Title of Paper: “Love is better than wisdom and more precious than riches”: The Influence of Greek Love on the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde

Author: Lindsey Brooke Kamerer
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Abstract:

This article examines Wilde’s fairy tales in *The Happy Prince* (1888) and *The House of Pomegranates* (1891). By examining the relationships of the characters in these tales, I argue that Wilde creates a positive counter-discourse about homosexuality through coded representations of Greek Love. The fairy tales work to subvert or oppose the dominant homophobic discourse on same-sex eroticism either by stressing the positive, ennobling and spiritual quality of love between men or by showing the damaging effects of denying men their capacity to love or achieve their heart’s desire. This is proved by examining the tales through the lens of Greek Love and how the ancient ideals as practiced by the Greeks were unaccepted in Victorian society. I demonstrate Wilde’s coded support for Greek Love by beginning with an examination of his trials when he invoked the purity of devoted friendships as a defense mechanism for questions concerning the perceived homosexuality of his work and life. The chapter continues with an explanation of Greek Love as articulated in the work of John Addington Symonds, an early apologist for love between men. It then looks at Linda Dowling’s argument about homosexuality in Victorian Oxford University as a context for understanding some of the tales in *The Happy Prince*. In the discussion of the tales in *The House of Pomegranates*, I argue that Wilde uses the mask of fantasy as a shield, as he codes same-sex, non-procreative sexual relationship under the cover of cross-species pairings. In these unlikely pairings of mermaids and mortals or ducks and linnets, I argue, Wilde examines the value and worth of Greek Love while suggesting how society’s rejection and shaming of it in his own era will someday be transformed into acceptance.

Keywords: sexuality, discourse, internalized homophobia, Oscar Wilde, Victorian England, fairy tales, The Little Prince, The Devoted Friend

Author Bio:

Lindsey Brooke Kamerer is affiliated with Radford University in the United Kingdom

Author email: lindseykamerer@gmail.com
The Happy Prince and The House of Pomegranates, Oscar Wilde’s two collections of fairy tales, are perhaps the most fascinating, sexually saturated, and understudied of his prose works. They are both slim volumes, the first containing five tales and the second four. Although scholarship on Wilde’s fairy tales is not plentiful, critics tend to focus on one of four main interests: religious elements or Christian parallels in the tales, aesthetic appreciation of the tales, the influence of Irish folk culture on the tales, and issues of sexuality hinted at in the tales. I argue that a major theme that persists throughout many of the narratives in The Happy Prince and The House of Pomegranates is Greek love, a subject that has received little attention in previous scholarship on the tales.

Carol Tattersall quotes Wilde’s description of the fairy tales: “They are an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality – to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and imitative” (135). Wilde uses fantasy as a means of encoding the sexual nature of his fairy tales which would otherwise not be acceptable. The representation of Greek love is quite veiled in Wilde’s fairy tales and is encoded in the fantasy relationships between various unlikely characters, such as Mermaids and Water-rats. This is perhaps the reason why the tales received little attention for their sexual content during the Victorian era. Wilde makes coded allusions to the discourse of Greek love to create a positive fantasy representation of same-sex love between men; in doing so, he creates a homosexual counter-discourse that is positive, unlike the negative discourses that defined homosexuality in fin-de-siècle England. Through both books of fairy tales, Wilde creates imaginative and creative characters that mimic and represent the experience of some men who desire
the love of other men in Victorian England. The Greek love encoded in the tales both honors and promotes the devotion of those who practice and understand the ancient ideals of love between men, while simultaneously displaying the harmful effects of contemporary Britain’s lack of acceptance of such erotic friendships between male partners.

Shortly after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde would become enamored with love and affection for a pretty-faced rich man, Lord Alfred Douglas, or as he was referred to by Wilde “Bosie” (Young 24). Morris Kaplan discusses the situation, noting the anger of Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensbury, who called for Wilde on February 18, 1895, at the Albemarle Club with a note addressed to “Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite” (116-118). Endorsing his own disastrous fate, Wilde decided the best course of action was to bring criminal charges against the outraged father, which led to the reversal of the legal prosecution as Wilde was put on trial for “gross indecency” under the La Bouchere Amendment, section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. ¹

The transcripts of these trials reveal Wilde’s acceptance of belief in the legitimacy and power of Greek love, as well as his awareness of the oppressive discourses that stigmatized and shamed the institution. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would become the most powerful prosecutorial weapon in Wilde’s conviction on charges of “gross indecency”, as his characters implied sexuality became inseparable from his own. Alex Ross explains that when confronted about the book, Wilde

¹ See Joseph Bristow’s article on *Dorian Gray* and “gross indecency” for a full analysis of how this amendment affected Wilde and other men who were prosecuted for their same-sex activities.
responded with clever witticisms while defending the relationship he and Bosie shared. In his defense of the poem about male same-sex desire, Wilde states:

The Love that dare 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 dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name," and on account of it I am placed where I am now. 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 elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (65-68)
Wilde compares the relationships between men to those of the ancients, invoking the ideal concept of Greek love. He is, however, on trial as the result of British society’s shaming same-sex relationships. This concept of Greek love which influences almost all of the fairy tales is a relatively untouched topic among Wildean scholarship on the tales. Wilde establishes though his tales a counter-discourse about Greek love that is positive, which contests Victorian England’s predominately negative view of male same-sex love as a shameful and unacceptable passion.

Much of the scholarship pertaining to Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales tends to focus either on his Irish heritage, religion, or, in fewer instances, sexuality. Jarlath Killeen published in 2007 the only full length analysis of the fairy tales that focuses on the Irish-Catholic influence that is behind the tales. Focusing discussion on each individual fairy tale, Killeen ties them together with his thesis that argues that Wilde infused the tales with traditional traits of religion while simultaneously including subversive metaphors. Christopher S. Nassaar analyzes the fairy tales in relation to the poetry of Yeats and Blake, as well as Wilde’s Irish nationality, while authors Gary Schmidgall, John Charles Duffy, and Naomi Woods focus on sexuality but do not analyze the discourse of Greek Love in the tales. To offer an original addition to these contributions, the following analysis focuses on using Greek Love as a lens to examine the coded sexuality that is present in many of the tales. Under the disguise of children’s literature, Wilde uses the ideal friendship of Greek love to encode homosexual passion in both books.

Over two thousand years before homosexuality was defined as a deviant identity in Victorian society, the act of an older man establishing a relationship with a
The ideal of Greek love was supported by Wilde and it frequently infiltrates the fairy tales through coded texts; such relationships were not respected amongst British society as they once had been in ancient Greece. John Addington Symonds wrote *A Problem in Greek Ethics* in 1873 in order to explore how the once ideal institution of male devotion among the ancients was misunderstood and defined as a perverse passion in later societies. Addington’s work sheds an abundance of light on the discourse used to speak of men who loved other men. The term “homosexual” was coined during the Victorian era but not yet popular in its use, making “Greek love” a more fitting description for male passions. Symonds explains the boy-man relationships common in ancient Greek society as beginning when a man was old enough to grow a beard and chose a much younger boy as his subject. The man was known as the lover and the boy the hearer, and the major objective of the relationship was to form a deep bond of honor, love, and respect that would allow for complete openness and trust. The relationship of the older to the younger man was a way to instill civic virtue and respectable social morals in the upcoming generation of youth. According to Symonds, *paiderastia* was a major staple in Greek society and culture. It was founded upon honesty, respect,

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2 The earliest study of the socially accepted institution of paiderastia in Athenian society is Kenneth J. Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality* (1978). In “Sex before Sexuality: Pederasty, Politics, and Power in Classical Athens,” David Halperin argues that classical Athenian society accepted the institution of paiderastia. However, he rejects the use of “homosexual” to describe the institution, since modern understandings of sexual practices and a sexual identity misread the social meaning of male same-sex practices in ancient Athens. More recently Thomas K. Hubbard offers a much more complex analysis of many different types of same-sex practices in Greece and Rome, including pedagogical pederasty, some of which were accepted and some condemned. Interestingly, he argues—contrary to Halperin and Foucault—that “some forms of sexual preference were, in fact, considered a distinguishing characteristic of individuals” (2).
and extremely devoted friendship; sexual intercourse was common and accepted between the man and the boy (Symonds 22-34). By the nineteenth century this type of relationship was completely unacceptable in England and was hidden in Wilde’s fairy tales, often under the guise of devoted friendships.

The act of an older male teaching a younger in an intimate mentoring relationship that was at once pedagogical and pederastic formed the backbone of Athenian Greek love;³ it was also a practice that Wilde himself must have been well aware of as a scholar of classical literature at Oxford. As Linda Dowling explains, the discourse and practice of devoted friendships at Oxford became well established in the 1860s; Benjamin Jowett was professor of Greek studies, and the highly respected mentor of Symonds. She argues that “Greek studies operated as a ‘homosexual code’ during the great age of English university reform,” during which time “a homosexual counter-discourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms” developed (xiii). During his time at Oxford, Symonds “met weekly for almost two years,” with Jowett “whose beloved presence he never stepped into without acute emotion” (32). According to Dowling, although Jowett denied that Greek love and devoted male friendships as practiced by the Ancients were sexual, many young men and their tutors at Oxford saw in the classics an idealized reflection of same-sex relationships between men. Relying on the support of Plato, Symonds published on the powerful emotions that existed between an older and younger man. He quotes Plato as having said, “I know not any greater blessing to a young man beginning life

³ Hubbard argues that this institution of “pedagogical pederasty” was not the only form of male same-sex relationships in classical Greece: “Greek homosexual activity, despite popular misconceptions, was not restricted to man-boy pairs” (5).
than a virtuous lover, or to the lover than a beloved youth” (25). This establishment of a coded counter-discourse that validated male same-sex love through invoking the notion of Greek love was also practiced by Walter Pater and transmitted to his student, Oscar Wilde. According to Dowling, Pater, after a near scandal when his romance with a Balliol College, Oxford, undergraduate was disclosed, chose to live a celibate life (Chapter 1). Oscar Wilde, however, not only practiced a coded counter-discourse on Greek Love in the fairy tales, but sought out sexual relationships with other men. Wilde’s early prose is saturated with the discourse of Greek love that established a devoted and loving bond between two men, sometimes an older male and a younger boy, sometimes a teacher and his pupil. Combining the discourse of Greek love with elements of fantasy makes Wilde’s fairy tales uniquely coded.

To take just one preliminary example of this coding, in the “Happy Prince,” Wilde’s first fairy tale in the book *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), Greek love is delicately woven into the tale in a very interesting and complex manner. The tale begins with a criticism of heterosexual love as the male Swallow falls in and out of love with a female Reed. The relationship was deemed unacceptable by the Swallow’s family, because of his love for a woman of a different species. This concern for such “a ridiculous attachment,” would quickly dwindle as the Swallow falls out of love with her because she “has no conversation,” and is not capable of traveling with him (11). This love that burns out as quickly as it ignites is just the opposite of the love the Swallow develops for the Happy Prince. Memorialized as a statue after his death, the Happy Prince stands high above the city he once lived in as a mortal. He stands high enough to gaze among the streets with golden eyes that are
The Victorian

able to notice the poverty-stricken people who are subject to his family’s crown. The swallow falls in love with the much older Prince, who directs the little bird:

“Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, said the Prince, “do as I command you” (16). On the second day of the Swallow’s visit, the Prince asks him to stay one more night and aid him in helping the poor of the city. The Swallow’s acceptance of the invitation to stay the night marks the beginning of a devoted friendship that quickly develops between the two male characters. On the third night, the “Swallow, who really had a good heart,” remained yet another evening to help a writer that was cold and hungry, despite the threat that the harsh weather posed to his warm-blooded body (16).

Unlike the relationship the Swallow had with the Reed, which quickly fell apart for lack of common interests and good conversations, the love that develops between the Swallow and the Happy Prince occurs out of the selfless acts of giving to the poor of the Prince’s city. They have a mutual devotion to one another which enables their charitable vision to work; the Prince possesses the ability and knowledge to direct the Swallow in what direction he must go in order to bring help to the poor. The devoted friendship mimics that of a teacher and student when taking into consideration the Happy Prince’s ability to see beyond the immediate horizon, and the Swallow’s devotion to him to undertake the suggested journeys. This parallel between an older male instructor providing guidance to his younger male subject is not only reflective of the ideal boy-man relationships of the ancient Greeks, but was also practiced and well developed at Oxford University before and during Wilde’s time there. Dowling demonstrates that Jowett encouraged intense relationships between the older Oxford tutors and their pupils by commandeering for his own more secular purposes certain
institutional structures, including “the college tutorial as [an …] intimate personal relationship, a recent Tractarian tradition of intense undergraduate male friendship” (xiv).

In *The Happy Prince* an emotional bond develops between the older and wiser Prince, who instructs the Swallow in selfless acts of courage to alleviate the suffering of others. Unlike the relationship the Swallow experienced with the female Reed, this one leads to a love that both the Swallow and the Prince die for. Having remained too long in the winter weather, the Swallow “kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet” (20). Symonds explains that the emotion of Greek love encompassed the willingness to die for a lover and was a powerful enough emotion that one could build states and armies with it. The Greek love between a boy and a man developed bonds that focused on “emulating one another in honour,” and dying for each either in time of war (25). The war Wilde was symbolically representing in the death of the Sparrow and the Prince was not a war fought by the ancients, but rather the current battle many homosexual men were facing since the 1885 passage of the La Bouchere Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act that labeled and prosecuted sex between men as acts of “gross indecency.” This beautiful notion of Greek love had died with the passing of time, and the present law had transformed male passionate desire into a monstrous act. The death of the Swallow and the Prince he loved, symbolizes the sorrowful death of Greek love in the British social structure of Wilde’s time.

An important element in the Greek love that Wilde weaves through his tales is also his tendency to display the failure of love between a man and a woman, which
The Victorian

further supports the love that is long lasting between two male characters. The strategic placement of “The Nightingale and the Rose” is a rhetorical device employed by Wilde to position a critique of heterosexual love between two tales that contain a heavily coded positive discourse on Greek Love. Following *The Happy Prince* and preceding *The Devoted Friend*, this tale is an aesthetically beautiful story about another bird who sacrifices her life in an attempt to advance the love that a male Student has for the object of affection, the Professor’s daughter. Wilde presents these characters as the first humans in the book of tales whose situation involves courtship and love. The relationship between the two young lovers ends in a complete disaster and represents Wilde’s metaphorical suggestion that the heterosexual love that the majority of British society regards as “normal” is in reality materialistic and false when compared to the practice of Greek love. The Student expresses with concern his inability to acquire a single red rose to present to the Professor’s daughter in return for a dance. The Nightingale literally sings her heart out in order to transform a white rose into a red one with the tint of her own blood. She believes the love between a man and a woman is worth her own life and while observing the Student’s need for a red rose she claims that “[h]ere indeed is the true lover” (24). Her beliefs about the love of a man and woman would quickly be proven wrong when in the end the Professor’s daughter chose the suitor with money and the Student carelessly threw the rose to the streets and admitted he would rather spend his days with science books than a female companion. Readers are left mourning the beautiful bird that died for the ungrateful and unworthy love of the man and the woman. Placing *The Nightingale and the Rose* between two tales with strong encodings of a positive discourse of
Greek love emphasizes the positive nature of Wilde’s counter-discourse that is embodied in the two tales framing “The Nightingale and the Rose.”

After exposing the selfish nature of a failed relationship, Wilde rhetorically follows this tale with another one that is strongly saturated in the virtuous ideals of Greek Love. Interestingly enough, this next tale mirrors the Tractarian movement at Oxford which exposed the downfall of those who deny and oppress the sexual element of Greek love.

Linda Dowling explains that Benjamin Jowett was one of the leading figures at Oxford who advocated a pedagogical and curricular reform away from a theological focus to one centered on the liberal and ethical values embodied in the Greek Classics, modifying for secular purposes some of the reforms of the earlier Tractarian Movement (xiv). Teaching the ancient Greeks classics, especially Plato, created an atmosphere that celebrated and embraced the ideals of Greek love. It is essential to note, however, that Jowett was not supportive of the physical connection between the male students and their mentors, and he denied that the pederastic relationships seen in Plato’s works were in any way sexual (Dellamora 158-64). He accepted the love and devoted friendship between two men but cast shame and rejection upon those who were physically involved. This shaming of Greek Love was typical of the Victorian era and created the “central contradiction within Oxford homo-social Hellenism – its willful denial of the paiderastia so crucial to the Greek culture it otherwise held up to emulation and praise” (Dowling 88). Denying this crucial aspect of Greek love was not an opinion Jowett could impose on many of the next generation at Oxford. As Dowling asserts, “Pater and Wilde and the Uranian
The Victorian

poets could not be denied the means of developing out of this same Hellenism a homosexual counter-discourse able to justify male love in...transcendental terms,” a discourse strongly established and visible in Wilde’s fairy tales (xiii).

Jowett’s partial acceptance of Greek Love but denial of its sexual component had devastating effects on his students, such as Symonds, who fully accepted devotion and sex. As Dowling explains, Symonds was involved in two same-sex scandals after his time at Oxford. He was influenced by Jowett’s pedagogy of Greek love, which he fully accepted and practiced, but was ostracized for practicing the sexual element in relationships between the teacher and the student. Victorian society, and Jowett, accepted the sheer devotion and commitment of Greek love, as long as it was not too devoted. During the sex scandals that “nearly ruined his [Symonds] life,” Jowett was faithfully by Symonds’ side; however, as Dowling argues, the former student was coming “to recognize how cruelly equivocal Jowett’s Oxford Hellenism was” (88). Jowett encouraged and supported Greek love, and although Symonds “remained grateful for Jowett’s help,” it was very damaging for Symonds to be shamed for his full support of all dimensions of Greek love that included same-sex pleasure (88).

Wilde constructs a relationship in The Devoted Friend that illustrates the cruelty of denying the sexual element of a relationship between men who practice Greek love. The relationship in the tale mirrors the cruel equivocation of Jowett’s promotion of the Greek classics, while shaming the same-sex love that students like Symonds found in themselves and in the texts they studied together.

*The Devoted Friend* is perhaps Wilde’s most clever and wittiest fairy tale.
This tale strongly advocates male same-sex love and criticizes, in a coded way, how Victorian society denies men the experience of Greek love by repressing the sexual dimension of such devoted erotic friendships. In observing disobedient duck children, the Water-Rat proclaims to the Green Linnet that he is “not a family man,” and in fact he knows “nothing in the world that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship” (41). The Water-Rat immediately professes the superiority of the friendship and devotion between two men, and labels it as “nobler” than the love between those who procreate children. The bird with whom he speaks does not understand the concept and proceeds to tell a story about two male (and human) friends that is a vividly coded interpretation of how selfless, genuine, and passionate the bond between two devoted men is in contrast to the union of a procreating married couple.

The two male characters are described as Big Hugh the Miller and Little Hans the Gardener, insinuating the superiority of the Miller. The Miller is also rich while Hans struggles in the winter without any flowers to sell or a garden to live off, yet Hans remains humble even when his “devoted friend” refuses to visit him or help him in his time of need. The Miller explains to his wife “[t]hat at least is my idea about friendship, and I am sure I am right,” which she promptly agrees with (43). This scene implies the Miller and his wife accept the virtues of devoted Greek friendship, but only to a certain degree as the Miller allows for his friend Hans to go without food and heat. The Miller’s son is, however, attentive to the undivided protection and sympathy that an older male should provide for the younger male in a truly devoted friendship of Greek love; that is evident when he proposes that his father bring Hans
in for the winter and care for him. The Miller resembles men like Jowett in his acceptance of devotion with limitations, while his son wants to fully extend the friendship to all areas. In showing that the boy is capable of the emotions that accompany Greek love, Wilde is suggesting that the character’s own sexuality desires the attention of men. The Miller’s son’s desire to live with Hans evokes male same-sex desire and passion in a coded way, extending the ideals of Greek love in a similar fashion to those of Wilde’s circle who accepted Greek love in its entirety. The boy is immediately reprimanded by his father for suggesting such an act, and the boy “felt so ashamed of himself that he hung his head down, and grew quite scarlet and began to cry into his tea” (44). The unaccepting father is in this sense a parallel to Victorian society, which did not accept the ideals of Greek Love in its full scope. Even more interestingly, the Miller could be a coded representation of the older generation of reformers at Oxford under the leadership of Benjamin Jowett, who as previously mentioned made the rigorous study of the classics the centerpiece of education and of mentoring relationships between the Oxford tutors and their students, but who also denied that the devoted relationships between men in the Dialogues of Plato, for example, were sexual. The failure of British society to recognize the virtues and importance of boy-man relationships is represented through the obvious corruption of Hans and the Miller’s friendship.

The friendship between the Miller and Hans is far from reciprocal, which is the exact opposite of the adoration two male figures share when joined together through the devotion of Greek love. Thus, the title of the tale drips with sarcasm when the reader sees just how “undeveloped” the Miller is to young Hans and how
deadly is the effect of that lack of devotion. As opposed to guiding Hans and instructing him with good advice on how to live a more fulfilling life, the Miller greedily takes various items from Hans, such as his flowers and plank of wood. Hans, who is symbolically in the position of the younger student, believes his older instructor is correct in his treatment and even though he is struggling to survive under his guidance is still grateful he “did not refuse the Miller, for he is my best friend” (49). Again, Wilde can be seen as alluding, in a coded way, to the pernicious consequences of Jowett’s and the other Oxford reformers’ denial of the sexual dimension of Greek love. Jowett and his fellow classicists opened up a world of erotic possibility to their students in their study of the Ancients. Yet they also cruelly denied the very passions that the texts and the close mentoring relationships with tutors provoked in the younger generation of classical scholars like Pater and, after him, Symonds and Wilde (Dowling x-xiii). The tale even mentions that the Miller was “a very good scholar,” paralleling the student-teacher relationship that was common among the students of Oxford (52). As the subject of his teacher, Hans continues to neglect his own needs and his dying garden to do as the Miller bids, just as the younger generation of man-loving men at Oxford were subjected to their Masters’ denials of the legitimacy of male same-sex love. Again, the Miller’s obvious lack of devotion reflects Jowett’s decision to block Walter Pater from the proctorial elections at Oxford due to a previous affair Pater had had with a student (Dowling 101-103). Jowett’s actions in embracing the pedagogy of Greek Love shows his acceptance of some Greek ideals, while simultaneously revealing a shameful attitude towards the sexual desires of the men who love other men. The study of the classics gave an
exalted name and textual embodiment to the love of other men, thus validating male sexual needs, but then the older male scholars like Jowett defined those needs as inappropriate—denying their “garden” the attention it required.

Interestingly enough, the male character that Hans gives his life for is the one who understands the true ideals of being a devoted friend: the Miller’s son. After sustaining a serious injury from a fall, the boy’s own father does not want to expose himself to the powers of a vicious storm to call on a doctor, so he sends Hans instead. In describing the powerful emotional attachment that accompanies Greek love, Symonds asks the question, “who would desert his beloved or fail him in the hour of danger” (25)? The Miller, by shaming his son about his desire to care for Hans, forces his boy to repress his affection for Hans, suggesting, in a coded way, how Victorian society and its guardians attempted to forbid love between men.

The “devoted friendship” that the Miller could have had with Hans was corrupted through the Miller’s shaming of the concept of love between men; the Miller’s inability to form such a relationship reflects the nineteenth-century denials that Paiderastia was an ennobling institution that included a sexual element. To Symonds, the Greek practice of boy-man relations embodied noble passions, a devotion so deep that the future existence of Greek culture and morals relied upon it. Symonds explains, “The lover taught, the hearer learned; and so from man to man was handed down the tradition of heroism” (33). The Miller’s misunderstanding of Greek love makes him incapable of treating Hans with true devotion, or teaching him any moral values to carry into his own life. As the learner who is relying on the teacher for guidance, Hans becomes tainted by the Miller’s shaming of same-sex
The Victorian

passions and meets his death. The text suggests that denials of the legitimacy of deeply erotic and sexual passions between men leads to the destruction of those who experience such passions for each other. The Miller shames his own son to tears for feeling sexual passion towards Hans, and eventually the Miller sends Hans off to his death to save his son. It is as though the Miller believes he must destroy Hans and the affection his son feels for Hans if his son is to live a “healthy” life. The Miller’s attitude of ignoring the suffering of his friend and continuously placing his own self-worth above the needs of Hans is the reason for Hans’ pain and death; something which the Miller never recognizes. He carries on throughout the entire tale with what Wilde rhetorically displays as sheer ignorance and disgraceful arrogance, mirroring the nature of Victorian England’s attitude toward, and misunderstanding of, Greek love—and, perhaps, mirroring the arrogance of the older generation of Oxford reformers, like Jowett, who presumed to define and limit the interpretation of the Ancients and their once exalted concept of Paiderastia. The two characters that display an understanding of male passions are either dead or in pain by the tale’s end. The Miller’s son is physically in pain from his fall and metaphorically in pain from the shame his father brings upon him for feeling desire towards another man.

Three years after the publication of The Happy Prince and Other Tales, Wilde published The House of Pomegranates (1891), in which he explores further the theme of devoted Greek love and critiques how British society attempts to deny, stigmatize, or repress it. The coded representation of the discourse of Greek Love found in the second book of Wilde’s fairy tales is considerably more intricate and subtle than in the first. The tales in this book become more complex in subject matter and are not as
The Victorian Era easily accessible to a wider audience, both during the Victorian Era as well as now. A majority of the ideal relationships that offer coded representations of Greek love are between male and female characters but with a difference in their species, or with a blood relation, making the coded message more difficult to analyze. John-Charles Duffy argues that many relationships in Wilde’s fairy tales are marked by the inability of the couple to procreate, which he argues is a clear code for homosexuality: “In response to the charge that homosexuality is reprehensible because it is non-reproductive, Wilde’s fairy tales cast non-reproductive sex acts and non-reproductive love in a supremely positive light” (333). Recognizing the overall construct of the relationship through the interspecies love affiliations extends this analysis of Greek love further than to just the ability to procreate. What the relations do produce is a positive homosexual counter-discourse that illuminates the virtuous nature of Greek love and those who practice it. Wilde used non-procreative relationships in these tales as a way to code erotic and passionate relationships between men.

The Fisherman and His Soul portrays the tale of a man whose feelings towards another man are considered forbidden in the eyes of his society. The love the public cannot accept in this tale is the devoted love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid, which serves as a coded representation for the way in which British society rejected the non-procreative love between men. After falling in love with a Mermaid, the Fisherman is confronted with the issue of his soul. In order to marry the one he loves, both partners realize that he must cast away his soul in order to enter the realm of “the Sea-folk,” who “have no souls” (134). The Fisherman is chastised by all of society (that reflects British attitudes towards men who love other men). The Priest,
The text explores the level of disgust that is directed towards the Fisherman for his decision to engage in a relationship with the Mermaid when he is attempting to do whatever is possible to be with his love: a devotion founded on Greek love. The Priest warns the Fisherman about the company he desires to keep: “[T]hey are as the beasts of the field that know not good from evil, and for them the Lord has not died” (135). The Priest curses the partner he has chosen and all of the people who live under the sea and “drove him [the Fisherman] from his door” (136). The “creatures” that live in the lower depths of the sea whom the Priest deems as unacceptable erotic partners for the Fisherman are a coded representation of men who love other men.

After contemplating how he can possibly be united with his partner in marriage, the Fisherman seeks the help of a Witch, who like the Priest does not believe the union to be ideal. “The Witch grew pale, and shuddered, and hid her face in her blue mantle,” at the Fisherman’s stated desire to lose his soul to be with his love (138). Surrounded by pagan imagery of gothic caves for housing, and spells that can control the winds and waters, it becomes clear that the (Greek) love the Fisherman has for the Mermaid is thought of as so scandalous that it is not accepted by heaven or hell. Like the lover in the devoted friendships among the Greeks that Symonds describes, the Fisherman is willing to sacrifice even his soul to be with his partner, but he cannot do so without the consequences of harsh treatment from an unaccepting society.
Wilde suggests through this coding that when the Greek love that exists between two partners is not accepted it can cause some man-loving men to lead a double life, their hearts belonging in one place while they live empty, loveless lives in another. After successfully separating from his soul, the Fisherman is asked by his previous shadow, “[G]ive me thy heart, for the world is very cruel, and I am afraid” (145). Looking into the eyes of the man who is identical to himself, he turns down the pleading of his soul and enters into the sea while his other heartless half remains on land. The soul that dwells among humans routinely tries to bribe the Fisherman with wisdom and riches to reunite with him on land and live with those who have souls. The Fisherman successfully resists returning to a loveless, heartless life that does not make him happy but is eventually unable to resist the pressure, and is tempted by lust to exit the sea. The Fisherman quickly realizes that his soul had walked alone with no heart for so long that it was corrupt, causing him to steal, murder, and lie. Having been deceived by his soul, the Fisherman was unable to return to the sea. Wilde uses this deception and confusion as an interesting suggestion of how life may have been for men who wanted to devote themselves to other men, while they were forced to hide this desire under the guise of heterosexuality.

The ending of The Fisherman and His Soul contains some of Wilde’s most daringly coded suggestions of a positive homosexual counter-discourse. Ignoring the urgings of his conniving soul to come back to his previous life with the humans, symbolically a sexually acceptable life, the Fisherman realizes that “[l]ove is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men” (175). Holding his dead lover in his arms the Fisherman chooses to die with
his partner rather than return to living a false double life caused by a society that does not understand the virtues of his devotion for his forbidden lover. A symbolic death has been threaded throughout many of the fairy tales but what happens next is arguably more controversial than any of the previous fairy tales’ endings. In accordance with typical Victorian era customs, the Priest continues to curse the love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid and casts them into an unmarked grave that later grows enchanting flowers. The death of both the Fisherman and the Mermaid follows the Greek ideal of love between men described by Symonds as so intense and devoted that, “[i]n his misfortune he suffers, and at his death he dies with him” (22). The Priest did not see the beauty in the love shared between the two, even in death, but he recognizes it in the beauty of the flowers “and there came another word into his lips, and he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love” (178). After discovering the flowers came from the grave of the Fisherman and the Mermaid, he blessed the seas and “all the wild things that are in it,” and “the people were filled with joy and wonder” (179). Previous fairy tales end with the lovers going to heaven, but this one daringly portrays a Priest who not only blesses this forbidden love between a human and a mermaid, but spreads the word about the beauty of it among his people. The tale suggests that eventually an affirming and positive discourse about same-sex love—like the Ancients’ discourse on Greek Love—will emerge from the very institutions that forbade it in fin-de-siècle British society.

The homosexual discourses that pervaded popular thought in fin-de-siècle England were damaging to the individual due to the extremely negative beliefs that were constructed about men who love other men. Oscar Wilde writes a positive
counter-discourse that admires Greek love and suggests that society as a whole will eventually shed ignorant beliefs for more fitting ones, like those previously held by the ancient Greeks. Greek love was practiced between an older male and a younger male, occasionally described as a teacher and a student; it was founded on extreme devotion, friendship, and love. Under the mask of children’s literature Wilde uses the disguise of non-human characters, such as birds, statues, and Mermaids to symbolically code the devoted, passionate and erotic friendship that occurs between men. As Symonds argues, in ancient Greece sexual practices between two men were not forbidden; neither were they the focal point or main interest of the relationship. Aside from physical passions, the bond that was formed was the center of the pedagogical relationship, which in ancient Greece was responsible for passing morals and civic education onto the next generation to ensure the survival of the state. These morals and lessons included various aspects of political and social life; all of which led to an intense bond between the boy and the man that was powerful enough to make both parties ready to die for the one he loved. Wilde’s characters symbolically embody many of these characteristics. In *The Happy Prince*, the Swallow and the Prince both die for one another, as do the Mermaid and the Fisherman in *The Fisherman and His Soul*. While all four characters are alive, they display a devotion and love for one another that is not accepted by the public. The relationship between the Miller and Hans displays how destructive the pedagogical relationship can be when the ideals of Greek Love are misunderstood and the older Master denies or shames the erotic desires implicit in these relationships. Through the events and lives of the characters in his two collections of fairy tales, Wilde suggests a new positive
counter-discourse on homosexuality that not only displays the negative impact of society’s rejection of same-sex desire but also extols the harmonious atmosphere that can be sustained in a society that welcomes the open expression of this form of love.

References/Works Cited