Oancea on Schultz and Seifert, eds. (2016)


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With this volume, coeditors Gretchen Schultz and Lewis Seifert offer a strong contribution to the popularization of Decadent writing for modern English-speaking audiences. Containing thirty-six stories by nineteen writers selected among those who were both prolific and “merely dabbled” in the genre, with all but four texts newly translated into French, *Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned* provides an excellent survey of the diverse engagement of late nineteenth-century authors with fairy tales. The editors’ critical introduction contextualizes the selection by discussing its prevalent thematics of “decline and degeneration, anxiety and distress associated with the incursion of the modern and the industrial, atypical gender expression and nonnormative sexuality” (xiv) in the period’s culture, which is represented as torn between a fascination with science and a love of literature. Readers are well served by this thoroughly articulated juxtaposition of modernity and tradition, as it prompts them to imagine the sources and products of the creative imagination vacillating between these poles.

The elegant storytelling voice adopted in the translation of these tales strikes a difficult-to-achieve equilibrium between heterogeneity of style among the authors and modern, readable expression. The opening tale, Charles Baudelaire’s “Fairies’ Gifts,” sets the tone through its crisp prose. Later, the translators opt for readability in the case of Rachilde’s “The Mortis,” where sentence structure is simplified even as poetic style is maintained. For example, the long opening sentence is divided into three. Through this division, the main tableaux under which the text opens—wild flowers, associated with stark color contrast—are not only maintained, but sequentially highlighted. Reading speed is thus increased, but the reader still enjoys the singular images created by Rachilde.

A communicative style is preferred by the translators, ensuring that the texts can be appreciated by a wide English-speaking audience. For example, in Jean Lorrain’s “Princess of the Red Lilies,” they avoid some archaisms. In this tale, a princess’ daily activities include secret malefic rituals held in a convent, and the author uses the prayer schedule to keep time. His vespers, however, are poetically rendered by the translators as “fall of day.” This choice maintains the lyrical tone and spirit of the description, rather than its precise yet outmoded vocabulary. In the same text, overly complex sentences and instances of syntax that purposely trouble the flow of reading, both common occurrences in Decadent prose, are tamed in favor of structures that guide the reader to its key motifs while remaining faithful to the original. For example, Lorrain’s rhetorical interpellation of his audience in “Un soir (comment avait-il pu gagner ce cloître ignoré?), un misérable fugitif venait s’abattre avec un cri d’enfant à la porte du saint asile,” is rendered as “one evening, a wretched figure, who had somehow found his way to this unmapped cloister, collapsed before the door of the sacred refuge crying like a child” (139–40), much as his narratively lyrical “Mais, ô mystère !” becomes the more functional “But what happened next was strange!” (140).

From the point of view of the translation, then, every effort was made to render the collection engaging to English speakers, who are offered diverse, linguistically interesting texts. Readers seeking to expand their knowledge of the literary production of the movement and to be able to place the fairy tales in the context of their authors’ other preoccupations would be well served to consult as a companion volume Asti Hustvedt’s *The Decadent Reader* (1997), which features different selections by various authors featured in *Fairy Tales for the Disenchanted*. As Schultz and Seifert suggest, the Decadent denomination is used broadly, with some included authors rejecting the label in favor of either no literary association or of movements such as Symbolism, Surrealism, or Naturalism.

Though most authors’ contributions represent a selection of one or two tales, the collection also contains longer sequences by Catulle Mendès and Marcel Schwob, from whose work eight and four texts, respectively, are included. These cycles allow readers to delve into greater depth into an author’s production, an approach which complements the collection’s overall emphasis on breadth and diversity. In the case of Mendès, the selection invites contemplation on the question of tradition versus innovation in the fairy tale genre through the versatile figure of the fairy, and also engages in a metatextual reflection on the status of the fairy tale in comparison with other literary genres such as poetry (poets are confronted with fairies who literalize their figurative language in one tale, while Love and Beauty, the poet’s muses, try to find their place in the modern world in another). From a pedagogical perspective, these sequences can also function as starting points for student research projects.

The volume is also notable for its excellent selection of illustrations, including examples by famous nineteenth-century artists.
associated with the fairy tale genre such as Gustave Doré. One only wishes they were larger format, particularly in the case of his engravings, which comprise six of fourteen illustrations, and in color in the case of Arthur Rackham’s delicate watercolor. In addition to being visually appealing, the illustrations work to establish connections between the Decadent fairy tales and their “original” sources of inspiration, and thus invite the reader to reflect beyond the bounds of the collection on the rewriting of these texts by different authors of various periods.

_Fairy Tales for the Disenchanted_ is a highly enjoyable collection of rare nineteenth-century texts, admirably translated by French literary experts. It is also recommended as a teaching text for college-level comparative and world-literature courses, cultural history courses focused on myths, or popular culture courses treating the rewriting or adaptation of literary classics.

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