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Women, Morality, and Materiality: Performing Transgression through Dress and Décor in Fin-de-Siècle Theatre

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> C'est aux époques de décadence, telle la nôtre, que la mode prend une très grande importance, non seulement dans le vêtement, mais dans toutes les manifestations de la vie sociale.
>
> [It is in the periods of decadence, such as ours, that fashion takes on a great importance, not only in clothing, but in all manifestations of social life.][1]

In his 1910 essay *La Théâtromanie* [*Theatremania*], Léon Legavre established a direct link between the decay of his time and the obsession with fashion, the presence of which was tangible in all aspects of society. But, as the title of his essay suggests, he largely condemned the main entertainment of the second half of the nineteenth century: the world of theatre. According to him, theatres were spoilt spaces where the exhibition of fashionable dresses and hats in front of 'des milliers d'yeux attentifs' [thousands of attentive eyes] perverted the audience with the vain pleasures of materialistic bedazzlement and consumption.[2] Sporting those gaudy costumes, interacting with the modish furniture on stage, female characters were at the very core of the spectacularization of consumption, and the characters associated with this idea of excessive fashion were portrayed as indecent, dishonest, self-interested, and immoral women. Blending with their material environment, heavily ornamented and fashionable, women's performance of debauchery was taken as a sign of a society in decay.

There is a strong resemblance between the representations of women on stage and in decadent literature. As Elaine Showalter argues in the opening of *Daughters of Decadence*:

> in decadent writing, women are seen as bound to Nature and the material world because they are more physical than men, more body than spirit, they appear as objects of value only when they are aestheticized as corpses or phallicized as femmes fatales.[3]

This connection to the material world was similarly emphasized on the late nineteenth-century stage, where women were represented both as consumables and consumers. Morality and materiality were thus intertwined around the performance of women embodying decadence.

While Legavre observed the entertainment world as a sign of his society's disintegration, the idea of decadence in theatre was not new at the turn of the twentieth century. As Pascale Goetschel has shown, in France the discourse around the condition of contemporary theatre has been dominated by the metaphor of decadence since the middle of the eighteenth century.[4] Nevertheless, around 1900, the aspects of materialism and encouragement of overconsumption were added to the causes of the decay of drama, often allocating the responsibility for this to women, both as characters and actresses. The links between decadence and theatre can therefore be examined beyond the literary. Artistic theatrical experiments, such as Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891), did depict decadent women expressing themselves through their pomp: the luxurious aspect of the Palace of Herod, overloaded with clothes, cloaks, jewels, mirrors, gold and silver, emphasized the theatrically decorative environment of the text.[5] However, in what follows I will be focusing on the world of mainstream theatre and the representation of contemporary domestic interiors, in order to argue that deviant women were embodying decadence prior to and then alongside the chief works of decadent literature. Decadence is here understood through a broad definition as a degradation of mores, morale and decency, and a general state of social decrepitude.

Taking the association of women, materiality, and morality as its focus, this article explores the connections between theatrical plots involving immoral women, especially *demi-mondaines* and courtesans, and the scenery crafted around them. From the divorcees and *parvenues* of Alexandre Dumas fils's *Le Demi-monde* (1855) to Marcel Prévost's *Les Demi-vierges* (1894), particular attention is paid to how aesthetic forms and decorative styles were chosen to depict deviant women, and were used to demonstrate their lack of social legitimacy and debauched lifestyle. From the fussy and disordered *rocaille* of the neo-Louis XV style to the swirling and luxuriant *modern style*, lustful and scheming women on stage merged with the materiality around them: they wore lavish dresses and

performed on sets crowded with furniture, ornaments, and ostentatious objects.[6] According to the contemporary taste for the staging of finely detailed and faithful material environments, the scenery chosen to depict the *demi-mondaines*, the *parvenues*, the courtesans, or *demi-vierges*, aimed to be as realistic as possible, all within a style as abundant as it was fashionable. Through examining performances as created domestic environments, I argue that the break-up of the seemly decorum of social gender roles was materialized through flashy interiors representing the latest excessive fashion, while moral decadence was materialized in the degeneration of ornament.

Coding/decoding deviant women through scenery

If feminine transgression could take many forms, deviant women, unmarried or unfaithful, were mostly portrayed as distancing themselves from marriage and therefore from the household. Between the seemly moral woman and the *femme fatale*, a multitude of female characters flirted with decadence by refusing social norms.[7] There was also an underlying implication about their sexuality, used as a tool to deceive and manipulate men.[8] The characters of the adventuress, prostitute, or fallen woman were depicting 'immoral' women not only as a menace to the stability of households and to the established family, but as a social threat: deviant women representing a decadent civilization. Consumer or consumable, the figures of the kleptomaniac and the prostitute were the most common depictions of the deviant woman in fiction. Those two profiles embodied broader anxieties about how unbridled economic growth and consumerism would disrupt social and gender hierarchies.[9] But many women living outside of the traditional framework of marriage – single mothers, divorcees, widows, or unmarried women – existed in a social void. Some lost their social position, others made their way up from the lower classes. This constellation of categories was often represented in French plays of the 1850s and 1860s, and inspired playwrights across the Channel, including Wilde.[10] For instance, the character of the *parvenue*, problematized in this article, combines the excessive consumer and the prostitute: she seduces wealthy men in order to buy status. She embodies many of the characteristics of a 'decadent woman' as described, for example, through the

character of Léonora d'Este by Joséphin Péladan in his novel *Le Vice suprême* (1883): 'Elle aime les chastes pour les corrompre; les forts pour les asservir; les indépendants pour les avilir' [She loves chaste men to corrupt them; strong men to enslave them; the independents to degrade them].[11] Her affection for material things is inherent in the way she is represented. The fallen woman was, in fact, often depicted as isolated from the material environment, lost in urban crowds, on the street, far from the safe domestic world to which she was previously accustomed.[12] But kept women or courtesans were inseparable from their domestic interiors: these were the proof and condition of their social success.

As early as Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules* [*The Pretentious Young Ladies*] (1653), male playwrights were exploring the comedic potential of women aspiring to exist beyond the social frame to which they were assigned. Nineteenth-century comedies were fond of these liminal women and often portrayed them as such – for example, by using the attribute 'demi', representing these 'half' women: *demi-mondaines*, or *demi-vierges*. Dumas' comedy *Le Demi-monde* was so successful that the term entered common parlance. The *demi-monde* was 'le monde équivoque' [the equivocal world], as a contemporary critic wrote, 'c'est la société qui tient à la bonne compagnie par le luxe, à la mauvaise par les mœurs' [it is society judging social worth by luxury, rather than behaviour].[13] It was composed of deviant women from various backgrounds: either they came from a lower social class and ascended by immoral means – being kept by rich men – and wanted to show off their new possessions, or they had descended from high society after a divorce or the death of their husband, and were clinging on to the remaining items indicative of their previous social status. Representing the *demi-mondaines* demonstrated their fight for legitimacy, and the social performance of presenting as someone one is not: a classic theatrical *mise en abîme*.

According to theatre director Adolphe Montigny, who revolutionized stage direction through his use of furniture to regulate actors' movements and interactions on stage, scenery and accessories enabled an exaggerated lustre and splendour, and the materialization of a 'peinture du vice élégant' [picture of elegant debauchery], as described by contemporary critic Edmond About.[14]

As well as creating a realistic material environment for the characters, the excessive furniture highlighted the depraved and spoilt behaviour of these women. As a more deviant form of the *demi-mondaine*, the term *demi-vierge* appeared in the 1880s, referring to women who would openly seduce men by pretending to be virgins in order to get married. Prévost's novel *Les Demi-vierges* inspired two theatrical adaptations, in 1895 and 1900. Like *Le Demi-monde*, *Les Demi-vierges* tells the story of self-interested women trying to find a good match by marrying a rich and naive man. Such female characters were recurrent in vaudeville and comedies, reaching a pinnacle in *Décadence* (1904), a comedy by Albert Guinon depicting a 'decadent' couple, and encompassing both antisemitism and misogyny. Censored in 1901, it received its first staging in 1904. The play depicts a Jewish man only interested in money and social status, and his self-interested wife who marries him just so she can live an extravagant life, while having an affair with an even richer marquis.

These women rely on material assets in order to fulfil themselves and access the social status and acceptance they are otherwise largely denied. In these comedies, they are caricatured as materialistic and heavy spenders. However, the need to acquire certain objects, and the art of arranging them in an interior, was a concern not just for *parvenues*, but for all women. In order to understand how *parvenues* could be identified through their belongings, it is necessary to acknowledge how domestic interiors could be validated as fitting moral and social expectations. The 'decadent interior' was therefore recognized in contrast to 'suitable interiors'. Leora Auslander argues that for bourgeois women, interior arrangements such as furnishing were 'necessary for representing and constituting the family's social position'.[15] The materiality around women was indeed highly codified, especially through handbooks regulating decoration habits and the distribution of rooms in the house depending on gender (husband or wife) and position (owners or employees). These books, covering all aspects of so-called 'domestic economy' – recipes, furnishing, decoration, maintenance, cleaning, childcare, and so on – tended to normalize gendered identities within households.[16] Furnishing the house had to be the preserve of women, as unlike men they were spending most of their time indoors.[17] The fact that middle- and upper-class families were socially

defined by their objects, furniture, and decor played a significant role in strengthening bourgeois identity in Western Europe.[18] Deviating from these spatial norms accentuated the impression of unconventional behaviour. As the press evolved, private interiors became more and more public: actors or writers progressively opened their doors to the press, and their material milieu was assumed to reflect their true nature.[19]

The increasing association of persons with their interiors was even stronger for women, to whom responsibility for the interior was primarily assigned. In *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] (1892), Max Nordau portrays the 'degenerate' woman in detail, first through her outfits, then through her domestic interior:

> Daylight filters in through painted glass, where lean saints kneel in rapture. In the drawing-room the walls are either hung with worm-eaten Gobelin tapestry, discoloured by the sun of two centuries or covered with Morris draperies, on which strange birds flit amongst crazily ramping branches, and blowzy flowers coquet with vain butterflies. Amongst armchairs and padded seats, such as the cockered bodies of our contemporaries know and expect, there are Renaissance stools, the heart or shell-shaped bottoms of which would attract none but the toughened hide of a rough hero of the jousting lists.[20]

Deviant women were still defined by their domestic space, although instead of presenting it as a safe and appropriate environment to raise a family, the *parvenues* exhibited it as a demonstration of their wealth and possessions. For instance, the *parvenu* baroness of *Le Demi-monde*, Suzanne d'Ange, was associated with her interior space by critics, who reported that when she appeared 'dans un salon tendu de damas jaune, elle a pris un titre assorti à son ameublement' [in a living room covered with yellow damask, she chose a title matching her furniture].[21] On the other hand, Olivier de Jalin's domestic interior is wealthy but sober, fitting the norms of decorum, which is mocked by the *demi-mondaines* who compare it with their new fashionable apartments in the richest streets of Paris.[22] The widowed viscountess lives in a sumptuous apartment where '[l]'or ruisselle sur les tables' [gold flows on the tables].[23] Her living room is richly furnished in the style of Louis XV, and saturated with decorative objects and flower arrangements. Objects on stage contribute to the acknowledgement of a prestigious environment, but their abundance and nonconformity to the rules of interior furnishing betray vulgarity and bad taste. Moreover, the dazzlingly overdressed women interact with

the proliferating objects of their *nouveau riche* interiors, invading rooms that are not usually open to them: living rooms, lounges, smoking rooms. Their social involvement was thereby spoofed, caricatured, and reduced to a failed attempt to mimic the upper classes and the men who had rejected them.

This idea of counterfeiting a social position was also revealed through their noticeable but cheap ornaments. Nordau described the possessions displayed in the interiors he associated with degeneration, emphasizing both the senseless heterogeneousness of the objects and the fact that they were not authentic:

> On all the tables and in all the cabinets is a display of antiquities or articles of vertu, big or small, and for the most part warranted not genuine; a figure of Tanagra near a broken jade snuff-box, a Limoges plate beside a long-necked Persian waterpot of brass, a bonbonniere between a breviary bound in carved ivory, and snuffers of chiselled copper.[24]

As Christophe Genin argues, a material object may reveal a failed attempt by the bourgeois classes to copy the aristocratic œuvre. While original works of art reference the creative spirit of the artist, the manufactured objects reference production, consumption, and are perishable products.[25] The artifice of these bourgeois interiors thus reflects the duplicity of the deviant women occupying them.

A 'decadent scenery' associated with deviant female characters often emphasized the idea of excess, while most of the housekeeping books advised on a certain moderation in the practice of decorating spaces, although the basic furniture they recommended was already significant. Women's duty, as household managers, was to find the right balance, oscillating between hosting dinners in an interior not so empty as to suggest deficiency or a low social rank, yet restrained enough that the dining rooms were not crowded with too many ostentatious ornaments which would indicate bad taste and eccentricity. While many handbooks suggested that decorating one's interior should not solely be a privilege of the upper class, wealthier households were recommended not to display their wealth.[26] 'Frugality and economy are home virtues', Isabella Beeton wrote, 'without which a household cannot prosper'.[27] The sobriety was often a byword for virtuousness and synonym for good taste and restraint because it implied the idea that a virtuous woman was not a spendthrift.

'[L]e vrai bon goût' [The real good taste], wrote Mme Pariset in the introduction to her book on etiquette, 'consiste à choisir les choses utiles, commodes, durables, qui surtout ont entre elles un rapport bien établi' [consists in choosing useful, convenient, lasting things, which have an entrenched connection between them].[28] Etiquette books, newspaper illustrations, and advertising images contribute to creating an iconographic memento of the ideal interior. The standardized 'good taste' defined by those books is precisely the norm against which indecency, excess, and decadence – what Nordau describes as 'degeneration' – can be judged. Interior decoration that displayed a departure from these well-known reference points was therefore a sign of social deviation. However, in addition to deviating from the norms, 'decadent interiors' could also be identified by their own aesthetic characteristics, showing the association of a decadent lifestyle with certain types of decoration.

From Rococo to Art Nouveau: staging the decadent interior

The identification of deviant women on stage was not only facilitated by the excessive quantity of their belongings, but also by the immoderate use of certain fashionable styles of ornaments. In his description of 'degenerate interiors', Nordau resorted to exhaustive references to the mixture of ancient and foreign styles: 'startling is the effect of a gilt-painted couch between buhl-work cabinets and a puckered Chinese table, next an inlaid writing-table of graceful rococo'.[29] Henry Havard wrote in the 1890s, that 'étudier les Styles, […] c'est étudier la vie morale et intellectuelle des peuples' [Studying styles, […] is studying the moral and intellectual life of people].[30] The art historian claimed that the values and morals of a group of people could be discerned from the architectural and decorative aesthetics they chose or invented. Therefore 'rudes et austères' [harsh and austere] styles were inherent to people 'vivant uniquement pour la guerre' [living only for war]. More developed and thorough styles were needed in civilised nations 'où règne une communication constante non seulement des deux sexes mais de personnes de tous les états' [where there is constant communication between the sexes, between all kinds and manner of person].[31] In this more complex

society, the artist, according to Havard, had to vary their creation depending on the social rank, gender, age, and position of the persons for whom they catered.

The nineteenth century gave rise to many debates about identity and styles. Despite the apparent decorative chaos and the recycling of styles from all eras and cultures into a motley combination, a certain unity was advised in decoration, affiliating to each room a specific style and era.[32] However, on the theatrical stage, the *parvenues* and courtesans were often pictured amongst a profusion of decoration in a neo-Louis XV style. In Havard's analysis, the different styles between the reign of Louis XIV and Louis XVI – *Régence*, *rocaille*, Pompadour – were all imbued with femininity and pleasure. Havard describes these styles as the direct consequence of an economic, political, and social crisis, revealing the "'passion de briller" pour la nouvelle "classe riche'" ['passion to shine' of the newly 'rich class'], their 'manifestation du désir et de la volonté de s'enrichir [demonstration of a desire and will to get rich]. It was also the ornamental demonstration of a new 'classe de femmes intelligentes, actives, remuantes et sans grands scrupules' [class of clever women, active, restless and without scruples].[33] Havard also associates the idea of comfort with a concern for luxury.[34] Such a definition of the Louis XV style was not new in the 1890s: the expanding fashion of *rocaille* in Parisian domestic interiors was condemned by contemporaries in the eighteenth century for being a counterfeiting culture, an attempt of the *tiers état* to imitate the taste of the aristocracy.[35] Such persisting stereotypes conveyed by the Louis XV style made it an obvious aesthetic out of which to compose the material environment of a woman-ruled society where seduction led to success.[36]

The ability of spectators to understand such stylistic differences can be explained by the fact that ancient styles were class indicators for the bourgeoisie or the aristocrats. Amongst London's upper classes, the taste for furniture tended towards the styles of eighteenth-century France. But in terms of wealth and ostentation, the Louis XV style strongly contrasted with the simplicity and sobriety praised by the instruction manuals as examples of decorum. In a long history of scorn for the *rocaille* ornaments associated with excess and lust, many etiquette books condemned the use of

this style. In the cyclical conception of taste – going through three phases: primitive, classical, decadent – authors placed the Louis XV style as a degeneration of more seemly past aesthetics. In *The Art of Decoration* (1881), Mary Haweis celebrates Louis XIV style as the most elegant and scientific, whereas she considers Louis XV as grotesque and vulgar.[37] In 1883, Rococo style was described by W. G. Collingwood as possessing these demeaning traits:

> Out of the taste for grotesque […] was developed Rococo, the 'Rock-cockle' style, I suppose one might say, – '*rocaille coquille*.' The object of this is picturesqueness, quaintness, gaudiness, and glitter; it has no grace, but broken, crooked grotesque lines to catch the light; and a crumpled surface to represent rock, or rather rockeries; which were fashionable then, before anybody had heard about geology, though now tolerated only by the uneducated.[38]

The perception of the Rococo aesthetic in the nineteenth century was therefore quite contradictory: it conjured up a lack of education and degenerative aesthetics, but at the time of *Le Demi-monde*, it was a very fashionable style with the expanding bourgeoisie, as its revival was popularized in France under the Second Empire, at the instigation of the Empress Eugénie.[39] The aesthetic practice of re-using or reinterpreting eighteenth-century décor was frequent in the imperial couple's residences. Like Napoléon III and Eugénie seeking legitimacy and affiliation to the royal tradition of France through the decoration of their interiors, resorting to references from the *Ancien Régime* was, for the *nouveau riche*, a strategy of affiliation with the most noble parts of society.[40] In *Le Demi-monde*, in order to create the environment of the *demi-mondaines*, contemporaries claimed that the stage directions of Adolphe Lemoine (known as Montigny) demanded interiors entirely decorated with *rocaille*.[41] But, in trying to be as faithful as possible, interiors on stage followed the fashions of interiors off-stage. When *japonisme* became the trending taste, it proliferated in the theatres, and was naturally exaggerated when the performance involved self-interested women with superficial tastes. Victorien Sardou's *Marquise!* (1889) staged the story of Lydie Garousse, a lower-class woman who gained access to the elite of society by being a successful cantatrice, but who, despite her best efforts, could never be officially given the title of marchioness and escape her status of *nouveau riche*. For her interior, decorator Amable created a Japanese lobby crowded with ornaments including two-metre-high bronze vases, opening onto a

garden with a large round window.[42] Each of her accessories was more extravagant than the last, from the pink gown made of Japanese fabric adorned with ostrich feathers, to her enormous conspicuous diamond crown.

More than a feminine and 'debilitating' aesthetic, Rococo was also associated with foreign lifestyles. On the fin-de-siècle London stage, plays based in France, and Paris in particular, made perennial reference to Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV, and Rococo. The ability to recognize 'national styles' can be partly explained by the culture created by furnishing brands in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In London, department stores offered French sections, most often composed of antiques and reproductions of Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI styles.[43] To represent a French interior, department store collections were exhibited on stage, as seen at the Prince of Wales theatre's pantomime *L'Enfant prodigue* [*The Prodigal Son*] (1891). This Pierrot pantomime, imported from Paris, was performed with scenery quite different from its original version. The plot involves an immoral and self-interested woman, Phrynette, who seduces Pierrot to make him steal from his own parents so she can decorate her boudoir in a showy Louis XV style. Unlike the French version, performed with very simple scenery, the British adaptation insisted on decoration that would follow the progression of characters in the evolution of their virtue. The second act, in Phrynette's new boudoir, took place on a stage covered with precious cloths and saturated with furniture and ornaments. It was entirely furnished by the Oetzmann & Co. department store, and was advertised as such in the playbill. In the following act, as Pierrot realizes he has been fooled, he returns to his parents to ask their forgiveness, and the scenery changes into a very sober and modest interior, materializing the moral of the story into the scenery.

Towards the end of the century, on French stages, Louis XV interiors were replaced by the more fashionable *modern style*, designated by the press as originating from England, although the term was invented in France.[44] In 1898, an article in *Le Temps* observed that contemporary fashion had 'abandonné les meubles Louis XV et Louis XVI, le style Renaissance ou Empire […] pour adopter les meubles élégants et si confortables dont les Anglais furent les créateurs et que les

amateurs ont baptisé modern style' [abandoned Louis XV and Louis XVI furniture, Renaissance or Empire style […] to adopt the elegant and comfortable furniture that the English have created and that connoisseurs called modern style].[45] However, the terms used to describe and characterize *modern style* were very similar to the attributes of *rocaille*: inspired by nature, flexible, whirling, comfortable, pleasurable, but also unbalanced, corrupted, exaggerated, feminine, counterfeited luxury, and a certain association with promiscuous life. The 'formes tourmentées et tarabiscotées' [tormented and convoluted shapes] of Louis XV style described as Havard are easily found in so called *modern style* or Art Nouveau.[46] It was even described as an English version of the French eighteenth-century style.[47] As *demi-mondaines* blended in with their Rococo décor, *modern style* was used as an adjective to describe a material environment as well as a lifestyle or a personality.

In a review of *La Princesse Bébé* (1902) by Pierre Decourcelle and Georges Berr, a journalist from the feminist newspaper *La Fronde* described the scene as 'une garçonnière vraiment moderne style, rien n'y manque: telephone, fleurs apportées trop vite, maîtresses diverses' [a really modern style bachelor flat, it is all there in full: telephone, flowers brought too fast, diverse mistresses].[48] This shift in fashion could also be used to identify women from different generations. In Fabrice Carré and Paul Bilhaud's *Ma Bru!*, performed at the Odéon in 1899, stage designers played on the contrast between the mother-in-law's interior, in an austere eighteenth-century style with boule furniture, and the daughter-in-law's living room, entirely in *modern style*. Following the tradition of mid-century handbooks, the fashion press advised women to match their outfits to their interiors, blending fabric like black or cream satin with the furniture in order to 'habiter les salons moderne style [inhabit the modern-style living-rooms].[49] While blending women and their clothing with the interior around them, the *modern style* scenery also stresses the idea of deviant women being obsessed with their appearance and the latest fashion.

The 1900 version of *Les Demi-vierges* opened on luxuriant *modern style* interiors, furnished by Maison Soubrier, a brand operating as both a retailer and a theatre scene designer. The play stages the story of Maud, a young woman testing the limits of innocent flirting while waiting to marry

well. She is surrounded by women behaving likewise, creating a type that Prévost encompassed in the term *demi-vierge*. Choosing this style for the play was not insignificant; if *modern style* was perceived as a liberated style from overseas, so were the *demi-vierges* themselves, considered as a decadent import from the other side of the Channel. Just as the overloaded Rococo style was associated with France on the English stage, the decadent *modern style* embodied the lack of decency of foreign mores: 'la demi-vierge est un type bien plus répandu à l'étranger qu'en France' [the *demi-vierge* is a type more pervasive abroad than in France], Prévost wrote in the foreword of the 1894 edition of the novel, implying that flirting originated from overseas.[50] Later articles maintained the association of *demi-vierges* with a foreign fad, explaining how French young women from the bourgeoisie followed the example of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts as to how to live their life before getting married.[51] Therefore, their association with such interiors was perceived by the audience as one more indication of their rejection of tradition, showcasing their rich dresses alongside 'des meubles du dernier genre anglais' [furniture of the latest English fashion].[52] The association of Art Nouveau or *modern style* with the idea of a pervasive growth of decadence from overseas was mutual on both sides of the Channel and, as Cyril Barde argues, it used the lexicon of deformity, diseases and viruses.[53]

Another aspect of the scenery of *Les Demi-vierges* caught the attention of the contemporary audience: the colours. Unfortunately, these cannot be experienced nowadays through photographic representations of the play. The interiors were 'implacablement bleus' [implacably blue], according to the critic of the *Journal amusant*, a colour associated with 'un moderne et très libre style' [a very modern and free style], and immaculate white lilies bedecked walls in friezes. The white of the flowers matched the white of the dresses of the characters. Dressing the *demi-vierges* in white dresses sprinkled with lilies, in a blue interior, was inevitably understood as a deliberate contrast to their virtue. It is as if 'une pièce vouée au bleu et au blanc, et pourtant…' [the play was dedicated to blue and white, and yet…].[54] The floral associations surrounding female virginity were thus projected onto the scenery and costumes, materializing the heart of the play as

a clear allegory, facilitated by the sinuous and blossomy aesthetics of Art Nouveau. The blue and white association, evoking Chinese porcelain, was one of the hallmarks of Aestheticism; they were two colours Oscar Wilde was very fond of, as Qi Chen argues.[55] Collecting blue and white porcelain was very fashionable among the fin-de-siècle middle and upper classes. In addition, the colour blue, and more specifically blue-green, was omnipresent in decadent literature, notably in descriptions of interiors in the novels of Jean Lorrain, where decadent heroes are all bathed in a blue-green light, as Phillip Winn remarks.[56]

Conclusion

To conclude, the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual in the late nineteenth-century imagination led to the notion that possessing objects for pleasure and not necessity indicated a lack of virtue, and, towards the end of the century, was a true sign of decadence. Women, more than men, were associated with the idea of impulsive buying, defenceless against commercial strategies. From the eighteenth century onward, theories linking women to irrational consumption began to circulate, and women's interest in luxury goods was considered as an innate characteristic of feminine psychology.[57] The role of the ornament and the practice of stage furnishing varies in plays involving immoral or deviant women at the turn of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the scenery always complemented the play. Its fashionable look emphasized the appearance of modernity and it identified women with the materiality around them. The extravagant and garish interiors of the corrupted *demi-mondaines*, *demi-vierges*, adulterous women or courtesans played a major part in the entertainment provided by mainstream comedies. 'Les soirées du demi-monde ont un attrait irrésistible pour nous' [The evenings of the *demi-monde* had an irresistible attraction for us], a commentator wrote in *La Patrie*; the attraction is attributed to luxury and elegance, topped with the zest of debauchery.[58] The character of the *parvenue* was pictured as an excessive consumer living in overloaded interiors, but the fin-de-siècle audience was also eager for bedazzlement.

Therein lies the main paradox of the representation of deviant women on stage: supposedly repulsive and distasteful, 'immoral' women were above all made appealing and desirable. This can be explained by the evolution of the relationship between entertainment and consumption. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, most plays staged in commercial theatres exploited the material environment provided by scenery to seduce audiences fond of realism. In this context, decadent female characters also played a major part in product placement. From the 1890s, collaborations between theatres and commercial companies were widespread. By lending furniture on deposit to theatres, shops took over the role of the property masters and their assistants. In both London and Paris, commercial theatres, shops, and department stores were brought closer together through urban development. This created an ideal opportunity for both institutions to work together: theatres could solve their space problems by reducing their own stock and avoid the expenses of building or buying disposable scenery for each performance; brands could benefit from efficient advertisement, through mentions in playbills and reviews, taking advantage of the high attendance levels at theatres at the end of the century and their influence on potential clients. The role of actresses in this type of advertisement was fundamental.[59] Jules Claretie wrote in 1911, that fashion, like theatre, is one of 'des grosses préoccupations de la vie courante, l'actrice en vedette devient tout aussitôt comme l'arbitre du goût, la lanceuse attitrée des chapeaux et des robes' [the main preoccupations of the modern life, thereby the actress in the limelight immediately becomes the arbiter of taste, the official trend launcher for hats and dresses].[60] Actresses' choices in interior design interested the audience to the extent that books about their apartments were published, such as Louis Germont's *Loges d'artistes* (1889), listing actresses and describing their possessions. The similarity between these interiors and those depicted on stage can most readily be seen in a description of actress Rosa Bruck's apartment:

> Le salon est une merveille où s'entassent les étoffes précieuses, les satins aux broderies d'or fantastiques venant du Japon, les bibelots rares, les statues de marbre, les bronzes, les ivoires […]. Et toutes ces choses sont disposées, arrangées, pour la plus grande joie des yeux, avec un goût parfait.

> The living-room is a marvel where precious cloth, fantastic gold-embroidered satin from Japan, rare ornaments, marble statues, bronzes, ivories are piling up […]. All those things are arranged for the greatest joy of the eyes, with a perfect taste.[61]

There is a thin line between the characters and the actresses playing them: the women depicted on stage could also be a reflection of those sitting in the audience. The show was also taking place on the other side of the proscenium. 'La moitié du demi-monde de Paris assistait de la galerie et du balcon à la représentation du *Demi-Monde*, qu'on jouait sur la scène' [Half of the *demi-monde* of Paris attended from the gallery to the upper balcony to the performance of the *demi-monde* that was acted on stage], a critic reported.[62] If emancipated women were watching their kindred spirits on stage, the mirror metaphor could also be applied to the actors themselves. 'Grande dame, synonymie de grande comedienne' [Great lady, synonym for great actor], Péladan wrote in *Le Vice suprême*: the worlds of actresses and courtesans being deeply intertwined, some actresses were performing in the same costumes they would wear outside the theatre and in interiors mimicking their own.[63] As Mary Louise Roberts argues, 'the worlds of journalism and theatre, which lay at the heart of commodity culture in this period, enabled these women literally to act out the instability of gender identity, and thus to refashion themselves as women'.[64]

Albeit different, deviant or immoral, women flirting with decadence were linked to their domestic interior and even blended into it. Exaggerated decoration, excess, and lack of harmony operated as signifiers of the unavoidable fate of those outsiders, who despite their accumulation of wealth, would never succeed in accessing the social acceptance they sought amongst 'polite' society.

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[1] Léon Legavre, *La Théâtromanie* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1910), p. 132. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
[2] Legavre, *La Théâtromanie*, p. 129.
[3] Elaine Showalter, 'Introduction', in *Daughters of Decadence*: *Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1993), pp. vii–xix (p. x).
[4] See Pascale Goestschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre, discours de crise et pratiques spectaculaires* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020), pp. 7–19.
To provide a few examples of this discourse: Louis Charpentier, *Causes de la décadence du gout sur le théâtre* (Paris: Dufour, 1768); Jean-François Cailhava, *Les Causes de la décadence du théâtre* (Paris: Moronval, 1807); J.-P. Vallier, *Recherches sur les causes de la décadence des théâtres et de l'art dramatique en France* (Paris: A. Appert, 1841); Emile Montégut,

'De la décadence des théâtres', *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 27.2 (1860); and Jean-Louis Dubut de Laforest, "Notre théâtre à sauver", *Le Progrès artistique*, 30 January 1880, pp. 2–3.

[5] Chad Bennett argues that the play focused on 'embodiment through ornament'. See Chad Bennett, 'Oscar Wilde's *Salome*: Décor, Des Corps, Desire', *ELH*, 77.2 (2010), 297–323 (p. 301).

[6] For a detailed discussion of *modern style,* see Sophie Basch, 'Le "modern style": un intraduisible dans les arts décoratifs', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.2 (2020), 46–63.

[7] As described by George Ross Ridge, the 'decadent *femme fatale*' is harmful and disruptive, using falsehood, deceit and even physical violence to achieve her ends. See George Ross Ridge, 'The "Femme Fatale" in French Decadence', *The French Review*, 34.4 (1961), 352–60 (p. 353).

[8] As Sarah Parker argues, 'female sexuality is often depicted as threatening in Decadent literature', an observation she backs up with many examples from Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. See Sarah Parker, 'The New Woman and Decadent Gender Politics', in *Decadence: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 118–36 (p. 120).

[9] Mary Louise Roberts, 'Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture', *The American Historical Review*, 103.3 (1998), 817–44 (p. 818).

[10] Ignacio Ramos Gay, 'From Dumas fils's Étrangère to Wilde's Aventurière: French Theatrical Forerunners of the Wildean Female Dandy', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 72 (2010), 83–98.

[11] Joséphin Péladan, *Le Vice suprême* (1884; Paris: Editions du Monde moderne, 1926), p. 122.

[12] Nina Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35.1 (1980), 29–52 (p. 33).

[13] Darthenay, 'Programme des spectacles', *Vert-vert*, 23 March 1855, p. 3.

[14] Edmond About, 'THEATRES. Le Demi-Monde, comédie de M. Alexandre Dumas fils', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 10, 31 March 1855, p. 208.

[15] Leora Auslander, 'The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France', in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective,* ed. by Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 79–112 (p. 83).

[16] Louise d'Alq, *Le Maître et la maîtresse de maison* (Paris: Bureaux des 'Causeries familières', 1887).

[17] The division of domestic space into rooms materialized social habits and gendered division according to what Jean Baudrillard described as the 'patriarchal order' governing the typical bourgeois interior. Stemming from royal architecture, bourgeois interior design appointed rooms for feminine use, which were also the more private ones – bedrooms, boudoirs, etc. – whereas masculine rooms corresponded to representational and social performance spaces such as living rooms, dining rooms, and smoking rooms. Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 21. See also Hilde Heynen, 'L'inscription du genre dans l'architecture', *Perspective*, 4 (2007), 693–708.

[18] Rachel Rich, 'Designing the Dinner Party: Advice on Dining and Décor in London and Paris, 1860-1914', *Journal of Design History*, 16.1 (2003), 49–61 (p. 51). See also Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-class Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

[19] Marie-Clémence Régnier, 'Le spectacle de l'homme de lettres au quotidien: de l'intérieur bourgeois à l'intérieur artiste (1840-1903)', *Romantisme*, 168.2 (2015), 71–80 (p. 75).

[20] Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, translated from the second edition of the German work (London: William Heinemann, 1895), p. 10.

[21] Edmond About, 'Chronique de la quinzaine – Histoire Politique et Littéraire', *Revue des Deux Mondes,* 10, 31 March 1855, p. 207.

[22] Alexandre Dumas fils, *Le Demi-monde, comédie en 5 actes en prose* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1855), p. 11.

[23] 'Théâtres', *La Patrie*, 26 March 1855, p. 1.

[24] Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 10.

[25] Christophe Genin, 'Le kitsch: une histoire de parvenus', *Actes Sémiotiques* (2007), <https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/3268> [accessed 9 December 2021].

[26] See Eliza Warren's books insisting on saving money: How I Managed My House On Two Hundred Pounds A Year (1864), Comfort for Small Incomes (1866), or A House And Its Furnishings; How To Choose A House And Furnish It At A Small Expense (1869).

[27] Isabella Mary Beeton, *The Book of Household Management, etc.* (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861), p. 2.

[28] Mme Pariset, Marie Armande Jeanne Gacon-Dufour & Elisabeth Celnart, *Nouveau manuel complet de la maîtresse de maison; ou, Lettres sur l'économie domestique* (Paris: Librairie encyclopédique de Roret, 1852), p.10.

This asceticism was also associated with England, through the concept of 'comfortable', an English word that made its way into the French language during the nineteenth century, described as such by Mme Pariset: 'Je crois que cette concordance fait partie essentielle de ce que les Anglais expriment par le mot *comfortable*. Elle plaît à l'œil, elle donne une sorte de repos à l'esprit, et constitue en grande partie ce bien-être duquel je vous parlais il y a quelques jours. Je l'ai rencontrée bien souvent chez les gens de fortune médiocre ; souvent aussi je l'ai cherchée en vain dans les maisons opulentes.' [I think this harmony is an essential part of what the English express through the word *comfortable*. It pleases the eye, rests the spirit, and constitute that well-being I was talking about. I often came across it from modest people; often I looked for it in vain in opulent houses.] (p. 10).

[29] Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 10.
[30] Henry Havard, *Les Arts de l'ameublement. Les styles* (Paris: C. Delagrave, 1891-97), p. 3.
[31] Havard, p. 4.
[32] See for instance H. J. Hennings's recommendations in 1902: 'For the dining room, you may have it Italian Renaissance, François Premier, Elizabethan, Jacobean, eighteenth-century English, or modern English Renaissance. French styles may be put on one side for an English dining room; so may the Gothique Anglais […]. For the drawing-room there are available the whole range of French styles, from Louis XIV to the Empire, also the English Chippendale to Adam period, and, if these give not scope enough, the English Renaissance as practised by the English school'. H. J. Jennings, *Our homes, and how to beautify them* (London: Harrison, 1902), pp. 73–74.
[33] Havard, p. 140.
[34] Havard, p. 141.
[35] Maxine Berg, 'From Imitation to Invention: Creating Commodities in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *The Economic History Review*, 55.1 (2002), 1–30; Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Stefan Muthesius, 'L'histoire de l'architecture et du design au XIXe siècle: avant et après l'authenticité', in *Repenser les limites: l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines* (Paris: INHA (Actes de colloques), 2005).
[36] Research on gendered consumption has shown the importance of the eighteenth century as a starting point for the lasting association of women with objects of consumption. David Kutcha argues that luxury was perceived both as a vice and a political threat in eighteenth-century aristocratic culture, and represented 'the debased, debauched, and debilitating form of consumption that effeminated and impoverished England'. See David Kutcha, 'The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832', in *The Sex of Things*, ed. by Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, pp. 55–62 (p. 63).
[37] See Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Decoration* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881); Mrs Loftie, *The Dining-room* (London: Macmillan, 1878); and Judy Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home 1870-1914* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2008), p. 58.
[38] W. G. Collingwood, 'The Philosophy of Ornament: Eight Lectures on the History of Decorative Art', given at University College, Liverpool (Orpington: George Allen, 1883).
[39] Margaret Barlow, 'Rococo Revival', in *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000072560> [accessed 9 December 2021].
[40] The imperial taste was exhibited to an international audience. For example, Le musée rétrospectif de la Reine, displaying the possessions of Marie-Antoinette, at the Petit Trianon during the Exposition universelle of 1867. Christophe Pincemaille, 'L'Impératrice Eugénie et Marie-Antoinette autour de l'exposition rétrospective des souvenirs de la Reine au Petit Trianon en 1867', *Versalia. Revue de la Société des Amis de Versailles*, 6.1 (2003), 124–34; Mathieu Caron, 'Les appartements de l'impératrice Eugénie aux Tuileries: le XVIIIe siècle retrouvé ?', *Bulletin du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles* (Centre de recherche du château de Versailles, 2015), <https://journals.openedition.org/crcv/13316> [accessed 9 December 2021].
[41] See Léo Lespès's anecdote in *Le Figaro*, in which the stage manager is summoned by M. Montgny and questioned as to why, in the second act of *Demi-Monde*, the clock in the 'genre rocaille, appropriée selon vos ordres, à l'ameublement' [rocaille style, matching the furniture, as you ordered] is 'retardait de dix minutes avec l'horloge de la Bourse' [running behind the clock of the Bourse by ten minutes]. Léo Lespès, 'Les accessoires au théâtre. Anecdotes et souvenirs de foyer', *Le Figaro*, 28 December 1856, p. 4.
[42] Un Monsieur du balcon, 'La Soirée théâtrale', *Le Figaro*, 13 February 1889, p. 6.
[43] See for instance the Oetzmann & Co. Catalogue of 1879 and its section 'Finest Old French Furniture', *Guide to house furnishing, Oetzmann and Co.*, 1879, cote W715, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, pp. 104–105. See also the London exhibition of French art in 1888, focused on Louis XIV and Louis XV art. Charlotte Robinson, 'Home decoration', *The Queen*, 3 November 1888, pp. 63–64. The success of the neo-Louis styles in England calls into question our current understanding of cultural nationalism and consumption habits. See also Adriana Turpin, 'Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism? Collecting French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century', in *Art Crossing Borders*, ed. by Jan Dirk Baetens and Dries Lyna (Leiden: BRILL, 2019), p. 225.
[44] See Sophie Basch, Rastaquarium: Marcel Proust et le 'modern style': arts décoratifs et politique dans 'À la recherche du temps perdu' (Turnhout, Brepols, 2014).
[45] Anon., 'L'Art nouveau à la campagne', *Le Temps Supplément*, 7 June 1898, pp. 8–9. (p. 9).
[46] Havard, p. 138.
[47] See Santillane, 'La Vie Parisienne. L'Hôtel Ritz', *Gil Blas*, 2 June 1898, p. 1, and Lucien Descaves, *Le Mot d'ordre*, 4 December 1898, p. 3.
[48] Berthe Mendès, "Soirée Parisienne", *La Fronde*, 16 April 1902, p. 3.
[49] Baronne Staff, 'Notes mondaines', *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, 24 December 1899, p. 13.
[50] Marcel Prévost, *Les Demi-vierges* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1894), p. iv.
[51] '[À] l'exemple de ses soeurs anglo-saxonnes, la jeune fille de la bourgeoisie française tâche à vivre sa vie avant le marriage, si souvent tardif, dès lors nous trouvons dans le roman, au théâtre, d'exquises figures de jeunes filles qui

ne sont plus que ces 'demi-Vierges', vicieuses et corrompues, à qui le talent d'un romancier heureux a fait une éphémère célébrité' [Following the example of their anglosaxon counterparts, the young bourgeoise French woman tries to live her life before marriage, often late; therefore we find in the novel, at the theatre, exquisite young women figures that are now nothing else than those 'demi-Vierges', vicious and corrupted, to whom the talent of a pleased novelist gave an ephemeral celebrity]. Ida R. Sée, 'Jeunes Filles Hier et Aujourd'hui', *La Fronde*, 8 May 1902, p. 1.
[52] Th. Avonde, 'Théâtres', *La Liberté*, 1 October 1900, p. 3.
[53] See Cyril Barde, 'Courbes névrosées, lignes asthmatiques: usages de la métaphore médicale dans la réception de l'Art Nouveau', in *Medecine and Maladies: Representing affliction in nineteenth-century France*, ed. by Sophie Leroy (Leyde: Brill, 2018). On the English side, French decadence was, for instance, considered as 'an exotic growth unsuited to British soil'. Hugh E. M. Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 157 (1895), 833–45 (p. 834).
[54] Le Moucheur de Chandelles*, Le Journal amusant*, 13 October 1900, p.12.
[55] Qi Chen, 'Aristocracy for the Common People: Chinese Commodities in Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism', *Victorian Network*, 1.1 (2009), 39–54 (p. 43).
[56] Phillip Winn, Sexualités décadentes chez Jean Lorrain: le héros fin de sexe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p. 165.
[57] See for instance philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote in 1762 that 'little girls love everything visual, mirrors, jewels, cloth', quoted in Jennifer Jones, 'Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Regime Paris,' in *The Sex of Things*, ed. by De Grazia and Furlough, pp. 25–53 (p. 36).
[58] Jules de Premaray, 'Théâtres', *La Patrie*, 26 March 1855, pp. 1–2 (p. 1).
[59] See Joël H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[60] Jules Claretie, 'La Vie de Paris dans le temps de la semaine passée', *Comoedia illustré*, 1 November 1911, quoted in Pascale Goestschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre, discours de crise et pratiques spectaculaires* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020), p. 285.
[61] Louis Germont, *Loges d'actrices* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1889), p. 78.
[62] Amédée Achard, 'Lettres parisiennes', *L'Assemblée nationale*, 25 March 1855, p. 1–2. (p. 1).
[63] Péladan, p. 122.
[64] Mary Louise Roberts, 'Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture', *The American Historical Review*, 103.3 (1998), 817–44 (p. 843).