Andersen's THE UGLY DUCKING and Wilde's THE BIRTHDAY OF THE INFANTA

The influence of Hans Christian Andersen on Oscar Wilde's fairy tales has been observed by many critics (Shewan, Raby, Nassaar). This is not surprising, since Andersen's fame spread to England and beyond well before his death in 1875, and his tales quickly became the core of the fairy tale canon. I propose here to trace the influence of one of Andersen's most famous fairy tales, "The Ugly Duckling," on Wilde's "The Birthday of the Infanta," although at first glance the two stories appear poles apart and any talk of influence is startling: Andersen's tale is one of ducks and swans while Oscar Wilde's deals with the corruption of the Spanish court at the time of the infamous Inquisition.

Many influences operate in shaping Wilde's tale. One obvious influence is the painter Velasquez. Another is Tennyson's poem "The Palace of Art." The Spanish court is nothing if not a magnificent palace of art, brilliantly beautiful but soul-destructive. Shades of Blake are discernible. There is also the influence of "Beauty and the Beast." In that tale a handsome but wicked prince is cursed and turned into a beast. He is saved from dying of a broken heart when Beauty agrees out of pity to marry him, thereby unknowingly breaking the spell and turning him once again into a handsome prince. Wilde gives us in "The Birthday" a beauty who is a heartless egocentric and a beast who remains a beast and dies of a broken heart, so that the inversion of the former tale is obvious.

But the chief influence remains "The Ugly Duckling," in which a duckling suffers because of his ugliness, but discovers in the end that he is a beautiful swan, and becomes extremely happy. Embedded in "The Ugly Duckling" is the disturbing idea that physical beauty and happiness are strongly connected, while ugliness brings rejection, misery, and persecution. Wilde responds to this idea and the entire tale at length and in detail in "The Birthday of the Infanta." No hard external evidence—letters, direct statements, and such—exists to support this view, but the internal evidence strongly indicates that, both thematically and technically, Wilde's tale is an extended reversal of Andersen's.

The most central and obvious reversal is thematic. To Andersen's simple celebration of physical beauty, Wilde gives us the Infanta, who is the physical equivalent among humans of the swan among birds. Superbly beautiful, with a "proud curved beautiful mouth," she has the same heartlessness as the ducks and other creatures who persecuted the ugly duckling. A princess brought up in a gorgeous palace, she shares instinctively Andersen's view that physical beauty is vital, but this leads automatically to a devaluation of moral qualities and to contempt for physical ugliness. Physically she is what the ugly duck-
ling wished to be and ultimately became. Wilde presents her as a moral monster, repulsive in spite of her dazzling outward appearance. The tale leaves us with an overpowering impression that what is really valuable is a good, kind heart and that those who glory in their physical superiority are in need of repentance. Wilde makes this idea of a good heart the central theme and value of his tale, relegating physical beauty to a secondary position. Even the most beautiful creatures physically are shown to be repulsive if they lack moral beauty.

Nor is the Infanta the only example Wilde offers us of the destructiveness of giving an exaggerated importance to physical beauty. The dwarf shares her values, and it is those same values that destroy him. The Infanta’s false values create a cold heart in her, and they break the dwarf’s heart. Over and over in this tale, Wilde condemns the excessive concern with physical beauty that is the focal point of Andersen’s tale, showing its disastrous consequences.

The dwarf, moreover, is an extended counterpoint and parallel to the ugly duckling. Each has a parent who is happy to get rid of him. The chief difference, however, is that the duckling is in reality a beautiful swan who is in the wrong environment and is therefore wrongly treated, while the dwarf is “a little misshapen thing that Nature, in some humorous mood, had fashioned for others to mock at” (239). But the dwarf is unaware of his grotesque appearance and is happy and in high spirits, in contrast to the duckling, who is convinced of his own ugliness and sinks into deep gloom. Because of his ugliness, the dwarf is the major success at the Infanta’s birthday party. The ugly duckling spots his reflection in the water and realizes that he is a swan. The turning point for the dwarf similarly occurs when he sees his reflection in a huge mirror. Whereas the duckling’s revelation occurs quickly, the dwarf’s is slow, and Wilde’s description of it is a literary masterpiece. There is no contrived happy ending for the dwarf but a full realization of the horror of his situation. When illusion gives way to reality the duckling is saved, the dwarf destroyed.

The ethos of “The Ugly Duckling,” despite the duckling’s suffering, remains lighthearted and childlike. This is not the case with “The Birthday of the Infanta,” with its chill atmosphere of corruption, poisonings, incurable sorrow, the Inquisition, and the cold beauty of lifeless objects of art. The ugliness of the duckling is not described by Andersen, but Wilde delineates the dwarf’s grotesque appearance in great detail so that we can almost visualize it, further reinforcing the dark atmosphere. Even the jokes in “The Birthday of the Infanta” are black humor and contribute to its dark ethos.

Finally, most of Wilde’s fairy tales take for their axis Blake’s idea that human beings develop from childlike innocence to experience a higher innocence (Nassar 1–36). The happy prince, the young king, the selfish giant, the fisherman who casts away his soul—all begin in a childlike paradise.
of innocence, fall into the demonic world of experience, then develop into Christians and attain a higher innocence. This Blakean pattern is absent in “The Birthday of the Infanta”: we can only observe that the Infanta remains from beginning to end in the child’s world of innocence and is in danger of never developing beyond it. The basic Blakean pattern is abandoned by Wilde here because he had another one in mind. In his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake often presents the same fundamental situation from two contrary points of view, one innocent, the other dark. Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling” is nothing if not an idyllic “song of innocence.” The same is true of “Beauty and the Beast.” Wilde responds to them and counterpoints with a powerful “song of experience”—“The Birthday of the Infanta.” The full power and meaning of Wilde’s tale become apparent only when we see them within this Blakean framework.

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WORKS CITED


Frost’s “OUT, OUT—”

“‘Out, Out—,’” Frost’s narrative of a farmboy’s accidental death, delineates the human desire to understand life, to perceive its grand design, or to ascertain whether such a design exists. Yet readers neglect the poem’s metaphysical concerns and focus on the narrator’s characterization of the survivors’ behavior. The narrator’s judgment, that the survivors turned away “... since they / Were not the one dead,” is the primary source of the poem’s surface tension; his harsh verdict spurs critics to justify the survivors’ response. Philip Gerber, for example, views their reaction as “the only possible course of action guaranteed to preserve equilibrium” (120), and John Kemp interprets the line, “No more to build on there,” as an articulation of regional values (213). While these explications address the poem’s surface ruptures, they also obscure its underlying tension. Frost engages readers in a struggle to recon-