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Dark Avunculate: Shame, Animality, and Queer Development in Oscar Wilde's "The Star-Child"

Rasmus R. Simonsen

[A]t the birth of a child or a star there is pain.

—Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

*Then he had been a young girl
Caught in the woods by a drunken old man
Knowing at the end the taste of his own whiteness,
The horror of his own smoothness,
And he felt drunken and old.*

—T. S. Eliot, "The Death of Saint Narcissus"

Critics dealing with Oscar Wilde's collection of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates*, have tended to focus on "how and why a single fairy tale might simultaneously appeal to adults and to children" (Marsh 73). In order to emphasize the different impact of the stories, Michelle Ruggaber points out that the title of the collection itself harbors sinister allusions, as it refers to the ancient myth of Proserpine, in which pomegranates are explicitly connected with the underworld (143). In "The Star-Child," the fourth and final story, a pomegranate tree indeed marks the entrance to the wicked Magician's underground dungeon (Wilde 280), which becomes the scene of shame and torment. In contrast to Proserpine, who must spend at least part of every year in Pluto's company, the Star-Child eventually is able to leave the dank, dark confines of his prison by performing a number of good deeds, which allow him to redeem himself and escape his ugly fate at the hands of his tormentor. However, this respite is only temporary; even though he manages to ascend to his rightful place in life, his trials and tribulations have been so taxing that he dies "after the space of three years" (284).

This article will outline the inequalities of the relationship between the Star-Child and his temporary master, known only as the Magician, in order to argue that Wilde's fairy tale should be read as the formalization of a queer interval that traumatizes the Victorian norm of maturation. This is not to suggest that "Wilde's Victorian readers [would] seem to have found [any]thing untoward about the fairy tales" (Duffy 328); nothing, at least, that hinted at the "homoromantic dimensions" which

were to become so devastatingly central to his libel trial of 1895 (338). John-Charles Duffy has nevertheless shown that a complex interweaving of myth and sexuality is at work in Wilde's fairy tale. Wilde's story differs in important ways from other variants of the Proserpine myth, most notably concerning the gender of the protagonist. The gender inversion of the Proserpine figure, as embodied by the Star-Child, is one important way by which we can activate a queer reading of the text. Moreover, Wilde exploits this mythical archetype in order to explore the sexual affect of shame and the way in which it disrupts or delays the narrative of childhood development.

* * *

Shame has become a regular bedfellow of queer theory in recent years. The sheer proliferation of studies exploring and elaborating on this connection means that we should be especially careful not to assume the universality of its application. Furthermore, what is meant in relation to Wilde's "queerness" bears explanation. In his article, "Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde," Duffy addresses the danger of submitting Wilde and other writers to an essentially anachronistic "gay reading," drawing on a terminology that can be historically located in the discourse growing out of Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, post-1892 (327). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also comments that while "Wilde's work was certainly marked by a grappling with the implications of the new homo/hetero terms," especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his "own eros was most closely tuned to the note of the pederastic love in process of being superseded—and, we may as well therefore say, radically misrepresented—by the homo/hetero imposition [of the late nineteenth century]" (*Tendencies* 56). Duffy argues, however, that this does not mean it is not possible to identify in Wilde's writings certain "gay-related" themes," as long as we recognize that these were likely to have been cast in "the conceptual vocabulary of Hellenism" (328), which was being disseminated by a certain group of young men at Oxford in Victorian England. To be sure, Wilde litters his work with descriptions of young male characters whose beauty approaches or equals that of their mythological forebears, such as the figure of Ganymede. Yet, as Patricia Flanagan Behrendt notes, according to custom, direct "references to the physicalization of homosexual love" would have had to be "shrouded in innuendo" at the time of Wilde's writing (14). The theme of pederasty in "The Star-Child" thus serves to retard the

impending binarization of “deviant” desires that Sedgwick traces, while the fairy tale form helps to shroud its “shameful” implications. Duffy sums up the theme of pederasty in Wilde’s story in the following way:

The pederastic nature of the Star-Child’s love for the leper is highlighted by the fact that the Star-Child is called “Child” (even though he is an adolescent, at least), and by the fact that the leper is old enough to be his father (the leper turns out, in fact, to be his father). A pederastic love, then—one which flowers in spite of the erastes’ physical unattractiveness—is the key to redemption and happiness. (340)

Happiness? Redemption? As a metaphysical category outside temporal and spatial limitations, yes, it would seem that the Star-Child has earned the enduring approval of the gods by the end of the story—he has redeemed himself. But, as Duffy also acknowledges (if only in an endnote), the Star-Child’s happiness is markedly brief: he dies a measly three years after having ascended the throne. There is no happiness “ever after” (Duffy 348), and since “he who came after him ruled evilly” (Wilde 284), it is clear that Wilde is not interested in sanctifying one of the most enduring conventions of the fairy tale genre: redemption through sacrifice. There are no guarantees of happiness in Wilde’s universe. It is not the outcome, or resolution, of the story that is interesting, then, so much as the narrative interval marking the Star-Child’s sojourn outside the grace of normative human society.

The (Christian) theme of redemption is related to shame in a way that I find instructive in my reading of “The Star-Child.” In his list of “contexts” that are said to resonate with “contemporary queer culture,” Michael Warner includes “*Christian redemption*” (292; original emphasis). In “Pleasures and Dangers of Shame,” he writes:

The narrative movement from shame to pride or dignity has a normative force for modern culture that stems in part from the resources of redemptive culture more generally. The queer embrace of shame thus has to combat—or adapt—the expectation of redemptive narrative. (292)

The “expectation” of such a narrative assumes the universality of shame. While Warner briefly criticizes the “tendency to treat shame as a constant, even in analyses that focus on the different role of shame in different cultures” (288), his context for discussing queer shame is “Anglophone North Atlantic cultures” (290). It seems that any discussion

of shame will invariably tend toward at least a degree of reductiveness. George Chauncey takes to task more directly the critical assumption that shame is "a natural and universal state" (278), as is usually affirmed by the Silvan Tomkins school of affect theory. Consequently, Chauncey calls for an approach to shame that takes into account "its historicity and cultural specificity in any particular context," in order to acknowledge that "shame has a history, and [that] it takes a lot of work to produce" (279). While we should not ignore the historical context surrounding the production of Wilde's fairy tale, to the extent that it participates in a narrative of redemption we can nevertheless draw certain conclusions about the way in which Wilde mobilizes shame that resonates with contemporary queer concerns. Of particular interest here will be the "shameful visibility" and "erotic objectification" (Warner 291, 290) of the Star-Child, and what I will refer to as the queer interval of the story is framed by perhaps the most "universally" accepted definition of shame as constituting "an experience of the separateness of the self, a broken exchange" (Warner 289).

On this point, it becomes pertinent to consider Duffy's category of "The Unblessed, Unnatural, Unnamable" in relation to the Star-Child's involuntary stay with the Magician, who, with his unambiguous markers of the Orient—as a Victorian signifier of "unblessedness" and indeed homosexuality (Duffy 344)—appears as a much queerer character than the leper, for example. If, according to Duffy, Wilde's "The Fisherman and His Soul"—the penultimate story in *Pomegranates*—"presents the realm outside the pale of Christian blessedness as beautiful and precious in its own right" (344), there is nothing "precious" about the Magician's lair, and the tale of the Star-Child does not elicit the same "positive allusions" to "homosexual love" that Duffy otherwise endeavors to unearth in Wilde's fabulous stories (344). I will thus argue that this particular fairy tale marks a significant aberration from the rest of Wilde's forays into the genre; and that, further, the relationship between the crestfallen youth and the Magician troubles the kind of scholarship that, when it pays attention to the theme of pederasty, prefers to view it as encoding "the vision of an idealistic pederast, a man who loves beautiful youths" (Wood 156).

As I will show later, the signification of the relationship between the Star-Child and the Magician becomes particularly evident when we consider the theme of sadomasochism and how it relates to what Sedgwick terms the "avunculate." In the nineteenth century, "uncle," in gay circles, acted "as a metonym for the whole range of older men

who might form a relation to a younger man . . . offering a degree of *initiation* into gay cultures and identities” (*Tendencies* 59; my emphasis).¹ In “The Star-Child,” however, the relation that the wicked Magician forms with the young, fallen boy is portrayed as neither especially benevolent nor instructive—on the surface, at least. And we might term this a *dark* avuncular relation. Whether darkly or benignly, the uncle position is one of mediation. But how does this work in relation to shame, if we take this to be fundamentally “an affect of defeated reciprocity” (Warner 289)? Initially, the Star-Child’s shame seems to be a product of his shamelessly disowning his mother, on the basis that she has brought him “to shame, seeing that [he] thought [he] was the child of some Star, and not a beggar’s child” (Wilde 278). What we take to be his quest for redemption—which is nonetheless problematized by the plot—reaches a crucial stage during the Star-Child’s involuntary stay with the Magician.

It is the ramifications of the initial event of shaming that I wish to explore in the remainder of this essay: to what extent will the Star-Child’s transformation come to serve as a developmental and pedagogical intervention in Wilde’s story? Further, if shaming is seen to be an effeminizing process, can the Star-Child’s ruptured development be read as queer? The latter question is unavoidably influenced by Sally R. Munt’s claim that “[s]hame, in the nineteenth century, became a code word for homosexuality and queerness” (86). However, my argument is less historically specific. My interest in how the process of shame works in conjunction with the theme of childhood innocence (to which our relation can never itself be “innocent”) grows out of a greater concern with the narratological conventions of the fairy tale genre. In this way, I will show how the dialectics of shame and innocence both engenders and disrupts the fairy tale theme of redemption. Fairy tales frequently employ anthropomorphized animals as guides or helpers, and “The Star-Child” is no different. Drawing upon Kathryn Bond Stockton’s exploration of animal–child sodality in her provocative 2009 work, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, I will consider how animality may influence the notion of shame in Wilde’s text.

* * *

In the realm of fairy tales, failure to rectify one’s morally improper or ill-conceived behavior is sure to be punished.² The fairy tale theme of degradation is clearly evinced in “The Star-Child”: toward the middle

of the story, the protagonist's pale Narcissus-like complexion is eclipsed by the coarse exterior expression of atavistic animality to match his interior "wickedness." In this way, Wilde seems to adhere to the classic, somewhat harsh moralistic structure of the fairy tale.³ This is a common element not only of the fairy tale, of course, but of ancient mythology as well (think of the punishment of the profanely gifted weaver Arachne by Pallas Athena, for instance).

As the Star-Child grows up to become a sublime proto-Wildean beauty at the age of ten, his inner moral life exponentially decays, leaving him "proud, and cruel, and selfish" (Wilde 276). He chastises the poor and weak, and it becomes clear that there is no direct correlation between his actions and the effeminate sentiment that his physical beauty otherwise signals. Indeed, he asserts himself by being decisively unsympathetic toward those who have been less fortunate in life: "No pity had he for the poor, or for those who were blind or maimed or in any way afflicted" (276). In fact, such ill-fated souls are rendered effeminate by the Star-Child's bullying, as, traditionally, "[c]ertain manners and behaviors are stigmatized by associating them with 'the feminine'—which is perceived as weak, ineffectual and unsuited for the world of affairs" (Sinfield 26). To a perverse degree, the Star-Child's immoral acts serve to call forth his own sense of budding manhood.

His complete and utter shamelessness is transformed into pure shame, however, as he extends his cruelty to the beggar-woman, who turns out to be his mother. He rejects her bitterly, for, as he says, "it had been better hadst thou stayed away, and not come here to bring me to shame, seeing that I thought I was the child of some Star, and not a beggar's child" (278). His perceived moment of shame consists in having his fantasy of otherworldly grandeur challenged by someone who, to him, is of immediate inferior stature, thus effecting a rupture in his self-imagined story of origins. His fosterage with the Woodcutter and his family, to the Star-Child's mind, was only meant to be a temporary solution, and this "low" affiliation would end on the day when he could claim his proper place in the cosmos.⁴ The Star-Child's claim to shame does more to shame the poor beggar-woman, then, and does not enter into the realm of affects proper; it is strategic rather than actually felt. In this case, it seems that the Star-Child will not experience the shame of expelling his mother until it is made manifest upon his body; it is through the externalized awareness of a changing self that he comes to realize his "inherent" hideous nature. Shame is then portrayed "as a kind of flashing light indicating the onset of the breakdown of hu-

manity” (Probyn 14). This might signify to us that genuine, affective shame “is innate and biological in its inception,” as Probyn argues by way of Tomkins (14)—meaning that shame is something like a dormant and universal affect, which nonetheless requires an external element or event to trigger its processes. However, I wish to caution here, with Warner, that shame depends on “a kind of social knowledge” (290), which is to say that shame is heavily context specific. In Wilde’s story, this is symbolized by the Star-Child’s physical transformation: “his face was as the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder” (278). At this moment, the Star-Child finds himself suddenly an object of, and for, shame; that is, while his experience of shame is ultimately what changes his moral perspective, there is nothing to suggest that his shame is “innate,” but rather that, as “an experience of exposure” (Warner 290), it is triggered by how the external circumstance of his body is regarded by himself and others.

Poignantly so, shame successfully disturbs the linear development of self. Having been brought to shame by his unfavorable treatment of his mother, the Star-Child’s development, not to say his humanity, is forcefully disrupted—which is to say, queered. Now, I want to suggest that the affective quality of shame is such that it halts the maturity of the afflicted. Shame temporally delays the formation of self, while concomitantly introducing a change in character. This change is necessarily brought about by a loss of face, which is made literal in “The Star-Child.” In Munt’s words,

the face is the vehicle for the self, an embodied metaphor for what it is to be human. . . . The face turned away . . . involves some loss of representability, that “loss of face” invokes a risk of dehumanisation. (103)

Curiously, it is not until the Star-Child’s exterior is altered that he is able to connect with his humanity, which at the same time, however, is brought into question at the moment of shame. In a sense, shame turns the subject inside out. The temporality of shame must be considered closely here.

To the extent that shame effects a turning away from the world, it can be said to delay the child’s progress, if only temporarily. In *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Bond Stockton says that “Delay is said to be a feature of [the child’s] growth: children grow by delaying their approach to the realms of sexuality, labor, and harm” (62). For Stockton, the obvious problem with the ideology of delay, as we might refer to it, is that delay

is fundamentally promiscuous: "It has relations with relations it stalls. (Labor relations, for example)" (62–63). On the face of it, shame would appear to be antirelational, in that it severs the connection between self and other. But a turning away from one thing might lead to a turning toward something else, and, in this way, shame may introduce yet another point of promiscuity with the world through vulnerability and fragmentation.

Such promiscuity can appear in the guise of certain "unnatural" and even nonhuman relations. In this regard, we can refer to what Stockton calls "the interval of animal," which often functions as a "central marker[] of queer child time" (*The Queer Child* 91). For Stockton—and here she follows Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—children are highly susceptible to the rhizomatic workings of the "becoming-animal" (94). Quoting Deleuze and Guattari, Stockton points out that in terms of the child becoming-animal, "unnatural participation" and "alliance" are key words (94). The allusion to unnaturalness is the point at which we can connect the becoming-animal to our previous discussion of fairy tale queerness. Stockton analyzes the queer child on the basis of the metaphor of "sideways growth." The animal—specifically the dog, in Stockton's analysis—becomes "a living, growing metaphor for the child itself. . . . [It] is a vehicle to the child's strangeness. It is the child's companion in queerness" (90). Stockton exploits the myth that sees children as sharing a particular sympathetic bond with animals, as they inhabit the same precivilized stage of maturation—with the obvious difference that children can overcome this teleological block as they turn into adults.⁵ Therefore, children are queered by their perceived innocence as well as by their attraction to and ways of being moved by other "innocent" beings; in effect, as James Kincaid has argued, this sets them as a species apart from adults (see Pugh 5).

While Stockton's discussion of the child–animal bond mainly concerns modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and, more specifically, Djuna Barnes, we might pause here to consider the trope of animality in Wilde's Victorian context. In Wilde's tale, the Star-Child is attracted to his own innocent appearance, but his narcissism translates into a not-so-innocent treatment of other people and animals. There is no direct contiguity between appearance and essence in Wilde's universe, yet appearances can be highly instructive. It is interesting to note in this regard that in "The Star-Child" the appearance of the animal interval triggers both a sense of moral awareness and shame, both of which appear to contradict what we might call the "innocence thesis."

Shame is not antithetical to innocence, however; rather, the point is that innocence always exists in a state of vulnerability, and that the experience of shame, as a result, may signal the end of innocence and the onset of a queer interval in the narrative of maturation—even if the Star-Child was never morally innocent.

Whereas, for the authors that Stockton considers, “animal/child affectionate bondings can offer opportunities . . . for children’s motions inside their delay, making delay a sideways growth the child in part controls for herself, in ways confounding her parents and her future” (*The Queer Child* 90), the Star-Child’s interval of animal is much less playful, if nonetheless at least as queerly “confounding” as in Woolf and Barnes. It is crucial, then, that the Star-Child should witness, or become aware of, his transformation into a monstrous form by peering into the abyss of a well, as this triggers the animal interval particular to this story. Previously, the well in the priest’s orchard served as the portal through which the Star-Child could access “the marvel of his own face” (Wilde 276); in the absence of his true mother, by the power of his own pseudomaternal gaze, he had made himself “into an object of extreme magnificence akin to the Child Jesus majesty (sic), a light and jewel radiating forth absolute power” (Leclaire 2–3). In the psychoanalytic tradition that Serge Leclaire remarks on here, the objectification of the child is reserved for the parent, but the Star-Child is able to narcissistically circumvent the gaze of the parent, while his “cloak of golden tissue” and “amber chain” remain the natural signs by which his mother recognizes him when she appears in the story (Wilde 277).

The Star-Child, of course, lacks the piety and humility of Christ. After his transformation, which serves as the narrative switch-point of the story, his reflection in the well presents him with an unfamiliar gaze, which, to borrow the words of Jacques Derrida, is ascribed to “the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself” (12). As a result, “the pleasure he had in his fairness” (Wilde 276) is subverted entirely by the infinite “uninterpretable, unreadable, undecideable” (Derrida 12) animalistic glare of the eyes staring back at him from the well. In other words, he does not view his animal-becoming as anything resembling a productive Deleuzean “assemblage” of the human with the animal that, according to Stockton, would engage the child “in a growing quite aside from growing up” (*The Queer Child* 90). Derrida’s treatment of animality in fact differs significantly from that of Deleuze and Guattari. Derrida’s

theoretical interest in "the animal" (*l'animot*) concerns the experience of *limitrophy*: "what abuts onto limits but also what feeds, is fed, is cared for, raised, and trained, what is cultivated on the edges of a limit" (29). The reason behind the neologism *animot*, denoting the agency of words in the word itself, is therefore to mark the compulsion of language to erase multiplicity. Derridean ethics thus consists of "caring" for the abyss, and attempts at effacing otherness, for Derrida, "would mean forgetting all the signs that I have managed to give, tirelessly, of my attention to difference, to differences, to heterogeneities and abyssal ruptures as against the homogenous and the continuous" (30).

It seems to me that, without mentioning Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida is nevertheless directing a pointed criticism toward the utopianism of the becoming-animal when he says, "I have thus never believed in some homogenous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal" (30; original emphasis). Rather, his concern is to investigate the bad faith of confining "*all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers," "within the strict enclosure of this definite article ('the Animal' and not 'animals')" (34; original emphasis). It is ironic, then, that from the moment he is named, on the page of Wilde's text, as a chimerical animal presence, the Star-Child should be able to "interpret" his own previous malicious and "beastly" behavior. Shame, as Derrida indicates, is the "detumescence" of being (36). The Star-Child's hitherto knowledge of self has been displaced by the horror that he has become the abject other that he had so far positioned himself against. And it is for this reason—the fact that the abyssal difference between "animal" and "man" is not erased in the story—that I find Derrida's comments on animality and shame to resonate more poignantly within the text of "The Star-Child" than the becoming-animal of Deleuze, Guattari, and Stockton. The ostensible waning of phallic power that the Star-Child's transformation entails, as we shall see, furthermore anticipates the theme of sadomasochism in the story.

In contrast to Dorian Gray's portrait, the surface of the well reflects the Star-Child's hideousness; but if before the latter's beautiful form seemed not to cohere with his lack of empathy ("his beauty work[ed] him evil" [276]), this chiasmic structure is now reversed. The "foulness" of his mother's face is doubled onto his own to an extreme extent, but, simultaneously, he can now attain to her presumed moral awareness of others. His moral transformation is far from complete at this point, however, as he fails to recognize the hurt he has inflicted on his fel-

low villagers; he is concerned only with rectifying the broken familial bond with his mother (again, the theme of “erection” surfaces). As a consequence, like another Cain (Derrida 43), he must flee the scene of humanity. Moreover, his transformation marks the “ugly” turn in the story, that turning away from the Wildean Hyacinth and Narcissus stereotypes which critics prefer to comment upon (see, for example, Wood 163).

Since the Star-Child obstinately refuses to recognize his parentage in the beggar-woman, he is consequently condemned to face—and, in turn, adorn—the visage of otherness. The gaze of the beast that he himself has become has ensnared him, caught him with the lure of his own glance. Thus we see how the Star-Child becomes, in the space of time it takes for the light to reflect and deflect his gaze in the water of the well, both “the shamer and the shamed” (Munt 103). In one traumatic instant, his self is split from the Imaginary relation he had developed with the reflective surface of the well (this split is, of course, a fact of the primary identification stage that Jacques Lacan calls the “mirror stage”), and it is for this reason also that shame operates as a dehumanizing process. The Star-Child’s quest then becomes simultaneously, and impossibly, about rejoining himself to that primary image which connected him to his sense of self prior to his fall from grace. Paradoxically, in this way his dehumanization prompts him to rediscover the path toward his humanity, to the degree that this spells humility and empathy. The Star-Child’s fall—or what amounts to the final, cosmic straw: the shaming of his mother—sees him embarking on a quest to find her, since it is only through begging her forgiveness that his sin can be expiated. As the Star-Child has now been transposed into the role of the object, the only way to exorcise his shame is by embracing exile, however painfully.⁶ In this way, his shame realizes “the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind” (Probyn 3).

In Wilde’s tale, the Star-Child starves in a most literal way. As he is left to sustain himself on an insufficient diet consisting of “bitter berries” (Wilde 278), and, later, “mouldy bread” and “brackish water” (280), we are indubitably reminded of “the repudiated or abused children in Dickens . . . whose deformed bodies stand for developmental narratives at once accelerated and frozen by, among other things, extreme material want” (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 42). The Star-Child’s descent into an animalistic state—which does not signify a step backward on the evolutionary ladder, but rather the progression

of his development—emphasizes the insight that “[s]hame is also a powerfully spatial emotion, effecting displacement, and effacement in its subjects” (Munt 80). This, of course, resonates with Derrida’s treatment of the “rhythmic difference between erection and detumescence” (36). The story of the Star-Child therefore mimics the plot structure of the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, as well as the myth of Cain as we have already noted. In the powerful tradition of such a narrative, the Star-Child is forced to reckon with the consequences of his past actions. Immediately following the onset of his quest, he seeks guidance from the animals of the forest—who have all suffered under his whimsical and malicious rule—but they refuse him, and he bows his head to beg forgiveness “of God’s things” (Wilde 279). The gravitational pull of shame indicates the breaking of a bond (see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 37) that he at this point realizes extends beyond his immediate familial attachment.

The expulsion narrative requires the subject(s) of shame to venture forth into the world “to discover their fallen humanity” (Munt 80)—which, as Derrida has taught us, might only be found within the abyss of the animal that always already inhabits us like an ontological black hole—and the Star-Child is consequently made to suffer the same cruelties that he had exposed others to: as he passes through villages on his search for his missing parent, “the children mock[] him, and thr[ow] stones at him” (Wilde 279). Thus it is as if the mournful shadow of his past wrongdoings has enveloped the whole world, and so it is that “in the world there was neither love nor loving-kindness nor charity for him, but it was even such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride” (279); he is clad in the veil of shame that, at the same time, renders him positively naked, vulnerable to insult and humiliation. The series of sufferings that he must endure has a distinctly instructive purpose nevertheless, but this is more thoroughly unfolded during his stay with the “evil-visaged man,” “the subtlest of the magicians of Libya” (280).

* * *

Bought for “the price of a bowl of sweet wine” (280), the Star-Child is led by the Magician to his lair. The entrance to the dungeon is “covered with a pomegranate tree” (280), which the Star-Child must pass under in order to enter his new abode. This scene bears a striking resemblance to the fate of Proserpine, of course, whom Pluto stole away to

the underworld. However, the pomegranate tree in Wilde's story has yet another function. The Star-Child's shame is metonymically connected to the pomegranate; since, in his nonhuman form, he is kept from blushing, the bashful color of the pomegranate fruit hangs over his head as an effective reminder of his shame. Rather than a "flower of decadence" (see Wood 157), the pomegranate signifies as a fruit of dejection. Through this moment of contingency in the story, it once more becomes apparent how the Star-Child's shame is reflected in his environment, either in the form of a melancholy ornament (the pomegranate) or by the negative acts perpetrated against him. Entering the domain of the evil wizard (an almost generic character, who in addition to Pluto can be seen to resemble female villains like the wicked stepmothers in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*) also means that the Star-Child is reentering shame, which, as Munt makes clear, "is a pungently intransigent affect, one that requires re-experiencing in order to relinquish it" (87). His frightful stay with the Magician is therefore a necessary step on the Star-Child's road to recovery. We might here refer to the Magician as the "malignant agent" of the narrative, as opposed to Joseph Campbell's notion of the "benign agent" (58), the hero's guide who will help him fulfill his quest.

Yet the Magician performs a most central role in the Star-Child's development. Having undergone his cruel tutelage, the Star-Child regains his beauty in a more developed and refined form, sustained by the virtues of "loving-kindness and charity" (Wilde 284)—qualities he can only come to appreciate at this (too) late point in the story. As an adjective, "avuncular" can denote the mere semblance of an uncle (as defined in the *OED*); in this way, his relationship to the Magician may be seen to take the form of a dark avunculate relation, which—even as it is inflected by a sinister motive—nevertheless spells out, in Sedgwick's words, "the possibility of alternative life trajectories" (*Tendencies* 63). Hence, while the function of the avunculate proper, as identified by Sedgwick, is not present in "The Star-Child," the impact of the "pedagogical model of male filiation" (60) that fits the "uncle" relation is still significant in the particular context of Wilde's sadistic prose.

The Magician exposes the Star-Child to a number of devious humiliations, including food deprivation and beatings. There is no doubt that the Magician relishes abusing his newly acquired slave; he is properly sadistic. But can we, on the other hand, read the protagonist as a masochistic child? Or does he in fact become something like a metonym, or simulacrum, of the martyr St. Sebastian, whose depiction by "his

late-Victorian apostles" figured as a "sublime image of stoic surrender to pain"—the "decadent *par excellence*" (Kaye 270)? Upon his entering "a strong-walled city," guards "prick[] [the Star-Child] with their spears" (Wilde 280). This is a clear allusion to the suffering of St. Sebastian, but the Star-Child's unspectacular death is quite disappointing compared to the arrow-riddled body of the martyred saint—in terms of pathos, there is no contest. In terms of ambiguity and eroticism, however, there are certain similarities to be found in Wilde's story. The Star-Child is sold off against his will, but he keeps returning every night to the clutches of the Magician, even as he knows what is in store for him: violence of increasing intensity. Upon his initial failure to procure the Magician's gold piece, he is beaten "with a hundred stripes" (280), but as he fails again the dosage is multiplied by the ever ubiquitous fairy-tale number, three (282). It seems that he enters into the liaison with the unconscious knowledge that such is the nature of his quest: his own suffering must be, if not equal to, then actually greater than what he has been responsible for inflicting upon others. Hence, the relation between the Star-Child and the Magician does not in the end measure up to the kind of mutually masochistic connection that Stockton identifies in the Jamesian novella, "The Pupil," in which the author can experiment with the vision of a "proto-gay" child (186). Through an avuncular relation to his tutor (who is no more than a child himself), the young boy in "The Pupil" signifies the possibility of queer childhood, which corresponds to the imperative of queer adults to make good on their childhood promises to themselves that Sedgwick so passionately invokes in *Tendencies*.⁷

In accordance with Suzanne R. Stewart's statement that all "masochistic scenes" must always be "initiated by the masochist[-to-be] himself" (36), the notion of a reciprocal rehearsal of pain is vital to "The Pupil." The tutor and the child take turns being on top, as it were, in their linguistic and mental play of domination, and the point, according to Stockton, is that "the tutor's embroilment with his pupil allows him to seek a *fraternal* symbolic that would lateralize (though not equalize or equate) adult and child" ("Eve's Queer Child" 191; original emphasis). But such is not the case in Wilde's fantasy. The relationship between the Magician and the Star-Child is decidedly, even painfully, unequal. The Star-Child is forced into an effeminate position under the brutal domination of his overseer; he clearly plays the passive partner, and not by volition or out of loyalty to a "contract," which would otherwise govern the masochistic act ("Eve's Queer Child" 189–90). Consequently,

he is rendered weak and unsuccessful in controlling his own destiny; the loss of phallic assertion, in this instance, is clearly a result of the intersection between shame and animality. Degradation is integral to the shaming experience, and it is by enduring, indeed exposing himself to, numerous humiliating moments that his reascent to glory is made possible (see Munt 80). In fact, the Star-Child's exposure to shame and humiliation ultimately is what reinstates his virility: with scepter in hand, he now stands as ruler over the land whose terrain marked his agonizing journey to reconnect with his humanity. His kingly position is nevertheless tempered by the image of Christ-like humility that we recognize in the allusion to the washing of feet (Wilde 284).

* * *

Despite the sympathetic and symbolic marriage of triumph and humility that we are presented with in the end, the fairy tale expectation of a direct moral outcome is missing from "The Star-Child." For example, the Star-Child's metamorphosis is nowhere near as transparent as that of the Swallow in "The Happy Prince," who, as Jerome Griswold has argued, through a series of lessons comes to understand and inhabit the ideal of mercy. To be sure, Ruggaber has pointed out the difficulty in extracting a coherent moral to the story (146), and this is in line with Duffy's remark that "[Wilde's] fairy tales deliberately resist unitary readings, undercutting themselves at the moment they seem to arrive at a clear moral, and sprawling out in various thematic directions" (329). The difficulty of deciphering "a clear moral" in this particular tale is mainly due to the fact that the Star-Child-cum-young king dies just three years into his benign reign, only to be replaced by an unnamed evil ruler. Initially, we might say that the moral of "The Star-Child" follows the built-in logic of shame, which shows "the reader that in order to transcend shame, we have first to enter it and know its deleterious (sic) effects" (Munt 102). Accordingly, in Wilde's story shame becomes instructive, in that the protagonist cannot access the nobility of his birth until he has gone through numerous self-effacing yet character-building moments of disgrace. This story thus moves beyond the naïveté of "The Young King," which also appears in *Pomegranates*. Similar to "The Star-Child," "The Young King" concludes with a phallic image—the "Glory of God" makes the king's "dead staff" blossom (Wilde 233)—but the story does not venture a glimpse into a future that could be anything but good. Rather, it ends with a close-up of the young king's angelic

face. This is a triumphant ending, whereas "The Star-Child" leaves the reader with a feeling of thwarted potential, as the symbolic potency of the scepter does not efface the protagonist's previous torments.

The narrative structure itself works to shame the Star-Child. The repetitious style of the fairy tale format permits us to glory in his humiliations: three years must he struggle without sufficient shelter or nourishment in pursuit of his mother; similarly, three times is he sent out to search for the Magician's gold. Wilde suspends and delays the Star-Child's progress into adulthood, and is content to have him expire after the administered row of humiliations has been expended, committing him to the beyond at the burgeoning age of sixteen. The suspension of maturation is a vital ingredient in the Proserpine myth as well, and we are here provided with a key to why Wilde should have chosen Proserpine's struggles as a template for "The Star-Child." In a paradoxical manner, therefore, the fairy tale time scheme slows down the child's development while, on the other hand, speeding up his decline. If, as Leo Bersani suggests, "Literary repetition is an annihilating salvation" (11), does it make of death a redeeming failure? Repetition emphasizes the artifice of art. This is surely one reason why the fairy tale format should have tempted Wilde. But artificiality is also what elevates art, and the possibility of transcendence increases as "existential authority" (Bersani 26) wanes—when the representation is severed from referential reality.

Although the story luxuriates in feminized masculinity as an element of "nineteenth-century decadence" (Kaye 270), ultimately "The Star-Child" does not represent Wilde's attempt to imagine what queer development might look like removed from the constraints of Victorian child-rearing practices.⁸ By lingering on the torment of a young body, Wilde foregrounds his own and the reader's pleasure, rather than successfully engaging in the subversion of the dogma of masculine boyhood in Victorian England. The author's pleasure is derived from indulging in what he knows to be the "truth" of the Star-Child's transformation; as Duffy states, "it's hard not to accuse Wilde of a little self-indulgent fantasy" (340). But this "fantasy," I would argue, is not so much rooted in a paradigm of a "pure" or "spiritual" affection of an older man for a young boy, resembling something like an ideal, Platonic kind of queer community. Rather, the tale of the Star-Child and his many hardships has a dark, sexual underpinning, which is colored by what we might call a different "shade" of gay from what Duffy imagines. Wilde capitalizes on the belief that, as fellow nineteenth-century writer Nathaniel

Hawthorne puts it in the preface to *A Wonder Book*, his own collection of fables and fairy tales, “No epoch of time can claim copyright in these immortal fables” (3)—including that of Proserpine and Pluto. Wilde “clothe[s]” the myth of Proserpine “with [his] own garniture of manners and sentiment” (Hawthorne 3), in order to present a “shameful” vision of authorial manipulation and humiliation. However, he must disguise the Star-Child—“clothe” him in the scales of abjection—in order to be able to submit his fantasy to print. The imagery of the body of a young boy being abused by an old man would read too much like the pederastic fantasy that it arguably can be seen as; it would lack the metaphoric refinement that the fairy tale affords the author.⁹ In addition, we can reiterate the obvious fact that, specifically, in Graham Robb’s phrasing, “[f]or many gay writers [if Wilde can be said to belong to such a coterie], metaphor was not a decoration or a cunning device, it was a social necessity” (225). Indeed, as a pertinent example, it would appear that *Dorian Gray* failed to make adequate use of metaphor; following its publication, one reviewer ascribed to the novel the strangely oxymoronic phrase of “unnatural iniquity” (Cohen 124).¹⁰

The Wildean queer child is not allowed to develop fully, but must be buried in the house of shame, so to speak, under the shade of the pomegranate tree, lest the “magic cloud” of metaphor (Robb 220) dissipate to reveal the “reality” of (im)properly queer desires. The ambiguous interval of animal thus aids in the Star-Child’s redemption and destruction at the same time: shame both reveals and negates his queerness. To borrow a phrase from Stewart’s study of male masochism at the fin de siècle, the “aestheticized celebration of rupture” (36) that the Star-Child’s suffering involves must necessarily avoid any specific references to homosexual acts. As a matter of necessity, it seems that Wilde will have to kill off the queer child thus fathered by his prose. Consequently, if Wilde can be said to offer the reader the promise of a kind of queer world building, where the male body can be enjoyed “unphobically,” as Sedgwick would have it (see *Epistemology of the Closet* 136), it is only one of near-completion, as he disrupts his own project at the moment when metaphor threatens to expose that which could not yet be spoken. It is almost perversely ironic to note that this somewhat innocuous fairy tale should come to prophesize Wilde’s own later moment of abasement in prison. As he wonders in *De Profundis*, “perhaps whatever beauty of life still remains to me is contained in some moment of surrender, abasement and humiliation” (937). In the end, whatever decorative devices Wilde may have turned to in his art could only serve

as a poor veil for the grabbling hands of the homophobes who wanted nothing more than to see him languish in Reading Gaol.

* * *

The fear of censure can only partially explain the content of Wilde's story. In "The Star-Child," Wilde constructs what Kincaid calls an "affective tableau," which allows the writer and reader to enjoy the image of the child in all its static glory (67). Such a tableau is always, and necessarily, "beyond reach," however (67), and the image of the beautiful child is blurred in Wilde's tale by the Star-Child's transformation into animal-other. This might, then, represent the fact that to Wilde, "The mind of a child is a great mystery" (qtd. in Schmidgall 153). Additionally, the desire that may fuel the depictions of childhood and their consumption can be seen to originate in envy—envy of the child's "natural" state, glorying in her or his "naïve" *jouissance*.¹¹ As Holly Blackford points out, Victorian psychologists viewed children as the entrance point to "excavating" a "pre-civilized past" (25). This past remains obscure, however, and for this reason the adult gaze apprehends the child, at least in part, with bitterness.¹²

There is something murderous about the fascination with children, and our readerly pleasure is perhaps not so different from the sadism of the Magician. This casts a different light on Duffy's rhetorical question as to whether Wilde's fairy tales can be read as "an attempt to create images that embody desires he experienced as a child, but for which he could find no written representation" (345). Duffy suggests that "like the dandy," the "childlike" person, as Wilde portrays him in his fictional work and in his Letters, may function "as yet another representation of the homosexual" (345). The figure of the child would then, for Wilde, come to signify as a sort of queer archeology of the self. In relation to this, we see a point of coherence with the ideology of Victorian child psychology, albeit the aim is different. Wilde's queer interest in the child appears the more convincing when we consider that childhood was often equated with a lost Hellenic ideal, beginning with German Romanticism in the late eighteenth century. For example, according to Blackford, in his essay "The Gods of Greece" (1788) Schiller "acknowledges the analogy between Demeter's tears for her lost child [Proserpine] and the sense among artists that they would never come close to the Greeks" (29). Tears are plentiful in Wilde's retelling of the Proserpine myth, but they evoke something different from pure

nostalgia. The simile with which Wilde's self-representation, "childlike," works is undercut by a frustrating distance, which is heightened by the veil of animality; and the inability to inhabit the alluring innocence of the child (one's anterior self) may, for writers of Wilde's ilk, therefore result in scenes of fictional infanticide in which we as readers may participate.

If the death of good, dear Little Nell were to induce laughter, how are we to read the ending of "The Star-Child," which also marks the end of its morally tainted protagonist? Is this simply Wilde's way of debunking the cult of Dickensian sentimentality, as centered on the vulnerability and innocence of childhood? Since the Star-Child, when we initially meet him, is already in a fallen state both morally and literally (having fallen from the stars), Wilde could be saying that there is nothing redeeming about a return to "innocence," as, according to Kevin Ohi, it can be "legible only from the retrospective perspective of its demise" (6). The innermost child that the childlike adult fetishizes is a "knowing" child, which will be birthed (only to be killed, mind you) by the knowingly childlike reader. From this death, then, emerges the scandalous child of queer theory, which is situated, structurally, prior to the demand to reproduce, prior to the pleasure principle. As Ohi formulates it, "The scandal of the child . . . is not that children do 'it,' want 'it,' or think about 'it,' but that they unsettle assumptions about what 'it' is, make sexuality in general veer away from reproduction to a generalizable perversion" (5). The queer child thus resists and subverts what Freud called the "narcissistic system" of paternal love, which requires that the child "fulfill those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out, to become a great man and a hero in his father's stead, or to marry a prince as a tardy compensation to the mother" (48). We see this in the beginning of Wilde's story, as the Star-Child rejects the destiny of his surrogate parent, the Woodcutter, preferring to idealize his own image as a noble heir to the heavens; even in the end the narcissistic system fails, when premature death steals him away from his kingly duties.

The Star-Child's death may also, and without contradiction, be read as a reaction against the imperative of "aesthetic morality," which is content to view art in terms of utility, "as providing an addendum of examples to a purer . . . discourse on and of truth" (Bersani 2). The bad, narcissistic Star-Child of the first half of Wilde's tale is transformed into a morally upstanding person, fit for the throne, by moving beyond his debased animal stage. But then he dies. The Star-Child is most

interesting during his "uglier" moments, Wilde suggests, as these, paradoxically, see him at his most aesthetically pleasing, during scenes of Christ-like torment. And since he ceases to be interesting for Wilde when he resumes—or, rather, assumes—his normative destiny, there is no reason to delay the inevitable. The Star-Child's death is a testament to the unruly nature of fantasy, and the inability of the artist to contain the ideal he is striving to represent. Wilde is wise to this basic process of making art. The excavation of Wilde's queer child fails, as it must, and the meaning of the Star-Child's death is too ambiguous to serve as an exemplar for Victorian morality. This death is important, therefore, exactly because it fails in this way, rendering Wilde's failure a success for both reader and author.

Notes

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¹Sedgwick includes aunts in the avunculate, and, as such, she expands on the etymology, which exclusively recognizes (maternal) uncles. Her usage, while textually appropriate, is technically muddled.

²We need only think of the haughty ball in fellow nineteenth-century fabulist Hans Christian Andersen's "The Love Affair of the Top and the Ball," whose unwarranted snobbery leads to a dismal fate among "sweepings," "cabbage stalks," and other general garbage (160). Sarah Marsh has noted how several critics "have observed Wilde's apparent imitation of Andersen's fairy tales" (73). However, to my knowledge no one has ever commented on "The Love Affair of the Top and the Ball" in relation to Wilde.

³Gary Schmidgall makes the biographical point that the Star-Child's "sudden transformation into 'loathsome' ugliness is rather reminiscent of descriptions of the furious egotism of Lord Alfred Douglas" (162).

⁴Wilde's choice to have the Star-Child brought up in the home of a woodcutter echoes many Indo-European legends and myths, in which "[f]avourite upbringers were the shepherd . . . and the smith" (Bremmer 73). Such narratives generally preferred "people who were of low social standing and *outside normal society*" (73; my emphasis).

⁵Stockton focuses specifically on the role of dogs in relation to children. Dogs are not the only animals that might perform the role of ally to children's queerness, however. In the *Little House on the Prairie* series, as Tison Pugh points out, "Laura's attachment to horses could . . . derail her development into social and sexual normativity: what happens to the series, to her character, if she refuses to marry Almanzo and instead remains contentedly in love with horses?" (40–41).

⁶The quest motif places ultimate importance on mandatory exile from society, which is indeed "the first step of the quest," as identified by Joseph Campbell in his classic book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (385).

⁷These promises are: "to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and,

with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged" (Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 3).

⁸For example, as Ginger S. Frost points out, "breaching" named the transition by which boys were made to wear pants instead of skirts; this served to (re)enforce gender difference among children (28).

⁹See Graham Robb's chapter on fairy tales, esp. 218–22, regarding pederastic poetry in nineteenth-century letters.

¹⁰The historical context should be considered here. *Dorian Gray* was published during the aftermath of what is known as "the Cleveland Street scandal," which uncovered the operation of a male brothel. Ed Cohen points out that this "affair provided the first major coverage of prosecutions under the Criminal Law Amendment Act for 'committing acts of gross indecency'" (124). The language of that law thus fueled the discourse on morality in the domain of literature.

¹¹In *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, C. John Sommerville invokes the expression "youth is wasted on the young" (as well as its negation) to explain that envy is central to the adult's relation to childhood (4).

¹²I base this understanding on how Lacan uses the term *invidia* (see Ohi 95).

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