Introduction

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Theatre is resource-intensive, which is usually reflected in the cost of a ticket. Its costliness is partly the result of dependence on people both on and off stage who labour for the pleasure of those in the audience, and it is partly because many theatre performances require substantive material investment in sets and costumes that are only required for the course of a limited run. Commercial theatre auditoria built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also tend to follow a stock design scheme that borders on rococo kitsch, with audiences sat beneath chandeliers watching a stage framed by a proscenium arch crowned with gilded scallop shells and cherubs blowing provocatively on trumpets. It is therefore unsurprising that the making and watching of theatre has been prone to derision as 'decadent'.

However, playwrights and theatre makers have also rebelled against the susceptibility of theatre to bourgeois taste ever since the bourgeoisie emerged as a social class with the rise of industrial modernity. Sometimes this has involved condemning theatre's commercialisation as a decadent symptom of an ailing institution – the Italian performer Eleonora Duse once pronounced that '[t]o save the Theatre, the Theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague', while the British director Peter Brook sought to rid the theatre of a deadly inability to innovate[i] – and sometimes it has inspired playwrights and theatre makers to embrace decadence as a subversive and highly stylised art of decay and unconventional refinement at odds with the prevailing winds of social and economic 'progress'.

Decadence, in the period addressed in this anthology – 1890 to 1930 – has been harnessed as a rhetorical trope in the condemnation of theatre as an institution, and it has been embraced by playwrights as a reaction to a raft of cultural and societal changes that fall under the broad umbrella of modernity, and the progress that industrial modernity, especially, was seen to represent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Decadence has also been used as a rhetorical trope in condemning playwrights who came to be associated with decadence because of their interest in countercultural themes and issues that went against the grain of propriety at the time, examples of which are addressed in each of this anthology's sections: subversive representations of empire and the ancient world, a fascination with oblivion and the occult, and probing explorations of eroticism and idolatry. The irony is that the very grounds on which theatre was condemned as decadent by the leading lights of modernism and the avant-gardes – a sclerotic inability to innovate – also prompted playwrights associated with decadence to embrace it as a stimulus for creative experimentation that subverted or at least troubled conformity with dominant styles and genres, like naturalism. Decadence also served as petri dish for staging dissident genders and queer sexualities, and for experimenting with themes that presented a captivating and subversive retreat from the debilitating impact of industrial modernity on people and social environments. These playwrights turned to the past in order to make sense of an evolving present, then, but they were also innovative authors concerned with enlivening tired tropes and styles.

This anthology is concerned with experimental and dissident playwrights, understood in the widest possible sense as *decadent*. Firstly, it is concerned with writers who embraced decadence in reacting against the influence of industrial modernity and the rise of bourgeois values on the writing and staging of plays, like Jean Lorrain (Paul Alexandre Martin Duval) and Remy de Gourmont. In its place they explored life's mysteries and excesses,

ungovernable and unruly bodies and behaviours, and imprudent practices and salacious desires at odds with the delimitation of 'appropriate' and 'healthy' moral and behavioural tastes and codes. Secondly, it is concerned with playwrights, like Oscar Wilde and Djuna Barnes, whose homosexuality has since been vaunted in studies of queer cultures, as well as lesser-known but equally important figures like Michael Field (the pen name of Katherine Harris Bradley and her niece and lover Edith Emma Cooper), whose plays have drawn the attention of scholars inspired by their unconventional lesbianism. Thirdly, the volume features plays by playwrights whose dissidence is a world away from anything that could be thought of as 'progressive'. For instance, Gabriele D'Annunzio was a militant nationalist, and although his relationship to the fascist leader Benito Mussolini was complex – at times supportive, and at times threatening – he nonetheless participated, very actively, in the advancement of Italian nationalism and fascism. The French playwright Rachilde (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery) was also a vocal critic of feminism and universal suffrage, even though her plays and novels often feature dominant women who overpower men. Finally, several of the names in this anthology will be familiar to many readers – particularly its male, west-European contributors, like the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck – although others may well be unfamiliar as they are yet to enter the west-European cannon, like the Ukrainian poet and playwright Lesya Ukrainka, the Russian author Leonid Andreyev, and the Japanese writer Izumi Kyōka (Kyōtarō Izumi).

The selection of plays in this volume, then, is intended to reflect the diversity of styles, themes, contexts, and issues that playwrights associated with decadence explored in the period running from 1890 to 1930. We divide them into three thematic sections. In 'Empire and the ancient world' the plays are filled with esoteric historical facts and myths, gods and goddesses, rituals and totems, some plucked from ancient chronicles, others from religious texts, but more often than not gleaned from or inspired by other historians, writers, and artists, creating a complex intertextual web that Matthew Potolsky has aptly described as a 'decadent republic of letters'.[ii] In 'Oblivion and the occult', the playwrights seek to pierce the veil of the visible, probing deeper into a mysterious and unfathomable world of possibilities, often with profoundly morbid and unsettling results. In reacting against the influence of positivism on art and literature in the nineteenth century, especially as it came to manifest in naturalist literature and drama, playwrights associated with both symbolism and decadence frequently turned to, and embraced, a rising tide of interest in the occult. Theosophy was widely read, and many writers were associated with esoteric and occult organisations like Joséphin Péladan's Salon de la Rose + Croix in France, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in Britain. The final section, 'Eroticism and idolatry', invites critical reflection on the representation of women in decadent plays. Women are frequently represented either as a threat, or as submissive playthings: at once persecuted, eroticised, and idolised. A particularly illustrative example can be found in Gabriele D'Annunzio's play *La Gioconda*, which also invites reflection on another unsavoury aspect of the decadent sensibility in the hands of certain playwrights: the fact that a few playwrights who came to be associated with decadence ended up adhering not to countercultural anarchism, but nationalism and fascism. Women were idolised in the service of male fantasy in their hands, although they also presented their own cults of the personality as emblems fit for idolisation.

Despite the breadth of the present volume, it has of course been limited by the plays available to us within a bounded period. We chose this period because it is most closely associated with decadent poetics and aesthetics, and because it presents an illuminating snapshot of the range of styles and genres that might be appreciated and understood through a decadent frame. The 1890s is especially significant in the study of decadence – a decade that mapped the height of Oscar Wilde's fame and influence, as well as his imprisonment for acts of 'gross indecency' in 1895 – but so too are the first decades of the twentieth century beyond

Paris and London, where Wilde largely resided. Many playwrights working outside of these cities were greatly influenced by the work that was produced within them, but that influence was less a determining factor than a stimulus for expanding and innovating the writing of idiosyncratic and experimental plays. This was the case in Russia, for instance, during its Silver Age (running roughly from the turn of the twentieth century to the Russian Revolution in 1917), as well as Japan during the Taishō period (1912–26). The period selected for this anthology enables us to offer a flavour of these decadent reverberations and legacies, although it only hints at the journey that decadence was to take in the hands of playwrights and theoreticians in the second half of the twentieth century – for instance, in the plays and essays of Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka, and Yukio Mishima.[iii] As such, we hope that its temporal boundedness might spark other collections and studies that pick up where this volume leaves off.

In selecting texts for an anthology such as this, we face a double challenge. Not only, as Sos Eltis has remarked, are there 'only a tiny handful of plays [that] are widely identified as decadent' (these would include Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* (1889) and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892), and Wilde's *Salome* (1891)),[iv] but decadence is notoriously hard to define. Our approach to the selection of plays makes any attempt to pin down the meaning of decadence all the more difficult. In fact, such a task is impossible given the myriad and often conflicting ways in which decadence was imagined in contexts ranging from Britain, France, and Italy to Japan, Russia, and Ukraine. Nonetheless, popular and scholarly understandings of decadence provide useful way markers in mapping its various lines of flight. In popular parlance, decadence is frequently used as a synonym for opulence and abundance – for instance, in describing the gilded scallop shells and cherubs adorning the upper recesses of theatre auditoria built in the nineteenth century, or the material resource and expense that is so often required to put on a show – but in the late nineteenth century decadence was more usually associated with decay and decline. The word 'decadence' derives from the Latin verb *decadēre* (de- 'down' + cadēre 'to fall'), meaning 'to decay' or fall down in quality. It is related to the word 'cadence' and was frequently used to describe a process of social, cultural, or moral decay, as well as declining artistic standards. Désiré Nisard was among the first to correlate the decay of the classical language of the third- and fourth-century Latin literature with the decline of contemporary French literature and an emergent cultural malaise in the nineteenth century with the publication of his *Études de Moeurs et de Critique sue les Poètes Latins de la DécadenceW* (Cultural-Critical Studies of the Latin Poets of the Decadence, 1834), but uses of the terms 'decadence' and 'decadent' to describe a set of stylistic and thematic preoccupations in art and literature only really gained traction after Théophile Gautier published an influential preface to the 1868 edition of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). In the 1870s and 1880s, the poet and essayist Paul Bourget followed Gautier's example in turning to Baudelaire as a progenitor of a set of 'decadent' themes and motifs that reflected the spirit of the times, including pessimism, nervous and physical exhaustion, flight from the modern world, civic decline, hallucination, extraordinarily refined tastes and sensations, sadism, morbidity, a love of artifice, eclecticism, and esotericism.[v] All of these themes can be found in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884), a book that proved influential in its stretching of the naturalist penchant for elaborate descriptions of people, places and things to points of exhaustive excess, causing some to consider the emergence of what Arthur Symons termed a 'decadent movement' in the 1880s and 1890s.[vi]

It is tempting to trace a stylistic and thematic line from Baudelaire and Huysmans to the work of the playwrights included in this volume, several of whom acknowledged a debt to their influence. However, the importance of the playwrights themselves ought not to be underestimated. For instance, Wilde and Rachilde were establishing reputations around the

same time as Huysmans – Wilde through his highly publicised wit and dandyism (his prose and society comedies gained recognition a little later, in the 1890s), and Rachilde with her fantastically scandalous novel *Monsieur Vénus*, which was published the same year as *À rebours* in 1884. Decadent style is also a contested area. Playwrights associated with decadence have often favoured historical verse dramas – Michael Field's *The Race of Leaves* (1901) is an example – although they also tested the boundaries of form, genre and style. For instance, Gourmont's *Lilith* (1892) presents directors and performers with fascinating practical challenges that were not to be matched until Antonin Artaud penned his plays and theories some thirty years later. Other plays, like Barnes' *The Dove* (1923), bear little resemblance to such works at a formal or stylistic level, and yet its strange mix of Wildean dialogue and Ibsen-esque social commentary captures other stylistic and thematic characteristics of decadence that are more immediately legible and apparent from a contemporary standpoint, especially with regard to its depiction of suppressed lesbianism.

Playwrights sought or came to be associated with multiple styles and affiliations over the course of the fin de siècle, which in many cases makes their definitive association with 'naturalism', 'decadence', or 'symbolism' something of a fool's errand. This anthology takes the 1890s as its point of departure not just to mark a historical juncture at which playwrights picked up the baton of decadence from their poetic and novelistic forebears; rather, the selection of plays from this period – which you might also find in collections of symbolist drama, particularly plays by Maeterlinck and Rachilde, as well as Wilde's *Salome* – are intended to encourage readers to re-appraise taxonomies that neatly compartmentalise a work as 'symbolist' or 'naturalist'. There were literary circles that self-described as 'decadent',[vii] and several literary reviews were associated with fin-de-siècle decadence in the 1880s and 1890s, like Anatole Baju's *Le Décadent* (1886–89), John Lane's *The Yellow Book* (1894–97), and Leonard Smithers's *The Savoy* (1896), but decadence is ultimately a vehicle for creative experimentation and moral provocation, and fails to coalesce into one coherent genre.[viii] Instead, we might think of decadence as a lens that can help with focusing attention on aesthetic qualities and moral issues, which can lead to very different valuations of a work's merit once compared with established genres of the period.

A final word on the plays' performability. In most cases, and contrary to received wisdom, the playwrights who wrote the plays included in this volume intended, at least at some point in their professional careers, for their plays to be staged. More detailed substantiation is offered below, but one of the main reasons why these plays have been considered in some quarters to be unstageable is because of the coevolution of decadence and symbolism in the 1880s and 1890s, and the stylistic bedhopping that many playwrights of the period embraced. The symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé played an especially important role in shaping opinion about the fleshy and unreliable presence of human bodies performing on a stage in front of other bodies. If disembodied symbolist poetry served as the literary ideal in the late 1880s and 1890s, then theatre was its intolerable perversion. Stage directions that dwell on evocative imagery also present directors with extraordinary difficulties. For example, Gourmont offers this fantastic direction in *Lilith*:

> *The Heavens tear open. The veil of the Universe is torn away. The sun rains burning fire down on Nature; the grass shrivels; the animals run frantically for the cover of trees – but the trees grow pale and, for the first time, the leaves fall. The sun laughs.*

Did Gourmont really intend for these directions to be staged, or were they intended to raise a wry smile, poking fun at those who would demean poetic purity by contaminating it with the prospect of materialisation? As Dan Rebellato observes, '[s]uch directions go beyond "challenging" [… coming] close to demanding something incompatible with theatre [… But]

it seems to me better to think of this play as one that is intended to be unperformable only in the conventions of the time and, by its very daring, to push theatre to reinvent its conventions as it also pushes a wider culture to reinvent its morality'.[ix] The plays included in this anthology are offered in the same spirit. Taxonomically ambiguous, provocative, and ahead of their time, these plays demand reappraisal, and invite a new generation of theatre makers to realise their potential.

Notes

[i] Eleonora Duse qtd in Arthur Symons, 'Eleonora Duse', *The Contemporary Review, 1866-1900*, 78 (August 1900), 196-202 (198); Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 2008).

[ii] Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[iii] For an illuminating study of the importance of decadence in the plays and critical essays of these writers, see Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2018). For a study of Yukio Mishima's decadent drama, see Ikuho Amano, 'Visions of Phantasm: *Madame de Sade* in the Excess of Language and Imagination', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 89-105.

[iv] Sos Eltis, 'Decadent Theater', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 318-34.

[v] See Paul Bourget, 'Notes sur quelques poètes contemporains', *Le Siècle littéraire*, 1 April 1876, 266. Reprinted in André Guyaux, *Baudelaire: Un demi-siècle de lectures des* Fleurs du mal *(1855–1905)* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), 564. See also Bourget, 'The Example of Baudelaire', trans. Nancy O' Connor, *New England Review* 30, no. 2 (2009): 90-104. http://www.nereview.com/back-issues/2009-pages/vol-30-no-2-2009/. Accessed 22 Nov. 2016).

[vi] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893, 858-67. Symons later rebranded what was essentially the same book as a study of symbolism rather than decadence, with very minor tweaks. See Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd., 1908).

[vii] Max Nordau describes how authors and artists meeting regularly at the Café Francois I on Boulevard St. Michel in Paris – including Jean Moréas, Laurent Tailhade and Charles Morice – called themselves 'Décadents'. Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. from the second German edition by George L. Mosse (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 100-01.

[viii] Sos Eltis makes a similar point. See 'Theatre and Decadence', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 201-17 (201).

[ix] Dan Rebellato in Dan Rebellato and Jennifer Higgins, 'Decadent Plays: Jean Lorrain and Remy de Gourmont', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 14 December 2021, https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/decadent-plays-jean-lorrain-and-remy-de-gourmont. Accessed 5 October 2023.