissolve into a series of circular twirling gyrations, it holds its shape because of the poet’s control of language.

The poet as artist is in control of the dynamics of the poem. For example, Symons creates a sense of movement through repetition in ‘On The Stage’, which creates a sense of artificial colours, lights, and costumed dancers whirling around one another.

Lights, in a multi-coloured mist,
From indigo to amethyst,
A whirling mist of multi-coloured lights;
And after, wigs and tights,
Then faces, then a glimpse of profiles, then
Eyes, and a mist again;
And rouge, and always tights, and wigs, and tights.¹⁰³

an effort seemingly encouraged by the text’s themes and style – is frustrated by the persistence of his or her own reflection.’ Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, ‘Introduction’ to *Perennial Decay*, pp. 16-7.

¹⁰⁰ Gordon, ‘Danse Macabre’, p. 433.

¹⁰¹ Symons, ‘La Mélinite’, p. 24.

¹⁰² Symons, ‘La Mélinite’, p. 24.

¹⁰³ Symons, ‘On The Stage’, p. 15.

The ‘whirling mist’ of lights and dancers is given a sense of movement through repetition; Symons creates an image of dancers being caught up in this mist, which is likely made up of gaslight fumes and cigarette smoke. The mist lifts from time to time, revealing the faces and eyes of the dancers which are glimpsed and disappear again. The dancers’ costumes flash in and out of view, and the stanza ends with repeating glimpses of their tights and wigs, which are not described in any other detail. This is a visual poem: the flashes of colour and glimpses of faces are like the ‘taches’ of paint which characterise Impressionist art. The dancers are unified by their costumes but no other distinguishing features. In fact, the costumes themselves seem to be dancing independently of the dancers, as if the wigs and tights were animated without having bodies inside them – there is no sense of connection between the costume and the dancer. This chaos of ‘unembodied’ costumes renders the ballet a unified mass of light and colour: ‘You see the ballet so and so’.¹⁰⁴ This allows one particular dancer to come to the foreground in the poet’s imagination, she and he being unique in their connection. While other viewers see ‘a dance of phantoms’, the persona has the privilege of sharing ‘memories and messages’ with one of the dancers.¹⁰⁵ He extracts from this chaos a sense of comfort in a moment of perceived communication with the dancer as he meets the eyes of ‘A girl, who smiles to me’.¹⁰⁶ This poem has an even rhyme scheme of couplets. This, combined with the final stanza consolidating with a repetition of ‘tights’ in the final line, which is long and repetitive, gives a sense of a fast-paced whirling with barely a pause for breath.

‘At the Foresters’, from the ‘Décor de Théâtre’ sequence, is written with an ABABA rhyme scheme, and repetition of the end word in the first and last lines of the stanza creates a sense of circularity; the words mirror one another. The first stanza reads:

The shadows of the gaslit wings
 Come softly crawling down our way;
 Before the curtain someone sings,
 The music sounds from far away;
 I stand beside you in the wings.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Symons, ‘On The Stage’, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ Symons, ‘On The Stage’, p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ Symons, ‘On The Stage’, p. 15.

¹⁰⁷ Symons, ‘Décor de Théâtre III. At the Foresters’, in *London Nights*, p. 23.

The return to the ‘wings’ emphasises the location of the couple; the persona’s mind has wandered, diverted by the sensory distractions of the theatre, but returns to the same position as if to root himself there. This poetic strategy is used elsewhere by Symons in his dance poems such as ‘Prologue’ and ‘La Mélinite’ to give the impression of dynamic movement, with the whirling circles created by the dancers revolving and returning to the same point. The repetition can also signal change, as in the final stanza of ‘At the Foresters’ in which ‘The tired defiance of the eyes’ gives way to ‘The softer welcome of your eyes’.¹⁰⁸

In ‘At the Foresters’, we also catch glimpses of the ‘real’ human being under the make-up. The poetic voice addresses a dancer, ‘Flo’.¹⁰⁹ The natural vitality of the dancer’s youth is set up in a parodic counterpoint to the false mask of stage make-up she is wearing: ‘The charm and pathos of your youth / Mock the mock roses of your face’.¹¹⁰ There is something natural beneath the artifice. However, the repetition of ‘mock’ suggests mirroring of one in the other – the dancer’s youth is mocking, but the roses are also described as ‘mock’, meaning artificial. Though the two words are homonyms, they are close enough in meaning to suggest that the youth and garish artifice of the dancer are intertwined and inextricable from one another. Symons’s poem playfully sends up the artifice of the performance. It is a joke, a ‘mockery’ or travesty. The dancer in this poem is dressed in male attire, ‘The prince’s dress, the yellow tights, / That fit your figure like a glove’.¹¹¹ While she is supposedly playing the part of a man, she appears feminine, her figure alluringly exposed by the clinging garments, and her cosmetics enhancing her ‘painted little mouth’ and ‘Divinely rosy rouged’ face.¹¹² Amy Koritz notes that in nineteenth-century ballet performances, women often appeared in the male roles, in ‘travesty’. The reason for this was that ‘every man in the audience is her partner’.¹¹³ The spectacle of the dance is enacted precisely so that the male audience member can project himself into the position of the woman’s partner and imagine that she is dancing (Salome-like) for him alone. Koritz explains that in travesty, ‘the woman

¹⁰⁸ Symons, ‘At the Foresters’, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ Symons’s *Memoirs* do not identify ‘Flo’, but in a letter to Ernest Rhys sent in late July 1892, Symons lists a ‘Florrie Hooten’ among several dancers from the Alhambra who attended a party at his rooms. See *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, p. 99. I am grateful to Chris Baldick for this insight from his unpublished annotations to *Arthur Symons: Collected Early Poems* ed. by Chris Baldick and Jane Desmarais (London: MHRA, forthcoming).

¹¹⁰ Symons, ‘At the Foresters’, p. 23.

¹¹¹ Symons, ‘At the Foresters’, p. 23.

¹¹² Symons, ‘At the Foresters’, p. 23.

¹¹³ George Edwardes, quoted in Ivor Guest, *Adeline Genée: A Lifetime of Ballet under Six Reigns* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958), p. 50. Quoted by Koritz in *Gendering Bodies*, p. 23.

playing this [male] part takes on the double role of nonthreatening substitute for the male spectator and object of erotic display in her own right'.¹¹⁴ The dancer, in this case, takes on the role of Žižek's 'blank surface or screen' on to which the male viewer can project his fantasies.

Symons frequently associates dancers with floral imagery, particularly that of the rose. He wrote about them in 'The World as Ballet', as a 'bouquet of living flowers'.¹¹⁵ This image can be used to describe a real or artificial blush, or the lips of an individual dancer, as in 'At the Foresters', in which the dancer's face is 'Divinely rosy rouged'. It can also appear as a representation of dancers *en masse*, collectively dancing as a rose together as in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', where the dance is 'The perfect rose of lights and sounds'. One particularly aptly-named dancer-flower with whom Symons had an affair was Violet Piggott, who was according to Symons 'The first ballet girl I ever "took up with" [...] sometime in 1892'.¹¹⁶ She appears in *London Nights* as 'Lilian' of 'On the Stage'. 'Lilian' is the name given to the first sequence in the collection, made up of twelve poems. The first of these, 'Proem', describes Lilian as a violet in the artificial world of the music hall. This poem opens with the lines:

This was a sweet white wildwood violet
I found among the painted slips that grow
Where, under hot-house glass, the flowers forget
How the sun shines, and how the cool winds blow.¹¹⁷

Symons alludes to the music hall as a 'hot-house', a Decadent trope suggesting artifice, exoticism and luxury, since the flowers that are grown in hothouses are rare imports from warmer climates. It is also suggestive of sin and decay, the heat and humidity providing an oppressive atmosphere similar to that of such disreputable places as music halls and brothels, a breeding-ground for disease.¹¹⁸ The interior of the hothouse, where there is no sunshine and no wind, is like the nocturnal world of the music hall, which is artificially lit and the dancers are 'painted slips' decorated by the artifice of make-up.

¹¹⁴ Koritz, *Gendering Bodies*, pp. 23-4.

¹¹⁵ Symons, 'The World as Ballet', p. 389.

¹¹⁶ Symons, 'Music Halls and Ballet Girls', in Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, p. 113.

¹¹⁷ Symons, 'Lilian I. Proem', in *London Nights*, p. 9.

¹¹⁸ Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck explores such themes in his 1889 poetry collection *Hothouses* (*Serres chaudes*). The poem 'Hothouse' ends with the lines 'My God, when will the rain come, / and the snow, and the wind, to this glass house!' – a similar sentiment to Symons's hothouse music hall. Maurice Maeterlinck, 'Hothouse', in *Hothouses*, trans. Richard Howard (1889; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 3.

Symons seems to struggle to reconcile fleshliness, particularly the bodies of female dancers, with spiritual and intellectual pursuits. Though they are still natural, consistent with the simile of the rose and the violet, Symons's descriptions of women in his personal memoirs, are closer to the rhetoric surrounding the *femme fatale*. Symons's impression of women, or at least, women of the lower class to which dancing-girls and 'fallen' women belonged was that they were physical, not intellectual creatures.¹¹⁹ Thus, in the fragments of his early twentieth-century prose writing collected by Karl Beckson as *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons* (1977), Symons describes the dancing girls with whom he associated as fleshly, and as evil, dangerous, cruel. His description of Violet Piggott in his *Memoirs* describes her as a body only.¹²⁰ She is described as 'stupid, sensual, pretty and not perverse; she was slender and had shapely legs. When flesh means nothing more than the satisfaction of one's senses, she was nothing more to me than a thing of flesh.'¹²¹ She is fleshly and unintelligent, an object only for the satisfaction of Symons's sexual desire. Her physical appearance is her only important attribute. She is the natural violet in the 'Proem' after all: pure nature. Paradoxically, she is appealing because of this. 'Proem' deals with these Decadent ideas of nature and artifice. In the artificial microcosm of the music hall, the natural flower is in fact the most artificial:

Yet here, in this spice-laden atmosphere,
Where only nature is a thing unreal,
I found in just a violet, planted here,
The artificial flower of my ideal.¹²²

In this poem, the speaker adopts a position similar to J.-K. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, who becomes 'tired of artificial flowers aping real ones, he wanted some natural flowers that would look like fakes.'¹²³ The natural conclusion to the pursuit of artifice is to return again to nature, when it appears more artificial, and therefore more appealing, than artifice itself. In the case of 'Proem', Symons describes a delight in the living flowers – 'orchids' – who are dancers in the 'hot-house' of the music hall, but considers

¹¹⁹ Koritz points out that while Symons romantically pursued and celebrated dancers in his writing in the 1890s, he did so from the perspective that they were of a lower class, and thus more immoral and perverse. See Koritz, *Gendering Bodies*, p. 62. Symons discouraged his friend Katherine Willard, of his own social class, from appearing on the stage because 'they [actresses and actors] are, as a class, more uniformly immoral than any other class of people.' Arthur Symons, letter to Katherine Willard, 21 December 1891, in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, p. 91.

¹²⁰ Symons, 'Music Halls and Ballet Girls', p. 113.

¹²¹ Symons, 'Music Halls and Ballet Girls', p. 113.

¹²² Symons, 'Proem', p. 9.

¹²³ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 83.

the violet the ultimate prize. Because the violet is the rare species among the orchids, it is more highly valued.

Matthew Sturgis comments on Symons's love of modernity and artifice, which are epitomised in the music-hall setting:

He loved all that was most modern, most artificial: the evocative world of night-time London, illuminated by the glare of the new electric lights [...] Above all he loved the tawdry world of Leicester Square with its thronging tumultuous streets, its crowded bars, its cheap hotels and its music halls.¹²⁴

The poetic voice of the 'Proem' seems also to be attached to the artificial, proclaiming that 'The orchid mostly is the flower I love' and that 'the mere violets of the wood, / For all their sweetness, have not power to move / The curiosity that rules my blood'.¹²⁵ However, the singular violet holds the most appeal for him. Though it tries to imitate the more exotic orchids – 'The violet took the orchid's colouring' – it is still natural at heart, with the 'wood's heart [...] wild within its breast.'¹²⁶ This violet is natural and exceptional because it is humanised. It represents the real dancer Violet Piggott. She is 'sweet' and 'dainty', a far cry from the cruel and sexualised *femme fatale*.¹²⁷

Symons's autobiographical writing also suggests a parallel between the hothouse and the music hall. He wonders,

Did I myself deliberately choose music-halls and the public-houses or did they choose me? I imagine they chose me. I lived in them for the mere delight and sheer animal excitement they gave me. I liked the glitter, barbarous, intoxicating, the violent animality, the entire spectacle, with absurd faces, gestures, words, and the very odour and suffocating heat.¹²⁸

Here, Symons describes himself compelled towards the music hall by an uncontrollable animal instinct. It was here, he imagines, that he could indulge his more natural and animalistic urges – which he did, though not without a sense of regret, as he disparages the animality of his dancer lovers. Yet, on the other hand, it was a place which stirred his poetic imagination, where he found inspiration for his Symbolist verses. He may have been swept up in the intoxicating spectacle, but he transforms the hyperbolic

¹²⁴ Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes*, p. 99.

¹²⁵ Symons, 'Proem', p. 9.

¹²⁶ Symons, 'Proem', p. 9.

¹²⁷ Symons, 'Proem', p. 9.

¹²⁸ Symons, 'Music Halls and Ballet Girls', p. 109.

barbarous animal violence into measured verses, rhyme, metre. Like Swinburne he aestheticises the loss of control and the masochistic pleasure he finds in bodily pleasure. He experiences potentially degenerate pleasure and altered states of mind and being, then writes about them afterwards, trying to capture the moment of being in that state.

The cruel woman as lover

In Symons's *Memoirs* he adopts a perspective consistent with the Decadent conception of woman as animalistic and natural. Of the dancing girls of the Paris music halls, Symons writes,

One always had the strange feeling that there might be something perilous in them: the sex gone wrong, corrupted, tainted; for these daughters of Sin and of Death bear always in their wombs the seeds of Eve, which like woman's first temptation by the Serpent have in them the seeds of birth and the seeds of death.¹²⁹

These women are conceived, as Paglia might say, as 'womb-tombs', responsible for birth and death. Female nature is corrupt, and women are not to be trusted. Symons evokes the biblical Fall as the original sin, belonging exclusively to women. Their reproductive ability is connected with fear and danger, their sexuality therefore also dangerous because it is alluring to the masochistic man who fears being corrupted, yet desires them sexually and is attracted by the thrill of the threat.

Symons became involved with the ballet dancer Lydia, the inspiration for 'Bianca' in *London Nights*. She was a dancer at the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square, whom Symons met in late 1893. Symons became obsessed with her, and was deeply affected by their relationship and its ending after two and a half years when she married another man.¹³⁰ Their love affair was the inspiration for Symons's 1897 poetry collection *Amoris Victima*. Symons describes his relationship with Lydia as a union of bodies rather than an intellectual connection: 'Her imagination, her senses and her sensations were – certainly in no sense as responsive as her body always was to me'.¹³¹ For Symons, she was more of a physical entity than a spiritual one. He describes her as an

¹²⁹ Symons, 'Marcelle and Other Parisian Diversions', in Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, p. 147.

¹³⁰ They did meet again and had an adulterous affair after Lydia's marriage. See Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, pp. 168-9.

¹³¹ Arthur Symons, 'Lydia' (taken from Manuscript and Typescript, Princeton, which have attached slip of paper in Symons's handwriting with the date 'December 20, 1920', presumably date completed), in Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, p. 157.

animal, particularly in regards to her sexuality: ‘She was absolutely seductive, fatally fascinating, almost shamelessly animal.’¹³² Her animal sexuality pervades her entire being, ‘She was always full of an indescribable and passionate curiosity which seemed to have no limits; it was that of a wild animal. It was perverse, excitable, unreasoning, sexual and sensual; it was literally erotic.’¹³³ Her bestial nature is appealing to Symons, but also threatening.¹³⁴ Desire and passion are overwhelming, consuming. They are associated with the flesh rather than with the mind, and they are also sinful. ‘Sin was with us in my rooms; the Flesh was with us always’.¹³⁵ The word ‘flesh’, for Symons, is a synonym for sexual desire, which again corresponds with the Decadent notion that the body is sexual, divorcing sexuality from the intellect. Lydia is described by Symons in terms consistent with the stereotype of the *femme fatale*.¹³⁶

This attitude is reflected in the ‘Bianca’ poems, such as ‘Escalade’ (revised for the 1897 edition), in which the speaker feigns indifference to his lover’s kisses and she resorts to a vampire-like attack as her lips ‘begin / Hungrily to fasten in / Upon my neck’.¹³⁷ But this is clearly a masochist’s game. The poem ends with the man taking control once again, ending the game and giving in to her advances so that he can assume the dominant position, paradoxically by yielding: ‘I yield, I’ll love you, lest it be / I die of you ere you of me!’¹³⁸ Bianca seems to be a fatal woman, as there are allusions to death and dying in connection with sexuality in this sequence. As the poems become more sexually explicit, passion becomes a matter of life and death. ‘Wine of Circe’ casts the woman as ‘Sorceress’, and the speaker claims that ‘I would die exquisitely, of the bliss / Of one intense, intolerable kiss.’¹³⁹ Her lips are ‘a rose of fire’ which burn ‘Like living fire through all my veins that yearn, / As, with one throb of rapt, surrendering breath, / Life dies into the ecstasy [*sic*] of Death.’¹⁴⁰ Though sexual pleasure is described as pain in a masochistic fashion, it is done so playfully. Rather than being an impassioned

¹³² Symons, ‘Lydia’, p. 157.

¹³³ Symons, ‘Lydia’, p. 163.

¹³⁴ She is described as having an animalistic orgasmic shudder, ‘a shudder that made her body tremble from head to foot, as a snake shivers as its coils contract in hot sunshine’. Symons, ‘Lydia’, p. 163.

¹³⁵ Symons, ‘Lydia’, p. 158.

¹³⁶ ‘As a Vampire, she sucked the blood out of me; as Circe, she gave me the wine that I drank at her matchless lips; as Helen of Troy, she cast into the very marrow of my bones that sweet and adulterous poison no antidote can ever alleviate.’ Symons, ‘Lydia’, p. 163.

¹³⁷ Symons, ‘Bianca: V. Escalade’, in *London Nights*, p. 96.

¹³⁸ Symons, ‘Escalade’, p. 97.

¹³⁹ Symons, ‘Bianca: IX. Wine of Circe’, in *London Nights*, p. 101

¹⁴⁰ Symons, ‘Wine of Circe’, p. 101.

appeal to a distant lover, the woman in this poem is ‘Pantingly close’.¹⁴¹ It is a one-sided monologue, even though the fantasy is of a union rather than distance. And though the speaker refers to torment and death, it is suggestive of a playful allusion to *la petite mort* rather than the woman being fatal.

In the poem ‘Bianca’, the speaker describes a sexual encounter with his lover using the imagery of pallor and morbidity typical of cruel woman as Pygmalion’s statue:

Her cheeks are hot, her cheeks are white;
The white girl hardly breathes to-night,
So faint the pulses come and go,
That waken to a smouldering glow
The morbid faintness of her white.¹⁴²

In this instance, however, whiteness represents intense heat rather than coldness. The woman is hot with the fire of ‘white ashes’, but her skin retains the deathly pallor of an ivory statue.¹⁴³ Her pallor belies the intense heat of her flesh; she does not blush. Even her red lips are ‘a false and phantom rose’, recalling Wilde’s ‘shadow of a white rose’.¹⁴⁴ The ‘white girl’ also seems close to death. She is morbidly faint, she ‘hardly breathes’ and her pulse is weak. At the moment of climax she appears to leave her body and become a rigid, sterile figure, ‘Her body that abandoned lies, / Rigid with sterile ecstasies’.¹⁴⁵ She is frozen in union with the speaker as an ambiguous ‘shiver knits her flesh to mine.’¹⁴⁶ Bianca is anatomized by the speaker, and her fragmented body parts connect with his. They mirror one another, and she does not seem to be a separate entity. ‘I take her hands into my hands’, ‘I set my lips upon her lips’, ‘She strains my hands within her hands’.¹⁴⁷ Other than these disembodied appendages we are not given a sense of the woman as a whole being apart from her whiteness and heat. As Bristow observes, the fragmented presentation of Bianca makes her an elusive figure; her body is rendered intangible to both reader and speaker. He explains, ‘the impulse to anatomize the female body fails to produce the intensities that would seem to inform this [sexual] desire. The more he fetishises each bodily part, the more her flesh

¹⁴¹ Symons, ‘Wine of Circe’, p. 101.

¹⁴² Symons, ‘Bianca: I. Bianca’, in *London Nights*, p. 91.

¹⁴³ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 91.

¹⁴⁴ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 91.

¹⁴⁵ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 92.

¹⁴⁶ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 92.

¹⁴⁷ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 91.

dissolves before him.¹⁴⁸ She is silent (‘Silently, and she understands’) and her lips are ‘inexorably close[d]’.¹⁴⁹ She has no voice, we only hear the speaker’s account of their encounter. The scenario is already a shadow of itself, as the final stanza reveals the woman becoming ethereal as she is sucked into the mists of memory: ‘Life sucks into a mist remote / Her fainting lips, her throbbing throat’.¹⁵⁰

The whiteness of Bianca (which means ‘white’ in Italian) is representative of her sexual allure. Symons also uses pallor as a symbol of innocence. In ‘Morbidezza’ (*Silhouettes*), we encounter a white and cold woman, a Decadent version of Pygmalion’s statue. The opening stanza evokes a pale and motionless female figure. She is almost corpse-like. The poem’s title is suggestive of morbidity, while referring to delicacy and softness, just as the girl’s flesh is as delicate as snow or lilies.

White girl, your flesh is lilies
Grown ’neath a frozen moon,
So still is
The rapture of your swoon
Of whiteness, snow or lilies.¹⁵¹

Lilies, snow, and whiteness are the same motifs as those used in Wilde’s description of Salome. Unlike Salome’s cold and threatening sexuality, the ‘white girl’ does not appear to be dangerous, but like the virgin princess, this girl is also chaste. However, there is a hint of temptation in this chastity. The final lines seem to be a frustrated exclamation of sexual desire, returning again to the comparison of the girl’s body to a row of lilies:

A jealous-guarded row,
Whose will is
Simply chaste dreams: - but oh,
The alluring scent of lilies!¹⁵²

The speaker’s final exclamation, while suggesting a Decadent reluctance to be drawn towards the natural, is also an expression of desire. He hints at violating the ‘jealous-guarded row’ of lilies which represent her chastity. The poem expresses the paradox of sexual desire for a pure body. He desires the girl because she is chaste, but would

¹⁴⁸ Bristow, ‘Sterile Ecstasies’, p. 78.

¹⁴⁹ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 91.

¹⁵⁰ Symons, ‘Bianca’, p. 92.

¹⁵¹ Symons, ‘Morbidezza’, in *Silhouettes*, p. 13.

¹⁵² Symons, ‘Morbidezza’, p. 13.

violate this purity by acting on the desire. We find this paradox, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, at the heart of much of Dowson's poetry. The speaker is drawn against his will towards the natural as an instinctive response to sexuality. In this poem, Symons uses circling repetition. He ends the first and last lines of each stanza with the same word, which is 'lilies' in both the first and last stanzas. This suggests a fixation. The poem returns to lilies four times, emphasizing the connection between the female form and the floral. The speaker considers other ways to describe the girl's flesh – 'whiteness' or 'snow' – but settles again finally on 'lilies'. The female form is best summarised in terms of the organic. The second stanza, refers to the girl's 'bosom's wavering slope, / Concealment, / 'Neath fainting heliotrope'.¹⁵³ The heliotrope is 'fainting', in a mirroring of the girl's swoon. Is this because it is too cold, not suited to the girl's coldness? Heliotropes grow towards the sun. She, the lily, is 'grown 'neath a frozen moon'. It is unclear whether the 'heliotrope' refers to the colour of her garments, which conceal the white flesh of her bosom, the flower itself, or its scent in her cheap perfume.

Experiments in synaesthesia

'Perfume', from *Silhouettes*, and 'White Heliotrope' from *London Nights* both compare the ghost-like recollection of a departed lover with the lingering scent of her perfume. Both deal with the notion of synaesthetic correspondence. In 'White Heliotrope' a woman's perfume is imagined to be a trigger for involuntary recollection. In 'Perfume', which is a single-sided address to a lover, the speaker entreats her to 'Shake out your hair about me, so, / That I may feel the stir and scent / Of those vague odours come and go'.¹⁵⁴ This recalls the poems in Baudelaire's 'Black Venus' cycle inspired by Jeanne Duval in *The Flowers of Evil*. The cycle includes the poems 'Exotic Perfume' (*Parfum exotique*) and 'Head of Hair.' (*La Chevelure*). In 'Exotic Perfume' the speaker is transported by the scent of his lover's perfume to a fantasy island, while in 'Head of Hair' he imagines the scent of her hair will unlock memories of mysterious foreign places. He addresses his lover, telling her that he will be able to conjure up fantasies from the odour of her hair. 'To people our dark room / With memories that sleep within this mane, / I'll shake it like a kerchief in the air!'¹⁵⁵ The fantastical images of 'Languorous Asia, scorching Africa' which the speaker imagines seem to be her

¹⁵³ Symons, 'Morbidezza', p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Symons, 'Perfume', in *Silhouettes*, p. 41.

¹⁵⁵ Baudelaire, 'Head of Hair' in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 51.

memories, but are in fact his projections based on his fetishisation of her exotic fragrance.¹⁵⁶

In Symons's 'Perfume' the speaker visualises only the lover herself from her scent. The waves of fragrance from the woman's hair grow stronger and recede. The odours of her hair are described as though they are moving and can be felt: 'I may feel the stir and scent'. Symons evokes movement in order to capture an olfactory sensation. The personified dawn is given the position of a new lover who has come to take the place of night, and appropriate the woman from the persona's embrace. The dawn 'steals in apace / And amorously bends above / The wonder of your face.'¹⁵⁷ The beloved woman departs the scene, 'You fade, a ghost, upon the air; / Yet, ah! the vacant place still keeps / The odour of your hair.'¹⁵⁸ The poem explores presence, and the scent and the light of dawn seem more embodied presences in this poem than the woman herself. She is a ghost, who vanishes into thin air, leaving behind her scent as the only tangible (yet, since it is only scent, paradoxically intangible) reminder of her presence. She is now defined by a vacant space. Like a shadow, this is something which exists only as the negative of something else: a presence defined by absence. As the woman's voice is absent from the poem, so is her body. The perfume synecdochally stands in for her whole being. Again we return to the Decadent trope of the desired woman being ghostly, intangible, and unreal.

'White Heliotrope' is another poem which takes the form of an address to a silent woman. Here, floral scent is connected with the memory of an encounter with a lover. The scene of a dishevelled boudoir, littered with 'Hat, hair-pins, puffs, and paints', is linked, through synaesthetic correspondence, with the scent of White Heliotrope.¹⁵⁹ Catherine Maxwell observes that White Heliotrope, a popular perfume at the *fin de siècle*, is formed by artificial means, as it cannot be extracted from the flower itself: 'It has to be made either by combining other perfume materials or by synthetic means, which give the impression or the illusion of the flower'.¹⁶⁰ This is interesting, because the poem is the illusion of an impression. It gives the impression of being recorded at

¹⁵⁶ Baudelaire, 'Head of Hair', p. 51.

¹⁵⁷ Symons, 'Perfume', p. 41.

¹⁵⁸ Symons, 'Perfume', p. 41.

¹⁵⁹ Symons, 'White Heliotrope', in *London Nights*, p. 50.

¹⁶⁰ Catherine Maxwell, 'Scents and Sensibility: The Fragrance of Decadence', in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 215.

the moment that the thought occurs to the speaker, since the scene is described in the present tense, ‘Your slant eyes strangely watching me, / And I, who watch you drowsily, / With eyes that, having slept not, ache’.¹⁶¹ So, rather than being at the point of the synaesthetic moment of recollection triggered by the scent of White Heliotrope, this is an anticipation of the future moment in which the scene will be recalled and ‘Will rise, a ghost of memory, if / Ever again my handkerchief / Is scented with White Heliotrope’.¹⁶² One might expect this kind of memory response to be involuntary, in which case, it could not be predicted in such a fashion, but Maxwell makes a criticism of Symons’s speaker being ‘too studied in his pose of insouciance’. She observes that ‘The very contrivance of this militates against the impression of casualness he hopes to achieve.’¹⁶³

We might read the poem from another perspective, however. The whole scenario is either already a ‘ghost of memory’ if it is a real memory, or if not, it is the impression of a ghost of memory. The poem is a deception, the whole thing is a fantasy. Even the parenthetical hesitation of the persona – ‘need one dread? nay, dare one hope?’ – is calculated to give the impression of a moment of ambivalence.¹⁶⁴ This is an attempt at capturing ‘the moment’ in a Paterian sense, and is therefore Decadent in Symons’s terms. However, the poem is still hindered by self-consciousness. Maxwell associates this with the speaker’s self-congratulatory attitude towards his sexual escapade, which is reflected in the poem’s awkward structure, and which undermines the relaxed pose he is trying to adopt.

The ‘ghost of memory’ calls to mind the phantom memories of dancers Symons conjures up. Memory is a concept likened to the spectral. The anticipation of a future when the floral scent will allow the ghost to rise again creates a comforting association between the flower and the memory. The moment of involuntary memory occurs when a sensory experience, such as catching the scent of White Heliotrope, triggers the recollection and brings the past back to the present. This can only happen in fantasy, of course; the scene will never be relived, but the memory allows it to rise and play itself out again in the mind of the person recalling it.

¹⁶¹ Symons, ‘White Heliotrope’, p. 50.

¹⁶² Symons, ‘White Heliotrope’, p. 50.

¹⁶³ Maxwell, ‘Scents and Sensibility’, p. 215.

¹⁶⁴ Symons, ‘White Heliotrope’, p. 50.

The recollection or involuntary memory which is the subject of 'White Heliotrope' recurs in 'Stella Maris'. Both poems address women, but 'Stella Maris' connects more directly with the fantasy phantom of woman, thereby demonstrating the subjectivity of the poet. Bristow calls the ghostly Stella Maris 'a *femme fatale* [...] goddess and demon in one'.¹⁶⁵ But she is not a fatal woman; the speaker's recalled sexual encounter with her is described as joyful, not masochistic. However, like the figure of the *femme fatale* she is a fantasy, one which is unreal and conjured up by the poet. The speaker tells the woman, who he is addressing as a 'ghost of memory',

Let us be glad to have forgot
That roses fade, and loves are not,
As dreams, immortal, though they seem
Almost as real as a dream.¹⁶⁶

Symons plays with the distinction between dream and reality, comparing love to something less real than a dream. By implication the dream is therefore closer to reality than wakefulness. Dreams are immortal, a comforting thought when considering mortality, or the fading of love. Through dream, Symons's persona is able to have 'won / An instant from oblivion' the 'Juliet of a night'.¹⁶⁷

Gordon compares Symons's projection of his own feelings on to images of women with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Jenny' (*Poems*, 1870). Gordon notes that 'Stella Maris' seems 'remarkably derivative' of Rossetti's poems. 'Particularly in a poem like "Jenny," the poet/narrator projects his own inability to love upon the prostitute to such an extent that her utterances are virtually indistinguishable from his own.'¹⁶⁸ The entire poem is in fact a projection on to Jenny, a prostitute, who is asleep throughout the poem. She is addressed but is unable to respond, thus the speaker is able to project his own fantasies on to her. She is abandoned at dawn by the speaker, who imagines her waking up without him.

I think I see you when you wake,
And rub your eyes for me, and shake
My gold, in rising, from your hair,
A Danaë for a moment there.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Bristow, 'Sterile Ecstasies', p. 78.

¹⁶⁶ Symons, 'Stella Maris', pp. 41-2.

¹⁶⁷ Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 41, p. 40.

¹⁶⁸ Gordon, 'Danse Macabre', pp. 436-7 (notes).

¹⁶⁹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Jenny', in *The Poetical Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William M. Rossetti (1870; New York: A. L. Burt, 1886), p. 98.

Symons's speaker's fantasy of Stella Maris rising like a ghost from the sea echoes Rossetti's 'Jenny':

Child, you arise and smile to me
 Out of the night, out of the sea,
 The Nereid of a moment there,
 And is it seaweed in your hair?¹⁷⁰

The speaker of 'Jenny' is ashamed of his encounter with the prostitute, 'And I must mock you to the last, / Ashamed of my own shame'.¹⁷¹ Symons's speaker imagines that the ghost of Stella Maris has arrived in his memory to 'claim / My share of your delicious shame' but he later declares that 'joy, not shame, is ours to share'.¹⁷²

So, though their encounter only lasted one night 'too briefly borne / To the oblivion of morn', he is able to counter this apparent ending by replaying their tryst in his memory. He joyfully states,

Ah! no oblivion, for I feel
 Your lips deliriously steal
 Along my neck and fasten there;
 I feel the perfume of your hair [...].¹⁷³

He employs a synaesthetic combination of senses in the description of hair as perfume which can be felt. The name 'Stella Maris' alludes to the Virgin Mary, like Swinburne's 'Dolores', another poem which addresses a woman as the object of desire. However, in Symons's poem, the fallen virgin, a streetwalking 'Juliet', one of many 'women one has met / In random wayfare', is made to seem active by apparently approaching the speaker.¹⁷⁴ The intermittent flashes of the lighthouse light, itself described as a phantom, call to mind her eyes, and she seems to rise from the sea.

For, surely as I see to-night
 The phantom of the lighthouse light,
 Against the sky, across the bay,
 Fade, and return, and fade away,
 So surely do I see your eyes
 Out of the empty night arise [...].¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40.

¹⁷¹ Rossetti, 'Jenny', p. 98.

¹⁷² Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40, p. 41.

¹⁷³ Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 41.

¹⁷⁴ Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40.

The male speaker seems passive, the woman active, even though he presents his memory in controlled, rhyming couplet verse. The sexual encounter he imagines casts the woman as the active participant, *her* lips fasten on his neck, *her* breast ‘heaves and dips, / Desiring my desirous lips’.¹⁷⁶ Yet the fantasy is played out and inscribed by the man’s mind and pen.

In both *London Nights* and *Silhouettes* women appear as silent screens on to which male desire is projected. Symons addresses this in the ‘Prologue’ to *London Nights*. He attempts to capture women during fleeting moments, in the middle of the dance, or during moments of passion. Because of the impossibility of recording an impression as it occurs, he turns to synaesthesia to create sensory correspondences, such as the waft of perfume conjuring the memory of a lover in ‘White Heliotrope’. Women who appear as fantasies of past lovers are portrayed as ghostly and insubstantial, just like the fantasy itself. The dancer is often white and delicate, like a flower. Her beauty can be observed from afar but as a mysterious and shadowy presence. Symons’s poems about women and dancing girls contain features of the masochistic model, as the female figure reflects the anxieties and desires of the artist himself. They are Pygmalion’s statues which mirror their creator.

In the following chapter I investigate the themes of coldness, ghostliness and fading in the pessimistic poetry of Ernest Dowson. Symons’s poem ‘Presages’, number VII in the ‘Bianca’ sequence, unites the synaesthesia, whiteness and haunting features of the cruel woman with the fear of death characteristic of Dowson’s *fin de siècle* poems. Inspired by the ‘piteousness of passing things’ which ‘Haunts her beseeching eyes’, the speaker is overcome by a feeling of anxiety about mortality.¹⁷⁷ He indulges his senses as he ‘drink[s] the odours of her hair’ and kisses her white breast, but the moment is marred by the image of death he sees in her pale flesh.¹⁷⁸ He desires to keep the white flesh living. This is an impossibility, and a problem faced by Dowson in his poetry. Death can preserve women or girls in an ideal state by freezing them in time, but it makes their bodies inaccessible. Similarly the Pygmalion’s statue is an ideal aesthetic image but it is purely an image. The problem with the living ideal is that it will die. The living body in

¹⁷⁶ Symons, ‘Stella Maris’, p. 41.

¹⁷⁷ Symons, ‘Bianca: VII. Presages’, in *London Nights*, p. 99.

¹⁷⁸ Symons, ‘Bianca: VII. Presages’, p. 99.

'Presages' is white, resembling a statue, but her living flesh is delicate and fated to decay.

Death in her liliated whiteness lives,
 The shadow of Death's eternal lust
 After the delicate flesh that gives
 The life of lilies to the dust.
 Ah, if thy lust my love forgives,
 Death, spare this whitest flesh that lives!¹⁷⁹

She is a haunting reminder of the inevitable fate of humanity. She cannot be preserved from death and nor can the speaker. Dowson's poems lament human mortality, while also embracing the decline intrinsic to Decadence. Female figures in Dowson's poetry are silent, cold and insubstantial, like the cruel woman. However, they are usually young girls, representative of Dowson's obsession with the ideal of youth. Dowson transforms these ideals into works of art in his poems, but as art objects they are inaccessible. The speaker is isolated; Dowson repeats the phrase 'alone, apart' in several of his poems. He represents the torment of being irreconcilably separated from his ideal in the poem 'Epigram'. Here, the speaker casts himself as a reverse Pygmalion whose beloved is turned to stone. The masochistic model is reversed.

Female figures in Dowson's poems are anatomized or killed. They are reduced to screens for his desires, which are not perversely enjoyed, but lamented. Dowson's masochism is hopeless and self-tormenting. He is caught in a 'decadent dilemma', between the love of innocence and being subject to adult desires. Rather than celebrating the agony caused by these contradictory states, he resigns himself to despair. His famous 'Cynara poem' is not a celebration of Decadence, but a plea for release from empty hedonism. Cynara is a ghostly projection of the speaker's ideals, and she represents pleasure distinct from pain. Dowson writes the cruel woman out of Decadence and signals the end of the tradition in the exhausted tone of his world-weary poetry.

¹⁷⁹Symons, 'Bianca: VII. Presages', p. 99.

CHAPTER FIVE

'The pale roses expire'

Ernest Dowson and the cruel girl in *Verses* and *Decorations*

Diluted Decadence

Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) published his first collection of poetry in 1896. *Verses* is a slim volume with a front cover by Aubrey Beardsley [Fig. 11] which exemplifies the refinement of Decadence in the late nineteenth century. Beardsley's design features a large curved stylised 'Y' shape consisting of a thin double border containing three thin lines emerging from the bottom left corner with tiny curled leaf embellishments at their tips.¹ The simplicity of Beardsley's design contrasts with the ornamentation which features in his other works such as the *Salome* or *Venus and Tannhäuser* illustrations, and complements the refinement of Dowson's verse.² As R. K. R. Thornton points out, the shape is 'a skeleton (sometimes reversed) of many of Beardsley's designs.'³ This can be seen for example in the composition of *A Platonic Lament* [Fig. 6], in which the detail is arranged in a triangular upside-down 'Y' shape. Beardsley's choice of the very bare bones of his own design, unadorned, for this front cover, is evocative of Dowson's poetry, which might be read as a dilution or weak reflection of the work of earlier Decadent writers and his contemporaries. This dilution, mentioned by MacLeod in her description of English Decadence as 'Huysmans "and water"' can be observed in the figure of the cruel woman, which is treated differently by Dowson.⁴ In his poetry the cruel woman is not an alluring punishing mistress as she appears in Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, nor is she an image of vitality and movement like Symons's dancers. She is similar to the pale and disembodied Salome, although she is not such a mature and threateningly sexual figure. In contrast to the *femmes fatales* which appear in French Decadence with increasing viciousness and vitality as the century progresses, in Dowson's poetry she is an infantilised figure who is sometimes killed off. The Decadent masochistic fantasy of the woman's sexuality is replaced with the fantasy of purity in

¹ Beardsley, who was disdainful of Dowson, joked that the letter 'Y' stood for 'Why was this book ever written?' Vincent O'Sullivan, *Aspects of Wilde* (London: Constable, 1936), p. 127, quoted in James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p. 159.

² Dowson admired the design, writing to the book's publisher Leonard Smithers that 'Beardsley's binding block is admirable – *simplex munditiis* ['elegant simplicity', from Horace's Ode 1.5], & yet most sumptuous. I am only afraid the reviewers will think the contents unworthy of such display.' Letter to Leonard Smithers, c. 4 June 1896, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 365.

³ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 177.

⁴ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 16.

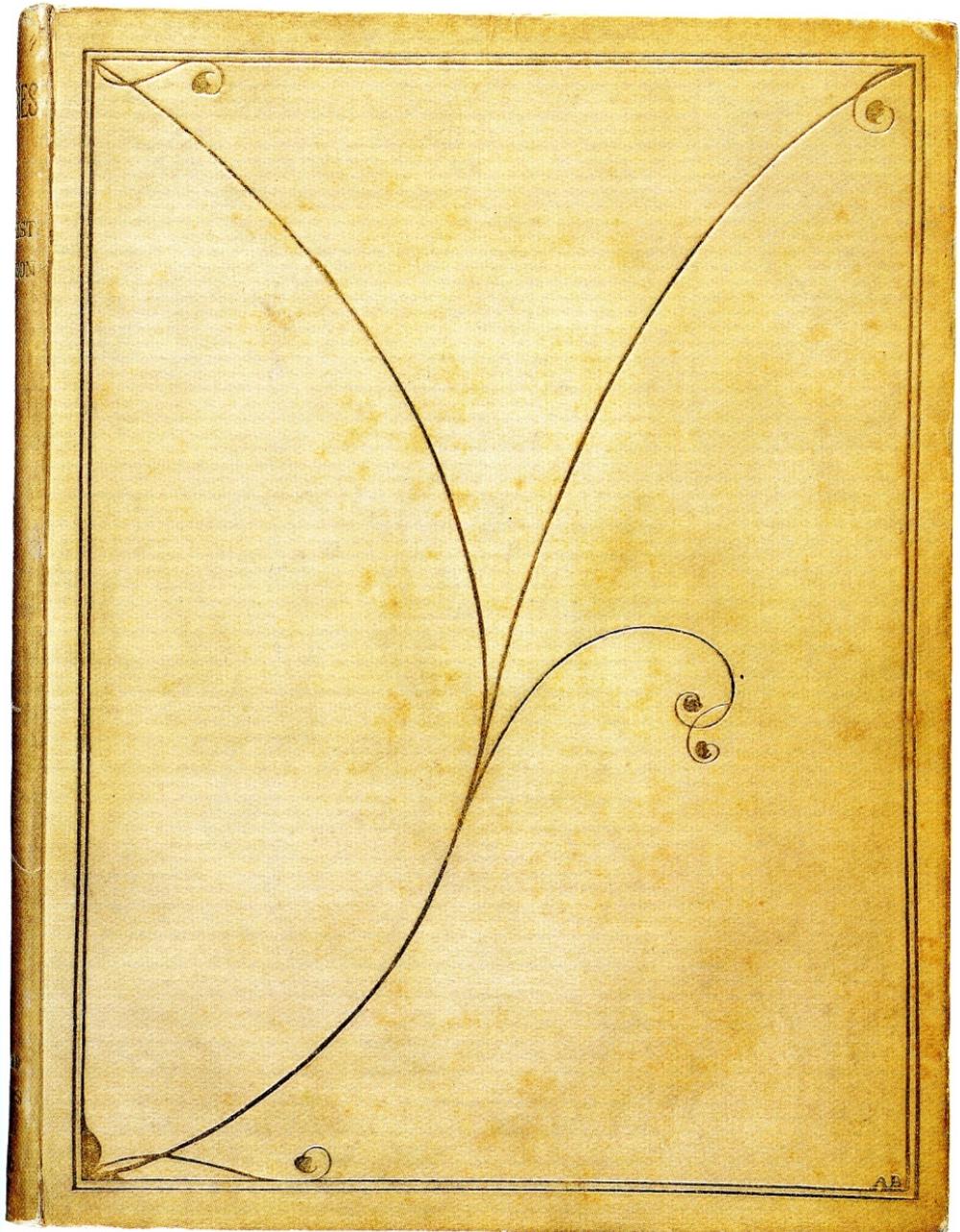


Fig. 11. Front cover of Ernest Dowson's *Verses* (1896) with design by Aubrey Beardsley, reproduced from Simon Wilson, *Beardsley* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1983).

the ideal girl. Dowson's poetic representations of girls are, like the Pygmalion's statues of the masochistic model, captured in a perfect, yet unattainable state. The vitality of the statue come to life is replaced with images of fading, death, and decay; in order to protect the fantasy girl, she is frozen and turned to marble once again.

Linda Dowling remarks that 'regret and resignation are [Dowson's] distinctive notes.'⁵ Themes of finality, death, ennui and desolation characterise Dowson's introspective verses composed during the final decade of the nineteenth century. Selected poems were published in the little magazines of the 1890s, such as the *Hobby Horse* and the *Yellow Book*, and the majority of Dowson's poems are arranged into two collections, *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899). He also wrote a verse play, *The Pierrot of the Minute* (1897), and wrote several novels in collaboration with his friend Arthur Moore. I concentrate on the two collections of poems, as they most clearly relate to the theme of the cruel woman, or rather the cruel girl, as Dowson's version of the type is infantilised. The pain of desire and a fixation on the brevity of life are themes evident from the earliest of Dowson's poems, and the final collection *Decorations* reveals an exhausted, world-weary attitude. *Verses* begins with an epigraph printed before the title page, '*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*'. Dowson borrows this quote from Horace's Ode 1.4, 'the brief sum of life does not allow us to start on long hopes'.⁶ Horace's statement reflects Dowson's defeated attitude and pessimism.⁷ This poem contains the famous statement about the brevity of life, 'They are not long, the days of wine and roses'.⁸ Wine and roses for Dowson are recurring symbols of the debauchery and excess of nineteenth-century Decadence. Dowson's own days of wine and roses were blighted by a constant longing for an unreachable ideal of youth, which is transient. Dowson laments the passing of time and the aging of the

⁵ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 204.

⁶ Horace, Ode 1.4, in *The Complete Odes and Epodes* trans. by David West (BC 23; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 20, line 15. Horace's poem is about the coming of spring as winter melts away, whereas Dowson's poems frequently lament the transition from summer to winter, as a metaphor for the ageing of the young girl as she grows out of her ideal innocence.

⁷ Norman Vance comments on Horace as an aid for Dowson's pessimistic attitude 'Later in the [nineteenth] century Horace, as the poet of transient (if substantial) pleasures, assists the process of transforming romantic despair into accomplished, conspicuously formal verse in the work of 'decadent' poets such as Ernest Dowson. Dowson's poetic persona [In the 'Cynara' poem, which Vance discusses later] looks back from a degraded and hopeless present to evanescent passion and fulfillment represented by the conventionalized Horatian delights of wine and roses and young love.' Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 182.

⁸ Ernest Dowson, '*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*', in *Verses* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. iii.

child, for example in ‘Ad Domnulam Suam’⁹ which entreats the girl to ‘Be a child: then, we will part’:

Soon thou leavest fairy-land;
 Darker grow thy tresses:
 Soon no more of hand in hand;
 Soon no more caresses!¹⁰

Dowson’s increasing pessimism, his submission to the passing of time, and inevitable solitude, can be traced through his use of female figures in his poetry.¹¹

In this chapter I argue that in Dowson’s poetry the masochistic model is replaced with an attitude of pure despair. However, the female figure is rarely presented as cruel. Instead Dowson’s speakers torment themselves before images of silent, cold, and insubstantial girls. The little girl is the only solace for Dowson but she is also a source of his misery. He represents her as a paradoxical figure from which his speakers are isolated. As Chris Snodgrass observes, she is aestheticised and frozen into a poetic image, but this is a Pygmalion’s statue which is cold and unfeeling. The poem ‘Epigram’ represents the torment of this situation. Dowson’s speaker is a Pygmalion in reverse, whose real beloved has been turned to marble. The masochistic model is reversed when the cruel woman’s apparent vitality is replaced with the image of a stone woman. Dowson has been called an archetypal Decadent poet by Jad Adams in *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (2000), and by Thornton. The ‘Cynara poem’ is considered to be his most Decadent work, but it is in fact at odds with the celebration of perversity. It seems to be a lament for Decadence. Cynara herself is a projection of the speaker’s fantasy, and represents an unattainable pleasure distinct from the pain which consumes him.

Cynara is different from the young girl figure; the ideal that she stands for is abstract. Adelaide Foltinowicz, the real girl who Dowson fell in love with, came to embody his ideal of youth. Adams compares this idolisation of youth to a form of courtly love. Adelaide is a silent symbol, whose image in Dowson’s writings is formed according to his projection. In her essay ‘Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood:

⁹ The title uses the diminutive Latin ‘To his little lady’, emphasising the youth of the girl.

¹⁰ Dowson, ‘Ad Domnulam Suam’, in *Verses*, p. 6.

¹¹ I choose to focus on Dowson’s poetry for this reason, and because Dowson’s novels were written in collaboration with Arthur Moore. Also, Thornton considers that ‘neither writer was very strong on plot’. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 72.

“Her Double Perversity” (2002), Christine Roth’s idea of the girl’s ‘double perversity’ fits with the paradoxes explored by this thesis, and with my exploration of the tension between sexual desire and infantile purity for Dowson. In particular, her observation that the little girl as represented by Dowson in ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl’ is a ‘fantasy and phantasm’, is relevant to my argument that the cruel woman (or girl) is a projection, and is not real.¹² The final type of unreal fantasy female figure that I explore in this chapter is the dead girl. For the ‘reverse Pygmalion’ Dowson, the dead girl is more suitable than a living one as a screen for his desires. She is also preserved in an ideal state of perpetual youth. Although cold and inaccessible, the dead girl is controllable. This is a dynamic that echoes Browning’s dramatic monologues.

Pittock hypothesises that ‘For Dowson, the fatal woman is indeed just that – there is no alluring combination of satisfaction and danger to be found in her.’¹³ I agree that the combination of satisfaction and danger – or rather, masochistic pleasure and pain – is missing from Dowson’s poems. However, I disagree that fatal women feature in his verse. Female figures are symbolically killed by Dowson, but they are not fatal themselves. His speakers lament maturity and human mortality, and a Dowsonian motif is a prayer for death as a relief from desire and the torment of the human condition.

Not all Dowson’s early poems were addressed to little girls. ‘Sonnet – To Nature’ from Dowson’s ‘Flower notebook’ dated August 1887, and published in *London Society* in March 1888, combines the sonnet form with the reverential terms of address his speaker uses towards the girl in the earlier ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl’, but differs greatly in tone. The speaker is simultaneously mocking and expressing awe for nature in this early poem. For the young Dowson this was a particularly Decadent attitude. The speaker refers to nature as the ultimate *femme fatale*, an evil womb-tomb:

O false, foul mother who to sate thy lust,
 Insatiate of misery doth consume
 The lives that thou hast fashioned out of dust,
 Who feedest on the children of thy womb,
 Thy beauty cannot conquer our distrust,
 Thy tenderness is crueller than a tomb.¹⁴

¹² Christine Roth, ‘Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: “Her Double Perversity”’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 45 (2002), p. 165.

¹³ Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, pp. 137-8.

¹⁴ Ernest Dowson, ‘Sonnet – To Nature’ (1887), in *Collected Poems*, ed. by R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2003), p. 42.

Nature is addressed as ‘Thou unclean harpy, odorous of despair’.¹⁵ Harpies are described in Virgil’s *Aeneid* as ‘The vilest of all monsters. [...] They are birds with the faces of girls, with filth oozing from their bellies, with hooked claws for hands and faces pale with a hunger that is never satisfied.’¹⁶ Nature in Dowson’s poem is a punishing mistress, the ideal masochistic fantasy of a beautiful but cruel entity. ‘I offer up no praises on the shrine / Of thy wild beauty’.¹⁷ Although the speaker protests that he hates the personified Nature, and that she is not divine, she is addressed reverentially throughout as ‘thou’. He claims that he will not offer any prayers to her or celebrate her in song, ‘never song of mine / Shall swell the shameful triumphs that are thine / Thou shalt not cajole me of ev’n one prayer.’¹⁸ However, he is ironically celebrating her in this reproachful sonnet. This poem is an energetic outpouring of rage against death, while Dowson’s later works are more resigned to mortality, and exhaustion rather than energy. Perhaps because his ideal is the virginal, prepubescent girl, he does not maintain an implicit connection between nature and women, although he does use the changing of the seasons from summer to winter as a metaphor for the maturing female body.

Coldness without cruelty

The young girl was a personal obsession, and an important motif running throughout Dowson’s work from his early poetry to his final collection.¹⁹ She is a substitute for religious devotion, as is the masochistic ideal of the idolised cruel woman. But Dowson does not combine religion with eroticism in the same way as Swinburne does in his subversion of Catholic imagery, or Wilde does in his presentation of the biblical figure in *Salome*. Dowling discusses Dowson’s preoccupation with religious themes, comparing him to Swinburne, his ‘favorite poet’. She considers the shared theme in Dowson’s ‘Cynara poem’ and Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* of guiltless pleasures interrupted by ‘the shadow of sickness unto death and the old passion of Christ’.²⁰ Yet she observes the difference between Swinburne’s paganism and Dowson’s religious leanings, ‘if Swinburne struggled to cast off the interdicting Christian shadow and live

¹⁵ Dowson, ‘Sonnet – To Nature’, p. 42.

¹⁶ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 3, trans. David West (29-19 BC; London: Penguin, 1990), p. 63.

¹⁷ Dowson, ‘Sonnet – To Nature’, p. 42.

¹⁸ Dowson, ‘Sonnet – To Nature’, p. 42.

¹⁹ Dowson’s early poetry which remained unpublished during his lifetime is collected as *Poésie Schublade* in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Thornton and Dowson.

²⁰ Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 204.

unoppressed in pagan sunlight and sea, Dowson clearly does not'.²¹ Dowson's poetry commonly expresses longing for the spiritual calm and solitude that a life of religious faith would bring, as in such poems as 'Carthusians' and 'Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration'. The girl represents the torment of desire; a torment which Dowson was perpetually trying to escape, yet which was pleasurable enough that he feared losing it.

He met Adelaide Foltinowicz in her parents' restaurant, which he nicknamed 'Poland', in November 1889 when she was eleven years old. Adelaide as the representation of a fantasy ideal is a spectral and haunting figure in Dowson's work. In his biography of Dowson, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, Jad Adams observes of Adelaide that 'no single word of hers has been recorded. It is as if, as the least charitable of Dowson's friends said, she was not real but a symbol for him.'²² She rejected his proposal of marriage in April 1893 shortly before her fifteenth birthday. The little girl as a model of innocence and youth would seem to exist at the opposite end of the spectrum to the masochist's self-abasement. However, the girl child was a figure with which Dowson could torment himself. Dowson was a tragic masochist-type in his personal life; his acquaintances remember him deliberately hurting or degrading himself and taking pleasure in pain. Robert Sherard, in whose house Dowson eventually died, acknowledged that Dowson 'hunted after suffering with the same eagerness with which most men pursue pleasure'.²³ Will Rothenstein wrote 'Poor Dowson was a tragic figure. While we others amused ourselves, playing with fireworks, Dowson meant deliberately to hurt himself. [...] he punished and lacerated himself, as it were, through excess.'²⁴ The excessive aspect of the decadent lifestyle was painful for Dowson. He seems to have abandoned himself to suffering, allowing himself to be controlled by his own perverse desires. He ceded control in an attitude of pure masochism rather than just adopting a pose of helplessness. His poems reflect pure despair, rather than the paradoxical pleasure/pain aspect of masochism. But while he punished himself physically 'through excess', in his poetry he renounces such excess and concentrates on emotional turmoil. As Thornton points out in his comparison of Dowson's 'Amor Umbratilis' to the masochistic oblations to deity figures in the poetry of Swinburne, 'If

²¹ Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 204.

²² Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 60.

²³ Robert Harborough Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde*, p. 82, quoted in Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 103.

²⁴ Will Rothenstein, *Men and Memories*, Vol. 1 (London 1931), p. 238, quoted in Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, pp. 103-4.

it derives from Swinburne, the passion is cooled, slowed down, made unassertive; it is a masochism of self-denial, not self-laceration.²⁵ The pleasurable aspect of corporal (or corporeal) punishment is missing from Dowson's masochism. His figures are incorporeal, disembodied and ethereal.

The minimalist structure of Beardsley's skeletal 'Y' is therefore an appropriate symbol for Dowson's poetic version of Decadent masochism. Dowson is the quintessential Decadent writer according to Adams and Thornton, and I consider their viewpoints further on, with reference to the 'decadent dilemma' However, as MacLeod observes, he is a poor representation of the Decadent stereotype:

Of all *fin-de-siècle* writers, Ernest Dowson has come to best typify the stereotypical Decadent. This stereotype, argue Desmond Flower and Henry Maas, figures Decadents as 'idle, penurious, drunken, promiscuous, living with [their] head[s] in a cloud of artistic ambition but doing little towards its achievement, tempted towards drugs and perversion, often addicted to them, producing exquisitely fashioned small works, but doomed, after material failure, to an early death'. This image bears little resemblance, however, to the Dowson we glimpse in his letters [...].²⁶

MacLeod notes Dowson's lack of perversity; though he was promiscuous and a heavy drinker, these habits seem to have been diversions from the despair at being unable to obtain the ideal object of his affections. His ideals were youth and beauty, and he speaks about the purity of his love for Adelaide in his letters. A masochistic and ambivalent attitude to women is one of the defining features of Decadent writing as observed in earlier chapters, but female cruelty is absent from Dowson's work. We are left instead with the ghostly remains of the cruel woman, exemplified by the instances in which female figures in Dowson's poetry are imagined as spectres or dead bodies. They are absences. Death haunts Dowson's verses, but not in terms of the physical corpse as ideal Pygmalion's statue. Although Dowson often uses the same poetic technique of speakers addressing a silent female auditor, they are often speaking to memories or ghosts, as in 'Yvonne of Brittany', from *Verses* and 'The Dead Child', from *Decorations*. In the cold moon-flower of 'Flos Lunae', in *Verses*, the ideal girl is presented in Dowson's poetry using the same symbols as those used by other Decadent writers to describe the cruel woman: coldness, shadowiness, insubstantiality, silence. Dowson occasionally takes these symbols to extremes, using them to represent dead

²⁵ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 90.

²⁶ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 150, quoting Flower and Maas, 'Introduction' to *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 3.

girls, rather than girls that *appear* dead because they are in fact ghostly fantasies which the masochist is trying to bring to life. The Decadent cruel woman is truly ethereal in Dowson. In masochistic poems such as Swinburne's, coldness is an attribute of the inaccessible, rejecting beloved. It also suggests the marmoreal lifelessness of Pygmalion's statue. In *Salome*, the princess's coldness symbolises her cruelty, and contributes to her ethereal presence in the drama. Coldness is associated with morbidity, particularly in the parallels between Salome and the moon. Dowson unites the themes of emotional and deathly coldness in his poems about inaccessible women and dead girls.

An example of such an address to a cold woman is 'Flos Lunae', which contains many of the markers of the Decadent cruel woman: silence, coldness, association with the moon, devotional worship from the speaker. Yet this poem also demonstrates Dowson's different treatment of the cruel woman type. I quote the poem in its entirety:

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
Nor trouble the calm fount of speech
With aught of passion or surprise.
The heart of thee I cannot reach:
I would not alter thy cold eyes!

I would not alter thy cold eyes;
Nor have thee smile, nor make thee weep:
Though all my life droops down and dies,
Desiring thee, desiring sleep,
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes;
I would not change thee if I might,
To whom my prayers for incense rise,
Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
With trouble of the human heart:
Within their glance my spirit lies,
A frozen thing, alone, apart;
I would not alter thy cold eyes.²⁷

'Flos Lunae' was originally titled 'Fleur de la Lune' in the draft Dowson sent on 20 July 1891 to Arthur Moore. In the accompanying letter he calls it 'the last vagary of my most modern Muse – of Montparnasse – or should I say Montmartre?' and refers to its

²⁷ Dowson, 'Flos Lunae', in *Verses*, p. 16.

deliberate obscurity, ‘Its obscurity, I may remark is designed.’²⁸ Dowson associates modernity with a posture of vagueness, and claims to be inspired by a voguish Parisian muse. His speaker adopts a position in this poem consistent with the masochistic model. The silent subject of the address is the masochistic ideal of coldness and cruelty, and the speaker is symbolically ‘beneath’ her. He is unable to reach her heart, and is sending prayers up to her. She is high, cold and distant like the moon, while the speaker is drawn downwards and diminishing. Exhaustion, ennui and the longing for sleep – both as rest and as a deathlike oblivion – are recurring themes in Dowson’s verse. In this poem, the speaker is drooping, dying like a flower, exhausted with desire. He is not trying to change the cold woman at all; he would not ‘have thee smile, nor make thee weep’. He wants her to remain cold, impassive, emotionless. He is not trying to give the impression of activity or sexuality, nor imploring her to interact with him. She is as immobile and cold as a statue. Even though he suffers, to the extent of losing his own vital energy, he would not change his cold beloved. She is an idol who is worshipped with prayers, but she is also the offspring of the speaker’s own fantasy. She is the ‘daughter of dreams’, and he claims possession of her as ‘my’ moon. The woman as moon is a central motif of *Salome*, which as I have demonstrated is a figure which is distant and cold and which reflects male desires and fears about female nature.

Dowson’s own one-act ‘dramatic phantasy’, the verse play *The Pierrot of the Minute* (1897) develops the theme. Pierrot, worshipping a statue of Cupid at a temple, is visited by the Moon Maiden, who is a manifestation of male desire: ‘I am to each the face of his desire’.²⁹ The Maiden is cold, but attractive to Pierrot, who is enraptured by her kiss, ‘Cold are thy lips, more cold than I can tell; / Yet I would hang on them, thine icicle!’³⁰ Having been kissed by the Moon, Pierrot is fated never to have his earthly desires satisfied. The Maiden departs, warning that Pierrot must

Go forth and seek in each fair face in vain,
To find the image of thy love again.
[...]
Whom once the moon has kissed, loves long and late,

²⁸ Ernest Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 20 July 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 208.

The poem was printed in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* in October 1891. In *Verses*, as well as the change of title to ‘Flos Lunae’, several lines were altered for the final publication. ‘Although my life droops down and dies’ becomes ‘Though all my life droops down and dies’, and ‘Pale daughter of the lunar night’ becomes ‘Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!’

²⁹ Dowson, *The Pierrot of the Minute* (1897), in *Collected Poems*, p. 131, line 174.

³⁰ Dowson, *The Pierrot of the Minute*, p. 133, lines 207-8.

Yet never finds the maid to be his mate.³¹

Pierrot will never again find the perfect reflection of his own desire, because living women are not fantasies. None will live up to his ideal.³²

The speaker of 'Flos Lunae' is similarly fated to solitude. His soul is imprisoned by the gaze of his beloved's cold eyes, 'alone, apart'. This is a recurring phrase in Dowson's work, referring to solitude and isolation. As noted in the previous chapter, Symons uses the same combination of words in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', in which the dancer is isolated and representative of the poet's separation from the crowd. Of the two poets it seems Dowson was the first to combine these words into the short yet meaningful phrase.³³ It first occurs in the roundel he sent to Moore in 1889, which appears as 'Beyond' in *Decorations*. It seems unlikely that Symons was influenced by Dowson since the first publication of the poem as 'A Roundel' was in 1893, and Symons composed 'La Mélinite' in May 1892.³⁴ Nonetheless it remains significant that both Decadent poets use the same combination of words; Dowson to isolate his speakers, Symons to isolate the dancer as inspiration. Symons's dancer represents the synthesis of art and life which the poet strives to achieve, while Dowson laments the ultimate isolation of the individual. The position of speaking one's desired woman into being is a lonely one. Dowson is ambivalent about solitude. It is a painful state when parted from the object of desire, but an ideal state when it means renouncing desire and love and the pain which goes with it.

Dowson and the 'decadent dilemma'

Despite the 'masochism of self-denial' which Thornton observes in Dowson's work, he is considered a figurehead of the Decadent movement in Britain. Adams declares him to be the 'archetypal decadent poet'.³⁵ Thornton justifies Dowson's central position in the movement by associating him with the 'decadent dilemma' – being caught between two contradictory pulls – which I have previously referred to in connection with masochism.

³¹ Dowson, *The Pierrot of the Minute*, pp. 147-8, lines 454-5 and 458-9.

³² Incidentally, Beardsley's illustrations do not picture the Moon. Once again his illustrations uncover subtle inferences of the text, in this case, that the moon is a projection of Pierrot's dreams, like the cruel woman which does not exist.

³³ Dowson and Symons first met in 1891. Dowson wrote to Arthur Moore, 'I met Arthur Symons last night: do you know of him? [...] on the whole, I was not greatly impressed.' Ernest Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 29 May 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 201. The two were both members of the Rhymers' Club, and became friends despite Dowson's initial disappointment in Symons.

³⁴ Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 85.

³⁵ Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. ix.

According to Thornton, ‘critics share the assumption that Dowson is at the heart of the Decadent movement. And so he is. The Decadent Dilemma runs through his whole work; it shapes his whole life’.³⁶

Dowson’s life was a dilemma, since he was tormented by his own desires, and caught in a doubly impossible position. His personal letters and his poems demonstrate an oscillation between taking comfort in desire for the girl (particularly Adelaide) as an ideal on one hand, and wishing for solitude and oblivion as an escape from desire on the other. To intensify the issue, the young girl figure he idolises exists in an in-between state herself, between innocence and maturity. But this is an impermanent state, and Dowson laments the inevitability of ageing.³⁷ Writing to Moore in 1890, he refers to the child being the only solace in his life, but also indicates his despair towards life:

Children certainly reconcile one – (or at least in my case) more than anything else to one’s life but on the whole I am more & more convinced each day that there is nothing really worth doing or having or saying. At least I can’t fix on any tangible object or aim in life which seems so desirable as the having got it finally over – & the remaining *in perpetuo* without desire or aim or consciousness whatsoever.³⁸

For Dowson his own decline is an ideal; oblivion provides the only escape from the torment of being unsatisfied with life. This attitude is reflected in such poems as the ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl’ sequence (only one of which, ‘Sonnet IV’, was printed in *London Society* in November 1886) in which a ‘child’s tender love’ is a comfort, but the final sonnets end with the speaker’s exhausted retreat to death. Thornton declares Decadence to be ‘a literature of failure, and a record of a wistful mood of inadequacy in confronting man’s impermanence in a world of appearances’.³⁹ This is the position Dowson occupies in literary Decadence; he records failure and inadequacy. Despite moments of elation – a glance from a beloved in ‘Vain Resolves’, or the brief sunlit union with the child in ‘Transition’, for example – Dowson’s verses fall back upon the pure pain and desolation of masochism. He is ultimately drawn downwards rather than pulled in two different directions. As the final lines of ‘Transition’ in *Decorations*

³⁶ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 71.

³⁷ Dowson wrote to Arthur Moore of Adelaide, ‘What a terrible, lamentable thing growth is! It “makes me mad” to think that a year or two at most the most perfect exquisite relation I have ever succeeded in making must naturally end.’ Ernest Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 5 March 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 187.

³⁸ Ernest Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 28 March 1890, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 144.

³⁹ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 190.

lament, 'The roses fall, the pale roses expire / Beneath the slow decadence of the sun'.⁴⁰ Decay is inevitable, and pleasure is marred by the knowledge of the transience of that pleasure.

Dowson's relationship with Adelaide took the form of the same devotional worship which is the subject of Swinburne's poems, for example the perverse Virgin figure in 'Dolores'. Dowson's Adelaide, however, is an ideal of innocence, rather than a sexual fantasy. Symons describes Dowson's enthrallment to Adelaide as 'a sort of virginal devotion, as to a Madonna'.⁴¹ In a letter to Moore in 1891, Dowson complains of a recent scandal, the abduction of sixteen-year-old Lucy Pearson by a journalist called Newton. He fears it will cause his friends to misconstrue his motives towards Adelaide, but that 'there never was a man more fanatically opposed to the corruption of innocence – even where women are concerned – than I am'.⁴² In the same letter Dowson laments that the abduction has left a 'slimy trail over my holy places'.⁴³ In describing his relationship as a religious one, Dowson positions Adelaide as an object of devotion. However, he does not worship her for her perversity, nor does he make his devotion a travesty of courtly love. Swinburne combines worship with a haughty cruel woman type appearing to sexually punish a masochistic and submissive male, but Dowson takes religion more seriously. His ideal may resemble a pure Madonna, but in such poems as 'Impenitentia Ultima' and 'Epigram' the speakers are punished for idolatrous worship of a woman. It is God who is the powerful, punishing entity, not the woman herself.

Roth compares Dowson's presentation of girls in an in-between state with the potential for innocence and corruption to the Catholic paradox of the Virgin Mary who is both a virgin and a mother. 'Dowson's various characterizations of the Virgin Mary, a prototype for Dowson's ideal girl figure, slip between benevolent nurturer and *femme fatale*'.⁴⁴ Roth refers to 'Impenitentia Ultima', from *Verses*, as an example. Here,

⁴⁰ Ernest Dowson, 'Transition', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1899), p. 28.

⁴¹ Symons adds, 'I think, had things gone happily, to a conventional happy ending, he would have felt (dare I say?) that his ideal had been spoilt'. Arthur Symons, 'Ernest Dowson', in *The Poems of Ernest Dowson: Verses, The Pierrot of the Minute, Decorations in Verse and Prose* (Portland Maine: Thomas B Mosher, 1902), p. xxiii. (Symons's memoir was originally published in *The Fortnightly Review* (June 1900) and reprinted in *The Bibelot*, Vol. VI., pp. 335-63.)

⁴² Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 3 September 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 213.

⁴³ Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 3 September 1891, p. 213.

⁴⁴ Roth, 'Ernest Dowson', p. 169.

Dowson situates the speaker as worshipper of a Madonna-like girl figure.⁴⁵ However, the woman in this poem is not a *femme fatale* but a being so pure and beautiful that the speaker would accept the punishments meted out by an angry god in order to look at her for an hour. The speaker imagines that if he were granted one final grace from God ‘Before my light goes out forever’ he would ask to be able to see the woman he loves.⁴⁶ He begs to be able to serve his beloved who is cast into the role of mistress, even though this devotion will condemn him to the torments of hell:

But once before the sand is run and the silver thread is broken,
Give me a grace and cast aside the veil of dolorous years,
Grant me one hour of all mine hours, and let me see for a token
Her pure and pitiful eyes shine out, and bathe her feet with tears.⁴⁷

Using the imagery of foot-bathing, Dowson casts his speaker as the sinful woman in the biblical gospel of Luke 7. 38, who washes Jesus’s feet with tears and is forgiven. He is the servant of the woman, but she is not cast as cruel or commanding like Swinburne’s Dolores. She would be a comforting presence as the speaker died, ‘Her pitiful eyes should calm [...] And her eyes should be my light whilst the sun went out behind me, / And the viols in her voice be the last sound in mine ear.’⁴⁸ As penitence for his decision to be with her, he would endure the wrath of God and punishment of hell:

Before the ruining waters fall and my life be carried under,
And Thine anger cleave me through as a child cuts down a flower,
I will praise Thee, Lord, in Hell, while my limbs are racked asunder,
For the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour.⁴⁹

It is not the girl herself who is torturing him, but the torture is a result of his devotion to her. He sets her up as a benevolent Virgin Mary type, but this elevation is his own projection, and the hell he consigns himself to is a place away from her charms and ‘grace’. She is not the tormentor in this hell. The power to torment, or even to grant him the vision of her face, is not hers. It is possessed by an even higher divinity, the god to whom he is praying. The girl is not portrayed as responsible for the speaker’s torments as the *femme fatale* would be; he chooses them as punishment for idolising the girl and forsaking his religious faith.

⁴⁵ The title translates as ‘final impenitence’. The poem was published in *Verses* and first printed in the *Savoy*, no. 1, January 1896.

⁴⁶ Dowson, ‘Impenitentia Ultima’, in *Verses*, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Dowson, ‘Impenitentia Ultima’, pp. 47-8.

⁴⁸ Dowson, ‘Impenitentia Ultima’, p. 48.

⁴⁹ Dowson, ‘Impenitentia Ultima’, p. 48.

It may seem then that Dowson is at odds with the attitude of other Decadent poets like Swinburne and Symons, but he was in fact influenced by these two writers.⁵⁰ His poem 'Libera Me' was one of the first he transcribed into his Flower notebook in which it is titled 'Hymn to Aphrodite'. Although it is an early poem it is published in *Decorations*, the later collection, where it complements the recurring themes of the end of life and laments for lost youth. 'Libera me' translates as 'deliver me' or 'free me'. The poem is presented as a plea from 'the end' of the speaker's life, he begs for his freedom even though it will not be for long: 'now render to me / Ashes of life that remain to me, few though they be'.⁵¹ It is a plea to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty and procreation, to be free of her after a long time worshipping her: 'Long have I served thine altars, serve me now at the end, / Let me have peace of thee, truce of thee, golden one, send.'⁵² Alliteration is used in a Swinburnean fashion, and the repetition of words emphasises the torment of passion and of what he has lost, as the words fall like repeated blows: 'Heart of my heart I have offered thee, pain of my pain', 'Blossom and bloom hast thou taken'. He has 'Fed the fierce flames on thine altar'.⁵³ The speaker uses the language of torment and bondage; he has been chained to Aphrodite, offered her his pain, worshipped at her altar. However the speaker's attitude is different to Swinburne's in that it is a plea for final release rather than an example of luxuriating in torment. A masochistic speaker would plead for the pleasure/pain dynamic to continue, but Dowson's speaker begs for freedom. Here, the speaker is not subversively in control like the masochist. He does call Aphrodite into being as a cruel woman, but he is not interested in her as a woman, and neither is he trying to create the illusion of life via a projection. Instead, he imagines *himself* as lifeless in the pursuit of love – he begs the goddess to 'restore / Life to the limbs of me'.⁵⁴ It is the speaker who is the statue in this scenario; like Pygmalion he begs for life, but this is to animate his own cold limbs rather than those of his beloved. This is a reversal of the Decadent trope of imagining women as lifeless. Dowson also uses floral imagery, typically associated with Decadent women, to describe himself: 'Having the first-fruits and flower of me, cast me the core'.⁵⁵ The speaker is feminised, weak and helpless. The flower represents his own lost youth and innocence.

⁵⁰ Of the many influences on Dowson including Symons, Poe and Baudelaire, Thornton remarks that 'The strongest influence is undoubtedly Swinburne'. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 87.

⁵¹ Dowson, 'Libera Me', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, p. 35.

⁵² Dowson, 'Libera Me', p. 34.

⁵³ Dowson, 'Libera Me', pp. 34-5.

⁵⁴ Dowson, 'Libera Me', p. 35.

⁵⁵ Dowson, 'Libera Me', p. 35.

‘Spleen’, a poem which is dedicated to and bears the influence of Symons, appears in *Verses*. The title echoes Baudelaire, who wrote a series of four poems titled ‘Spleen’, which lament boredom and ennui. The speaker in Dowson’s poem is a powerless victim of desire. While he replicates Swinburne by creating an apparition of a cruel woman to present helplessness, in his homage to Symons Dowson’s speaker is more introspective, considering his weariness and memory. The style is similar to Symons’s in terms of structure and repeated rhyme. ‘Spleen’ is composed in two-line stanzas of rhyming couplets that conclude with simple rhyme, for example, weep/sleep. There is also a return to the first lines in the last lines with slight alteration, a typical feature of Symons’s poems. The line ‘I was not sorrowful, I could not weep, / And all my memories were put to sleep’ transforms at the poem’s conclusion with the arrival of evening to ‘And left me sorrowful, inclined to weep, / With all my memories that could not sleep.’⁵⁶ The style of the poem evokes the subject of obsessive thoughts; the repetition represents the involuntary return of haunting memories. The woman who is the reason for the speaker’s sorrow is a shadow of memory: ‘Her lips, her eyes, all day became to me / The shadow of a shadow utterly.’⁵⁷ Yet he is unable to avoid the resurgence of memory which comes to haunt him. The shadow cannot completely dissolve.

We can observe changes to the Decadent cruel woman here. Symons’s, Wilde’s and Swinburne’s shadowy intangible type is transformed to a ‘shadow of a shadow’. In Dowson’s verse she is reduced even further. The torment once ascribed to the woman herself is now traced back to the male speaker and his memories. As with Symons’s poems about female shadows haunting him in memory, Dowson’s speaker is left helplessly facing apparitions that are projections of his own desire. Dowson imagines situations in which the male lover appears truly vulnerable, unable to derive pleasure from pain, yet naturally he is still in control as the writer and creator of the fantasy ideal.

Pygmalion in reverse

⁵⁶ Dowson, ‘Spleen’, in *Verses*, p. 22.

⁵⁷ Dowson, ‘Spleen’, p. 22.

Dowson's 'Villanelle of His Lady's Treasures', from *Verses*, refers to the process of controlling and transforming the desired ideal into art.⁵⁸ The speaker narrates the process of creating the villanelle before the reader's eyes. He makes the poem out of a woman's attractive features: 'I took her dainty eyes, as well / As silken tendrils of her hair: / And so I made a Villanelle!'⁵⁹ The beautiful attributes of the woman or girl are artfully captured by the poet in his creation. The speaker who addresses an idealised representation of his desire is isolated in the process of creating art, like Pygmalion alone with his statue. Dowson's poem is reminiscent of the macabre process of creating an artwork from the hair and eyes of the beloved in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*. Like the Pygmalion-artist Raoule, Dowson's speaker is left with nothing but the artwork, which he can control but which is not the same as the living person. As Chris Snodgrass observes in his essay 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination' (1983), with regards to Dowson's prose fiction, aestheticism allows characters to affirm the pure, timeless perfection of the ideal. Dowson's artist-lovers

seek to embrace the ideal, but since the ideal's only access point to earthly realization seems to be man's desire of it, the actual qualities which Dowson's characters reflect when they do attempt to embrace the ideal are not Art's unity or harmony, but rather its coldness and isolated self-sufficiency. [...] Art is perfect and timelessly unchanging in its perfection, but also, in a sense, 'cold' and 'unfeeling'.⁶⁰

Here Snodgrass articulates the paradox faced by the artist. His observation could be applied to the work of Symons, who makes a similar assertion in 'The World as Ballet', referring to dissatisfaction with the 'statue which remains cold'.⁶¹ Coldness is a feature of the work of art, the statue which never really comes to life. In earlier Decadent versions of the cruel women, 'statues' are seemingly brought to life through the processes of projection and ventriloquisation. Dowson leaves his Pygmalion's statues cold and lifeless.

In a later essay Snodgrass revisits the theme of Dowson's attempts to transform ideals into *objets d'art*, arguing that the preservation of the ideal as an artwork creates a suspension of time and thereby allows the protection of the object. He considers that Dowson's obsession with innocence and purity are symbolically worked through in his

⁵⁸ First published in *Temple Bar* August 1893.

⁵⁹ Dowson, 'Villanelle Of His Lady's Treasures', in *Verses*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ Chris Snodgrass, 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 26 (1983), p. 167.

⁶¹ Symons, 'The World as Ballet', p. 390.

poems, dealt with by ‘killing’ the ideal female figure into a timeless work of art. Snodgrass puts forward the notion that

Almost invariably, Dowson’s attempts to preserve purity and ‘renounce’ timebound Schopenhauerean corruption take the form of the *fin-de-siècle*’s favourite vehicle for suspending time – the transformation of life into art, specifically, turning beloveds into the equivalent of chaste and time-sequestered objects of art.⁶²

Dowson’s ideal female figures are frozen, and therefore timeless, like the cold beauty of ‘Flos Lunae’. However, timelessness is also problematical, and Dowson acknowledges this. He idolises innocence and childhood, and he does fear the passing of time, the changing from an ideal state to a mature one. But he also acknowledges that it is inescapable. Snodgrass asserts that Dowson’s protagonists ‘seek to forestall the potentially destructive evolution of their relationships by transforming them into timeless tableaux of an idealized past or eternal present, set free and perpetually sequestered from human action (and carnal corruption) by an aestheticizing act of the mind.’⁶³ Similarly, Thornton suggests that Dowson would have been happier to find an artwork, rather than a living girl, to worship and adore: ‘for Dowson the artificial is the approach to the ideal [...] he almost did wish for an ideal to worship as un-real as an image in a milliner’s window, or a statue in a museum.’⁶⁴ The artwork may be an approach to the ideal, but it is ultimately a poor substitute. Dowson’s speakers are not ‘set free’, but trapped in time, either fearing an inevitable future of maturity and death, as in ‘Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad’, or looking back on an ideal past which is no longer accessible. Dowson is aware of the limitations of the ideal; the innocent girl child must either die or be ruined – or both, as occurs in ‘Yvonne of Brittany’. Both of these poems from *Verses* will be discussed in detail further on. Dowson’s poetic representations of girls imagine them either as subject to time or victims of it. The alternative, freezing the beloved ideal into a perfect state, leaves the lover in an equally isolated position, for example speaking to a dead girl or faced with a cold unresponsive artwork.

⁶² Chris Snodgrass, ‘Aesthetic Memory’s Cul-de-sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 35 (1992), p. 30.

⁶³ Snodgrass, ‘Aesthetic Memory’s Cul-de-sac’, p. 37.

⁶⁴ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 84. Thornton draws the idea of worshipping a milliner’s dummy rather than a real person to Yeats’s account of his own unrequited love, in *Autobiographies*, in which he claims of his unresponsive beloved, ‘my devotion might as well have been offered to an image in a milliner’s window, or to a statue in a museum’. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 399.

The cold beauty is like Pygmalion's statue in its original form. Dowson uses the myth in order to demonstrate the impossibility of achieving union with his ideal. In 'Epigram', one of the final poems in *Verses*, the speaker casts himself as a reverse Pygmalion, whose living beloved is turned into a statue. He turns the Decadent masochistic strategy back on itself. He also diminishes the power of the artist, whose representation of his ideal woman does not come to life, indeed, it causes the living original to die for him. The poem can be read in two ways: as a fantastical transformation of a real woman to stone, or as a metaphor for the beloved turning cold and rejecting him:

Because I am idolatrous and have besought,
 With grievous supplication and consuming prayer,
 The admirable image that my dreams have wrought
 Out of her swan's neck and her dark, abundant hair:
 The jealous gods, who brook no worship save their own,
 Turned my live idol marble and her heart to stone.⁶⁵

The living woman (or girl) is the inspiration for the speaker's fantasy, the 'admirable image that my dreams have wrought'. He has been adopting a masochistic stance of supplication before the image of the woman, which he has created from his own dreams, but which is as inaccessible as a marble statue.

The ideal image is not always hard and cold, like a statue, but can be shadowy and ethereal. The ultimate inaccessible ideal can be found in Dowson's 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae'.⁶⁶ This poem was composed in February 1891 and subsequently revised several times.⁶⁷ It was published in volume VI of *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* in the same year, in the *Second Book of the Rhymers' Club* in 1894, and in *Verses*. The Cynara poem is a premature elegy for the Decadent movement, reflecting the exhausted mood of the end of the century, and the impossibility of finding happiness through pleasure-seeking excess. Decadence is, of course, a self-conscious tradition that celebrates the very pain and languor which Dowson's speaker suffers from in the Cynara poem. However this poem lacks the celebratory aspect. The word 'desolate' is repeated at least once in every stanza, establishing the poem as a lament.

⁶⁵ Dowson, 'Epigram', in *Verses*, p. 54.

⁶⁶ The title is a quote from Horace, Ode IV.I, 'I'm not the man I was / in good Cynara's reign'. Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes*, trans. David West, p. 112, lines 3-4.

⁶⁷ On 7 February 1891 Dowson sent a draft of the poem in a letter to Arthur Moore. See *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 134-5.

In Holbrook Jackson's opinion, 'The whole attitude of the decadence is contained in Dowson's best known poem: "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" [...] In that poem we have a sort of parable of the decadent soul. Cynara is a symbol of the unattained and perhaps unattainable joy and peace which is the eternal dream of man.'⁶⁸ However, the speaker's attitude *towards* decadence is at odds with the perversity, artificiality, egoism and curiosity which Jackson elicits as one of the key characteristics of Decadent fiction: 'The chief characteristics of the decadence were (1) Perversity, (2) Artificiality, (3) Egoism and (4) Curiosity'.⁶⁹ Music, wine, dancing, feasting and sex are not celebrated by Dowson's speaker, but are lamented as inadequate distractions from his despair. Cynara is a symbol of an ideal, another example of a female figure imbued with the desires of her creator. Here the ideal is beyond Decadence; this is a problem that remains unacknowledged in criticism of Dowson which attempts to fit the poet to the definition.⁷⁰ In Adams's estimation,

'Cynara' was to become the defining masterpiece of the period and it is easy to see why. It is full of the iconography of decadence with the writer trading, like Swinburne, the 'lilies and languors of virtue / For the raptures and roses of vice'. It is full of the scent of love and wine and innocence and sin. It is the archetypal decadent poem because it is so obviously written from an age which took its pleasures with guilt.⁷¹

However, the speaker is not expressing guilt towards Cynara, but reproaching himself. He regrets the choice of roses over lilies; roses as symbols of Decadence, consistently associated with women, are now the less-desired flower. Even though he has 'Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng' he has not been able to 'put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind'.⁷² Dowson's speaker imagines Cynara as a projection of his own ideals, to which he has tried to remain faithful but has inevitably fallen short.

Cynara represents an ideal which cannot be bought as the prostitute can, nor attained by consuming mind-altering substances. Intoxication and the prostitute's purchased body are insufficient replacements for the intangible Cynara. The ideal is symbolised by the shadow which haunts the speaker while he desperately seeks to forget her:

⁶⁸ Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p. 59.

⁶⁹ Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p.58.

⁷⁰ Thornton cautions against trying to do this. As a cautionary example he cites Karl Caton Kopp's four characteristics of Decadence in his thesis *The Origin and Characteristics of 'Decadence' in British Literature of the 1890s* (Berkeley, 1963). Dowson's poems do not reveal the characteristics of literary Decadence according to Kopp's list. Thornton warns, 'We ought to fit the definition to the movement, not the movement to the definition.' Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 189.

⁷¹ Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 47.

⁷² Dowson, 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae', in *Verses*, p. 17.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
 But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
 Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
 And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
 Yea hungry for the lips of my desire:
 I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.⁷³

Unlike other Decadent writers who celebrate debauchery, who idealise the ‘bought red mouth’, Dowson exposes such hedonistic posturing as a distraction from the desire for an unattainable ideal.⁷⁴ Cynara is at odds with the debauchery of wine and music. She is not part of it, as are Symons’s dancing-girl lovers or Swinburne’s idol-like goddess figures. Dowson’s focus is directed beyond the ‘decadent’ lifestyle, interrogating the motivations for this behaviour. His speaker is haunted by an inescapable desire for something else, which Jackson identifies as joy and peace. The deliberate discontent of the Decadent – ennui, masochism, celebration of perversity – is not satisfying for the speaker. His ideal is given a female form and described in similes consistent with the cruel woman. Like the cruel woman she is distant and separate from the speaker, but also connected to him as a projection of his fantasy. She comes from within his mind, thus her distance is paradoxically described in terms of closeness. She is a shadow which falls between the lips of the speaker and his bought lover: ‘betwixt her lips and mine / There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed / Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine’.⁷⁵ Cynara’s breath on the speaker’s soul combines two intangible incorporeal things. Cynara is purely a fantasy, not even a memory as her shadowiness might imply, but an ideal which has been yearned for a long time. In this poem the sinful, perverse aspects of the speaker’s desires are disconnected from the figure of the woman. She is distant, even, from the masochistic scenario. She represents a pleasure that is distinct from pain, while the speaker is fixed at the level of pain with little or no relief to be found when he tries to escape.

The little girl: a silent symbol

Cynara is an ageless and formless female ideal, which is different from the young girl type that reappears in many of Dowson’s poems. Like Symons, Dowson is an introspective poet; he searches within himself and his experiences for poetic inspiration. Adelaide was the living silent symbol of his unfulfilled desire for the ideal of childhood.

⁷³ Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, p. 18.

⁷⁴ Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, p. 17.

⁷⁵ Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, p. 17.

But while Symons transforms Lydia into the cruel Bianca, Dowson's beloved girl is not referred to by name or even a pseudonym. Dowson dedicated *Verses* to Adelaide, 'you, who are my verses'.⁷⁶ This is a dedication which negates itself, 'I need not write your name for you at least to know that this and all my work is made for you [...] So for once you shall go indedicate, if not quite anonymous'.⁷⁷ If Adelaide is the verses then it follows that the verses are representations of Adelaide as Dowson sees her. Though he dedicates the work to Adelaide, he does so by returning to himself. It is even implied that she has not even read the verses: 'if you ever care to read them, you will understand'.⁷⁸ This self-effacing suggestion that Adelaide may not care to read his poems continues in the assertion that he is not fit to praise her at all: 'I need not to be reminded by my critics that I have no silver tongue such as were fit to praise you.'⁷⁹ However, Dowson's statement is disingenuous. By putting himself down he is lowering himself into the pseudo-lowly masochistic position, like the troubadour, singing the woman's praises but actually showing off his own skill in doing so.

Dowson's miserable unrequited affection for the young Adelaide is mentioned by Thornton and Caroline Dowson as the crucial influence behind the pessimism and longing in his poetry.⁸⁰ However, both Jad Adams and Christine Roth have acknowledged that Adelaide herself was not the sole catalyst for Dowson's despair, but a symbol of an ideal which predated his meeting with her. His appreciation for the young girl as a poetic ideal can be observed in his writing before his meeting and subsequent obsession with Adelaide, particularly in the early 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl' sequence. Adelaide as a silent symbol is the mute ventriloquist's dummy. She is portrayed in his letters and poems only according to Dowson's interpretation of her. She is the inspiration for the recurring image of the silent girl in his poems. The image we have of Adelaide is formed by Dowson's projections. Conal O'Riordan, a contemporary of Dowson, compares Adelaide to the fictional Peter Pan, observing that she

was at most the symbol of a symbol, imaging an ideal as preposterous as Barrie's Peter Pan. In his lucid moments Dowson knew that his union with her if consummated would destroy his notion of her. He might be content to woo her

⁷⁶ Dowson, 'In Preface: For Adelaide', in *Verses*, p. ix.

⁷⁷ Dowson, 'In Preface: For Adelaide', p. ix.

⁷⁸ Dowson, 'In Preface: For Adelaide', p. ix.

⁷⁹ Dowson, 'In Preface: For Adelaide', p. ix.

⁸⁰ For example, Thornton and Caroline Dowson argue that 'The relationship with Adelaide is central to Dowson, and his shaping of the books to comment on it seems deliberate.', R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson, 'Introduction' to *Collected Poems*, p. xxi.

for all eternity: to win her would be fatal. I believe that in his heart of hearts he knew this.⁸¹

As Jackson notes, Decadent ennui arises because the easy fulfilment of desire leads not to satisfaction but to a new desire for a different sensation.⁸² Dowson's fantasy of marriage to Adelaide never died because it was never fulfilled. Dowson returns compulsively to the ideal girl in his poems, where she appears dreamlike, intangible, inaccessible, just as he returned compulsively to 'Poland' to visit the girl who it was impossible for him to possess. First her age, then her refusal of his marriage proposal, were obstacles to Dowson obtaining the object of his desire. Even if he had been able to marry Adelaide it is likely that he would have become dissatisfied. Adelaide would have grown up into one of 'those very objectionable animals, women'.⁸³

Roth explores Adelaide, the ideal, as an embodiment of tension in terms of a more general Victorian attitude towards girlhood. She refers to Deborah Gorham's *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (1982), which outlines the nineteenth-century view of girls as either chaste and innocent or sexual and worldly. These opposites correspond to class and working status, with middle class girls envisaged as pure and in need of protection, and working girls sexualised.⁸⁴ Dowson's description of Adelaide possessing a 'double perversity' is used by Roth as evidence of the girl in Dowson's poetry representing both sides of the divide.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Conal O'Riordan, 'Bloomsbury and Beyond', in *Essays by Divers Hands: Transactions of the RSL of the UK*, vol. 24, London 1948. Lecture given 11 September 1946 [page number not given], quoted in Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 85.

⁸² 'To kill a desire, as you can, by satisfying it, is to create a new desire. The decadents always did that, with the result that they demanded of life not a repetition of old but opportunities for new experiences.' Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p. 59.

⁸³ From a letter from Dowson to Charles Sayle: 'the world is a bankrupt concern and life a play that ought to have been damned the first night. There are, as you say, still books, dogs and little girls of seven years old in it but unhappily, one begins to yawn over the books and the dogs die and, oh Sayle, Sayle – the little girls grow up, and become those very objectionable animals, women.', Ernest Dowson, letter to Charles Sayle, c. 1 October 1888., *New Letters of Ernest Dowson*, ed. by Desmond Flower (Andoversford, Gloucestershire, 1984), [page no. not given], quoted in Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Roth refers to William Stead's 'Maiden Tribune of Modern Babylon', an 1885 *Pall Mall Gazette* exposé on brothels and child prostitutes. Stead had to align working-class prostitutes with middle-class daughters in order to provoke sympathy and outrage. William Acton's 1870 study of prostitution argued there were natural inherited differences between classes and their levels of sexual promiscuity (ie. the lower classes possessed a degenerate sexuality). Roth, 'Ernest Dowson', p. 161.

⁸⁵ In fact both sides of this double perversity have negative connotations, and Dowson claims that he has seen something beneath them, which is giving him hope: 'I begin to think there is, really, beneath her double perversity of enfant gâtée and jeune fille coquette a solid foundation of affection.' Ernest Dowson, letter to Victor Plarr, c. 23 February 1892, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 275.

At the one end of the spectrum, the girl figures as a corruptible (and corrupting) agent of transgression and sexual vice. At the other, she possesses an invulnerable chastity that aligns her with domesticity and a sense of moral duty. Neither side is complete without the other, because if they are isolated, the ideal girl becomes distant and cold, and the ‘real’ or mundane girl becomes fallen, aesthetically flawed, and utterly forgettable.⁸⁶

Roth takes Adelaide’s social status as a marker of her difference from the ideal girl archetype in order to argue that critics are mistaken in assuming that Dowson’s relationship with Adelaide is the only framework against which to read Dowson’s poetry.

Dowson had fashioned his archetypal girl figure long before he met Adelaide, and his fictional dream-girls were, in fact, incompatible with his real-life girlfriend. The girls of his poems and stories are most often rural, spectral, and sheltered, while Adelaide was an urban, worldly, working girl.⁸⁷

Roth uses the terms ‘ethereal’ and ‘spectral’ as markers of the middle class girl according to Victorian ideals. She views Adelaide as a figure representing a working girl, in contrast to a pure girl. However, ethereality is a marker of the fantasy girl or woman. Adelaide herself, regardless of her social status, is a mysterious figure since she is a screen on to which Dowson projects the ‘spectral, sheltered’ ideal regardless of her background. She herself is immaterial in both senses of the word. Dowson saw more in Adelaide than her worldliness and working-class status. The girl in Dowson’s poems is an ideal girl, which Roth equates with distance and coldness. Rather than situating his speakers between the ideal and the worldly, Dowson tends towards the ‘distant and cold’ ideal, as poems such as ‘Flos Lunae’ demonstrate.

Adams also notes the necessity of distance between Dowson and Adelaide as the object of his affections: ‘She was easier to love from afar. She was cold and distant [...] He made her passionless acknowledgement of his suit almost a poetic virtue, incorporating her disdainful moods into a picture of haughty beauty in his verse’.⁸⁸ Because Dowson’s speakers in *Verses* frequently adopt positions of helplessness, a picture emerges of the beloved girl as a cold, unfeeling, haughty character. She reflects the helplessness of the spurned lover, who feels rejected and so forms an image of her as a cold idol. In ‘Vain Resolves’, a poem from *Verses*, the speaker begins with an affirmative statement,

⁸⁶ Roth, ‘Ernest Dowson’, p. 159.

⁸⁷ Roth, ‘Ernest Dowson’, p. 158.

⁸⁸ Adams quotes ‘Flos Lunae’ in support of his statement. Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 110.

‘There is an end of my desire’.⁸⁹ The ‘ashes of ancient fire’ of desire, he tells himself, ‘shall not be quickened’.⁹⁰ He spends the first two stanzas confirming that he will forget his love and find solace in being alone,

I shall forget her eyes, how cold they were;
 Forget her voice, how soft it was and low,
 With all my singing that she did not hear,
 And all my service that she did not know.⁹¹

However, his attempts to quench the fires of his desire are undone by one smile from the beloved:

And once she passed, and once she raised her eyes,
 And smiled for courtesy, and nothing said:
 And suddenly the old flame did uprise,
 And all my dead desire was quickened.
 Yea! as it hath been, it shall ever be,
 Most passionless, pure eyes!
 Which never shall grow soft, nor change, nor pity me.⁹²

Dowson’s speaker recognises the impossibility of trying to break away from the object of desire. She does not even speak, and yet the lover is filled with the burning flame of desire. This painful, unreciprocated love for a cold and disdainful woman resembles the Deleuzeian masochistic ideal, but the poem lacks the pleasure aspect of the pleasure/pain combination that comprises masochism. The poem is a desperate cry of pain; a benevolent and kind ideal (like Cynara) is longed for but will never be obtained. In ‘Vain Hope’, the companion poem to ‘Vain Resolves’, the speaker reflects on a comforting fantasy of prostrating himself before the woman he loves ‘So might she look on me with pitying eyes, / And lay calm hands of healing on my head’.⁹³ However, this is acknowledged as an impossible fantasy, so the hope that ‘Her kind, calm eyes, down drooping maidenly, / Shall change, grow soft’ is purely a dream. ‘I know these things are dreams / And may not be!’⁹⁴ These two poems comprise a double bind. Both hope and resolve are hopeless. The speaker cannot stop wishing for an impossible ideal, and cannot stay true to his resolve to stop loving the woman who will never be kind to him. There is no hope of happiness or satisfaction. He is helplessly drawn to the woman, and

⁸⁹ Dowson, ‘Vain Resolves’, in *Verses*, p. 29.

⁹⁰ Dowson, ‘Vain Resolves’, p. 29.

⁹¹ Dowson, ‘Vain Resolves’, p. 29.

⁹² Dowson, ‘Vain Resolves’, p. 29.

⁹³ Dowson, ‘Vain Hope’, in *Verses*, p. 28.

⁹⁴ Dowson, ‘Vain Hope’, p. 28.

presents her as cruel to exemplify the pain he feels in his position. No perverse pleasure is taken in the cruel ideal. It is *his* desire which is the problem, not her cruelty. Dowson again creates an image of a solitary self-tormenting masochist trapped within his own desire.

Distance and courtly love

The troubadour stance exemplifies the distance between the masochist and the object of his desire. It is evident in one of the first poems in *Verses*, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, which was first published in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* in October 1891.⁹⁵ The speaker adopts the troubadour’s position in the first stanza, as he presents himself to a silent anonymous beloved, ‘To lay down at your unobservant feet, / Is all the gift I bear.’⁹⁶ He lowers and debases himself by kissing the ground on which she has trodden, ‘I lay / My lips upon your trodden, daisied grass’.⁹⁷ The beloved woman is a typical cold, disdainful character according to the speaker, who laments his unacknowledged position, ‘I watch you pass and pass, / Serene and cold’.⁹⁸ However, just as he reverses the Pygmalion myth in ‘Epigram’, in this poem Dowson turns the courtly love convention back upon itself. The troubadour usually pours words upon the disdainful woman, but Dowson’s speaker promises silence instead. The poem opens with the line, ‘A gift of Silence, sweet!’⁹⁹

At first reading, the poem appears to conform to the courtly love-style monologue characteristic of Decadent poems about cruel women. The opening declaration could be a command addressed to the woman. However, it is in fact the speaker’s gift to his beloved. It is his silence, not hers, which begins the poem. This is of course a gift which is negated by the rest of the poem, as the speaker does not immediately silence himself. He does return to the vow of silence in the final stanza, ‘This one gift, you shall take: / Like ointment, on your unobservant feet, / My silence, for your sake.’¹⁰⁰ He makes a show of the generosity of his promise to silence himself. Having formed her into a cold and distant ideal, he concedes to her disdain and imagines himself in compliance with

⁹⁵ The word ‘Umbratilis’, meaning ‘unworldly’, is taken from Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*: ‘Had the Romans a word for *unworldly*? The beautiful word *umbratilis* perhaps comes nearest to it’. Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. by Michael Levey (1885; London: Penguin, 1985), p. 49.

⁹⁶ Dowson, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, in *Verses*, p. 7.

⁹⁷ Dowson, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, p. 7.

⁹⁸ Dowson, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, p. 7.

⁹⁹ Dowson, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Dowson, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, p. 7.

her desire not to be worshipped. The poem still conforms to the masochistic model of projection on to a woman who is perceived as cold, although the speaker's attitude of agony at unrequited love is more helpless than masochistic. He does not plead to be acknowledged, but resigns himself to his silent miserable fate.

The element of the courtly love convention which is part of the masochistic model is present in Dowson's poems addressed to young girls both dead and alive. Adams argues that the girl in Dowson's poems is an archetype: 'Dowson always made friends with little girls – and he idealized their features into an archetype.'¹⁰¹ Dowson was a part of the 'cult of little girls' at Oxford in the 1880s, in which it became fashionable for men to take little girls out and write verses to them. Adams notes that this trend for addressing young girls as idealised objects of affection is another version of courtly love. 'This was a form of courtly love, a perfect, adoring love with the object of one's affections being unable and not required to reciprocate. The girls were there to be adored.'¹⁰² The object of the courtly love address is a projection of the speaker's desires. In this case the little girls provided the screens for the men's projection of their desires. Like the idol figure projected by the masochist she is unattainable, since this would violate the purity and sexlessness that she represents. Adams suggests that this sexlessness is problematically juxtaposed with the sexual maturity of her adult male admirer.¹⁰³ While there is no reason to suspect that Dowson was actually sexually attracted to young girls or took part in any indecent activity with them, their presentation in his poetry is motivated by his awareness of their sexuality since it must be implicitly acknowledged as a feature missing from the childhood ideal.¹⁰⁴ Adams calls this a 'central contradiction' for Dowson: 'The adult passion combined with the unnatural yearning for innocence is a central contradiction in his nature'.¹⁰⁵ The irreconcilable adult desires and childhood innocence are a source of tension in Dowson's poems.

¹⁰¹ Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 8.

¹⁰² Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 14.

¹⁰³ See Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ In *Men In Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, a study of the obsession with girls in the Victorian era, Catherine Robson makes a brief reference to this problem in relation to Dowson. She explains that 'although the innocence of the little girl continues to be her defining and most beloved characteristic, this very quality is insistently sexualized by virtue of the fact that it is continually placed in relation to mature female sexuality'. Catherine Robson, *Men In Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 187.

¹⁰⁵ Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 29.

Roth explores these tensions and, like Adams, maintains that Adelaide was only the living symbol of Dowson's previously-held ideal of young girlhood. The 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl', composed during the poet's youth before meeting Adelaide, demonstrate his ideal girl. In this series of eight sonnets, Dowson constructs a courtly-love style address by a speaker to a silent girl. Roth associates the girl in these sonnets with Dowson's innocent ideal and with the cruel woman, by including a reference to a critical opinion of the girl as a *femme fatale*:

In these sonnets, Dowson lays out the framework for his later poetic themes and constructions of the ideal little girl – a framework that juxtaposes the girl's ethereality with a distinct corporeality. The eight sonnets (including an Epilogue) set up '*le thème de la femme enfant/ femme fatale ... elle allegorise la beauté et le mal, la cruauté et la souffrance, la pureté et la perversité*' ('the theme of the woman-child/ femme fatale' who 'allegorizes beauty and evil, cruelty and suffering, purity and perversity').¹⁰⁶

However, this reading of the girl as a *femme fatale* is inconsistent with her representation as she never moves beyond being an 'enfant'. Each is definitively titled 'Of a Little Girl'. It is possible that the child's maturity is referenced obliquely, as Roth reads the 'Epilogue' as referring to the speaker and girl's love having been consummated. Roth sees the lines 'vain things alone / Have driven our perverse and aimless band' as suggestive of sexual activity.¹⁰⁷ However, this phrasing occurs in the revised version of the poem as 'A Last Word' in *Decorations* (1899) but not in the earlier version, in which the corresponding lines read 'while overthrown / The veil of woe enwraps us where we stand'.¹⁰⁸ The girl is either a comfort in the face of the speaker's existential suffering, or, as the sequence progresses, a victim of a cruel world in which suffering is inevitable. The aspect in which she most resembles the cruel woman of the masochistic model is her existence as a silent ideal on to which the speaker's desires are projected, a state which Roth recognises in her critique.

In 'Sonnets' I and II the speaker describes being revitalised from despair by a child's love: 'One fresh oasis in the wilderness / Of this sad world whereunto thou shalt cling / As to salvation – a child's tender love'.¹⁰⁹ The theme of the love of a child offering salvation from despair is consistent throughout Dowson's poetry, although the despair

¹⁰⁶ Roth, 'Ernest Dowson', p. 164, quoting and translating Jean-Jacques Chardin, *Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) et la crise fin de siècle anglaise* (Paris: Editions Messene, 1995), p. 146.

¹⁰⁷ Dowson, 'A Last Word', in *Decorations*, p. 39

¹⁰⁸ Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl: VIII. Epilogue', in *Collected Poems*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl: I', in *Collected Poems*, p. 18.

becomes more pronounced in his later work. In ‘Sonnet III’ the girl’s name, which is never revealed in the poem, is a talisman which the speaker repeats to save himself from harm ‘My lips will frame it loath to let it go, / And kiss it quietly till I cease to grieve. / It is mine amulet’.¹¹⁰ Roth acknowledges that the girl is a fantasy for the speaker. ‘The girl’s name – now both an “amulet” and a “charm” – unlocks mysterious fantasies for the poet because of its association with the child. Metonymically, the girl becomes both fantasy and phantasm.’¹¹¹ She notes the ghostliness of the fantasy girl.

Roth makes a distinction between ethereality and corporeality, suggesting that the girl’s real corporeality does not match up with the fantasy girl, who is transcendent and therefore ethereal. Yet it is possible to call the girl’s corporeality into question. Rather than implying a separation between the ‘Little Girl’ of the sonnets and the fantasy ideal, Dowson in fact constructs the little girl *as* a fantasy. Her status as a fantasy reduces her to one-dimensionality, and this is observed by Roth: ‘while her ethereality makes her invulnerable, it also makes her one-dimensional.’¹¹² Roth infers an embodied girl, whose corporeality can be observed in the references to her body parts: hair, hands, eyes, face, mouth.¹¹³ This technique of anatomizing the fantasy girl into distinct parts can be observed in other instances of women in the Decadent writing of Swinburne, Wilde, and Symons. The fragmentary parts contribute to the girl’s ethereality. The intangible ideal girl is another version of the cruel woman, which exists as a projection of her creator’s desires and self-perception.¹¹⁴ Decadent writers attempt to bring the fantasy to life, and present the illusion of a vital and cruel woman by referring to parts of her body. But the ethereality gives away her status as a one-dimensional fantasy conjured up by the poet.

The dead girl

There is no vitality in the anatomized girl, or in the dead girl. Dowson’s distant and cold dead girls contrast with the ‘haughty beauty’ Adams believes Dowson uses to represent

¹¹⁰ Dowson, ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl: III’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 20.

¹¹¹ Roth, ‘Ernest Dowson’, p. 165.

¹¹² Roth, ‘Ernest Dowson’, p. 165.

¹¹³ ‘The girl’s hands, eyes, face, hair, and mouth are meticulously revisited throughout the sonnets. In these descriptions the tenderness, purity, sweetness, and mysticism that make the child ethereal are revealed explicitly and ironically in her very corporeality.’ Roth, ‘Ernest Dowson’, p. 166.

¹¹⁴ Bristow, referring to Maud Ellmann’s comments on synecdoche in Eliot, remarks upon such dismembering of the female body reflects the crisis of masculinity in Decadence. The fractured woman reflects the male Decadent poet’s damaged and fragmented vision of himself: ‘a “disembodied” Decadence where literary masculinity was increasingly ill-at-ease with itself.’ Bristow, ‘Sterile Ecstasies’, p. 82.

Adelaide's disdain. Dowson's girls are less *femme-fatale*-like than his description suggests. For example, 'Yvonne of Brittany', from *Verses*, considers the paradox of sexual desire for the chaste innocent girl. The speaker in this poem addresses Yvonne, entreating her to remember their springtime tryst a year ago. The speaker reminisces fondly about her fragile youth. Her delicate heart is likened to a dove: 'beating, / Like a fluttered, frightened dove.'¹¹⁵ Spring turns to 'the fullness of midsummer' at the point that she surrenders her innocence, symbolically maturing. Her shyness is overcome: 'Oh, brave was your surrender, / Though shy the words you said.'¹¹⁶ The final stanza returns to the speaker's present, no longer a reminiscence. It is set in darkness, 'It is grown too dark to stray'.¹¹⁷ The natural cycle ends in darkness and the death of the girl, who has served her purpose. The address to Yvonne is revealed to be an address to a corpse, 'There is dew on your grave grass, Yvonne!'¹¹⁸ Time has passed and her innocence has been corrupted, and death is the inevitable end. Roth links this to the destruction of the ideal which the girl represented. The desired ideal is longed for but both desire and the ideal are destroyed in the fulfilment. She argues,

as soon as the girl 'sheds' her apple blossoms and 'surrenders,' she becomes tangible and sexualized, destroying the tension between innocence and corruption that had previously sustained the orchard scene. Predictably, after this symbolic consummation/conquest, Yvonne becomes literally and figuratively lifeless to the speaker [...].¹¹⁹

Dowson reverses the trope of calling women into being through projection, as Symonds does, for example, in 'Stella Maris' in which his speaker's memory of a woman is presented as a ghostly figure emerging from the sea to visit him. In 'Yvonne', Dowson's speaker withholds until the final stanza the revelation that the girl (he is supposedly addressing) is dead. The projected fantasy girl remains a fantasy since there is no real subject being addressed. Moreover, the fantasy itself is doomed, as the memory will not be a lasting one: 'No, you never remember, Yvonne! / And I shall soon forget.'¹²⁰ Yvonne cannot remember, since she is dead, and the speaker will forget her soon.¹²¹ The once-desired delicate girl will fade from memory. The image of the girl,

¹¹⁵ Dowson, 'Yvonne of Brittany', in *Verses*, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ Dowson, 'Yvonne of Brittany', p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Dowson, 'Yvonne of Brittany', p. 12.

¹¹⁸ Dowson, 'Yvonne of Brittany', p. 12.

¹¹⁹ Roth, 'Ernest Dowson', p. 159.

¹²⁰ Dowson, 'Yvonne of Brittany', p. 12.

¹²¹ These lines echo Swinburne's 'Rococo', in which the speaker addresses a lover from whom he has separated. The last lines of every second stanza end with 'remember' and 'forget'. For example:

We have done with tears and treasons

like her chastity, is transient, and the fantasy constructed by the poem is undone by the prospect of being forgotten. The fulfilment of desire, this poem suggests, leads to the death of the desire, and therefore the death of the desired object.

Dowling notes the ‘family resemblance’ between ‘Yvonne of Brittany’ and Swinburne’s ‘In the Orchard’. She reads Swinburne’s and Dowson’s poems as having speakers who have killed their mistresses. She states that ‘Dowson’s lover, unlike Swinburne’s, does not actually murder his mistress, but he is responsible for her death (his seduction of her in the orchard brings on a fatal chill).’¹²² However, this is not directly stated; the cause of Yvonne’s death remains mysterious. Swinburne’s poem also makes no direct reference to murder. The speaker muses on his own impulse to die before daybreak can take his lover away from him:

Yea, with thy sweet lips, with thy sweet sword; yea,
Take life and all, for I will die, I say;
Love, I gave love, is life a better boon?
For sweet night’s sake I will not live till day;
Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.¹²³

Dowson’s poem considers the problem of the death of innocence, and does not, as Dowling suggests, portray ‘the bravado of a criminal speaker’.¹²⁴ The fantasy girl in this poem is metaphorically killed by Dowson because she is no longer required. Her purpose has been served as the speaker’s desire was fulfilled. However, the dead girls in Dowson’s other poems have a different significance; they are unreachable ideals. They represent the ‘paradox’ Roth observes, and exist either to represent the ruin caused by attaining the object of desire, or the impossibility of doing so, in which case the dead girl is frozen like Pygmalion’s statue in the ideal pure state, but impossible to reach in this state. The tension between innocence and corruption is one which cannot be

And love for treason’s sake;
Room for the swift new seasons,
The years that burn and break,
Dismantle and dismember
Men’s days and dreams, Juliette;
For love may not remember,
But time will not forget.

A. C. Swinburne, ‘Rococo’, in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 94, lines 57-64. Incidentally, the final two lines of the alternating stanzas end with ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’. Swinburne unites opposites in this poem in a masochistic fashion, creating paradoxical pairings out of a ‘decadent dilemma’.

¹²² Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 213.

¹²³ A. C. Swinburne, ‘In the Orchard’, in *Poems and Ballads*, p. 84, lines 41-5.

¹²⁴ Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, p. 213.

sustained. The paradox cannot actually be embodied. To maintain innocence the girl has to be symbolically killed to remain in a position of purity and stop time acting on her.

‘You would have understood me, had you waited’ is another of Dowson’s early poems which was published later in *Verses*.¹²⁵ This address to a dead beloved combines the inaccessibility of the cruel woman with the idealised image of the corpse as an object for desires to be projected on to. Dowson uses Paul Verlaine’s words as an epigraph, ‘*Ah, dans ces mornes séjours / Les jamais sont les toujours.*’ (‘In these gloomy sojourns / Nevers are evermores.’)¹²⁶ The paradox is fitting for this poem. The speaker will never be united with his lover, but his fantasy of her being his can exist forever. He claims ownership of the woman now that she is dead. As she is therefore incapable of rejecting him, her inanimate state allows the speaker to feel that he has a greater claim to the woman than he did when she was living:

I would not waken you: nay! this is fitter;
 Death and the darkness give you unto me;
 Here we who loved so, were so cold and bitter,
 Hardly can disagree.¹²⁷

This ‘reverse Pygmalion’ finds the dead and cold woman more suitable than the living version. Her death gives her to him; he can finally take control over her without having his projected desire rejected. He can also reclaim her from the other man she had chosen to love, ‘I could have loved you, dear! as well as he’.¹²⁸ He imagines that they could have been lovers if they had been patient, he suggests they would have been able to move beyond their arguments, in which ‘all the words we ever spake were bitter’.¹²⁹ Still, death is what saves her now from reproach. She cannot act in a fashion he disapproves of, and cannot talk back to him. She is the ultimate silent auditor. The earth covering her body symbolically obliterates the romantic strife of the past. The speaker rhetorically asks ‘Shall I reproach you dead? / Nay, let this earth, your portion, likewise cover / All the old anger, setting us apart’.¹³⁰ In her lifetime they were set apart by anger, but her death allows a reunion in the speaker’s mind. The woman who was ‘fated

¹²⁵ From the Flower notebook, dated Sept. 13th, 1891, first printed in the *Second Book of the Rhymers’ Club* 1894. See *Collected Poems*, pp. 234-5.

¹²⁶ The Verlaine quote is from lines 11-12 of ‘Réversibilités’ from *Parralèlement* (1889). Translation in notes by R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson to *Collected Poems*, p. 235.

¹²⁷ Dowson, ‘You would have understood me, had you waited’, in *Verses*, p. 26.

¹²⁸ Dowson, ‘You would have understood me, had you waited’, p. 25.

¹²⁹ Dowson, ‘You would have understood me, had you waited’, p. 25.

¹³⁰ Dowson, ‘You would have understood me, had you waited’, p. 25.

/ Always to disagree' with the speaker, in a phrase which is repeated twice in the poem, is no longer able to disagree with him in death.¹³¹ The poem closes with the speaker imagining a truce between them – they 'Hardly can disagree' because she can no longer speak, this is a perverse power he takes over her.¹³² The sinister dynamic of Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover' is again at work here; the dead beloved is under the control of her lover, who now speaks for her. In Dowson's poem, he also speaks to her, conjuring up her presence as a disembodied auditor.

The dead women in the above examples from *Verses* have died after transitioning from innocence to maturity. Rather than attempting to reconcile with the process of ageing as Dowson's speaker does in 'Ad Domnulam Suam', 'The Dead Child' from *Decorations* goes one step further and imagines death as a means of arresting this development, preserving the child in an ideal state of youth before the transition to adulthood can take place. The dead child will never be 'defiled' by ageing and experience:

Lie still, and be
For evermore a child!
Not grudgingly,
Whom life has not defiled,
I render thee.¹³³

Death is a recurring theme throughout Dowson's work. It represents both an inescapable fear and an escape. He is able to take comfort from the oblivion of death. We see an example of working through these fears in a poem from *Verses*, 'Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad'. Rather than celebrating the death of a lover, the speaker of this poem fantasises about his own death. In the speaker's view it would be an opportunity to preserve a perfect moment forever. In an alliterative plea addressed to the silent beloved, similar to Swinburne's 'Anactoria', the speaker wishes to

Reap death from thy live lips in one long kiss,
And look my last into thine eyes and rest:
What sweets had life to me sweeter than this
Swift dying on thy breast?¹³⁴

¹³¹ Dowson, 'You would have understood me, had you waited', p. 25, p. 26.

¹³² Dowson, 'You would have understood me, had you waited', p. 26.

¹³³ Dowson, 'The Dead Child', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, p. 4.

¹³⁴ Dowson, 'Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad', in *Verses*, p. 52.

Lionel Johnson parodies such alliteration in his poem 'A Decadent's Lyric'; the lines 'When she and I / Play on live limbs love's opera!' seem to echo the 'live lips' in Dowson's poem. Lionel Johnson, 'A Decadent's Lyric' (1897), in Desmarais and Baldick, *Decadence*, p. 312.

The beloved resembles the cruel woman type in that she is addressed, though told to be silent and sad. The first two stanzas begin with the commands, ‘Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad’ and ‘For Love’s sake, Dear, be silent!’¹³⁵ The speaker is unable to take pleasure in the moment, and he entreats his lover to be miserable and silent with him. He is unable to fully escape his fears of ageing and death; love and sex are inadequate defences against his inevitable decline. ‘Fear is upon me and the memory / Of what is all men’s share.’¹³⁶ He projects fear of the inevitable future, of ‘the old, extinguished fire / Of our divine, lost youth.’¹³⁷ The woman is part of the speaker’s fantasy of a fatal union ‘O red pomegranate of thy perfect mouth! / My lips’ life-fruitage, might I taste and die’.¹³⁸

Again, this poem has echoes of the desire to consume the beloved in Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria’. The vampire is one of the incarnations of the *femme fatale*, but Dowson’s woman is a reverse-vampire. Where the vampire is feared because she sucks the blood and drains the life of her victim often in the sexual act of a kiss, here the speaker adopts the vampiric pose, wishing to drain the woman in a kiss. But what he wants is not her life-blood, but his death. To preserve his youth and happiness he must die. Death would be the only defence against the passing of time. The alternative dream is an impossible fantasy: ‘that we shall lie, / Red mouth to mouth, entwined [...] Beyond the reach of time and chance and change, / And bitter life and death’.¹³⁹ In ‘Cease smiling...’, Dowson manipulates the image of the fatal woman into a relief from the agony of acknowledging one’s own mortality, rather than an embodiment of the fear.

Solitude and mortality

‘Beyond’, the epigraph to *Decorations*, was composed in 1889 and first published in *Temple Bar* as ‘A Roundel’ in September 1893.¹⁴⁰ The passing of time is likened to the passing of seasons, as the crop of ‘Love’s aftermath’ is ready for harvesting. The changing of seasons also represents the transitory nature of childhood in ‘Transition’, another address to a child from *Decorations*. In ‘Transition’, night and winter are

¹³⁵ Dowson, ‘Cease smiling, Dear!’, p. 51.

¹³⁶ Dowson, ‘Cease smiling, Dear!’, p. 51.

¹³⁷ Dowson, ‘Cease smiling, Dear!’, p. 51.

¹³⁸ Dowson, ‘Cease smiling, Dear!’, p. 51.

¹³⁹ Dowson, ‘Cease smiling, Dear!’, p. 52.

¹⁴⁰ Dowson first refers to this poem in a letter to Arthur Moore on 22 August 1889, in which he sends it as a ‘specimen’ of his recent experiments with the roundel form, ‘I betook me, weakly enough to the writing of rondeaux.’ Ernest Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 22 August 1889, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 101.

symbols for the death of love and happiness: ‘A little while to love thee, scarcely time / To love thee well enough; then time to part, / To fare through wintry fields alone’.¹⁴¹ The end of the day and the end of nature’s fertility are symbolic of the child growing up and away from him, towards her own sexual maturity. As she grows fertile, the speaker is left cold and alone in the dead fields of winter. The transitory nature of both childhood and the seasons are emphasised. In ‘Beyond’, Dowson makes a pessimistic analogy of the gathering in of ‘The saddest crop of all the crops that grow’ for the ending of a relationship.¹⁴² This analogy suggests that the crop has been growing throughout the relationship, and its ripening for harvest is inevitable. The couple must ‘part [...] reaping as we sow’.¹⁴³ They are now cold, in twilight. Endings of seasons and days cannot be forestalled, as time continues inevitably to pass. The clock cannot be put back, and the lovers cannot be reconciled: ‘the tears that start / Can not put back the dial’.¹⁴⁴ Though published in Dowson’s final collection it is actually the earliest use of the phrase ‘alone, apart’ by him. The speaker and his lover are separated and in solitude, ‘we must gather in, alone, apart / The saddest crop’.¹⁴⁵

The phrase ‘alone, apart’ recurs in another poem in *Decorations*, ‘Breton Afternoon’.¹⁴⁶ In contrast to the tormented speaker of ‘Flos Lunae’, whose soul is trapped in thrall to his beloved’s gaze, the speaker in this poem is in a peaceful place, presumably the Breton countryside. He experiences a spiritual calm surrounded by nature away from the city. His surroundings are imbued with a religious atmosphere, where he can hear ‘Only the faint breeze pass in a whisper like a prayer’.¹⁴⁷ The place seems unreal, a ‘dream-land’, in which the calm and clarity descend upon the speaker like a spell. In his trance he is at peace, ‘Out of the tumult of angry tongues, in a land alone, apart, / In a perfumed dream-land set betwixt the bounds of life and death’.¹⁴⁸ The speaker’s distance from the Babel of voices is beneficial to him. He is able to meditate on himself and his concerns. He is dismissive of his own desire for girls, trivialising his past despair now that he is at peace: ‘And the world fades into a dream and a spell is cast on me; / And what was all the strife about, for the myrtle or the rose, / And why have I wept

¹⁴¹ Dowson, ‘Transition’, p. 28.

¹⁴² Dowson, ‘Beyond’, in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, p. ix.

¹⁴³ Dowson, ‘Beyond’, p. ix.

¹⁴⁴ Dowson, ‘Beyond’, p. ix.

¹⁴⁵ Ernest Dowson, ‘Beyond’, p. ix.

¹⁴⁶ First published in the *Savoy*, July 1896.

¹⁴⁷ Dowson, ‘Breton Afternoon’, in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁸ Dowson, ‘Breton Afternoon’, p. 25.

for a white girl's paleness passing ivory!¹⁴⁹ The girl is the marmoreal statuesque pale archetype of the Decadent cruel woman, and here Dowson's speaker renounces her. While alone and apart from the company of others he can distance himself from the situation, rationally dismissing his own desires. But his peace is transient. Ironically since he has located himself in a place of spiritual fulfilment, he is disturbed by religion in the place where he has found his own peace. The sound of the angelus 'Softly steals my way from the village' and awakens him.¹⁵⁰ He must face reality once again. The poem ends as the speaker echoes Catholic prayer, '*Mother of God, O Misericord, look down in pity on us, / The weak and blind who stand in our light and wreak ourselves such ill.*'¹⁵¹ The poem finishes on an admission of the speaker's own complicity in his torment. The strife and tears he has shed over a desired girl are an anguish of his own making, as the masochist controls his own torture.

For Dowson religious devotion provides an escape from desire. The speaker of 'Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration', one of the first poems in *Verses*, aspires to the meek and simple existence of the devoted nuns. They do not have to face an internal battle with desire and passion, since they are sequestered away from the lives of others, 'Outside, the world is wild and passionate; / Man's weary laughter and his sick despair'.¹⁵² As in the Cynara poem, supposedly enjoyable pursuits are presented as empty and exhausting. The speaker is envious of their ability to acknowledge the futility of such transient unpleasurable pleasures. 'Yea! for our roses fade, the world is wild; / But there, beside the altar, there, is rest.'¹⁵³ They are protected from the exhausting life outside the convent which is doomed to decline.

Decorations contains a similar poem, 'Carthusians'. The speaker envies the peace of monks who exist in solitude – they are alone and apart. Dowson wrote to Moore on 3 April 1891 that he had spent a day at a Carthusian monastery, and he was enchanted by the silent solitude of its inhabitants.¹⁵⁴ The monks of 'Carthusians' are alone in a group, and described in a series of self-contradictory phrases. 'A cloistered company, they are

¹⁴⁹ Dowson, 'Breton Afternoon', p. 25. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁰ Dowson, 'Breton Afternoon', p. 26.

¹⁵¹ Dowson, 'Breton Afternoon', p. 26. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵² Dowson, 'Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration', in *Verses*, p. 2.

¹⁵³ Dowson, 'Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration', p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ See Dowson's letter to Arthur Moore, 3 April 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, p. 191. He composed the poem the following month. The manuscript in the Flower notebook is dated 27 May 91. *Collected Poems*, p. 254.

companionless', 'They are but come together for more loneliness'.¹⁵⁵ Their isolation is ultimately rewarding as they achieve transcendence above the tedium of secular existence:

Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail:
Pray for our heedlessness, O dwellers with the Christ!
Though the world fall apart, surely ye shall prevail.¹⁵⁶

Once again Dowson uses wine and roses as negative motifs. He reverses the convention of the rose as a symbol of beauty, emphasising instead its transience and inevitable decay. Those associated with Decadent roses are fated to failure and death, while the 'cloistered company' of monks achieves transcendence of mortal failures.

Religious solitude offers a peaceful escape from desire, and the only other escape, for Dowson, is the eternal sleep of death. The speakers in 'Cease smiling...' and 'The Dead Child' wish for death as an escape from time and desire. There is an increasing pessimism in Dowson's later volume, an overall sense of submitting to death-driven thoughts. As Thornton observes, 'Almost every poem in *Decorations* ends on a note of disillusion, reaching nothing, silence'.¹⁵⁷ The weary submission to oblivion is best exemplified by 'Dregs', another poem of exhaustion and surrender to the end of life. The speaker's best days are in the past, and there is no hope for anything more from life:

Ghosts go along with us until the end;
This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:
This is the end of all the songs man sings.¹⁵⁸

Lovers and friends are now ghostly memories which accompany the individual until death. Dowson paints a bleak picture of the curtain coming down upon the theatre of life. If Symons's picture of the Decadent life is 'like a music-hall', Dowson's is a sad spectacle.

Verses opens with a declaration that 'They are not long, the days of wine and roses'.¹⁵⁹ Wine and roses, in 'Cynara', are inadequate substitutes for a pure ideal of peace. The

¹⁵⁵ Dowson, 'Carthusians', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ Dowson, 'Carthusians', p. 7.

¹⁵⁷ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, p. 105.

¹⁵⁸ Dowson, 'Dregs', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, p. 23.

speaker cannot defend himself with beauty and intoxication. The rose fading beneath a sunset is the final image of 'Transition':

Short summer-time and then, my heart's desire,
The winter and the darkness: one by one
The roses fall, the pale roses expire
Beneath the slow decadence of the sun.¹⁶⁰

The choice of 'decadence' as the word to encapsulate decline and finality is significant. In connection with the roses dying it suggests the decline of the Decadent movement. The slowness of the decline evokes the languorous mood characteristic of the Decadent *fin de siècle*.

Dowson's poems acknowledge the eventual exhaustion of the pleasure-seeker. Roses fade and wither in Dowson's poetry along with the figure of the cruel woman. 'Transition' ends with the winter and darkness, symbolising the end of childhood which marks the beginning of her maturity. The end is the focal point; the woman is written out before she can even become a woman. Dowson's poetry signals the end of English Decadence, recording the failure of artifice and vice as defences against nature and eventual decay.

Unlike Symons's poems, in which the figure of the dancer is a metaphor for the poet's struggle to represent the fleeting sensations of erotic experience, Dowson's poems are preoccupied with the transience of girlhood. Symons attempts to open up new ways of presenting sensations and emotions in his writing. In Dowson's poetry the girl symbolises decline rather than renewal. His girls are ideals of innocence, purity and youth which cannot be reached by the adult man. Dowson's poems reveal his speakers to be alone, talking to themselves rather than creating the illusion of life through ventriloquised female figures. The masochistic model involves projecting one's desires outwards and creating the illusion of life in the image of the cruel woman. Dowson however is a 'reverse Pygmalion' poet, who symbolically kills the image of the young girl into art, like Browning. The girl is the unattainable statue which does not gratify its creator by appearing to come to life. His poetry reflects his own self-tormenting masochism and longing to escape from desire into solitude.

¹⁵⁹ Dowson, '*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*', p. iii.

¹⁶⁰ Dowson, 'Transition', p. 28.

CONCLUSION

A Last Word

Dowson's *diminuendo*

The death of the cruel woman and the end of English Decadence are signalled by Ernest Dowson in 'A Last Word', the final poem in *Decorations*. This is a revised form of the 'Epilogue' from the 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl' sequence. In this poem the speaker entreats a silent auditor (perhaps the girl as in the original sequence, perhaps the Decadent reader) to accompany him to the 'Hollow Lands' of death.¹ He opens with the command 'Let us go hence: the night is now at hand'.² Once again Dowson uses the imagery of nightfall to represent endings, and he does not consider the sunrise that would usually follow. All that is left is 'Despair and death; deep darkness o'er the land'.³ The speaker seems critical of the life lived as a Decadent:

[...] we cannot understand
 Laughter or tears, for we have only known
 Surpassing vanity: vain things alone
 Have driven our perverse and aimless band.⁴

Dowson frequently makes use of the double meaning of 'vain' to refer to arrogance and futility. Both senses of the term are self-defeating: the cruel woman is a narcissistic self reflection, and the pursuit of an impossible ideal in vain leads to disappointment. As in Dowson's other poems, death is a kind of liberation, a final freedom from the torment of love and desire. Death offers 'freedom to all from love and fear and lust. / Twine our torn hands! O pray the earth enfold / Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.'⁵ In 'Engendering Tragedy: Toward a Definition of 1890s Poetry' (2005) Jerusha McCormack observes that the voice of the speaker seems itself to fade out in an attitude of despair:

'A Last Word' plays out desire to its logical conclusion, which is the extinction of all desire. But even while its rhetoric mimes a series of stern injunctions, the voice

¹ Dowson, 'A Last Word', p. 39.

² Dowson, 'A Last Word', p. 39.

³ Dowson, 'A Last Word', p. 39.

⁴ Dowson, 'A Last Word', p. 39.

⁵ Dowson, 'A Last Word', p. 39.

seems to lapse from line to line, finally praying to be returned to ‘dust’ in music of the most exquisite despair.⁶

This ‘last word’ on Decadence embraces the end, seeks death as the ultimate release from the languor and ennui of a ‘perverse and aimless’ life. Dowson’s poetry is an apt diminuendo for the end of the century.

English Decadence reaches a peak and then declines after 1895, and the torment of desire is turned progressively inwards. We can observe this in Symons’s quest to represent his own moods and sensations in poetry, and Dowson’s verses addressed to unattainable young ideals that reflect his own anguish. The masochistic model in Decadent writing is based on a sense of ambivalence and division, but the divide between pleasure and pain widens towards the end of the nineteenth century. English Decadence becomes introspective and solipsistic, not celebrating the pleasure of pain, but abandoned to pain and ennui. It therefore comes to its natural conclusion with Dowson’s work, in which self-consciousness and introspection lead nowhere. The cruel woman is diminished to a girl, and she reflects the emptiness that the poet feels. The seemingly cruel and vital female figure we encounter in the work of Swinburne, which is attenuated by Wilde and Symons, is replaced with the figure of a dead girl. The masochistic model in Dowson’s work is recognisable only in terms of pure pain. The girl is a figure that embodies his projected anxieties. However, she is a lifeless figure, a Pygmalion’s statue that represents the poet’s agony at the impossibility of possessing the object of his desires.

What I hope to have shown in this thesis is that the cruel woman (or girl, as she appears in Dowson) of English Decadence is inconsistent with the seemingly powerful *femme fatale* stereotype with which she has been associated in previous studies. Through a theoretical consideration of the process of writing masochism, which I term the ‘masochistic model’, I have established that the cruel woman is an image formed according to the projection of male desire. I therefore view such fictional women as Pygmalion’s statues, although they are frequently imagined to be more ghostly and incorporeal than cold and marmoreal. Heather Braun believes this change can be traced back to Baudelaire’s conception of

⁶ Jerusha McCormack, ‘Engendering Tragedy: Toward a Definition of 1890s Poetry’, in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 57.

women as idols whose power and status is derived from their aesthetic appearance and the adornment of their bodies. She argues that there is ‘a significant change in the figure of the Decadent femme fatale: once stripped of her ornament and her power to beguile men, this overdone figure is forced to confront an unadorned reflection that is both grotesque and powerless in its lack of “magic” and mystery.’⁷ This thesis has examined this change in the Decadent cruel woman more fully, while establishing a parallel discourse about masochism and the dynamics of control in which the female tormentor is exposed as a projection of her creator’s desires. In Swinburne’s poetry we can observe traces of idol-worship, but by the mid-nineteenth century Wilde envisages his cruel woman Salome as a natural and threatening figure. She is unadorned and powerless, and she exists in the text only as she is perceived by the male characters surrounding her. In Symons’s poetry his dancer figures are projections of his own poetic consciousness. In Dowson’s poems the cruel woman becomes a young girl, idolised precisely for not being a woman. She is also powerless. Rather than being placed symbolically on a pedestal the girl is often lowered to the ground as a corpse.

There is, therefore, a spectrum of cruelty in the figure of the cruel woman which the term ‘*femme fatale*’ cannot adequately represent. The fictional women who have been grouped under this label are in fact different and changing. They are pale roses – representative of beauty and female association with the natural world – which finally expire ‘beneath the slow decadence of the sun’ in Dowson’s poetry. The cruel woman in English Decadence is emblematic of the life cycle in reverse. She returns to lifelessness from the seemingly animated statue figure in Swinburne, to the fatalised yet ghostly dancer in Wilde and Symons, to the dead girl in Dowson. The cruel woman fades out of Decadence, and we can trace this through her increasing incorporeality.

The cruel woman as idol, the white, cold woman, and the dead girl, are all variations of female images formed to male desires, like Pygmalion’s statue. These images of cruel female sexuality are created according to the masochistic process of forming a tormentor that appears to be independent of the suffering subject. However, because the cruel woman in these Decadent fictions is a projected fantasy, she does not have a bodily form. The

⁷ Braun, *Rise and Fall*, p. 110.

different writers I have examined represent this problem in different ways. The female idol or muse figure in Swinburne's poetry appears to be a statue but is in fact a phantasmal figure animated through ventriloquism. The anatomized female body suggests the same physicality as a statue but in actuality it renders the female image intangible, while the corpse in Dowson's poetry is an immobile, inaccessible figure. The coldness and ultimate lifelessness of these images is what reconnects them to the myth of Pygmalion's statue of his fantasy woman. Other images of cruel women, such as the shadow, the reflection and the ghost, are less evocative of actual statues. These types exemplify the fantasy element of the scenario.

The idol(ised) statue

The whiteness of the cruel woman in English Decadence is comparable to the ivory surface of Pygmalion's statue, and this cold and distant female ideal resembles the Lady of Medieval courtly love poetry before whom the speaker prostrates himself. Slovenian Žižek and Jacques Lacan have acknowledged that this Lady is an insubstantial projection of male desire. However, the technique of addressing a fantasy female image creates the illusion that she exists. This technique can be traced back to Browning's dramatic monologue poems. Catherine Maxwell compares the female images in these poems to Pygmalion's idealised female image. Browning's women reflect the insecurities of the poems' male speakers, who kill women into art in an attempt to control them.⁸ In order to (re)animate them, they must speak for them. In Swinburne's poetry his speakers celebrate cruel and dominating women, just as masochists direct their torment and take pleasure in it. Swinburne's poetic monologues are addressed to silent auditors who are reminiscent of Pygmalion's statue. His speakers adopt poses of subjection and genuflection before female figures which they conjure up as reflections of the pleasurable torment of sexual desire. As Chris Snodgrass observes, 'As devouring as [Swinburne's] *femmes fatales* often seem, they are fundamentally passive.'⁹ Dolores, for example, is a cold and immobile passive figure, a statue in the form of a blasphemous altarpiece. As Jerry Palmer points out, she is an 'algolagnic phantasm'.¹⁰

⁸ Maxwell, *Female Sublime*, p. 153.

⁹ Snodgrass, 'Swinburne's Circle of Desire', p. 73.

¹⁰ Palmer, 'Fierce Midnights', p. 101.

Dolores is an image of the Virgin Mary, 'Our Lady of Seven Sorrows'. This recalls the similar invocation of the virgin mother in Baudelaire's 'To a Madonna' ('*A une Madone*'). In this poem the speaker addresses a statue of the Madonna, imagining that he can adorn it with his own sorrows and desire:

I'll cut your Cloak in the barbaric mode,
Lined with Distrust, a heavy, stiff abode
Emprisoning those charms I hold so dear;
Brocaded not of Pearls, but of my Tears!
My trembling Lust will do me for your Gown,
Surging Desire that rises or sinks down.¹¹

Baudelaire takes the fantasy further than even Dowson does in his addresses to dead girls. Baudelaire's speaker imagines piercing its heart with daggers formed from the seven deadly sins. He says he will 'plant them all within your panting Heart, / Within your sobbing Heart, your streaming Heart!'¹² In *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (2003), Lisa Downing analyses this poem, observing that the speaker first fantasises a statue then symbolically kills it. She speaks of the statue in the same way that I discuss the cruel woman figure, as a figure animated in the poet's mind. She observes, 'In '*A une Madone*', a fantasized religious icon, a statue of Mary, is animated by the poetic imagination and finally killed by seven knives, representing the seven sins.'¹³ It is Downing's view that Baudelaire enacts his death drives through this necrophiliac fantasy. She states, 'the woman's identity is borrowed to allow the game to be played: the poet is doing to her (the part of him that is split off as an other) what he cannot do to himself.'¹⁴ The female image is a fantasy that represents the poet's own self. In the English Decadent writing I have examined we do not encounter the same sadistic death drives, but frustration at the inaccessibility of the desired object. Rather than creating a statue in order to enact a murder fantasy that would be dangerous to achieve in real life, the image of the statue is used to show how unreachable the object of desire really is. Even in Dowson's poetry there is no desire to actually copulate with a corpse. The dead body is not desirable as an object, but it is figured as an object because it is an unattainable fantasy.

¹¹ Baudelaire, 'To a Madonna', in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 119.

¹² Baudelaire, 'To a Madonna', p. 121.

¹³ Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 78.

¹⁴ Downing, *Desiring the Dead*, p. 85.

The shadow and the reflection

Swinburne's speakers are alone, addressing phantasmal images of their own desire. The process of calling a female figure into being through speech is evident in Wilde's *Salome*. Braun compares her with other mute and immobile Decadent women, and suggests that Salome is an ideal counterpart to them, as part of the fading out of the Decadent cruel woman in the late-nineteenth century. Braun argues that

The figure of Salomé complements Decadent images of languid, mute female bodies, unable to move or speak, sensual forms that anticipate future femmes fatales more compelling than the passive-aggressive Salomé. Their sensual, immobile forms anticipate a moment of despair and decay that demands their replacement with new desires, ideals and motivations.¹⁵

Braun recognises the change that I have focused on in this thesis. In her suggestion that twentieth-century *femmes fatales* are replacements for the 'languid' Decadent cruel woman who is emblematic of 'despair and decay', she illustrates the problem of using the term '*femme fatale*'. If it can be replaced or 'overwritten' with a new type, it diminishes the value of the term. It becomes too vague.

Wilde's Salome is a figure which has endured as a *femme fatale* in later reworkings of his version of the popular myth. Petra Dierkes-Thrun imagines her to be an assertive, independent *femme fatale*.¹⁶ However, revisiting the text of the play we find that she is in fact an elusive and disembodied figure. Wilde diminishes the power and sex appeal of the typical *femme fatale* by diminishing the power of her body. She is anatomized by the male characters in their descriptions of her body parts, which are delicate and natural. Her power is also transposed on to the moon, which is characterised as active and fatal by the characters' dialogue. The disembodied Salome reflects Wilde's different attitude to the typical Decadent masochistic ambivalence. Pleasure and pain are mutually exclusive in *Salome*. Wilde does not play by the rules of the masochistic 'game', and Salome is an atypical cruel woman. She is, like the character of Sybil Vane in *Dorian Gray*, a screen for male desire who is only attractive when embodying feminine artifice, and whose

¹⁵ Braun, *Rise and Fall*, p. 122.

¹⁶ Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, pp. 35-6.

naturalness is her undoing. In *Salome*, all the characters are isolated and driven by their own solipsistic passions. Salome's own desire for Iokanaan leads her to become a 'reverse-Pygmalion'. She kills the living object she desires in order to possess it, but is then dissatisfied by its unresponsive silence. She thus finds herself in a similar position to the speaker of Swinburne's 'Dolores', addressing a lifeless object and imagining the physical torments it has inflicted upon her when in fact the torment is that of her own desire.

The masochist's role in creating their own tormentor is exemplified in Symons's poetry, in which the dancer reflects the poet's image back to him. The dancer represents the poet's divided self. It is a mirror on to which his speakers project sexual desire and artistic self-image. Cruel women in Symons's poetry reflect either his conception of himself as an artist, or his experience of erotic desire. As Jan B. Gordon observes, Symons's speakers are distanced by time, memory, or the physical space between spectator and dancer in the music hall, from their idealised selves or the experience they attempt to capture.¹⁷ In Symons's Decadent poems from *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* the desire to unite the aesthetic impression of the dance from an objective position competes with sexual desire for the dancer. The dancers as poetic images are phantoms animated by the poet's fantasy. They are thus variations on Pygmalion's statue because they are animated by their creator, yet frustratingly they exist only in his own mind. In Symons's more personal poems in which speakers recall images of past lovers they often adopt the same masochistic model of a sexualised cruel mistress who is more like a cold statue. For example, Bianca is pale and morbid, a rigid and anatomized figure. She therefore remains as inaccessible as Pygmalion's statue in its lifeless marble form. As Joseph Bristow suggests, Bianca's body eludes both the speaker and the reader.¹⁸ As dancers, women are described in parts, as flashes of costume and make-up, 'wigs and tights' that flicker in and out of view. As lovers, they fade into ghostly beings which return to haunt the speaker but which he cannot capture. Symons's speakers are often alone with the ghostly recollection of a past conquest, as in 'Stella Maris'.

The corpse

¹⁷ Gordon, 'Danse Macabre', p. 436.

¹⁸ Bristow, 'Sterile Ecstasies', p. 78.

Dowson's women can be similarly ethereal, as in the 'Cynara poem', a premature elegy for Decadence. Cynara is described like the typical Decadent cruel woman: pale and ghostly. However, she is not a Decadent masochistic projection. She is the ideal that is sought as an escape from the empty hedonism of bodily sensations. In Dowson's poetry the fantasy Pygmalion's statue is turned back into a statue again, either literally or symbolically in the figure of the cold dead girl. The impermanence of the state of girlhood is a source of torment for Dowson, a torment which is endured but not masochistically enjoyed. The ideal can only be captured if the beloved is fixed in an inaccessible artistic image, as in the reverse-Pygmalion poem 'Epigram', or symbolically killed to prevent her from ageing. For Dowson the divided self is too much to bear. Desire for the ideal young girl leads only to pain, for which the Decadent lifestyle is an inadequate remedy. Girls remain statues; cold and unresponsive. They are not elevated to the position of the tormenting cruel woman, but diminished and belittled. As reflections of the poet they represent a defeated and exhausted man who struggles to aestheticise his own suffering. R. K. R. Thornton considers Dowson a typical Decadent, and attributes this to the sense of division in his poetry:

The musicality of his verse, the flavour of sensationalist sex (largely the contribution of his most famous poem), the successful translation and assimilation of contemporary French poetry, the development of the 1880s' interest in complex form into a more subtle lyricism, the self-conscious artificiality of language and inspiration, the wistful depiction of a sterile love and a fruitless existence, all these characteristics are modified by the fundamental sense of division. That division, not only the biographical truth, but both the subject and the style, is the Decadent Dilemma.¹⁹

The musicality of Dowson's poetry is evoked, although Thornton's analysis of Dowson's poetry as 'wistful' and 'sensationalist' is perhaps downplaying the sheer defeatism of the poems. Instead of the ambivalence of the Decadent pulled in two directions, Dowson is unable to escape his pessimism and languor. The speakers in Dowson's poems address fantasies of their own desire which are acknowledged to be impossible ideals. The little girl, frozen in time, or dead, is unreachable. His speakers commonly long for a life of religious solitude, or death, as the ultimate release from the torment of desire.

Statues and automatons

¹⁹ Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, pp. 106-7.

Further research on Decadent images of cruel women could focus on agalmatophilic statue-worship. For example, in a twist on the Pygmalion story, in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve* (*L'Ève Future*, 1886), a female body is replaced by an automaton.²⁰ The android Hadaly is fashioned by a fictional Thomas Edison after his friend Lord Ewald's lover Alicia who herself is the image of 'the eternal statue', Venus de Milo.²¹ Alicia's personality is repulsive to Ewald, but she is so physically perfect that he cannot bear to leave her. He tells Edison

My passion, which began as a craze for the figure, the voice, the perfume, and the EXTERIOR charm of this woman, has become absolutely platonic. Her moral being has forever frozen my senses: from now on they are merely remote. To think of her as mistress would *revolt* me nowadays. I am attached to her by nothing more than a kind of painful admiration. What I would really like would be to see Miss Alicia dead, if death didn't result in the effacing of all human features. In a word, the presence of her form, even as an illusion, would satisfy my stunned indifference, since nothing can render this woman worthy of love.²²

Hustvedt compares the treatment of women in the novel to the treatment of hysterics by Charcot. He would envision the hysteric in terms of body parts and poses, with photographs replacing the real woman and providing supposed evidence of hysteria. Hustvedt acknowledges the importance of the artificial woman as a surface for the projection of male fantasy:

Artifice, not nature, opens a path to the ideal. Once the natural woman, who is seen as an obstacle to this appropriation, is replaced by her artificial simulacrum, she can be animated by male fantasy. [...] it is in *The Future Eve*, a fiction made for this fiction, that the anatomy of an artificial hysteric becomes fully articulated and exposed for what it is: an empty corpse filled with the dreams of men.²³

²⁰ Pulham has examined the allure of artificial bodies in *The Future Eve* and in real-life examples of 'living dolls' as fetish objects. See 'The Eroticism of Artificial Flesh in Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *L'Ève Future*', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 7 (2008), pp. 1-22.

²¹ She exclaims 'Look, it's ME!' when taken to see the statue at the Louvre. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *The Future Eve* (*L'Ève future*) trans. by Robert Martin Adams in Hustvedt (ed.) *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Zone, 1998), p. 569.

²² Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *The Future Eve* (*L'Ève future*) trans. by Robert Martin Adams in Hustvedt (ed.) *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Zone, 1998), pp. 569-70.

²³ Asti Hustvedt, 'Science Fictions: The Future Eves of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Jean-Martin Charcot' in Hustvedt (ed.) *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Zone, 1998), p. 514

The statue version of Alicia is made up of copies of her body parts, and is a surface on to which Ewald can project his fantasy of an ideal lover.

In *The Future Eve* and in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, troublesome beloved people are turned into statues the better to control them. The Pygmalion model is actually reversed: the beloved is killed rather than brought to life as in the original myth. English Decadent writers use similar strategies, but instead of writing about literal artificial figures, they invoke women as Pygmalion's statues through imagery of whiteness, coldness, and death. In English Decadent writing we encounter more ambivalence about the statue form. It is not quite the ideal it promises to be. The problem is that women are either alive and natural (and therefore problematic) or cold, artificial, and unreachable. In Decadent writing the cruel woman as artificial creation appears to be vital and alive, but is actually cold and unreachable. The female tormentor is 'brought to life' in Swinburne's work in a ventriloquist's performance. As Deleuze observes, in the masochistic scenario the 'victim speaks through the mouth of his torturer'. The masochist makes his tormentor appear powerful by making her enact his fantasy.²⁴ Ovid's Pygmalion is a physical statue, while the cruel woman as Pygmalion's statue is also a kind of ventriloquist's dummy which is 'animated' as the auditor of male speech. Though the idol-like statue figure in Swinburne's poetry can be animated, later nineteenth-century versions of the Decadent cruel woman are increasingly incorporeal.

The English Decadents of the 1890s created a bridge to the Modernist literary imagination. Dowling has illustrated that the emptiness characteristic of Dowson's poetry is a precursor to T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' (1925). Dowson, in turn, was influenced by the Decadence of Swinburne, who took inspiration from Baudelaire.²⁵ Tracing a line from Decadence to Modernism in England is an area of potential future research based on this

²⁴ This very scene is acted out in Huysmans's *A rebours*, in an episode recalled by Des Esseintes in which he had a love affair with a ventriloquist. He would control the fantasies that she would act out for him by throwing her voice: 'With strange intonations that he had made her rehearse beforehand for hours, she gave life and voice to the monsters [statues of mythical beasts Des Esseintes has placed in the room]'. However, she is dissatisfied with the role that has been forced upon her, she wears 'the sullen expression of the actress forced to play a scene, to practise her profession, at home'. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A rebours)* trans. Robert Baldick (1884; London: Penguin, 2003), p. 100, p. 101.

²⁵ Eliot quotes Baudelaire's 'To the Reader', 'hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!', in *The Waste Land*. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922) in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 53, line 76.

project. Modernist literature emerges from Decadence as similarly introspective and individualistic. In *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (2007), Peter Gay cites Baudelaire and Wilde as early founders of literary modernism in Europe, according to their advocacy of individualism and ‘art for art’s sake’.²⁶ Gay relates Baudelaire’s investigation of his own feelings and sensations, particularly the sexual and sensual, to the beginning of Modernism:

Baudelaire did not find even sexual pleasure an unmixed delight. He was persistently preoccupied with human suffering – and not only his own. [...] No other confessor, not even Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had ever been able to show himself quite so naked as this revolutionary poet. This is the way modernism begins, not with a whimper but a thrill.²⁷

Gay alludes here to the final lines of Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’, ‘*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper*’.²⁸ It could be said that English Decadence turns Baudelaire’s thrill into a whimper, ending the century on a note of resignation. The introspective focus is maintained, but as I have shown by tracing a path from Swinburne to Dowson, the salacious aspects of Decadent writing – sexuality and transgression – become as vague and diluted as the cruel woman. Kirsten MacLeod however cautions against considering Decadence as a weak ‘other’ to another ‘strong’ literary movement: ‘It is time that Decadence took its place within this new *fin de siècle* and that the Decadents were recognized not as demonized others in relation to their contemporaries, but as participants in a complex literary field’.²⁹ She points out that Modernists tried to distance themselves from Decadence, which had fallen into disrepute: ‘In the period of high Modernism [...] Modernists disavowed their debt to Dowson and other Decadents, establishing themselves as hard, neat, and mature in contrast to the muzzy, soft, adolescent, and even infantile Decadents.’³⁰ However, as MacLeod acknowledges, Modernist writing is indebted to Decadence. It is an important transitional step between Romanticism and Modernism. Elements of the writing of the cruel woman that I examine – the capturing of moods and

²⁶ Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: William Heinemann, 2007).

²⁷ Gay, *Modernism*, p. 41.

²⁸ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925) in *Selected Poems*, p. 80, lines 97-8. Emphasis in original.

²⁹ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 170.

³⁰ MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 153.

sensations, anatomising the female figure through synecdoche, anxieties contemplated in masochistic terms – are also important features of experimental Modernist literature.

I hope to have established that the Decadent cruel woman is not as powerful as she seems, and that the stereotype of cruel woman is inconsistent. She becomes more ghostly as the century progresses. Braun notices a similar trajectory in her study of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale*. This becomes a worn out stereotype,

an aged and ineffectual symbol of excess. By the 1890s, the once expressive, shape-shifting *femme fatale* was reconceived yet again as mute and immobile. This anticlimactic shift marked an unsettling moment of decadence and decay, a moment when the fatal woman, unveiled, silenced, and severely scrutinized, was forced to confront her own tragic finale.³¹

Running parallel with my investigation of the silencing and eventual decline of the cruel woman has been a consideration of the Decadent movement in England, and the attributes that have led scholars to deem it a pale reflection of its French counterpart. By tracing the figure of the cruel woman through English Decadence I have attempted to show that she reflects the attitude of the male writers who create her, and that, as a reflection, she gradually fades out of view as the Decadent attitude cedes to Symbolism and Modernism. Desire in these texts is a lonely condition; the speaker is ultimately always alone addressing an unresponsive or nonexistent incorporeal beloved.

As the ‘days of wine and roses’ come to an end, the writers of English Decadence master their anxieties through the masochistic model and the figure of the cruel woman. We hear echoes of this as Decadent anxieties are replaced with fears for humanity in the shadows of war during the early twentieth century.

³¹ Braun, *Rise and Fall*, p. 109.

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