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The Aesthete, the Hedonist, the Imperialist, and the Dandy:
The Construction of Masculinity at the *Fin de Siècle* in Vernon Lee's "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*

In 1901, J. W. Mackail looked back over the nineteenth century and came to a ghastly conclusion: "the end of the century which we have just passed through might well seem, to any highly-kindled imagination, the visible index of some approaching end of the world" (Greenslade 37). The fatalism that characterized the *fin de siècle* was not unique to Mackail, but had been a fear slowly encroaching upon the British Empire as the century drew to a close and Queen Victoria left the throne. Centuries of rampant territory-annexation around the globe, mutinies in the colonies, and the crushing failures of the first and second Boer Wars prompted a nationwide fear of vulnerability and decline (Stott 4). Moreover, the New Women challenged their social and economic roles with early feminist philosophies, and in doing so, seemed to rip the family, the basic unit of the Empire, apart at the seams (Stott viii). Along with the deterioration of the nation and the family, the very premise of the patriarchal British Empire seemed to be at stake in the apparent degradation of masculinity.

In the decades leading up to the end of the century, a new male figure emerged that confused the formerly strict confines of gender in a shocking new way. Just as the New Woman was alarmingly masculine, the Decadent male was disturbingly feminine. The male aesthete's tendencies did not end at the "amalgamation of the sexes," but included an edict to reject "all that was natural and biological in favour of the inner life of art, artifice, sensation and imagination," as manifested in Oscar Wilde's emphatic valuing of "cultural exquisiteness" and Walter Pater's "art for art's sake" treatise (Showalter 170; Hamilton 69). The construction of masculinity in literary works at the end of the century, then, understandably operated under conflicting ideas of what characteristics and qualities defined manliness. For Vernon Lee in "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (1896), the titular figure is a true male aesthete and the villainous Duke is the hedonistic caricature of exploited aesthetic values; both are in line with her own decadent beliefs. In J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), however, the heroic Peter Pan and the Lost Boys are described in terms of upper-class, imperialist English manliness that purposefully contrasts with the Decadence Movement, while the wicked Captain Hook represents the effeminate and impotent dandy persona. Both Lee and Barrie acknowledge the changing face of masculinity, they understand the danger of aesthetic beliefs, and use their constructions to communicate a didactic message to their reader. They differ, however, in their personal portrayals and beliefs of aestheticism's validity for the British Empire.

Violet Paget, a New Woman who wrote under the male pseudonym Vernon Lee, provides Prince Alberic with an unquestionably effeminate and androgynous description. The prince is “at once manly and delicate, and full of grace and vigour of movement. His long hair, the colour of floss silk, fell in wavy curls, which seemed to imply almost a woman’s care and coquetry. His hands also, though powerful, were. . .of princely form and whiteness” (Lee 198). Whereas male decadents assumed traits of the feminine “through excessive attention to clothing, the body, and forms of cosmetic artifice,” Alberic is naturally gifted with effeminate features (Hamilton 67).

Alberic is a beautiful boy, but in order to truly encompass the “art for art’s sake” principle, he has to be more than just attractive. The tapestry of the Snake Lady and the beauty of the Castle of Sparkling Waters capture his fascination and adoration with their aesthetic appeal, appropriately defining Alberic as a connoisseur of beauty with no thought to underlying morality or message. Moreover, Alberic is blessed with “dignity and discretion,” and “excellent morals, courage and diligence; but there was no denying it, he had positively no conception of *sacrificing to the Graces*” (Lee 219, 217). Interestingly, he is adept in everything but music, dance, and wit. In the four tenants of Decadence, Alberic excels at art, sensation, and imagination, and lacks only in artifice. In appearance, manner, and lure, Alberic is naturally gifted with what others might attempt to gain through affectation—making him truly a genuine male aesthete.

Duke Balthasar Maria, however, illustrates the feared hedonism of decadence. After Wilde’s highly publicized 1895 trial, decadence became the socially accepted scapegoat for the degeneration of the British nation and its families, morals, and gender roles (Stott 18). Effeminacy was judged morally by the public and was associated with illicit sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, hereditary illnesses, and sterility (Hamilton 67). The Duke falls into this societal stereotype as he strives through deception, extravagance, and narcissism to obsessively pursue the youth and beauty which Alberic obtains artlessly. The Duke has “delicate taste” and prohibits “the folly of feeding the thoughts of youth on improbable events” (Lee 184). The appreciation of art with no concern for an underlying moral message can be misinterpreted as the endless pursuit of beauty and pleasure, and the Duke mindlessly pursues this through artifice and sensation. His lust for far younger women and his reliance for “much of his happiness and pride” on his maintained appearance reveal him to be a lecherous and vain “old sinner” (Lee 195, 216).

In the end, the Duke’s death is a descent into debauchery, guilt, and horror, whereas Alberic nobly commits suicide (Lee 227). Even this is appropriate for a story so intertwined with allusions to the Aesthetic Movement, as “an obsession with unrequited love, violence, and death characterized the Decadents” (Vicinus 93). Whereas Alberic is as appealing as he is effeminate, as the admirable potentiality of the aesthete, the Duke is a horrendous caricature of what decadence was feared and misconstrued to be. Despite the decadent edict that art has no

underlying message, Lee shows that decadence is not inherently evil or morally suspect, but, like anything, can become so in the wrong hands.

The representation of men in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* is far different from Lee's portrayal of decadent masculinity. In 1901, the Inspector General of Recruiting's annual report seemed to confirm fears of decline when it revealed that only three out of every eleven applicants from Manchester were considered healthy enough to serve in the Boer War (Greenslade 48). England's urbanization following the industrial revolution had brought with it terribly unhealthy living conditions, only adding to the sense of fatality at the *fin de siècle*. It seemed as if "an increasingly complex and urban society seemed inevitably to encourage softness and decadence," prompting a counter-cultural response that emphasized "toughness and harshness" in an attempt to restore masculinity and the nation to its former levels of greatness (Greenslade 45). In William Ernest Henley's 1891 *Lyra Heroica*, boys were encouraged to patriotically appreciate the attraction and satisfaction of living and dying for one's country to "keep the blood" of Britain's youth "from the wretched and morbid stagnation of modernity" (Greenslade 45). These "civilizing" principles were also emphasized in schools for boys and popular adventure stories, where "physical hardship, spiritualized love, and idealistic self-sacrifice all equated youth with the perfect time of life" (Vicinus 95). It is only appropriate, then, that Peter Pan and the Lost Boys should want to capitalize on this perfect time and remain within it forever in Neverland. Barrie creates these characters from within this reactionary discourse, and his boys represent the stauncher, imperialist British masculinity that seemed to have become so eroded over the nineteenth century.

Unlike Prince Alberic's amalgamation of the sexes, Peter properly portrays all the masculine characteristics dictated by the Victorians' carefully constructed gender roles. He does not know how to sew, he refuses to cry in front of Wendy, he is "indifferent to appearances," he has so much courage it is "almost appalling," and he is so conformed to the accepted standard of masculinity that the narrator refers to him as "boylike" and exults in "[h]ow exactly like a boy!" he is (Barrie 23, 39, 22). It is not difficult to see the didactic teaching of gender roles and separate spheres at play between Peter, the valiant leader, and Wendy, the homemaker. The Lost Boys, too, are portrayed as true English gentlemen. The boys remove their hats upon seeing and meeting Wendy for the first time, Tootles gallantly offers himself up to Peter for punishment, John wonders if as pirates they will remain "respectful subjects of the King," Curly cries "[r]ule Britannia," and there seems overall to be no differentiation between chivalry, patriotism, and masculinity (Barrie 55, 57, 124). As the pirates threaten to force the boys down the plank, Wendy announces to the boys that she feels she has "a message to you from your real mothers, and it is this: 'We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen'" (Barrie 125). Like Peter's declaration that "[t]o die will be an awfully big adventure," there is no mistaking that the boys' duties as sons

and protectors of the British Empire were reinforced throughout their childhoods and adolescence (Barrie 85).

A similar emphasis on what is manly, what is proper, and what is thoroughly British is evident in the preoccupation with “good form.” Like in “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” what the villain so passionately strives for the hero already unknowingly has in abundance in *Peter Pan*. Peter’s child-like dedication to fighting fair is explained by his inability to remember ever being cheated, but it is the uncontrived nature of Peter’s good form that Hook admires and envies (Barrie 82). With Peter’s memorable “courage and cleverness” along with his chivalrous and noble good form, the boys whose brothers and fathers were sent to the Boer Wars and who would soon be sent themselves to the First World War were given a mode of English masculinity and “genteel warfare” that would make them the pride of the Empire (Springer 96, 97).

With the heroes of the story showing the determined and courageous masculinity common to the discourses reacting against the effeminate men of modernity, it is no surprise that Hook embodies such a degenerate figure. The “other” appeared now in reactionary literature with “an introspective or aesthetically sensitive temperament, whose ‘unfitness’ made it ‘fit’ for modern decadence” (Greenslade 45). Hook—who sighs dramatically and repetitively with a “profound melancholy,” is “not wholly evil; he loved flowers (I have been told) and sweet music (he was himself no mean performer on the harpsichord)” and who, when on the deck with Smee, “heaved a heavy sigh, and I know not why it was, perhaps it was because of the soft beauty of the evening, but there came over him a desire to confide to his faithful bo’sun the story of his life”—is decidedly introspective and aesthetically sensitive (Barrie 77, 115, 51). Indeed, Hook fits the caricature of the decadent so well that it is impossible for him to not have been purposely constructed as such.

After Wilde’s trial, “effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, [and] luxury” became the distinguishing characteristics of the upper-class dandy (Wilson 601-2). The narrator easily acknowledges that in Hook’s “dark nature there was a touch of the feminine”: the care he has for his hair “dressed in long curls,” his hat “at its most rakish angle,” and his extravagant clothing, even to his last moments, contrasts sharply with Peter’s boyish carelessness (Barrie 80, 48, 116, 137). Hook’s effeminate leisure and idleness stand in stark contrast to Peter’s action and vitality, as shown by the first scene in which he appears, where he lies “at ease in a rough chariot drawn and propelled by his men,” or when he walks about the deck “fingering a pack of cards” and smoking his cigar (Barrie 47, 133). There is no doubt that Hook lives a life of upper-class luxury.

Hook’s well-educated and aristocratic background are overly prevalent in his manner, as though “something of the grand seigneur still clung to him,” and “the elegance of his diction” along with “the distinction of his demeanour, showed him one of a different caste from his crew” (Barrie 121, 48). Hook loathes his pirate crew, which corresponds to the “general

abhorrence” that aesthetes tended to have towards the “uniformity, mediocrity, and vulgarity” of the inferior masses (Hamilton 69). This is another key contrast with Peter and his men: Peter is a captain to the Lost Boys and leads them firmly to engender loyalty, whereas Hook treats his followers as dogs, and “as dogs they obeyed him” until “they showed him their fangs, and he knew that if he took his eyes off them now they would leap at him” (Barrie 48, 133). The sharp contrast between Barrie’s conception of the ideal British gentlemen and the “impotent” decadent (Barrie 123) is evidenced by the order of obedience that Peter and the Lost Boys have compared to the abuse and mutiny of Hook and his pirates.

As the degeneration of the Empire moved from a vague fear to something of a growing certainty, colonies fell away from British power, wars were lost, women started to challenge their relegation to the home sphere, and men started to emulate the characteristics of women in the Decadence Movement, apocalypse really did seem to hide just beyond the *fin de siècle*. Since men ran the nation, fought the wars, and were the heads of their households, perhaps it is easy to understand why the construction of masculinity was so important to late Victorian and early Edwardian writers. The demise of the House of Luna occurs in 1701, implying that it is not Alberic’s fault that the Duchy meets its end, but the corrupt Machiavellian nature of the court, perhaps with a pointed jab at how the decadents had become scapegoats for the nation’s degeneration (Lee 182). Conversely, Barrie self-consciously teaches a new generation of boys how to grow into the new men of the British Empire. Perhaps both Lee and Barrie hoped that through the didactic messages in their works about the construction of masculinity in society, the end of the world might be staved off for another century or two.

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