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Introduction

Fairies were dying off in the nineteenth century. . . . Their movements became languid in a fever of erudition and philosophy.

(Goyau 345)

The nineteenth century, arguably one of the most chaotic in France's history, was marked by perpetual revolution and regime change, cycling through two empires, two monarchies, and three republics. The fairy tales included in this volume were written by writers who participated in the decadent literary movement or whose work is indebted to the decadent aesthetic, a cynical and aesthetically driven reaction to this tumultuous century. Hundreds of "decadent" fairy tales appeared in France between 1870 and 1914, and our volume aims to introduce English-language readers to this enthralling and often troubling corpus.

In an important sense, these fairy tales are the continuation of a long-standing fascination with the genre known in French as the *conte de fées*. From the late seventeenth century until the Revolution, writers in France had written more than three hundred fairy tales, mostly for adult readers, that were influential far beyond the borders of metropolitan France, "the Hexagon." In the nineteenth century, the genre took on new life through rewritings

and new tales by the likes of George Sand, translations of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, adaptations for opera and theater by Jacques Offenbach and Paul Dukas, and at the very end of the century in the films of Georges Méliès. All of these developments owed a great debt to the canonical status the *conte de fées* had acquired thanks especially to the burgeoning of children's literature at the time. Figures such as Puss 'n Boots, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Sleeping Beauty—all characters featured by Charles Perrault in his *Stories or Tales of Yesteryear* (1697)—became ubiquitous cultural references because of the chapbooks, *images d'Épinal*,¹ children's books, and marionette plays that proliferated in nineteenth-century France. Alongside these literary and artistic developments were the efforts to collect and preserve oral folktales undertaken by folklorists.²

In France and elsewhere, fairy tales have often appeared in moments of cultural, social, or political crisis and transition, and decadent *contes de fées* were no exception.³ Deeply indebted to the rich and variegated traditions of the *conte de fées* in nineteenth-century France, decadent writers also sought to depart from them in ways that responded to the political, social, and intellectual upheaval of their times. A European phenomenon, the decadent movement in France appeared during—and in reaction to—the Third Republic (1870–1940), which was born in the flames of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and of the short-lived Paris Commune (1871), a radical experiment in collective governance that was brutally quashed by the provisional government. Although constitutionally stable, the Third Republic witnessed a period of political, social, and religious contention. Historians have attributed a number of anxieties to the nation during this

time, stemming from several social and geopolitical causes, including fallout from the devastating loss to the Germans, a rapidly evolving class structure, and the entrance of women into the workforce. Causing an influx of workers to cities, the Industrial Revolution fundamentally changed the economy and demographics and challenged class boundaries. The labor movement and demands from women's rights groups, including expanded education for girls and marriage reform, were perceived as threats on both the right and the left. In the political sphere, monarchists and their allies in the church continued to oppose the Republic, which, in return, stirred anticlerical sentiment. Republican secularism eventually culminated in the separation of church and state in 1905. Political divisions were often stark, as traditionalists sought a return to an order that no longer was possible, in opposition to defenders of the young Republic, who waved the banner of progress.

The nineteenth century was also an intellectually dynamic time. The philosophy of positivism, dating to the first part of the century and originating in the works of philosopher Auguste Comte, undergirded the rationalist affirmation of science and progress. Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection had a profound effect on the way people saw the physical and social world. Across Europe, innovation and discovery contributed to the extraordinary advances in industry, transportation, communications, and science. The expanding networks of railroads, automation, and electricity fueled the rise of industry. This period also saw enormous breakthroughs in medicine, such as Louis Pasteur's germ theory and work in immunology. Other developments include photography and X-rays, transatlantic ocean travel and automobiles, and the telegraph, all astounding innovations,

many of which were on display at universal expositions in Paris and abroad at the end and turn of the century.

In the face of such innovation and change, observers toward the end of the nineteenth century noted the disparity between technological and broader social trends on one hand, and, on the other, the stereotypically unmechanized and yet magical world of fairy tales. According to historian and philosopher Ernest Renan, “the richness of the marvelous endures up until the incontrovertible advent of the scientific age” (*L’Avenir de la science* 263). It was frequently repeated that progress menaced the fairy, that “railways . . . put fairies to flight” (Goyau 18). Trends in literature during the second half of the century would also seem to have been inhospitable to the genre of the fairy tale. Naturalism, the hyper-realistic, scientific approach to fiction championed by Emile Zola, had no patience for irrationality, much less magic wands and talking animals. Its harsh and unblinking representations of the seamier aspects of contemporary France were anything but enchanting.⁴

In a different literary vein, one also the product of positivism and technological advancement, this period witnessed the development of science fiction as a genre. Although important precedents existed before the nineteenth century, inventions related to electricity and travel fueled writing that relied upon futuristic settings, unfamiliar worlds, or as-yet-unrealized technological inventions. The term “science fiction” was coined in the 1850s. Soon thereafter Jules Verne, considered one of the genre’s founding fathers, began publishing books such as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) to great acclaim from both general readers and members of the scientific community. Interestingly enough, one contemporary writer linked

Verne to the passing of fairies: “The good fairies of yesteryear are no longer among us. . . . There is only one remaining today: the fairy Electricity, whose godson Jules Verne might well have been” (quoted in Lemire 98). Jean Lorrain also lamented that “children of this generation read Jules Verne rather than Perrault” (*Princesses* 2). However, even Verne authored a story labeled as a fairy tale, called “The Rat Family” (1891), which was based on the premise of metempsychosis. Pierre Veber’s “The Last Fairy” ironically invokes science fiction by representing a fairy who is dumbfounded and outdone by cutting-edge technology.

The fairy tale nonetheless thrived at the end of the century: one critic writes of an “invasion of fairies” around 1880 (Jullian 67). This burst in the production of fairy tales coincided with the decadent movement, the cynicism of which countered positivism in general and naturalism in particular. Beyond its literary and artistic manifestations, decadence could be called a philosophical position that took issue with the celebration of progress. As suggested by the word’s Latin root, “to fall away from,” the idea of decadence presupposed a world in decline rather than one moving forward. Although it was much more innovative and experimental than was the stylistic conservatism of naturalist fiction, decadent literature followed a logic that was *politically* conservative. Like monarchists and proponents of the church, decadent writers regretted the fall of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie and working classes. Instead of seeing advancement in new technologies, they were frightened by modernization and appalled by democratization and ensuing changes in the social landscape. Philippe Jullian contends that this renewal in fairy tales “responds to the profound need for a change of scene; their magic wand is a protest against Edison’s discoveries” (69–70).

In flight from the modern, decadent writers frequently looked back to classic fairy tales, which they recast with deliberately contemporary reinterpretations. They proposed sequels to classic tales, imagined new plots inspired by details from them, and blended magical fairy-tale settings with anachronistic elements. Several examples appear in this volume, including variations on Cinderella (Apollinaire, Bergerat, Cahun, Lemaître, Schwob), Sleeping Beauty (Fersen, France, Mendès), and Bluebeard (France, Lemaître, Schwob). Other tales borrow characters and weave them into their own plots, such as Renée Vivien's "Prince Charming" and Emile Bergerat's "28-Kilometer Boots," which takes elements from Perrault's "Little Thumbling." These examples confirm Jean de Palacio's contention that the tales of Charles Perrault had a particular resonance for decadent writers. Even prior to the decadent moment, Perrault's prominence among nineteenth-century writers was evidenced by such titles as Alphonse Daudet's *The Novel of Red Riding Hood* (1862) and Léo Lespès's *Perrault's Tales Continued* (1865). But there is a paradox in the decadent fairy tale's reliance on Perrault, who championed the "modern" notion of progress in the late seventeenth-century Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, and whose fairy tales eschewed nostalgia for an aristocratic ethos found in many of the *contes de fées* by contemporaneous women writers.⁵ And so, fin de siècle revisions were in no way constrained by respect for the master and, indeed, might better be called perversions rather than revisions.⁶ Willy's "Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned," for instance, presents a parade of characters from Perrault's *Stories or Tales of Yesteryear* and allows such villains as the ogre of Little Thumbling, the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood, and Bluebeard himself to relate their own tales of woe, demonizing those

who are victims in the original versions. Similarly, France's "The Seven Wives of Bluebeard" subtitled "according to authentic documents," contests the authority of Perrault's version altogether, as does Mendès in his "Dreaming Beauty." But the seriousness and naïveté that decadent writers attribute to Perrault stand in stark contrast to the mocking irony deployed by the narrative voice and the final morals of the *Stories or Tales of Yesteryear*. Their (mis)reading of Perrault is yet a further perversion of the genre they credit him with inaugurating. Another perversion of sorts is the decadent fairy tale's neglect of the many women writers who dominated the seventeenth-century vogue, but who were being steadily eclipsed by Perrault in spite of chapbook publications and stage productions of their tales throughout the nineteenth century.

Beyond Perrault, references to other traditions speak to decadent writers' acquaintance with contemporaneous scholarship and literature. Characters and settings from Arthurian legend (Morgane, Viviane, and the forest of Brocéliande), made prominent by nineteenth-century medievalists, appear in tales by Fersen, Mendès, and Ricard, among others. Also referenced is Melusina, who is featured in medieval French and German works and resurrected by nineteenth-century German writers and composers (Arnim, Goethe, La Roche, Mendelssohn, and Hoffmann). An important French influence was the vein of fantastic literature that appeared throughout the century, from Mérimée (*La Vénus d'Ille*, 1837) and Nerval (*Aurélia*, 1855) to Maupassant (*Le Horla*, 1886–87) and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (*Contes cruels*, 1883). Following Tzvetan Todorov's well-known definition, the fantastic text, unlike the fairy tale, is predicated on a narrative hesitation about the reality of seemingly supernatural events. This hesita-

tion is found in many of the decadent fairy tales, most notably those by Rachilde and Régnier. Decadent writers in France were also familiar with Victorian English fairy tales and incorporate into their stories the diminutive fairies and pixies of this tradition. Unlike the rewritings of Perrault's fairy tales, these borrowings aim less to rework plot than to put these characters into decidedly new and modern settings.

But decadent writers also invented their own characters, whose powers of enchantment they nonetheless place in question, frequently exploiting the genre to respond to present-day issues. Whether these writers situate their characters in settings that are magical or, on the contrary, realistic and contemporary, the trope of death and decline runs throughout their tales.⁷ In many of them, fairies represent an endangered species; in others, their very existence is questioned. A common trope of decadent literature finds a maladapted but artistically refined protagonist, typically of noble birth, who represents the last descendent of a dying bloodline. The classic example, from Joris-Karl Huysmans's seminal decadent novel, *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*, 1884), is the androgynous character Des Esseintes, a physically and psychologically fragile young man whose family has fallen victim to hereditary degeneration. Among the tales that follow, Rachilde's "The Mortis" offers the example of the count Sébastiani Ceccaldo-Rossi who, like Des Esseintes, is identified as "the last of his clan." Similarly, the last remaining fairy is a recurring figure in these tales. In Daudet's "The Fairies of France," for instance, the last fairy appears in court as an angry incendiary who accuses modern rationality and the death of belief in the marvelous for the crime of killing off fairies. Both Pierre Veber and Catulle Mendès wrote tales entitled "The Last Fairy," and each attributes their demise to

the contemporary moment: “there is no longer a place for fairies in the modern world” (Veber).

Mendès, by far the most prolific writer of fairy tales during this period, blames knowledge in particular: “men and women had become too wise to require the help of a little fairy.” Erudition rendered obsolete the powers of fairies, previously sustained by folk wisdom. Not only does empiricism disprove magic; its gravitas threatens the lighthearted innocence associated with children and fairy tales. One nineteenth-century author described what he saw as a change in the way such tales were written, considered, and consumed:

When we were children . . . we were given fairy tales at the new year for our amusement. . . . This no longer happens today. Fairy tales have acquired immense importance in literature. Now they have a genealogy or a history, like the great seigneurs. There is a geography, an astronomy, a zoology, and soon there will be a philosophy and a religion of fairy tales. *Analysis has arrived, goodbye jollity!* (Laboulaye 1–2, emphasis added)

According to Laboulaye, erudition and the marvelous are incompatible: “the wittier the man, the more artless and tedious his tales” (3).

Fairies are thus frequently seen to be the victims of modern cynicism and technological advancement. While plentiful in the French fairy-tale tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in this corpus they lose their homes owing to deforestation and industrialization: “there were no longer many fairies in the region since the ravages of the war, industry, and the attentive care

of the government had cleared their forests” (Mockel). Simple country folk cease to believe in them. Fairies are sometimes obliged to move to Paris, center of manufacturing and science, which Walter Benjamin called the “capital of the nineteenth century.” Urbanism incarnates everything that is antithetical to enchantment, including industry and cynicism. In the capital, fairies must beg to survive.

As a motif, the disappearance of the fairy echoes nineteenth-century folklorists’ frequent laments about the rapid decline in oral storytelling, which was attributed to the modernization so forcefully derided by decadent writers. Although it is impossible to know for certain whether they were alluding to the contemporaneous work of those collecting and publishing oral folktales, this striking parallel points to a shared reverence for tradition in spite of very different, even antithetical means of expressing that reverence. Whereas folklorists employed the tools of modern erudition to preserve the record of endangered beliefs and stories—while distancing themselves from them—decadent writers used their fairy tales to counter positivistic rationalism. As does Catulle Mendès when he depicts young innocents who still believe in magic (“the illusions of a poor little girl”) and the restoration of the powers of fairies (“The Lucky Find”). Still, typical of the cynicism of the decadents, Mendès undercuts this solution in his “Last Fairy,” when another naive young girl chooses to follow a decrepit old man carrying a box of precious stones instead of saving the last fairy, thus assuring her death. The rejection of a happy ending, not unprecedented in folk- and fairy tales, here might be read as an indictment of an economy based on capital, but also as a jaundiced reflection on love. Whether it is celebrated

or mourned, the marvelous becomes a means by which the decadent fairy tale casts a critical gaze on modern existence.

While fairies are frequently depicted as victims of the present day, tale writers just as often represent them as dangerous creatures corrupted by contemporary society, thus updating the traditional evil fairy character and using her to highlight modern perversity.⁸ Willy's "Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned" informs its readers that "there are no good fairies: the bad ones killed them off long ago." They wreak havoc, from Mockel's spiteful fairies to vengeful ones in Lorrain, to the burning of Paris in Daudet. The depiction of bad fairies, or bad magic, also illuminates the sexual politics of the decadent moment, which was shaped by the post-war crisis of masculinity.⁹ Just as the prominence of the *femme fatale* in decadent literature reflected this *fin-de-siècle* crisis, so did the fatal fairy reflect male anxiety about the dangers of female sexuality. Arène's "The Ogresses," a rewriting of Perrault's "Little Thumbling," presents a sensitive young painter "in love with the unreal" who falls in love with and falls victim to the Ogre's seven daughters, who are assimilated to contemporary Parisian women. As does Willy, France turns the tables to reveal Bluebeard to be the victim of his scheming wives. Other examples of the characteristically decadent trope of the *femme fatale* include Régnier's "The Living Door Knocker."

Nearly a century before postmodern fairy tales by Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter, and others upend fairy-tale stereotypes about gender and sexuality, decadent writers created female characters unlike the virginal beauties of the classic tales and exposed the romantic myths associated with the genre. Mendès's *Beauty* refuses the prince's kiss, preferring her own

dreams to the love and riches he offers. And in Willy's tale, the young couple Daphnis and Chloe are dissuaded from marrying each other after a troop of characters out of Perrault convince them not to believe in fairy tales: "People have filled your head with ridiculously optimistic notions and persuaded you to believe in good fairies. . . . All that, my children, is a farce, and you must believe the exact opposite of such nonsense." They are not, however, deterred from consummating their passion, and Chloe happily loses her virginity. Mendès also paints a cynical picture of love in "The Lucky Find," whose personified Love and Beauty lose "the respect and admiration of the human race" because they fail to conduct themselves "as honorable divinities."

Decadent writers frequently compared the decline of contemporary civilization to the fall of the Roman Empire, especially indicting what they saw as the perversity of modern gender roles and sexuality. Joséphin Péladan, a colorful, prolific, and extremely conservative monarchist and Catholic (who nonetheless was deeply interested in the occult) is a case in point. His fourteen-volume novel cycle, *La Décadence latine* (*The Latin Decadence*, 1884–1900), which he called an *ethopœia* (moral portraiture), presents Paris as a den of corruption, filled with depraved, sexually aberrant characters. Although Péladan did not write fairy tales per se, he showed interest in fairies and folklore in such works as his novel *Méluşine* (1895) and a treatise on femininity entitled *Comment on devient fée* (*How to Become a Fairy*, 1893). In the latter, Péladan condemns contemporary women for having usurped male prerogatives and suggests that gender confusion is a symptom of cultural decline: "Periods of decadence display an inversion in sex roles, and degenerate bloodlines are full of women doctors and women artists" (106). He posits the fairy as a sub-

lime incarnation of nurturing femininity, a “queen of feelings” (167) who welcomes her ornamental role as counterpoint to the “master of ideas”: “to be a fairy is to be beautiful in both heart and body” (166).

Characters manifesting nonnormative sexual and gender comportment are not infrequent in the sexually convoluted world of decadent fiction. Contemporary trends in such fields as anthropology, psychiatry, and criminology—which were keenly interested in what they viewed as sexual pathologies, chief among them homosexuality—contributed to the decadent fascination with perversion. Writers of the period regularly peopled their fiction with sexually deviant characters, thus mirroring the scientific work of men like British physician Havelock Ellis, German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who categorized and documented erotic aberration. Androgynous, effeminate, and sapphic characters abound in decadent fiction, exemplified in this collection by Vivien’s “Prince Charming” and Mendès’s “An Unsuitable Guest.” The former presents a charming prince who turns out to be a woman, the latter a less-than-manly prince who prefers collecting flowers to waging warfare. And in his tale “Isolina / Isolin,” Mendès’s title character is magically transformed into a man. Cahun’s version of Cinderella paints her as a masochist, which, like the homosexual, was a category invented toward the end of the century. And Rachilde, whose prolific oeuvre is famous for its portrayal of nontraditional sexualities (one of her most notorious novels, *Monsieur Vénus*, 1884, features sadomasochism and gender role reversal), presents a prince who “loved in equal measure brunette ladies and blond pages, beautiful statues and heraldic dogs.”

Decadents looked to Charles Baudelaire, author of *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), as an important influence. He described his aesthetic project as an alchemical process of extracting beauty from evil. We include his sole tale, “Fairies’ Gifts,” originally published in his collection of prose poems, *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869). In the sexualized landscape of the decadent fairy tale, flowers of evil abound. Jean Lorrain’s “Princess of the Red Lilies” destroys the lilies of her garden; as she does so, soldiers fall on the fields of battle and princes die. Similarly, in Rachilde’s “The Mortis,” hoards of lovely flowers, “smoldering with forbidden fragrances,” attack the city of Florence after cholera has wiped out its inhabitants, bathing it in a sea of color. To ease his hunger, the lone survivor eats rosebuds, likened to heads of women, which intoxicate and then kill him.

Such unnatural, deadly flowers incarnate both the decadent quest for beauty, aligned with the movement of art for art and its denaturalizing aesthetic, which privileged artifice and ornate refinement over crude realism. A sense of despair before the contemporary and contempt for the masses fed decadent preference for the uncommon, and even abnormal, excessive, and neurotic, over the commonplace. Arène’s character Estevanet is an exemplary decadent hero: a painter of delicate sensibility, whose art “the public could not understand.” Because he is out of synch with the vulgarity of the present, he is ill-equipped to withstand its barbarity and succumbs to the seven fatal ogresses.

Just as the decadent fairy tale repudiated positivism and naturalism by taking refuge in magic and the unreal, so did renewed fin de siècle interest in the occult, magnetism, and esotericism represent a reaction to scientism, the ideal of progress, and mod-

ern society. But even as decadents fled from the empirical world, in their fairy tales wonderment falls victim to the contemporary moment, and herein lies their cynicism. Palacio has suggested that the decadent tale is “devoid of naïveté.” These tales both reject a conception of the genre dependent upon innocence and wonder, and renew it by infusing it with modern paradigms and opening up ways of critiquing them, albeit ambiguously.

Like the vast majority of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *contes de fées*, decadent fairy tales were written for adult readers rather than children and so dispensed with naïveté and didacticism. Reveling in irony and dénouements that strayed from traditional morality, they often held ambiguous messages. The critique they perform of late nineteenth-century political, social, and intellectual worlds cannot always be reduced to the reactionary impulse at the heart of the decadent movement. And occasionally, some of these fairy tales swerved in a different direction to find inspiration, rather than annihilation, in modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, one critic optimistically predicted that after their nineteenth-century decline, fairy tales would regain visibility, prompted by science itself. Were not electric lighting, horseless carriages, urban underground railways, and moving pictures all cause for marvel? Indeed, following the discovery of electricity and the 1881 Paris Exposition internationale d’électricité—which featured, among other things, Edison’s incandescent light and Bell’s telephone—electric current was frequently referred to as “la fée électricité.” As the twentieth century dawned,

fairies and genies began once again to show themselves to people. The first automobiles they caught sight of con-

vinced them that the prophecy had been fulfilled. They believed that women traveling in automobiles were fairies come to revisit the realms they once inhabited. (Goyau 18)

Technology might just have given new life to the “last fairy.”

Notes

1. Illustrations with narrative captions on a single page that were ancestors of the comic book.
2. Including, most notably, Jean-François Bladé, François Cadic, Emmanuel Cosquin, François-Marie Luzel, Achille Millien, and Paul Sébillot. On folklorists in nineteenth-century France, see Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France*, and Baycroft and Hopkin, *Folklore and Nationalism in the Long Nineteenth Century*.
3. For instance, the first vogue of fairy tales in France occurred during the waning years of Louis XIV's reign, a period Paul Hasard famously equated with a "crisis of European consciousness."
4. For example, in *L'Assommoir* (1877) Zola tackled the social plague of alcoholism among the working class, and in *Nana* (1880) he focused on the life of a courtesan. However, Zola himself published a rather conventional fairy tale, "La Fée amoureuse," in an early publication, *Contes à Ninon* (1864).
5. See Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality and Gender*.
6. Characters from fairy tales were also quite visible in such novels as these: Oscar Méténier, *Barbe-bleue* (1893); Gustave Claudin, *La Veuve au bois dormant* (1888); Emile Richebourg, *Cendrillon: la fée de l'atelier* (1892). And in plays: Maurice Maeterlinck, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* (1896); Jean Richepin and Henri Cain, *La Belle au bois dormant: féerie lyrique en vers* (1908).
7. See Chatelain, "Lorsque le titre se fait épitaphe," and Goyau, *La Vie et la mort des fées*.
8. See Viegnes, "La Force au féminin dans le conte merveilleux fin-de-siècle."
9. See Maugue, *L'Identité masculine en crise*.