Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Das Märchen der 672. Nacht* and the Trials of Oscar Wilde

Charles H. Hammond, Jr., University of Tennessee at Martin

In this article, the author argues for a reading of Hofmannsthal’s *Märchen der 672. Nacht* (1895) as a work that was profoundly influenced by the three trials and ultimate criminal conviction of Oscar Wilde. In addition, he asserts that the Wilde trials led Hofmannsthal to reassess the shortcomings inherent in aestheticism and, as a consequence, to reaffirm the critical importance of social engagement for the artist.¹

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During the first trial of Oscar Wilde on the charge of “gross indecency,” Hugo von Hofmannsthal published *Das Märchen der 672. Nacht*, a work that is widely recognized as marking Hofmannsthal’s disillusionment with and disassociation from aestheticism.² The first critic to suggest the connection between the Wilde trials and the *Märchen* was Eugene Weber, who points out that Hofmannsthal began to write the piece scarcely two weeks following Wilde’s arrest. “Die Ähnlichkeit [des Märchens] mit [dem Schicksal] Oscar Wilde[s],” Weber observes, “ist nicht zu übersehen” (Weber 1971, 104). Noting that Hofmannsthal had certainly been following the progress of the trials in the local newspaper, Weber cites a letter of April 1895 from Hofmannsthal to his father in which he claims to have meant nothing with the publication of the tale apart from “[das was] mit jeder Lokalnotiz in den Tagesblättern gemeint ist” (Hofmannsthal 1935, 169). In the same letter, Hofmannsthal describes the *Märchen* as an attempt “die Märchenhaftigkeit des Alltäglichen [.. .], das Absichtlich-Unabsichtliche, das Traumhafte [.. .] auf den heutigen Tag zu verlegen” (p. 170, my emphasis).³ Both of these remarks hint at a link between the tale and what was considered by many to be the scandal of the decade. Jacques Le Rider, as well, considers the fact that Hofmannsthal decided to write the tale during the Wilde trials to be
more than mere coincidence. Citing Weber’s article, Jacques Le Rider points to Hofmannsthal’s letter to his father as further evidence that the trials loomed large in the young man’s mind at the time he was writing the *Märchen* (Le Rider 1993, 85). Finally, Jens Rieckmann comments at some length on the similarities between Hofmannsthal’s fictional piece and the reality of the Wilde trials, pointing out that “Hofmannsthal [hat] sich wiederholt in Briefen, Aufsätzen und Tagebuchnotizen [mit den Wilde Prozessen] auseinandergesetzt, Zeichen dafür, daß er von dem Fall Oscar Wilde tief betroffen war […] Von dieser Betroffenheit zeugen Das Märchen der 672. Nacht […] wie auch noch der erst 1905 verfasste Essay ‘Sebastian Melmoth’” (Rieckmann 1997, 171–172). This essay will further reinforce the connection between Hofmannsthal’s cryptic tale and the Wilde scandal by providing a reading of the *Märchen* that seeks to bring to light significant links between the story and the trials that have, to this point, gone largely unremarked in the critical discussion of this pivotal early work. I begin by taking a brief look at the events that led to the trials and subsequent imprisonment of Wilde. I then discuss Hofmannsthal’s early association with Stefan George, which was overshadowed by a private scandal that shared a number of important similarities with the Wilde affair. I bring this up in order to show why the Wilde trials would have had such a deeply personal impact on Hofmannsthal. Following this (largely historical) excursus, I move on to a close reading of the first part of the *Märchen*, paying special attention to the protagonist’s self-imposed social isolation, his preoccupation with death and his relationship to the only male servant in his household – a relationship that, I argue, of a homosexual nature. I follow this analysis with a reading of the second part of the story, which opens with the protagonist’s reaction to an anonymous letter accusing the male servant of an unspecified crime. I show how the protagonist’s rash decision to descend into the city to confront the accuser is doomed from the outset as a direct consequence of his earlier decision to withdraw from society. In the final section of the essay, I examine how the trials influenced the young Hofmannsthal’s views on aestheticism, leading him to conclude that social engagement was indispensable to his maturation both as an artist and as a human being.
I. Public scandal of a decade, private scandal of a lifetime

In 1895, Oscar Wilde sued the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, for libel. Queensberry had passed a note to Wilde, warning him to cease all contact with his son and insinuating Wilde was a “somdomite [sic]” (Ellmann 1988, 438). Prodded by Lord Douglas, who despised his father intensely, Wilde took Queensberry to court on the charge of publishing a libel against him, this despite the advice of virtually all of Wilde’s friends and family, who warned the lawsuit against the wealthy and powerful man, whom Wilde had called “the most infamous brute in London,” was ill-advised (p. 447). Disregarding all conventional wisdom, Wilde persisted in his quixotic quest and ultimately failed. During the trial it was alleged that Wilde had initiated contact with a number of young male prostitutes (or “rent boys,” as mostly underage male prostitutes are called in England) whom he had solicited to commit sodomy. These allegations were supported by the testimony of several of the young men. Further evidence included amorous letters from Wilde to Lord Douglas which had been confiscated by Queensberry. Predictably, Queensberry was found innocent of the charge of libel. In April of the same year, Wilde was arrested and tried for the commission of indecent acts. This trial ended in a hung jury and another one was ordered. At the conclusion of this final trial in May, the jury returned a verdict of guilty and Wilde was given the maximum penalty prescribed for several counts of “an act of gross indecency”: two years’ hard labor.

During the first trial, the attorneys for Queensberry succeeded in casting new light upon the homoerotic subtext of Wilde’s only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray. Wilde was asked, for example, whether “the affection and love of the artist of Dorian Gray might lead an ordinary individual to believe that it might have a certain tendency” (Hyde 1956, 124). In addition, lengthy passages from the text in which the artist Basil Hallward confesses his love for the young Dorian Gray were read aloud in the courtroom to attest to Wilde’s proclivity for young men. Wilde’s responses to his interrogators were at times humorous, at others indignant, but invariably evasive, which only served to reinforce the suspicion of a public that for years had been the object of Wilde’s merciless attacks. Even under legal cross-examination, Wilde “presented himself as an amoral artist and scorned the moral mob” (Ellmann 1988, 448). In