

**PEDERASTY AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S  
*THE HAPPY PRINCE AND OTHER TALES***

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*Abstract*

This article argues that pederastic sexual activity is evident in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), and it suggests that sex was a significant element in Wilde's pederastic imagination. I contend that sexual activity is a pressing topic in Wilde studies due to the prevalence of the queer theory framework in the field. The historical exactitude of queer theory has produced an overdue analysis of Wilde's eros in relation to 'pederasty' as opposed to 'homosexuality', but its profound anti-foundationality has led to a refusal to calcify the moments in Wilde's fiction when sexual activity between males may be in the figurative mix, and this repeats the de-realising representational strategies that once consigned male-male sex to a shadowlike existence. I contest the etherealising bent of queer theory *vis-à-vis* Wilde on theoretical, textual and historical grounds, and I then unearth a hitherto unidentified interaction between the pederastic and sexual elements in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. I show that the issue of mutuality in pederastic relations is a significant concern for Wilde, and I argue that he remains pessimistic about the place of sex in pederastic relationships because it subsumes, distorts, or eradicates what he saw as pederasty's invigorative properties.

The denaturalising, decentring and defamiliarising properties of queer theory have had a significant impact on Wilde studies over the last twenty years.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I focus on the relationship between two of these effects: (1.) the need to consider the 'pederastic' nature of Wilde's eros as opposed to the 'homosexual' one, and (2.) the fact that sexual activity has been sidelined in most discussions of Wilde's literary works. In the first section, I conduct a general discussion of the relationship between sex, pederasty and Wilde, and I outline the need for more analytical follow through on the moments in Wilde's *oeuvre* when sexual activity seems to be implied. In the second section, I consider three intergenerational and inter-dimensional relationships between male characters in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888).<sup>2</sup> This collection is an apt place to engage the link between pederasty and sexual activity: it has been one of the main focal points in current discussions of Wilde's pederastic identity, and John-Charles Duffy has recently bucked the critical trend by identifying

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion of these effects, see Richard A. Kaye, 'Gay Studies / Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde', in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. by Frederick S. Roden (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 189-223 (pp. 191-219).

<sup>2</sup> The stories from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* are included in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1966). Subsequent references to all of Wilde's works in the article are to this edition, and they appear parenthetically in the text, preceded, when necessary, by the title of the work.

its representations of sex scenes.<sup>3</sup> However, Wood does not locate sexual activity in the collection as she advances her argument that Wilde ‘proffers an artificial, idealistic sensuality’, and sexual activity in Duffy’s essay is just one of the many ‘gay’ ‘themes’ that he discusses.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I demarcate two hitherto unidentified examples of sex scenes in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and I examine how the pederastic frame of the relationships in the collection enables Wilde to consider the dynamics of pederastic bonds, especially the place of sex in them. An important element of my argument is that the prevalent queer theory framework in Wilde studies is not the most effective way of handling the presence and significance of the pederastic sexual undercurrents in Wilde’s *oeuvre*.

## I.

Queer Theory promotes attentiveness to historical particularities, and its refusal to presuppose the existence of homo/hetero forms of selfhood in periods preceding the twentieth century has yielded a culturally unfamiliar version of Wilde. Wilde has (re)emerged as ‘the most famous pederast in the world’s history’, but the dissolution of his status as the ‘ultimate icon of the modern homosexual’ has coincided with the etherealisation of sexual activity in his *oeuvre*.<sup>5</sup> This movement into indistinctness is epistemo-logically troubling, and it is also difficult to uphold in view of Wilde’s literature and his life experiences. In this section, I explore why pederastic sex scenes in Wilde’s *oeuvre* have remained untapped, and I demonstrate the connection between pederasty, sex and Wilde that sets up my consideration of this subject in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.

In the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Wilde’s own eros was most closely tuned to the note of [...] pederastic love’, and ‘his desires seem to have been structured intensely by the crossing of definitional lines – of age, milieu, initiatedness, and physique, most notably – sufficiently marked to make him an embattled subject for the “homosexual” homo-genization’.<sup>6</sup> As Sedgwick notes, the

<sup>3</sup> The fact that pederasty is at stake in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* has been convincingly established in the last decade, mainly by Naomi Wood’s ‘Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales’, *Marvels & Tales*, 16 (2002), 156-70, and, perhaps to a lesser extent by John-Charles Duffy’s ‘Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 327-50.

<sup>4</sup> Wood, ‘Creating the Sensual Child’, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> For the two comments, see, respectively, Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (London: W.H. Allen, 1967), p. 176; and Joseph Bristow, ‘“A Complex Multiform Creature”: Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 195-218 (p. 199).

<sup>6</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 57-58.

‘new homo/hetero terms’ had a ‘fix[ing]’ quality because they hinged on notions like ‘sameness’, ‘diagnos[is]’, ‘congruence’, and ‘stabil[ity]’, and they thereby ‘streamlined’ people and desires.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, pederasty is a more unruly framework. Its links to the hereditariness of the ‘homo/hetero’ model are weak, as pederasty is based on ‘acts’ and ‘relations’ as opposed to ‘types’.<sup>8</sup> The resultant idea of mutability is also evident in the fact that pederasty was designed to enable the growth, the socialisation, and, thus, the alteration of male youths through relations with adult males.<sup>9</sup>

The framework for analysing Wilde’s texts is now invariably a ‘queer’ one.<sup>10</sup> The ‘queer’ framework eschews and denaturalises the stabilising interpretive apparatus that produced our ‘modern sexual identities’, and it can thereby attend to the ‘slippage’, ‘blurr[ing]’, ‘confus[ion]’, and ‘indeterminacies’ that characterise sexuality in the minds of queer thinkers.<sup>11</sup> Alan Sinfield’s work on *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) aptly demonstrates the removal of the ‘homo’/‘same’ equation from discussions of Wilde’s texts. Christopher Craft has argued that the ‘discourse’ of ‘homosexuality’ is invoked in the play by the titular pun of Earnest/Urning, but Craft notes that the character Ernest does not correlate with the ‘essentialist notions of being’ that the word ‘Urning’ evoked: Ernest’s origin was in a terminus, and he was replaced by a work of fiction.<sup>12</sup> After his ‘origin has been terminated in this [farcical] way’, ‘no “serious” appeal can be made to natural reference or natural ground’, and ‘the very possibility of a “true inversion” grounded not in trope but in nature is [...] punningly dismissed by [the] play’.<sup>13</sup> Sinfield disputes Wilde’s ability to ‘broadcast homosexual critique into the gay interspace of a pun’.<sup>14</sup> He rejects the locus of such readings by arguing that sexual readings of ‘Ernest’ are invalid because the two Ernests are pursuing females, and he disputes attempts to read effeminate dandies as ‘Urnings’ because the ‘aristocrat was expected to be effeminate, so same-sex passion was not foregrounded by his manner’.<sup>15</sup> In this

<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, pp. 57, 58, 59, 60.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 18-21.

<sup>9</sup> See William Armstrong Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 87-96.

<sup>10</sup> Kaye, ‘Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde’, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Mills, ‘Male-Male Love and Sex in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500’, in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. by Matt Cook, with Robert Mills, Randolph Trumbach and H.G. Cocks (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), pp. 1-44 (pp. 43, 11, 5, 29, 18).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*’, *Representations*, 31 (1990), 19-46 (pp. 22, 46, 38-39).

<sup>13</sup> Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury’, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury’, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Sinfield, ‘“Effeminacy” and “Femininity”: Sexual Politics in Wilde’s Comedies’, *Modern Drama*, 37 (1994), 34-52 (pp. 34-35, 35, 39).

reading, Craft's delineation of the play's 'homosexual' content is a product of our expectation of the 'disclos[ure]' of a sexual 'truth', and this expectation distorts a text that was written by a man whose perception was not informed by our framework.<sup>16</sup> In the reading of *Sinfield*, as in Joseph Bristow's interpretation, the 'homo' in 'homosexual' disappears, and its attendant notions of sameness, 'truth', and singularity also vanish.<sup>17</sup> As a result, queer theory's cherished idea of 'openness' prevails.<sup>18</sup>

As the 'homo' disappears, though, so does the assuredness that produces 'fully developed homosexual undercurrent[s]' by 'reduc[ing] each and every moment of suggestive obliquity in Wilde's writings to an undeniable instance of homophile intensity', and, crucially, the envelopment of Wilde's *oeuvre* by 'queer' haziness either obfuscates or erases possible instances of sexual activity.<sup>19</sup> For example, Bristow leaves Ernest's 'sins' unspecified, and he always refuses to follow through on suggestions that such secrets may be homosexual: he refuses any definiteness by simply conceding that they may, 'at some undisclosed level, point to [...] disruptive fields of meaning'.<sup>20</sup> *Sinfield* goes further than Bristow: he empties the seemingly suggestive notion of 'Bunburying' of its sexual import by noting that there is no evidence that 'bun' denoted 'bum' in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the 'oral, genital, and anal' resonances of the act that Craft identifies presumably dissolve.<sup>22</sup>

One problem with the pluralisation or dissolution of such suggestive sexual moments is that it replicates the 'derealiz[ing]' representational strategies that have been used by opponents of sex between people of the same gender.<sup>23</sup> Terry Castle offers a valuable comment on this issue when she attempts 'to bring the lesbian back into focus' by showing that she has 'always' 'existed'.<sup>24</sup> Her book is a response to the 'nonseeing', 'forgetting', and 'disembod[y]ing' strategies which previous generations have used to represent 'homosexuality', and which are being perversely replicated by the current generation of academic 'deconstructors'.<sup>25</sup> She even posits a reason why these recent 'deconstructors' are so determined to dismantle the sexual categories that she seeks to uphold:

<sup>16</sup> See Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 211, 197-99.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 197-98, 208, 210.

<sup>18</sup> The description of queer theory as an 'open' methodology is widespread (see, for example, Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, pp. 8-9).

<sup>19</sup> Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 197, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 197, 210.

<sup>21</sup> *Sinfield*, "'Effeminacy'", pp. 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Craft, 'Alias Bunbury', pp. 29, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 1-20.

<sup>25</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 12.

One of the reasons that historians of sexuality have been so eager to treat lesbianism as a recently ‘invented’ (and therefore limited) phenomenon, it seems to me, is because it is so difficult – still – for many people to acknowledge that women can and do have sexual relations with one another.<sup>26</sup>

These ‘morbid refusals to visualize’ are labelled ‘imaginative “blockages”’, and they allegedly ‘afflict the more sophisticated’ as well as the bigots, the conformists, and so forth.<sup>27</sup>

Are these ‘blockages’ manifest in the works of Bristow and Sinfield, and why might they be operative? For example, can the obfuscation or contestation of the sexual meaning of ‘Bunbury’ really be upheld? Bunbury is a ‘permanent invalid’, and to be familiar with him is to dwell by a ‘bed of pain’.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it is noted that ‘know[ing] Bunbury’ (p. 327) may produce ‘pain’ and ‘pleasures’ (p. 348), and to go Bunburying involves indulging scandalous, unspeakable ‘pleasures’.<sup>29</sup> Neither Bristow nor Sinfield interrogate these specific moments, and the sexual acts that seem to be striving to appear are thereby left ‘undisclosed’.<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, they are left as Wilde packaged them, but they are left that way in a society that no longer has the legal restraints which once proscribed ‘Bunburying’ from being packaged directly. Importantly, though, the same cannot be said for the intergenerational sexual elements in Wilde’s texts. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, a Canon is described as a ‘Paedobaptist’ who ‘[s]prinkl[es]’ on young ‘infant[s]’, and his plan to perform this act at one of the ‘outlying cottages’ (pp. 346, 347, 346, 347) calls to mind the idea of sexual solicitation between males known as ‘cottaging’. Sexual relationships with minors are illegal and loaded with opprobrium in our own century, of course, and so perhaps it is understandable why there may be ‘imaginative “blockages”’ regarding such sexual relations in Wilde’s texts, as they may reflect negatively on the man who has come to ‘serve’ as ‘the ultimate icon of the modern homosexual’, and, thus, on ‘homosexuality’ itself.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, the question of whether it is sufficient to leave the sexual meanings in Wilde’s literature to operate on ‘some undisclosed level’ is a particularly freighted one, but sexual activity simply cannot be avoided in relation to Wilde.<sup>32</sup> Wilde knew that pederastic ‘affection’ was predicated on transitivity and difference, and he therefore does answer uneasily to the ‘homo’ type of readings that expect a

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<sup>26</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1966), pp. 321-84 (pp. 326, 348).

<sup>29</sup> Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury’, p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 197.

<sup>31</sup> See Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 199.

<sup>32</sup> See Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 197.

‘fully developed’ ‘sexual truth’.<sup>33</sup> However, sexual activity *was* always somewhere in his pederastic mix. In his famous speech from the dock during the second of his three trials in 1895, he said:

‘The love that dares not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. [...] It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an older and a younger man, when the older man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him.<sup>34</sup>

In Wilde’s model, the elder man and younger man have very *different* qualities, and this is what generates the bond between them. The absence of the ‘homo’ is further pronounced by the deficiency of other features that cluster around *sameness*. Reciprocity and congruence do not exist in the ‘great affection’ as it is one-way: the elder man has feelings for the younger man, but Wilde never actually suggests that these feelings are reciprocated. Wilde’s view of the relationship is also unavoidably ephemeral because its younger side will eventually grow into the ‘life [that is] before him’. Nonetheless, Wilde’s protestation of the ‘pur[ity]’ of this type of ‘affection’ was simply not true: he may not have agreed with the legal framing of pederastic relations as ‘gross indecency’, and his denials of its sexual element may have been prudent given the punishment for the charges that he faced, but he had engaged in sex with boys. Sex was buried underneath the surface of Wilde’s speech, and it ultimately came out in the courtroom. Sex was no longer undisclosed.

The disclosure of pederastic sex scenes in Wilde’s works is a worthwhile endeavour, then, and it has both a contradictory relationship to queer theory and an important relation to Wilde studies. On the one hand, identifying the pederastic nature of such scenes is a product of queer theory’s attentiveness to the existence of unfamiliar eros, but, on the other hand, it is a contestation of the etherealising bent of a methodology that is liable to consign sexual activity to the hazy realm of indeterminacy. Queer theory has become the ‘received wisdom of humanistic scholarship’ over the last twenty years, and its disorderly precepts have proved valuable to critics who have analysed the ostensibly de-anchoring elements of Wilde’s aesthetic.<sup>35</sup> However, queer theory has also come under fire from some scholars due to its ‘reductive tendencies’, its ‘fundamentalism’, its ‘de-gaying’/self-

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 197, 211.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Century, 2003), p. 391.

<sup>35</sup> See Kaye, ‘Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde’, p. 194.

erasing effects, and the shortcomings of its thesis of historical discontinuities.<sup>36</sup> The thread that unites these various critiques is the idea of loss: the decentering strategies of queer theory remove the possibility of historical anchorage and stable identities, and they ultimately weaken both the validity of notions like ‘homosexuality’ and the enabling properties of such notions.<sup>37</sup> Bristow inadvertently captures this sense of loss when he concludes his essay on Wilde’s ‘sexual identities’ in a valedictory tone when discussing *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Such is the fate of the Bunburyist whose unnamed pleasures are terminated once the Army Lists are pulled off the shelves. But that is not to claim that he was ever at any point the ‘homosexual’ that Wilde, in our confused modern age, was for decades thought to embody.<sup>38</sup>

Bristow fittingly stresses absence as opposed to presence, and he places the onus firmly on mystery as opposed to definiteness. He denies the possibility of embodiment, identity, nomenclature and ‘the “homosexual”’ in relation to Wilde and his literary works, and he deploys negative lexemes like ‘not’ and ‘[n]ever’ to conduct this disavowal.

The disclosure of pederastic sex in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is one way of contesting the indeterminacy and absence that now seems to preponderate in Wilde studies, especially regarding the pederastic nature of sexual relationships. The demarcation of these scenes can potentially open up a new critical avenue in the field of Wilde studies, which hinges on the idea that queer theory is not always the most appropriate way of handling Wilde’s engagement with sexual issues.

## II.

The relationship between sex and pederasty is aptly shown by the critical discussion of pederastic relationships in Wilde’s lifetime, and by Wilde’s relationship to this discourse. John-Charles Duffy has argued that Wilde would have perceived two different forms of the ‘great affection’: there was the model of desexualised ‘devoted friendship[s]’ that Wilde’s contemporaries like Benjamin Jowett and John Addington

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<sup>36</sup> See, respectively, Sebastian Matzner, ‘From Uranians to Homosexuals: Philhellenism, Greek Homoeroticism and Gay Emancipation in Germany 1835-1915’, *Classical Receptions Journal*, 2 (2010), 60-91 (p. 77); Joseph Pequigney, review of David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 35 (1998), 95-105 (p. 101); Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 69, 4; and James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), passim.

<sup>37</sup> See Bersani, *Homos*, pp. 69, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 215.

Symonds eulogised, and there was the notion of *paiderastia* that invariably denoted some type of sexual contact.<sup>39</sup> Wilde himself was more than willing to *articulate* the desexualised ‘strain in Victorian discourse *pro* male love’, but he was also more than willing to *live* the sexual ‘strain’.<sup>40</sup> Dowling offers a nuanced reading of Wilde’s relation to the two discourses by eschewing the obvious verdict of hypocrisy: instead, she argues that Wilde did believe in the ‘pure’ form, but he still indulged the purportedly ‘[im]pure’ one.<sup>41</sup> He thereby occupied a more complex position on the subject of ‘pederasty’ than either the ‘devoted friendship’ or the ‘*paiderastia*’ models allow, and this tension between sexualised and desexualised pederasty is an apt context in which to discuss *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. The collection contains five stories, and I discuss the three in which the tension is most pronounced: ‘The Happy Prince’, ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’ and ‘The Devoted Friend’. In each case, I discuss the purpose of pederastic relationships, their dynamics, and the place of sex in them, and I intend to gain a further sense of the workings of Wilde’s pederastic imagination.<sup>42</sup>

‘The Happy Prince’ is the first tale in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and it chronicles the growing friendship of a Prince and a Swallow. The little Swallow is diverted from travelling to Egypt by an enormous statue of a prince who tells the Swallow of the suffering in the city that he overlooks. The Swallow is subsequently encouraged to alleviate this distress by transporting various parts of his new friend’s jewelled body to the afflicted city dwellers. He stays in the city over winter to keep his dilapidated friend company after the latter gives his eyes away to his people and the Swallow eventually dies. As a consequence, the Prince’s heart breaks and his decaying body is dismantled and melted down. The obvious discrepancy in size and age between the two friends, the depth of the “love” that they have for one another (p. 290), and the tender “kiss” “on the lips” (p. 290) that they ultimately share all point to the fact that this is an unusually intense inter-generational and inter-dimensional bond between two males. Indeed, Naomi Wood has noted that the ‘tale of the love relationship between the happy prince and the male swallow who serves and learns from him clearly dr[a]w[s] upon and analyse[s] the transcendent effects of the pederastic relationship’.<sup>43</sup>

However, Wilde inverts the intergenerational relationship in the story, and this enables him to conflate the two constituents of this bond and their seemingly separate

<sup>39</sup> Duffy, ‘Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, pp. 329-30.

<sup>40</sup> See Duffy, ‘Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, pp. 329-30.

<sup>41</sup> See Duffy, ‘Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, pp. 329-30.

<sup>42</sup> I should note that opening up sexual moments in Wilde’s texts requires the ‘monothematic’ interpretation that has been used to unearth their other pederastic undertones. For a defence of this ‘monothematic’ approach, see Michael Matthew Kaylor, *Secreted Desires: The Major Uranians: Hopkins, Pater and Wilde* (Brno, Czech Republic: Masaryk University, 2006), p. v <[http://www.mmkaylor.com/Secreted\\_Webpage\\_page\\_2.html](http://www.mmkaylor.com/Secreted_Webpage_page_2.html)> [accessed 04 May, 2011].

<sup>43</sup> Wood, ‘Creating the Sensual Child’, p. 161.

functions. In terms of experience, the Prince is clearly a youth, since his only memories involve ‘play[ing] with [his] companions in the garden’ (p. 286), whereas the Swallow is clearly the adult, since he has travelled widely. In terms of size, though, the Prince is a colossal figure who towers ‘[h]igh above the city’ (p. 285), and the Swallow is a tiny bird who is always referred to as “‘little’” (p. 290).

Even the pedagogical function of intergenerational relations is inverted and then reversed back in ‘The Happy Prince’. Pederastic pedagogy was theorised by the early Greek tribes, and it involved the *erastes* teaching his *eromenos* ‘courage’ and ‘loyalty’, preparing his mind and body for war, and stimulating and developing his intellect, thereby making him a useful, integrated member of the community.<sup>44</sup> This ‘educational authority’ of pedagogical pederasty reached its ‘culmination in Plato’s *Symposium*’.<sup>45</sup> In ‘The Happy Prince’, though, the child is the one who teaches the adult about social responsibility. The Prince repeatedly illuminates ‘all the ugliness and all the misery of [his] city’ to the Swallow (p. 286), and after continually soliciting the Swallow to ‘stay with me one night longer’ in order to aid the unfortunates in his realm (p. 288), the Swallow eventually proves to be a committed student by continuing to perform this task without even being asked. Indeed, the Swallow is the one who changes as a result of the relationship: he transforms from a cynical and self-absorbed individual into a romantic and altruistic one. Wilde manages to present this situation congruously because the child is big and the adult is small. One evening, the roles reverse back to their original form as the Swallow takes the adult role by educating the Prince about the world: he illuminates the ‘marvellous things’ (p. 290) that can be viewed in the world by telling the Prince ‘stories of what he had seen in strange lands’ (p. 289), and, at the Prince’s request, he relays the dolorous plight of the poor in the city that the Prince overlooks. The result of such inversions is something approaching harmony and equality: the seemingly patent distinctness is jumbled and reduced as both characters perform the anticipated functions of the other, and possess the expected attributes of the other.

This harmony is actually out of tune with Wilde’s pederastic imagination, since pederastic affection for him was usually one-way, and it was also reliant on exchange and extraction. In his speech in the courtroom, the elder man feels the ‘affection’, not the younger one. Indeed, the capacity for devotion that the elder man possesses is rarely properly reciprocated in Wilde’s works: Shakespeare and Erskine from *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* (1889) are besotted by younger men, and the latter run amok and behave heartlessly as the elder men helplessly observe this uncaring, reckless and wilful behaviour. Similarly, Dorian Gray goes on a series of variegated and wild adventures as his two obsessed elder companions fall away to the story’s sidelines, and even *De Profundis* (1897) can be read as Wilde’s lamentation of his devotion to a younger man who had been inattentive to the elder one’s wishes, needs and counsel.

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<sup>44</sup> See Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy*, pp. 87-89, 96.

<sup>45</sup> Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy*, p. 89.

Indeed, pederastic affection was premised on inequality, whether of size, age, experience, beauty or fondness, and it was also reliant on the idea of exchange. As Wilde's speech in the courtroom suggested, the older man desires attributes that he does not possess anymore, and the younger man will receive benefits by allowing the elder one to absorb his vivacity.

The fact that Wilde inverts and conflates the constituents and the function of the intergenerational relationship in 'The Happy Prince' enables him to address his concerns about the one-way nature of pederasty, and its foundation on exchange and extraction. The bond in the story enables the development of the adult, but the adult could easily be the child given his size and his status as the student for most of the relationship. Likewise, the child enables the adult to grow, but his lack of growth, his enormous size, and his status as a teacher could easily make him the adult. In other words, a pederastic bond like this one can be mutually invigorating: it can foster the development of the adult as well as the child, and the idea of status and discrepancy thereby becomes inconsequential. Fittingly, then, the older/smaller and younger/bigger partners in 'The Happy Prince' each express 'love' for the other, and, despite the tale's deaths and disfigurements, there is thus still a sense in which its pederastic relationship is romanticised. This may convey Wilde's hope (or his wishful dream) that mutuality and depth of affection could exist in pederastic bonds.

Wood has drawn attention to the idealisation of pederasty in 'The Happy Prince', especially given the absence of sexual suggestiveness in the story, and whilst this idealisation can be acknowledged in two senses, it can also be questioned in another.<sup>46</sup> Pederasty is connected to altruism in the story, insofar as the relationship between the Prince and the Swallow is able to develop because the Prince needs the Swallow to aid his plan to redistribute his gold and jewels. By doing so, though, the Prince and the Swallow are effectively living for others, and this mode of life is one that Wilde would strongly condemn less than a year later in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1890). Perhaps this is why the story sandwiches the altruistic actions of the two characters between the behaviour of the city's negligent and misinformed rulers: it shows that they may have temporarily alleviated the conditions of the poor, but they have done nothing to change the state of affairs that generated such conditions in the first place. Indeed, the idealism and naivety of the Prince's policy for alleviation may spring from its germination in the mind of a child, and it impacts on both members of the relationship: the Swallow suffers through the winter and dies of cold, and the Prince is blinded, disfigured and eventually heartbroken by the death of his friend. Admittedly, such occurrences could point to the physical transience of the pederastic bond that the pederastic poets from Wilde's period were so prone to lament: children, after all, grow out of the plasticity, spotlessness, beauty and vigour that make them objects of affection to pederasts.<sup>47</sup> However, the adverse influence

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Wood, 'Creating the Sensual Child', p. 161.

<sup>47</sup> See Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English*

that the younger man has over the older one may also point to the dangers of a youth possessing sway over the actions and decisions of an adult.

The vision of pederasty in 'The Happy Prince' may not be as idealised as some critics have suggested, but it is certainly romanticised, and it markedly contrasts with the figuration of pederastic relationships in the collection's second tale. Duffy's shrewd essay, 'Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', usefully delineates the sexual nature of 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. The story chronicles a little bird being penetrated by the thorn of a giant tree so that it can produce a red rose for a desolate young student, who needs to supply his female lover with a red rose in order for her to dance with him at a forthcoming ball. Duffy reads the scene of penetration and the Tree's constant encouragement to allow the penetration to go deeper as an 'act of sexualized, but non-reproductive, penetration [that] figures as the supreme gesture of self-sacrificing love'.<sup>48</sup> Given the anal undertones of the act and the awkward fact that the tree is never assigned a gender, Duffy reads the tale as a glorification of 'non-reproductive sex'.<sup>49</sup>

However, Duffy never includes the young Student in the scene, and he never frames the text in relation to male-male sexual activity, let alone the inter-generational variety. The former reading is understandable in view of the Student's departure from the scene before the penetration takes place, and the latter one is understandable considering the Tree's 'gender[less]' position and the Nightingale's status as a female.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, in *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal* (1893), which is an underground erotica that Wilde may have had a role in writing and/or editing and which is certainly a good source of the period's sexual codewords and metaphors, the word 'nightingale' is used to refer to a phallus.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the act of giving someone a '*feuille de rose*' denotes anal rimming: 'I greatly wondered what she meant, and I asked myself where she could find a rose-leaf', admits the callow narrator, but 'I was not left to wonder long, for [...] two other whores came and knelt down before the backsides that were thus held open for them, put their tongues in the little black holes of the anuses, and began to lick them'.<sup>52</sup> These codewords enable a pederastic subtext in 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. Firstly, it becomes possible to include the young Student in the story's sexual action because he desires and eventually receives a rose. Secondly, the Nightingale might actually connote something that is distinctly masculine, and the upright Tree's action of sinking its own thorn into a little creature can potentially add to the effect that this scene

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'*Uranian*' Poets from 1889 to 1930 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), passim.

<sup>48</sup> Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 334.

<sup>49</sup> Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 334.

<sup>50</sup> Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 334.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal* (1893; New York: Mondial, 2006), p. 131.

<sup>52</sup> Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], *Teleny*, pp. 131, 30.

involves males.

The sex act in 'The Nightingale and the Rose' can be presented bluntly, baldly and with the degree of licence that the text seems to invite by including two codewords in its very title. The giant member of the ménage penetrates the tiny member, thereby drawing the 'blood' that is always evident in the scenes of anal penetration from eroticas like *Teleny* and *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881). The latter is replete with 'crimson engorged member[s]' and 'tortured arseholes' as an alleged male prostitute charts his lifetime of sexual escapades.<sup>53</sup> The former presents 'ruby beads of blood trick[ling] from all around [a] splitting orifice'.<sup>54</sup> In turn, the Nightingale's willingness to be penetrated and become 'crimson as a ruby' (p. 295) enables it to give the younger Student a red rose straight after receiving its bloody impact. This particular subtext can enable us to understand Wilde's conception of sex acts between three differently sized and differently aged males, especially the effects of such acts, and it thereby offers a version of pederastic bonds that differs in content from the one available in the collection's previous tale.

In some senses, though, the second story invites comparison with the first, and this process draws attention to the impact that sex can have on pederastic relationships once it comes into the mix. The Tree is obviously older and bigger than the tiny Nightingale, but the Student is much bigger than the bird, and yet he is also younger and childlike in his naivety, selfishness and petulance. In other words, a similar inversion exists in the relationship between the Student and the Nightingale as the one between the Prince and the Swallow. Indeed, the smaller but older member is once again wholeheartedly dedicated to the younger and larger one: like the Swallow, the Nightingale mutilates itself and finally perishes in order to fulfil the wishes of the bigger man. However, the key difference between these two relationships is the absence of mutuality in the one between the Nightingale and the Student: the Student's only mode of interaction with his little companion involves carelessly and obliviously receiving the red rose.

The reason why inequality and subservience are so pronounced in 'The Nightingale and the Rose' is because of the sexual impulse. The story's opening excessively repeats the desperate need of the Nightingale and the Student to have a red rose. "[I]n all my garden there is no red rose", laments the student, "[n]o red rose", and "for want of a red rose my life is made wretched" (p. 292). Similarly, the Nightingale 'crie[s]' three times, "Give me a red rose", and it avidly reaffirms that "[o]ne red rose is all I want [...] only one red rose!" (p. 293). The story subsequently becomes based on this one notion: "If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it [...] and stain it with your own heart's-blood" (p. 293), and this route

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Jack Saul, *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881; [London]: Olympia Press, 2006), pp. 40, 64, 71, 101, 107.

<sup>54</sup> Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], *Teleny*, p. 82. For another scene of bloody anal sex in the novel, see p. 98.

involves enduring the penetration of a large thorn. In other words, sexual experiences like giving and receiving a red rose must be earned, and the story's frantic, consuming urge to give and receive such 'pleasures' is placed within a self-interested economy of labour and exchange, which clearly cannot accommodate the nonsexual aspects of pederasty that were evident in 'The Happy Prince'.

This urge-driven longing is thereby responsible for the affliction and the lack of mutuality in the story, and it is also responsible for the absence of the pedagogical function of pederasty and its capacity to invigorate its members. Indeed, Wilde notes that the Student cannot understand the words or feelings of the Nightingale amidst his obsession about the red rose, and this obsession with the physical element of existence is captured when his fixation on the Nightingale's "'form'" obscures its other qualities (p. 294). Just as importantly, the Nightingale's mania about receiving and giving a red rose cannot lodge pedagogical considerations: "'Give me a red rose'" is literally its one and only refrain. The fact that the Nightingale is prepared to die in order to get hold of a red rose gives full voice to an apprehension that runs throughout the story about the capacity of sex to vaporise the enlivening and instructional elements of pederastic relations. The death of the Nightingale immediately after it receives and gives a red rose implies that pederastic relations will not unfold through both stages of what Dowling calls 'the Platonic ideal, according to which "intercourse"' between adult males and young men should pass 'from pandemic physical delight to Uranian intellectual friendship'.<sup>55</sup>

These two possibilities comprise the juxtaposition that Wilde sets up between idealised and sexualised pederasty in 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and Wilde's concern about sex proving inimical to the 'noble[r]' facets of pederasty is best viewed in 'The Devoted Friend'.<sup>56</sup> The story contains the sexualised and pedagogical elements of pederasty, but given the fact that nobody has unearthed the sexual elements in the story, its consideration of the relationship between the two elements has never been examined.

'The Devoted Friend' chronicles a "'friendship"' between 'little Hans' and 'big Hugh the Miller' (p. 302). Big Hugh teaches little Hans about various aspects of life: 'nothing gave [little Hans] greater pleasure than to listen to all the wonderful things [big Hugh] used to say' (p. 302), for 'he was a very great scholar' (p. 307). Little Hans is clearly in need of some tutoring since he is 'an honest', unworldly 'little fellow' (p. 301), and the mature, assertive and well-established big Hugh consequently acknowledges his responsibility as the young man's "'best friend"' to "'watch over him"' (p. 303). He also offers to give him a wheelbarrow. As in Ancient

<sup>55</sup> See Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 338.

<sup>56</sup> Each of the five tales in the collection contains pederastic elements. 'The Remarkable Rocket' is about a phallic firework rocket that can only 'get very stiff and straight' and "'explode"' before 'little boys' (pp. 318, 316), and 'The Selfish Giant' is about a Giant who learns to 'love' and 'play' with 'children', especially a 'little boy' (p. 299).

Greece, then, the older male takes the younger one under his wing, monitors him, supplies him with gifts and stimulates and develops his intellect.<sup>57</sup>

The consistent implication in the story is that this ‘friendship’ has a corporal dimension that recalls the one in ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’: big Hugh always expects a ‘return’ for his services, and after supplying little Hans with his wisdom and the promise of gifts, he takes many ‘flowers’ from the ‘garden’ of little Hans despite the latter’s unwillingness to part with them, as he had planned to sell them at market (p. 305). In other words, little Hans gives away his flower to an older male, despite the discomfort it will later bring him. This pattern continues throughout the tale: little Hans submits to big Hugh’s taxing and harmful demands, and this invariably brings him pain because he can never tend to his garden and make money from its contents, as he is always completing various ‘long errands’ (p. 307) for big Hugh that leave him ‘tired’ (p. 36) and ‘very much distressed’ (p. 307). This is actually consistent with big Hugh’s ‘theory’ of ‘friendship’: he notes that “‘a true friend [...] does not mind giving pain. Indeed [...] he prefers it, for he knows that then he is doing good’” (p. 306). So after receiving wisdom and being promised presents from the senior, the junior must submit to a form of punishment that he is told he should enjoy. This may anticipate the idea that ‘know[ing] Bunbury’ will produce pain and pleasure. Indeed, big Hugh’s demands for painful pleasure tire little Hans, and they keep him away from his flowers.

The sexual content of ‘The Devoted Friend’ is reinforced by the story’s employment of specific words like ‘basket’, ‘friend’, ‘cottage’, and ‘flower’. Paul Baker has collected the words and phrases that have been used amongst homosexual people over the past few centuries, and amongst some users, at least, these ‘slang’ words even came to ‘resemble’ a type of gay ‘language’.<sup>58</sup> Some of these words are familiar today. ‘Cottaging’ had its root in the resemblance between Victorian public toilets and cottages, and these ‘cottages’ were locations where men solicited sex with men.<sup>59</sup> This is why Craft is able to sexualise the scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when a ‘Paedobaptist’ basically follows big Hugh’s lead by ‘go[ing] down’ to the ‘outlying cottages’ to ‘sprinkl[e]’ on youths. Less familiarly, ‘basket’ could denote a phallus, as it referred to the bulge of a male’s genitals through his trousers, or, more simply, to his crotch.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, ‘friend’ could mean either side of a pederastic bond in Wilde’s lifetime.<sup>61</sup> The word ‘flower’, meanwhile, could obviously signify

<sup>57</sup> See Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy*, pp. 87-89, 96.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Baker, *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), p. vii.

<sup>59</sup> Baker, *Fantabulosa*, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> Baker, *Fantabulosa*, p. 77.

<sup>61</sup> Timothy d’Arch Smith notes the use of this word by late-nineteenth century pederastic poets in the abovementioned context (d’Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest*, p. 53), and it is also used in *Teleny* after the two central male characters have slept together – they describe each other as ‘my friend’, and ‘my friend–my lover’, see Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], pp. 126, 128, 129, 132, 136,

virginity. Each of these words combines in ‘The Devoted Friend’. Big Hugh’s relationship with little Hans is initially played out at the latter’s ‘cottage’, and big Hugh goes down to this cottage with his ‘basket in his hand’ in order to take little Hans’s ‘flowers’. Indeed, big Hugh knows that little Hans “‘will be able to give me a large basket of primroses, and that will make him so happy’” (p. 302).

These code words are yoked halfway through the story in order to suggest an anal encounter, and the nature of this encounter is supported by G.P. Jacomb Hood’s illustration to the story that adorned the early editions of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.<sup>62</sup> Wilde writes:

‘And now [said big Hugh], as I have given you my wheelbarrow, I am sure you would like to give me some flowers in return. Here is the basket, and mind you fill it quite full.’

‘Quite full?’ said little Hans, rather sorrowfully, for it was really a very big basket, and he knew that if he filled it he would have no flowers left.

‘Well, really,’ answered the Miller, ‘as I have given you my wheelbarrow, I don’t think that it is much to ask you for a few flowers. I may be wrong, but I should have thought that friendship, true friendship, was quite free from selfishness of any kind.’

‘My dear friend, my best friend,’ cried little Hans, ‘you are welcome to all the flowers in my garden. [...] [A]nd he ran and plucked all his pretty primroses, and filled the Miller’s basket.’ (pp. 304-5)

The original illustration for ‘The Devoted Friend’ gestures towards this reading. It shows little Hans bent over in his garden whilst being approached from behind by big Hugh, and the look of shock and anxiety on little Hans’s face is justified, since

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123).

<sup>62</sup> The question raised here is whether Jacomb-Hood gleaned the pederastic subtext, or whether Wilde informed him of it. Indeed, it should be noted that the idea of a coterie readership for the collection is given renewed force by my interpretation. Michael Matthew Kaylor has suggested that the ‘paederastic elements often hidden beneath the complex surfaces’ of Wilde’s texts were ‘intended primarily for a select group of readers’, and, according to Naomi Wood, this ‘Hellenic coterie led by Wilde emphasized the physical senses’. See Kaylor, *Secreted Desires*, p. v; Wood, ‘Creating the Sensual Child’, p. 159. Kaylor suggests that ‘Wilde’s coterie’ embraced the physical aspect of pederasty, and it would be feasible that this is reflected in his texts (pp. 295, 344, 342, 371, 295). By 1888, this coterie included Robert Ross, Harry Marillier, W. Graham Robertson, Richard Le Gallienne, Harry Melvill and Arthur Clifton, and a recent biographer has noted that it would be ‘easy to imagine [Wilde] giving copies’ of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* ‘to members of his rapidly growing gay circle’. See Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 153-54. Indeed, Wilde did distribute the collection to men who may have been receptive to its pederastic subtexts, such as Walter Pater, Clyde Fitch and Harry Marillier, and his friendships with the latter two males may have had a sexual dimension. See McKenna, *The Secret Life*, pp. 71-77, 95, 115; Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde*, p. 156.

although big Hugh is barricaded from little Hans's garden, he is about to force an entry from the rear of his little 'friend'.<sup>63</sup> There is also no suggestion in the picture that big Hugh is interested in the nonsexual aspects of 'friendship' that he so energetically theorises, since the picture only shows him in the process of attaining access to his little friend's private area.

Indeed, 'The Devoted Friend' demonstrates the ability of the sexual urge to distort and subsume the 'noble[r]' elements of pederasty. Big Hugh's promise of gifts is null because the wheelbarrow that he offers little Hans is worthless and never materialises, and it is thus a particularly cynical gesture when he mobilises his promise in order to gain little Hans's 'flowers'. Likewise, the 'theor[ies]' about 'friendship' and tutorship (p. 306) that big Hugh supplies are sullied by the fact that they are marshalled to justify the punishing favours that he desires, and to gain unrestricted access to little Hans's property: 'the wonderful things' he 'say[s]' to little Hans 'about the unselfishness of friendship' enable him to 'never go by his garden without leaning over the wall and plucking' its contents (p. 302). Indeed, 'The Devoted Friend' is devoid of idealistic inversions of age and dimension, and it seems that the hope for mutuality that was evident in 'The Happy Prince' cannot be posited in view of the sexual relationship between little Hans and big Hugh.

This is a pessimistic view of pederastic relations that equals the one in 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and the fact that sex is the culprit relates to the broader themes of the collection. Two points of critical focus in Wilde's fairy tales have been the disharmony evident in them, and their presentations of contrasts between ideas of responsibility and egotism, spirituality and physicality, and so on. Philip K. Cohen has noted that '[r]ather than the humanized, unified world common to fairy tales, Wilde almost always presents a setting marked by division, fragmentation, and irreconcilable strife'.<sup>64</sup> This strife is principally evident in the disconnection between the characters: for example, the Student never hears the Nightingale or sees its sacrifice. Norbert Kohl has also noted that 'tensions arise' in each of Wilde's tales 'between selfishness and thought for others', and that the 'development of the action' in the stories 'depends on whether the initial moral defect' of selfishness is 'overcome'.<sup>65</sup> In Kohl's argument, the stories contain one of 'two types of dénouement': the spiritual 'transformation' that ensues if the characters reject their 'self-deception and egotism', or the 'unreconciled fade-out' that results if they remain egocentric and deceptive.<sup>66</sup> It is a sense of loss and disappointment that prevails in

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<sup>63</sup> See Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, ill. by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood [1888] (London: David Nutt, 1910), p. 59.

<sup>64</sup> Philip K. Cohen, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978), p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 52, 53.

<sup>66</sup> Kohl, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 53.

the collection, as shown by the deaths in every story, and as epitomised by the anticlimactic conclusion of the collection's final tale, 'The Remarkable Rocket', which ends with its eponymous protagonist fading away without the fanfare that he has always craved: 'And he went out', as Wilde fittingly concludes (p. 318). It is worth noting that the triumph of the defiling, distorting sexual drive in the collection is one source of its defeatist, fatalistic atmosphere, and it is thus an important facet of the contrasts that the collection draws between reality and romance, physicality and spirituality, and egotism and selflessness.

## Conclusion

*The Happy Prince and Other Tales* contains Wilde's engagement with the question of mutuality in pederastic relationships, and the deleterious impact that sex can wreak on the nonsexual elements of pederastic bonds. The almost rhapsodic version of pederasty in 'The Happy Prince' is despoiled in 'The Devoted Friend' because its pedagogical properties are used by the older man to take advantage of the younger one, and this marks a return to the type of relationship that was evident in 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. In other words, when the two types of pederasty are asked to cohabit, the vitalising facets are sullied by the sexual ones.

It is the willingness to follow through on the moments when sexual activity is in the figurative mix that enables the emergence of Wilde's struggle to find a place for sexual activity in pederastic relationships, and the demarcation of these moments enables us to grasp an important feature of Wilde's eros. My reading of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* thereby profits from interpreting Wilde's fiction in a manner that the etherealising hermeneutic of queer theory has refused to countenance, and this shows that queer theory is not always the most effective tool for grasping the dynamics of sexual issues in Wilde's fiction, or, indeed, the very presence of such issues.

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