Queering and Politicising the Fairy Tale in Italy: Oscar Wilde in Conversation with Federico Zappino

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Abstract
This paper explores the radical and queer potential of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales by placing them in conversation with the work of an Italian philosopher, Federico Zappino. The parables of self-sacrifice and recognition offered by Wilde in his fairy tales will be shown to be stories of self-mutilation which fall short of guaranteeing any lasting change within the combined oppressive systems of capitalism and what Zappino terms 'heterosexuality'. Far from being tales of remote realms disconnected from reality, Wilde's fairy tales queer the relation between text on the one hand and genre, reader, ideology on the other. Thus, Wilde realises the queer ideality that many queer theorists regard as a paramount objective in the collective struggle against oppression.
Key-words: Oscar Wilde, Federico Zappino, fairy tale, queer, radical.

1. Introduction

In contrast to formalist studies of Wilde's fairy tales, this paper will draw on Federico Zappino's philosophy to look at the tales from a radical and queer angle that emphasises how Wilde used the genre to destabilise subject constitution through relation, thereby opening up a space for queer ideality.

In fact, despite their "'classical' status" outside of academia (Zipes [1991] 2006: 10), Oscar Wilde's collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), still occupy a marginal place within the Wildean canon. While there seems to have been a surge of interest in this genre as elaborated by Wilde, recent studies have tended to emphasise his fairy tales' structural qualities. Michelle Ruggaber (2003), for instance, insists on the different target audiences Wilde had in mind

when writing the two collections: in contrast to Josephine Guy and Ian Small's claim that the difference between the two is predicated on a "marketing […] decision" (Guy and Small 2000: 81), Ruggaber draws attention to *creative* differences in the collections. She thus foregrounds formalist and structuralist concerns and seems to discount any continuity between the two collections. This article, instead, aims to emphasise the similarities of the fairy tales: although the two collections are clearly intended to be different in many aspects, signalling them as being intended for different audiences would fail to acknowledge the fact that, as Jack Zipes argues in his social history of the genre, the dialogue into which writers of fairy tales entered was not just with "implicit adult and young readers", but also "with the folktale, with contemporary writers of fairy tales, with the prevailing social code, […] and with unimplied audiences" (Zipes [1991] 2006: 9). While reconstructing authorial intention may well be important, this contribution is based on the premise that a text always surpasses and survives its author's intentions.

In his recent introduction to Wilde's short stories, Nicholas Frankel stresses the importance of the "circumstances in which the stories were written": not only did Wilde's relationship with Robert Ross start in late 1886, but the infamous Criminal Law Amendment Act came into effect in 1885, the same law that would see him condemned for "gross indecency" in 1895 (Frankel 2020: 17). Similarly, John-Charles Duffy (2001) focuses on the four different tropes commonly associated with (male) homosexuality in Victorian England and finds many allusions to them in Wilde's fairy tales. Because these are important aspects of the context around the writings, my approach will build on intersecting readings of the fairy tales to better illustrate the productiveness of Zappino's thought for the interpretation of Wilde's writings.

In his monograph, Jarlath Killeen (2007) dedicates one chapter to each fairy tale and endeavours to reconstruct previous interpretations. However, Killeen's interest lies mostly in the Christian and Irish undertones of Wilde's writings. Although he highlights interesting readings of the tales that have little to do with Christ or Ireland, he tends to dismiss them because they do not seem to be in line with his own understanding of the 'real' meaning of the fairy tales. In a similar fashion, Deaglán Ó Donghaile's recent monograph emphasises the radical potential of the fairy tales and

concludes that these stories "recommend mutualism as both a realistic and progressive social practice" (Ó Donghaile 2020: 122), thereby confirming his own thesis that Peter Kropotkin's thought is in keeping with Wilde's writing.

Albeit understandable from a practical point of view, this division into water-tight compartments (Irish Wilde, Christian Wilde, radical Wilde, gay Wilde, etc.) falls short of doing justice to the author's protean writing. Only by working at the intersection of different fields is it possible to unleash the potential that Wilde's writings conceal in their recesses. This article illuminates the radical, queer potential of the fairy tales by complementing diverse readings of them.

2. Federico Zappino and Oscar Wilde: a virtual conversation

In his work, Italian philosopher, translator and queer activist Federico Zappino focuses on two intersecting systems of oppression: capitalism and what he calls 'heterosexuality'. In his view, any form of subjectivation and relation emerges from both systems, so that any attempt to dismantle capitalism is bound to fail unless heterosexuality is also addressed as an oppressive system. Although this word has come to indicate a sexual orientation, Zappino's use of the term is idiosyncratic: this concept, in his terminology, comprises three different things:

[1] [the] *mode of production* regarding people, that is the rationality behind the production of men and women, from which it clearly ensues that men and women do not exist 'in nature' but are the product of a constant and performative [2] *social relationship*, based on the transfiguration of this unequal and hierarchical production of genders into a "sexual difference", which is in turn elevated to a [3] *yardstick* on which every evaluation, no less than the possibility, the conformity, the conditional inclusion, or the radical exclusion, of every form of subjectivation or relation, depends implicitly or explicitly, be it cisgender or trans*. (Zappino 2019: 38)[1]

Heterosexuality, Zappino argues, 'produces' people into the complementary and opposite categories of men and women, thereby creating an unequal and hierarchical distribution of

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[1] All quotations from Italian texts are provided in my own translation.

power. This system enables certain subjects to enjoy rights such as the possibility of work, safety and comfort, while at the same time preventing other subjects from accessing an equal livelihood. His notion of heterosexuality does not simply insist on the sexual orientation of any given subject but extends to all levels of subject constitution, thus including under its umbrella the concepts of patriarchy, racialisation, and ability. In his definition, heterosexuality comes to indicate a rationality whereby ontological differences are produced as inequalities from which capitalism draws its lifeblood: as the philosopher encapsulates it in a later passage, "no difference would come to intelligibility if it were not functional to establishing an inequality" (p. 266). Thus, if heterosexuality is not subverted, oppression will continue to thrive even beyond the dismantling of an oppressive economic system.

In "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), Wilde similarly argues that the battle against capitalism is only a first step towards the full realisation of an individual. Even after the potential establishment of socialism – which Wilde understands more generally as the conversion of "private property into public wealth" and the substitution of "competition" with "cooperation" (Wilde 2010b: 237) – it is essential that what he terms 'Individualism' regain its original status of freedom from external authority: Individualism "does not come to man with any claims upon him at all. […] it says to man that he should suffer no compulsion to be exercised over him" (p. 268). This compulsion impinges upon the individual's freedom to realise his or her potential as it forces him or her into categories, Zappino would add, that enjoy differing levels of legitimation and different possibilities of self-fulfilment depending on their positionality within an oppressive system.

While Wilde insists here mostly on the interpersonal relationships among individuals, it could be argued that his intuition about the interrelation between private property and competition on the one hand – two ideological buttresses of capitalism – and subjectivation and relation on the other is a prescient warning about the machinations of an oppressive system beyond the purely economic structure. Within this context, the fairy tales become a way for Wilde to imagine a different but all too similar realm where systemic oppression is still in fact terribly present and, for all the efforts Victorian society made to conceal it, blatantly visible.

3. Parables of self-sacrifice and recognition

In "The Happy Prince", the Prince and the Swallow renounce their comfort in order to alleviate the suffering of poor workers in the city and thus end up meeting their premature death. In the existing scholarship, this tale has very often been interpreted as having a happy end where God eventually saves the two protagonists from the appalling scenario on earth. Some critics have already noted that, for all their efforts to alleviate the inhumane conditions under which the working class live, the two protagonists do not succeed in changing the system. For instance, Guy Willoughby stresses that the Prince's noble actions are, "in concrete terms", "quite futile", as "the oppressive conditions that perpetuate the wretched poverty of their lives will continue" (Willoughby 1993: 26). He goes on to note how Wilde himself, in "The Soul of Man under Socialism", dismisses charity as an impracticable solution to the wrongs of capitalism. Willoughby eventually concedes that "in wider social terms, such charitable gestures may be useless, but in individual terms […] such sacrifices are vital" (p. 26); this would be evidenced in the text by the fact that the Prince and the bird finally receive God's grace.

When we apply Zappino's radical philosophy to this tale, however, it becomes evident how this dichotomy between "individual" and "social" is unworkable: because every individual constitutes him- or herself precisely *through* heterosexuality and capitalism, there is no such thing as a subject without or outside of social relation. The latter, it ought to be recalled, is intrinsically hierarchical, which means that it forecloses certain possibilities of subjectivation, as Judith Butler has amply discussed in her work on gender performativity (e.g. Butler 1997). The distinction between 'foreclosure' and 'repression' is crucial here: as Zappino points out, when we refer for instance to homosexuals being *repressed*, that "presupposes that the homosexual possibility is already formed (innate, for example), that it exists in a symmetrical relationship with the heterosexual one and that only at a later moment is it repressed" (Zappino 2019: 110). 'Foreclosure', a term Butler and Zappino derive from psychoanalysis, indicates instead a "preventive prohibition of homosexual attachment, and thus its possibility" (p. 110). This term helps us to illuminate the supposed agency of the individual in "The Happy Prince": the Prince and the Swallow are *foreclosed*

in their attempt to alter the system's machinations, because their political position as *individuals* is incapable of bringing about lasting change. Unlike what Ó Donghaile argues, the two protagonists *do not* "accomplish change through their practice of mutualism" (Ó Donghaile 2020: 125); on the contrary, they bring but temporary relief to some individuals. Thus, the final intervention of the town councillors is not so much a *repression* of their actions as a removal of any residual presence of their powerlessness.

In this context, individual self-sacrifice ought to be understood, as Wilde pointed out in "The Soul of Man under Socialism", as "merely a survival of savage mutilation" (Wilde 2010b: 268): it is quite telling that the Prince has to be stripped of parts of his body in order to aid those in need. Much like a mutilated human, the Prince ends up dying because of his sacrifices: all that is left of him is his leaden – and broken – heart. It is at this point in the narrative that God's intervention seems to rescue the two protagonists and set them as examples for posterity:

> "Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.
>   "You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me." (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 78)

Despite divergences in their interpretation of whether or not the Prince and the Swallow are supposed to be regarded as examples of radical change, most critics seem to concur that this salvation is to be taken at face value: to their mind, God recognises the two protagonists' worth and salvages them from the wreckage of civilisation on earth. It ought to be remembered that, as Jerusha McCormack has wisely pointed out, Wilde's work is steeped in "doublespeak" (McCormack 1997: 96). This technique is evident, for example, in the subtle use of the term 'precious' in the passage quoted above. In a Victorian society so bent on utilitarian value, 'precious' things are normally understood as economically valuable objects: within this framework, there is no room for a leaden heart and a dead bird, but, the tale seems to suggest at first, God does not seem to mind whether things have an economic value at all. When we read that the bird will sing in Paradise "for evermore", it seems

to be a liberating experience for the Swallow, which spent his last few days helping others and neglecting his own needs. However, a more disturbing element occurs in the very last sentence, which should make us alert to the undertones God's response conceals: "in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me". First of all, gold within the narrative has served to emphasise the materialistic tendency in civilised society. It is no coincidence that, upon asking the Swallow to divest him of his gold, the Prince said "the living always think that gold can make them happy" (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 77), thereby suggesting that gold is generally considered to be a stand-in for happiness but is in fact just a sign of blinding privilege, as the protagonist's backstory seems to prove. It is at least striking that God himself should have a "city of gold", in this sense. What is even more alarming, nonetheless, is the phrasing that follows: the Prince, unlike the Swallow, is not rescued to enjoy heaven; rather, he is to "praise" God in his city of gold.

The Prince's experience in heaven sounds strikingly similar to that which he had on earth: much in the same way as he was placed on a pedestal to distract people from their appalling living conditions, thereby serving the establishment and its trappings, the Prince is made to celebrate God's grandeur in heaven. The hierarchical structure that prevented him from enjoying his new 'life' as a statue by promoting him to a bulwark of an oppressive system is reproduced here in God's city of gold: the Prince is meant to become a symbol of power and prestige once more, but in a different kingdom and for a different ruler. In this sense, although at first it seemed as if the 'preciousness' of the two protagonists lay in their souls, ultimately what emerges from a more attentive reading of the final lines is that God is, much like the town councillors and the mayor, materialistic and self-absorbed. In this context, the bird's singing could be regarded as the purpose another ruler has imposed upon him. Thus, God's grace is no guarantee of eternal bliss, but a promise of perpetual labour. Wilde's doublespeak operates here on one more level than most critics seem to have thought.

What is more, the queer eroticism of the relationship between the Prince and the Swallow can hardly be overlooked: not only do the two characters exchange a kiss – one which incidentally breaks the Prince's heart when the Swallow dies –, but, because he is a statue, the Prince is divested of his clothes by the bird, an act

which clearly has erotic and sadomasochistic undertones, as the 'divestment' coincides here with mutilation. The language of (male) homosexuality was at the time rather tentative: as Jeffrey Weeks points out, "though homosexuality was clearly recognised as all too present a reality on the streets of London, its meanings were ambivalent […] in the Metropolitan Police and in high medical and legal circles" (Weeks [1981] 2012: 125). Because of the 'catch-all' Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, queer men had to "perform a delicate balancing act, between full deniability or 'innocence' on the one hand, and the search for some full and adequate register of desire on the other" (Frankel 2020: 22). Allusion to a shared imaginary thus became of paramount importance, and it is on this common knowledge that Wilde draws in some of his tales: by creating a link between self-sacrifice and homoeroticism, Wilde is gesturing towards the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, a figure that was, as Elisa Bizzotto has aptly pointed out, "a powerful heuristic device for most cultural concerns" of the time (Bizzotto 2018: 137), not least Decadence and homosexuality, as amply documented by Richard Kaye (1999). The figure of the Prince may thus be seen as alluding to Saint Sebastian, and this allusion, coupled with our understanding of his salvation by God as a promise of perpetual labour, would suggest that the recognition of male homosexuality at an institutional level (God 'rescuing' the two protagonists) would lead to its being placed in the service of capitalism and what Zappino calls heterosexuality.

In a similar fashion, the story within the story told by the Linnet in "The Devoted Friend" could be read as an allegory of how an oppressive system (the Miller) plays on individuals (little Hans) to extract value from them with the prospect of giving them something in return (the wheelbarrow little Hans is promised but never granted). The Miller's dispossession of little Hans is predicated upon a promise of recognition and compensation that will never be truly fulfilled. In this sense, the Miller's repeated vow sounds very much like the promise of intelligibility and recognition that any neoliberal form of legislation seems to offer to the oppressed. As Zappino aptly points out, however,

behind our most immediate and frequent perception of less freedom is in fact an inequality […]. And just as it did not make any sense to think

that the ideological corrective to communism could be liberalism, in the same way it does not make any sense to confine oneself to claiming more freedom, be it understood in an individual (liberal) sense or in a collective (liberal democratic) one. (Zappino 2019: 33)

In this context, "being recognised" equals "being put to worth and work by capital" (p. 35), which is precisely what happens to the Prince and the Swallow in heaven. Thus, it is not by aspiring to social intelligibility that the oppressed can be liberated, as Zappino stated again in reference to the recent debate on the Zan bill in Italy (cf. Carraro 2020); rather, heterosexuality and capitalism ought to be *subverted*. That is to say, we ought to subvert "the schemes of intelligibility, possibility and reality on which the material and current production of people and their relations depends" (Zappino 2019: 254).

As Duffy has properly underlined, male friendship gained a prominent position in certain Victorian circles: Oxford Hellenists such as Benjamin Jowett, Walter Pater, and J.A. Symonds offered "a revisionist reading of texts like the *Symposium*" to idealise and sanitise "male love as devoted friendship" (Duffy 2001: 330f). Within this context, the Water-rat could be read as ventriloquising this discourse when he suggests in "The Devoted Friend" that "[he] know[s] of nothing in the world that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship", that "friendship is much higher" than family life (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 89) – the family being, it ought to be reminded, "the crucial site for Victorian ideology" (Weeks [1981] 2012: 33). Considering how self-absorbed the Water-rat is and how the story told by the Linnet ends up highlighting the dispossession at work in an oppressive system, Wilde seems to be offering here a cautionary tale about the perils of making certain forms of supposedly 'deviant' sexuality more palatable to the public. Although the author was later to appeal to this ideal of devoted friendship during his trial, a strategy which earned him the cheering of the audience, in the fairy tale there is clearly a more subtle argument being put forward: striving for institutional recognition means being placed in the service of an oppressive machinery. In this sense, "The Devoted Friend" may be regarded as an unheeded prophecy of doom.

Wilde's second collection of fairy tales comes in handy when discussing these concerns. In "The Young King", for instance, we have a clear trajectory of holiness being temporarily hampered

by all those surrounding the King, but in the end the protagonist's divestment of worldly possessions is sanctioned by God, and thus the King is sanctified in his doing. Although the Bishop finally acknowledges he was wrong because "a greater than I hath crowned thee" (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 152), his point about the impossibility of correcting the world's misery through individual action remains valid, and his statement could easily be taken to be the moral of "The Happy Prince" in our radical reading of it: "the burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world's sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer" (p. 151). As Ruggaber insightfully remarks, "in his quest to be simple and selfless, [the protagonist] denies many people a livelihood without offering them a solution" (Ruggaber 2003: 150).

Moreover, the tale doubles as a story about a dandy with masturbatory tendencies who realises his own privilege and attempts to redeem himself, as Duffy (2001: 334ff) has convincingly shown. His final *imitatio Christi*, despite being denounced as fruitless, does, quite paradoxically, lead to salvation: as Duffy summarises it, "thus God justifies the masturbator" – and aesthete, we should add – "not in spite of, but because of, his unproductive act of love" (p. 335). After all, his appearance of self-mutilation and his effeminacy once again recall Saint Sebastian, who was associated in Victorian England with "feminized masculinity, homoerotic desire, working-class consciousness, and sado-masochism, all seemingly sanctioned by religious faith" (Kaye 1999: 269f). Here, in an ironic twist, Wilde brings together the sacred and the profane, thereby destabilising a morality which was often perceived as monolithic: the King's non-reproductive and unproductive behaviour queers the relation between subject and institution, between capitalist production and heterosexual reproduction, but this attempt is ultimately ineffectual because it is individual rather than collective. As Justin Jones points out, "the Young King's revised aesthetic allows him to retain both his own beauty and his worship of art by eschewing real suffering and authentic moral transformation" (Jones 2011: 895).

4. Wilde, queering relation, and queer futurity

How is it possible to subvert the system if self-sacrifice generally turns out to be a self-defeating neoliberal practice? The answer Wilde provides is both generic and political.

As Zipes has shown in his social history of the genre, the fairy tale "contributed toward strengthening bourgeois domination of the public sphere in the first half of the nineteenth century" (Zipes [1991] 2006: 106), but this changed, in his view, with writers like Wilde, who "[brought] out the need for the alteration and restructuring of social relations by questioning the arbitrariness of authoritarian rule and the profit motives of rulers" (p. 109). In fact, Wilde goes so far as to exploit the transformative radical potential of the genre to queer the relationship with the genre, with the reader, and with heterosexual ideology.

When we circle back to our reading of the story within the story in "The Devoted Friend" as an allegory of capitalism and heterosexuality, it becomes evident what strategy Wilde implemented to reach his readers. The Linnet's story about the Miller and little Hans clearly serves as a cautionary tale for the self-absorbed aesthete, the Water-rat. By embedding this story within the fairy tale, Wilde not only is voicing his concerns about the notion of 'devoted friendship' propounded by Oxford Hellenists but is also anticipating his own implied readers' response to the radical potential of his tales. The Water-rat is obviously interested in the story just because it is a mirror reflecting him: "Is the story about me? [...] If so, I will listen to it, for I am extremely fond of fiction" (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 89). Here, Wilde is subtly enacting a process of reading which the bourgeoisie implemented when approaching a fairy tale: much like the Water-rat, they were happy to listen – as long as the story was about them and their values.

This enactment of storytelling also anticipates that his implied audience would reject any moral, just as the Water-rat shows angry disdain when told that the story had one. This moment points to the fact that, for all the didacticism the fairy tale was meant to exhibit when read to children, adult readers could easily give the cold shoulder when provided with a clear moral aimed at them. For this reason, Wilde's fairy tales rarely have a clear-cut moral: in order to establish a more direct relationship with his audience and stimulate it, Wilde built on different allusions but ultimately refrained from providing the tales with an unambiguous message. Even the moral of the Linnet's story is framed in a strange way: the Miller voices a message – "One always suffers for being generous" (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 98) – which nonetheless does not really suit his

position within the story. While the moral could be exact, it is most definitely told by the wrong character. The Miller's message not only adds a comedic twist to the genre but also positions it more closely to those (adult) readers who might be averse to hard and fast rules of conduct.

The final sentence in "The Devoted Friend" adds to this ambiguity: when the Linnet worries that his telling a story with a moral has annoyed the Water-rat, the Duck concedes that it is "always a very dangerous thing to do." But, more importantly, another narrator appears, stating "And I quite agree with her" (Wilde [1980] 2010a: 99). This addition in the very last sentence of the fairy tale further destabilises any notion of moral message and emphasises how fairy tales have ceased to be a place to educate children. As Zipes aptly suggests, "no longer was the fairy tale to be like the mirror, mirror on the wall reflecting […] cosmetic bourgeois standards": "the fairy tale and the mirror cracked into sharp-edged, radical parts" (Zipes [1991] 2006: 107). The message is pluralised, refracted, made ambiguous and unclear. Much like the Dwarf in "The Birthday of the Infanta", the readers of the tales could find a more disturbing image of themselves in this fantastic realm and, despite recognising either coded homoeroticism or supposedly liberating neoliberal practices, they would not receive the moral salvation they expected; rather, they were invited to deconstruct their own identity by acknowledging its relationality: there is a fine line between funny and ridiculous, the Dwarf realises at the end of the tale, and there is an equally fine distinction between Wildean Individuality and 'masturbatory' selfishness.

Wilde's queering of the genre resides within this uncertainty and this disruption of a linear development of the fairy tale. As Fredric Jameson aptly points out, "genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between writer and a specific public whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact" (Jameson 1981: 106f). Wilde's anti-institutional stance in his dealing with the fairy tale is here evident. The generic and the political come to coincide: any attempt to subvert the genre is also a political act which consists in dismantling the institution that preserves and prescribes certain conventions. In this sense, Wilde queers the fairy tale by complicating or outright obfuscating any straightforward moral, by deviating his narratives towards unexpected developments, and

by interweaving strands that are normally perceived as belonging to separate contexts (Christological images, anthropomorphic animals, homoerotically charged symbolism, fantastic monarchies, divine forces, all too human workers).

Wilde's elaboration of homoerotic symbols is far from providing a triumphalist view of homosexuality; even aestheticism, which Wilde embraced and helped to disseminate, is shown to be an individual 'masturbatory' practice that, while being sometimes recognised and supposedly sanctified, falls short of generating structural change. Read against his public persona and his own ideas, Wilde's fairy tales destabilise the very foundations on which identity rests, whether human or animal, middle class or working class, straight or queer. In contrast to Gay Studies, which "insists on the salutary nature of self-identified homosexuals" and ends up perpetuating the myth of "Wilde-as-Gay-Martyr" (Kaye 2004: 192f), queering the fairy tales presupposes a less naïve notion of subjectivation and relation and emphasises the disruptive potential of storytelling.

Wilde's choice to tell the stories "from the margins of society, from the perspective of the poor, the colonised, the disreputable and dispossessed" (McCormack 1997: 102) may be regarded as a profoundly critical take on the genre that is very much in keeping with the definition of queer theories that Lorenzo Bernini, among others, provides: queer theories "look at power from the position of those who are [...] oppressed by a power that they suffer as intolerable: those who belong to the subaltern classes, to the subaltern 'races', to the 'second sex', to the so-called 'sexual minorities'" (Bernini 2017: 51f). Thus, queer theorists provide "a *pars destruens* without a *pars construens*" (p. 50): as Annamarie Jagose perfectly encapsulated it before Bernini, "queer is less an identity than a *critique* of identity" (Jagose 1993: 131). Wilde's fairy tales enact a critical reading of identity and invite the reader to deconstruct meaning constitution without ever establishing a stable message which could exhaust the tales' sexual/textual complexity. This interaction – or *conversation* – between the tale and its readers results in a negotiation of its meaning that is never really fixed: much like queer identity, the message is always "under construction, a site of permanent becoming" (Jagose 1993: 131). In this sense, Wilde's tales realise the radical potential of what José Esteban Muñoz has termed "queer futurity":

Queerness is an ideality. […] We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. (Muñoz 2009: 1)

In this tension between a fantastic past far removed from – but all too similar to – the present and a future where oppression may be overcome, readers of the fairy tales participate in a deconstruction of their own identities that might lead to what Zappino terms "queer separatism", a collective premised on the subversion of "heterosexual ideology" (Zappino 2019: 254). Only from a queer relation with one another, with institutions, with the very act of reading can it be possible to realise those utopias that will bring progress. More importantly, it is in a *collective* effort that this can happen.

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