The Revisionist "Disembodied Voice" in the Decadent Stella Maris poetry of John Addington Symonds and Arthur Symons

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In his essay "Paul Verlaine", published in the *National Review* in 1892, Arthur Symons (1865-1945) describes Verlaine's poetry as "an act of impressionism", and he compares Verlaine's poetic technique in this context to a Whistler painting (501). The following year, in "The Decadent Movement in Literature", Symons points to Verlaine as an "ideal of Decadence", explaining that in his poetry, Verlaine manages to "fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul" (862). Through the trope of the disembodied poetic voice, Symons suggests, Verlaine expresses the complicated and conflicting rhythms of his own life and, therefore, Verlaine "has been constant only to himself, to his own self-contradictions" (860). However, through the trope of the disembodied voice, Verlaine at the same time gestures inclusively toward readers, thereby suggesting the pertinence of his context to humankind in general. In 1899, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature,* Symons added another dimension to the sensory appeal of Verlaine, suggesting that "there are poems of Verlaine which go as far as verse can go to become pure music, the note of a bird with a human soul" (215). In this essay, I examine the ways in which Symons and John Addington Symonds (1840-1894) manipulate Verlaine's trope of the disembodied voice that speaks through nuance and suggestiveness: they employ a very specific disembodied voice, that of the Virgin Mary, in autobiographical poetry written in the transitional culture of late-nineteenth-century Catholic decadence.

In July of 1892, Arthur Symons met John Addington Symonds, with whom he had exchanged letters for several years. At this time, they both admired Verlaine's sonnet "Parsifal", which had appeared in the January issue of the *Revue Wagnérienne* in 1886.[1] In the final line of the sonnet, the speaker thinks of "those children's voices singing in the dome", and it was this line that Symonds particularly admired, writing to Arthur Symons that it was "a line [to] treasure forever" (quoted in Riddell 485). Riddell points out that Symons, however, expressed "his reservations about the line to Horatio Forbes Brown, explaining that "'fine as it is, [it] looks like it . . . must be rather of the sickly school'" (Riddell 485). Riddell argues persuasively that John Addington Symonds's emotional confusion with respect to this line had to do with his experiencing such a moment as a child when his sexual desire for boys was first aroused. The line had a slightly different effect on Arthur Symons, for as Riddell suggests, "these children's voices become the epitome of the 'disembodied voice' that Symons sees as characteristic of Decadent poetics" (485). The poetic context for Symons's characterisation of Verlaine as the best that poetic decadence offers is "Art Poétique", the 1874 poem in which Verlaine sets out his perspective on enabling a "disembodied" poetic voice that hints rather than expresses explicitly:

[1] Arthur Symons wrote his own poem titled "Parsifal", which was published in *Images of Good and Evil* in 1899.

> For Nuance, not Color absolute,
> Is your goal; subtle and shaded hue!
> Nuance! It alone is what lets you
> Marry dream to dream, and horn to flute! (Shapiro 127)

Edward Delille had already identified Verlaine's specific "shaded hue" of poetic expression in 1891, calling the "keynote" of Verlaine's poetry the "peculiar thrill of grief" that lingers as "a new shade of woe" (394). The disembodied voice enables expression of the "thrill" of attaining happiness through grief and is, thus, a trope consistent with late-nineteenth-century decadence.

John Addington Symonds and Arthur Symons rely on the illusive and ephemeral quality of nuance to enable the disembodied voice of the Virgin Mary in autobiographical poems titled "Stella Maris". Each poet creates a speaker who is a thinly disguised version of himself, a speaker who experiences the "thrill" of confession and absolution, the hallmark of the Catholic faith, but in each case, the speaker manages to avoid the atonement upon which redemption is contingent, a process that is normally an important feature of the ritual of confession. Instead, Mary is embodied as the speaker's object of desire, and in this unorthodox form, she leads the speaker through a different process through which he transforms behaviour that is conventionally considered sinful into a means of spiritual redemption. As Martin Lockerd points out, decadent poetry tends to be "confessional in nature", and it addresses through the confessional the "need to name transgression" (18). Therefore, in these confessional "Stella Maris" poems, Symonds and Symons write obliquely about their own experience as the disembodied voice of the Virgin Mary guides the poetic speakers toward affirmation that behaviours conventionally considered sinful were instead revitalising and renewing. She enables the speakers to shift the parameters against which the dichotomy of sacred and profane was measured, thereby setting new standards of "good" behaviours consistent with a transformative decadent culture.

Paul Verlaine was influenced in his poetics of "nuance" by Charles Baudelaire, who, as Symons points out", rarely asserts; he more often suggests or divines—with that exquisite desire of perfect and just work that is always in him" (*Charles Baudelaire* 1). These are the qualities that Symons incorporates in his own work to produce, as Roger Holdsworth describes, "the poetry of suggestion rather than of statement, of nuances rather than of sharp edges" (22). John Addington Symonds also highlights the virtue of indirect and suggestive poetic expression in the preface to his 1884 volume of poetry *Vagabunduli Libellus*, in which "Stella Maris" appears. The sonnet sequence as a genre, he writes, is particularly suited to "the crystallization of thought around isolated points of emotion, passion, meditation, or remembrance" (ix). Edith Crowell and Alex Murray have recently argued that decadent life writing is not only a "gesture of reaching back to transform forward", but it is also "always both translation and confession", with the past reshaped through remembrance (378, 379). During the years leading up to the fin-de-siècle, the Roman Catholic structure of the formal confessional, implicitly linked to memory, offered the penitent an opportunity to revisit the past; however, with the mediating presence of the symbol of unconditional love, the paradoxical virginal mother Mary, the sinner could revise the past in such a way that absolution was not contingent on atonement.

In his *Fortnightly* essay on Huysmans, Symons makes the point that Catholicism had become "the adopted religion of the Decadence" (408). Catholicism in the context of English decadence appealed to the decadents, Ellis Hanson explains, because it is a religion based on contradictions: Catholicism is "at once modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art" (7). Roman Catholicism, then, could accommodate the disparate and incohesive cultural movement of decadence, for ambiguity and paradox allow fluidity in matters of right and wrong. Frederick Roden's studies of the Catholic church as a "sanctuary" for homosexuals and Mary as a figure more "carnal" than maternal provide the context within which we can usefully situate the Stella Maris poetry of Symonds and Symons (255). It is not surprising, then, that Symonds and Symons turn to the Stella Maris, who for centuries had been a powerful supernatural and mystical symbol of beneficence, as they struggle to reconcile desire with reservations about the propriety of that desire. They were sinners according to mainstream Victorian ideals, and these were the ideals with which each had been brought up. Symonds was a married man having secret sexual relations with men, and Symons, in defiance of his strict Methodist upbringing, frequented prostitutes and enjoyed the London music hall scene. The Stella Maris has a history of assisting with problems broadly defined and was often credited with intervening in economic and social disasters, with righting social injustices, and with compensating believers for wrong done to them (Nayar 2). As early as the sixth century, she was featured in her specifically religious context in a lyrical composition, "Ave Maris Stella", as a sailor's prayer for guidance in dangerous waters: should a sea disaster occur, she was charged with leading the lost to spiritual salvation. The twelfth-century theologian Richard of St. Victor referred in his sermons to the metaphorical role of the Stella Maris:

> The world, dear brethren, is a sea. Because like the sea it stinks, swells, is false and unstable . . . in order to cross this sea safely, dear brethren, we must frequently salute, and while saluting invoke the star of the sea, that is Blessed Mary, saying Ave Maris Stella. (quoted in Nayar 2)

This is the Stella Maris that Symonds and Symons evoke in their lyrical representations of life as a metaphorical sea voyage fraught with peril and danger, particularly when the waters that must be navigated are made turbulent through transgressive behaviours. In speaking embodied as Stella (for Symonds) and Juliet (for Symons), Mary guides the speakers through the process of transforming desires they fear are immoral into affirmation that that they are instead the means to their better selves. Mary's disembodied voice is directly related to her role as mediator as she helps the speaker of each poem to recast sin in redemptive terms. She fulfils this role embodied as a woman of questionable morals, a woman who is flawed and who lives unconfined by the conventions of Victorian decency. In each case, the disembodied voice of the Stella Maris speaks through this woman to guide the speaker on a metaphorical journey that is autobiographical and that suits his circumstances. Moreover, in each case, she closely resembles the Madonna of Baudelaire's "À une Madone", a poem in which the Madonna is, as Hanson writes, "the object of lust, of a sexual desecration, her white and rose flesh exciting in the speaker a dream of kisses" (47). In embodying the voice of Mary as Stella and Juliet respectively, Symonds and Symons create a decadent version of Baudelaire's Madonna to suit the nature of the rescue that their speakers—and implicitly the poets themselves—need. There is perhaps nothing quite as isolating as guilt, self-doubt, and fear of

social recrimination, and in these poems, Symonds and Symons find relief from their inner demons through the disembodied voice of compassion and spiritual intervention long associated with the star of the sea.

The trajectory of the poetic narrative of Symonds's "Stella Maris" is directed by the speaker's complicated sexual relationship with Stella, a conflation of woman, religious icon, and the man with whom Symonds was in love at the time. Symonds felt immense guilt about his failure to suppress his desire for men and his repeated succumbing to what he called "the wolf", or "that undefined craving coloured with a vague but poignant hankering after males", he writes in his *Memoirs*, which remained unpublished until 1984 (*Memoirs* 366).[2] Although this "hankering" subsided somewhat after his marriage, he admits that he found sexual intercourse with his wife profoundly disappointing, for he felt that his feelings for her were "too pure, too spiritual, too etherealized" for him to enjoy her physically (*Memoirs* 260). "Few men have ever been more tortured by their homosexuality than John Addington Symonds", points out John Julius Norwich, reporting as well that Symonds told Arthur Symons that "he had never feared anything as much as his own self—in spite of the means he tried, again and again, to escape from that self of his" (231).

Symonds's ambivalence about affirming his homoerotic desire is evident in his tendency to intellectualise his fears about homosexuality in his scholarly work, specifically in his misgivings about, as Emily Rutherford points out, his being able to "manage desires that threatened to make one lose control" (608). In the *Memoirs*, Symonds explains that there is "no harm to society or character in sensual enjoyment between man and man", but he warns that, as in enjoying wine, moderation is the key (520). His relief in discovering at a young age that the Greeks treated homosexual love "seriously, invested it with moral charm, endowed it with sublimity", is palpable in the memoirs (152). Moreover, in his scholarly work and in his personal reflections, Symonds argues consistently that homosexual relations contribute to the formation of a strong society, a claim that gained more prominence in decadent literature as the *fin-de-siècle* approached. As Rutherford explains, "Symonds believed that homosexuality could restore chivalry to the modern age, but he thought doing so would benefit all civilisation—not only, or even primarily, homosexuals" (626). This democratic approach to homosexuality shaped Symonds's lifelong interest in reconciling his desire for what he saw as a purified, ideal physical love between men with what he valued intensely, his marriage and his children. In life, Symonds felt compelled to express his homosexual passion secretly, and even his friends who suspected the truth worried about revelation. His poet-friend A. Mary F. Robinson pointed out when Symonds was considering publishing poems in a context that could have been damaging to him that "there is nothing so dangerous as a dramatic imagination lying about when it's loaded" (Letter to Symonds). When Symonds sent her a copy of "Stella Maris", he told her that "Stella never existed, except in my brain" and he insisted that he had "never passed through any such experience with any woman—'nor' (to reverse Hamlet) 'man neither'" (quoted in Grosskurth 242). Therefore, Symonds wrote his Stella Maris sequence as a revision of a sequence written for private consumption and self-vindication, thereby ensuring that he could control the "dramatic imagination" of his readers and simultaneously assuage his own feelings of guilt.

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[2] I refer in this essay to Amber K. Regis's critical edition of the *Memoirs* (2016). See also *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, edited by Phyllis Grosskurth (1986).

In his memoirs, Symonds identifies which sonnets he wrote originally for and about the gondolier Angelo Fusato that he altered in significant ways by changing pronouns and other details to give the sequence a heterosexual context. These sonnets, he writes, “faithfully describe the varying moods, perplexities and conflicts of my passion before it settled into a comparatively wholesome comradeship” with Angelo (*Memoirs* 514). Stella replaces Angelo in the revised sonnets, and she speaks implicitly in the disembodied voice of the Star of the Sea. She and Angelo are figures in a “Maya” world—a world created in “the Spirit of Illusion”, Symonds explains in his notes to “Stella Maris” in *Vagabunduli Libellus* (205). He refers in this note to the second sonnet of a fourteen-sonnet sequence titled “L’Amour de L’Impossible”, which was published in his 1882 volume *Anima Figura.* This sonnet, titled “The Furies”, warns against “Maya, the sorceress”, who urges men to “love what may not be”, men who “are sick of soul” (37). Only men “who wed discretion . . . are wise / and who place limits on their lusts, are whole”, the speaker cautions. The speaker of “Stella Maris” echoes these sentiments in the first sonnet when he refers to “loves that know themselves shameful and blind / fierce cruel loves that crucify the mind” and that typify “our Maya-world of wishes” (11). However, these same loves that establish the speaker as sinner make him a candidate for redemption in the context of Roman Catholicism. It is in this context that Symonds employs the trope of the disembodied voice of the Stella Maris.

Symonds’s poem traces the speaker’s retrospective account of his affair with Stella after she has died, when there will be no opportunity for him to rectify his actions; instead, without the need to atone, he can recast his actions in a light that makes them seem less egregious than he fears they were. Venice, the “Siren of sea-cities”, the speaker says, is representative of “Loves that seize / Man’s soul, and waft her on storm-melodies” (Sonnet 3). Stella was born on “the first morning of the month of May”, which in Catholic liturgy is the day on which Mary, a symbol of purity and constancy, as well as a harbinger of new life and new hope, is crowned Queen of the May (Sonnet 5). However, the speaker considers himself to be the man who will address what he sees as Stella’s need of “love to wake” her, thereby signalling his intentions toward this representation of the Stella Maris (Sonnet 8). He later reminisces about Stella’s first appearance on “the shore of Lido” wearing a “white dress” with the “light in her eyes from heaven’s deep wilderness, / Blue lustre linking her to skies and seas” (Sonnet 35). The colours—white and blue—are traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary, and the speaker intuits that in Stella, like Mary, “from brow to forehead flew / Prayer and compliance”. The tension between a compliant and reticent Stella and his desire to “wake” her sexually evokes Symonds’s description in the *Memoirs* of his first glimpse of Angelo on the Lido, dressed in his white gondolier uniform. In this moment, Symonds admits, he “writhed in the clutches of chimaera, thirsted before the tempting phantasmagoria of Maya” (*Memoirs* 515n).

Arthur Symons suggests that John Addington Symonds presents Stella as “the modern Lilith”, a demonic woman who “is the lure of souls” (“A Study of John Addington Symonds” 233). The biblical Lilith is a seductress who preys on the selfish desires and lustful nature of men. She is aware of her female beauty and her seductive powers, and she is successful in her conquests. If Stella is indeed a modern reincarnation of Lilith, so too implicitly is Angelo. Symonds admits that his love for Angelo was complex: the gondolier invaded his dreams to such an extent that Symonds imagined himself “at one time a woman whom he [Angelo] loved, at another a

companion in his trade—always somebody and something utterly different from myself" (515). However, he had reservations about Angelo's "stooping to what seemed so vile an act" as meeting him for sex (516). The sonnet that he wrote to commemorate the first sexual encounter with Angelo remains in the *Memoirs*, and some of the motifs in this sonnet make their way into the sequence:

> I am not dreaming. He was surely here
> And sat beside me on this hard low bed;
> For we had wine before us, and I said—
> "Take gold: 'twill furnish forth some better cheer."
> He was all clothed in white; a gondolier;
> White trousers, white straw hat upon his head,
> A cream-white shirt loose-buttoned, a silk thread
> Slung with a charm about his throat so clear.
> Yes, he was here. Our four hands, laughing, made
> Brief havoc of his belt, shirt, trousers, shoes:
> Till, mother-naked, white as lilies, laid
> There on the counterpane, he bade me use
> Even as I willed his body. But Love forbade—
> Love cried, "Less than Love's best thou shalt refuse" (*Memoir* 516)

The physical details of the first quatrain—the bed, the wine, and the offer of money—reappear in the sonnet sequence as unifying motifs that mark the speaker's attempts to reconcile his resentment of Stella's greed and her monetary motives for their sexual relationship with his intensely physical passion for her. The gondolier's white clothes taken off by the "four hands" of the male lovers conveys the power of the physical dimension of this sexual moment, and this moment is reinscribed in "Stella Maris" in "Sonnets 38 and 39". Specifically, the image of the male bodies left "mother-naked, white as lilies" in the sonnet to Angelo evokes a complex symbol of maternity that makes its way into the poetic sequence in a heterosexual context:

> She was a woman; therefore was she one,
> Worshipping whom a man of woman born
> Shrinks like a guilty thing surprised by morn
> From thoughts of self and sin's dominion. (Sonnet 39)

This image of the maternal blurs the lines between Stella as Baudelaire's sexual Madonna and Stella as the conventional Madonna, a holy symbol of sexual purity. However, in the rest of the sonnet, the speaker overcomes his hesitancy and shifts his perspective to Stella, the woman. He describes their sexual encounter as nurturing and natural: "I clasped her in my arms . . . I drank her lips; as thirsty flowers drink rain, / Kisses I drank sweeter than honey-dews". Only in the post-coital moment of the final tercet does the speaker shrink from the implications of his actions, and the personified Love of the sonnet to Angelo left buried in the *Memoirs* speaks in "Sonnet 39," warning the speaker in the same words, "Less than Love's best thou shalt refuse". In the remainder of the sonnet sequence, the speaker focuses on finding a way to make the love that Stella offers "Love's best".

The speaker's challenge in navigating the troubled waters of Stella's Lilith-like awareness of the power that her beauty gives her is intensified by his own fallibility in sexual matters. The situation comes to a head one morning, at dawn, when the speaker realizes that "Maya" has come and that there can be no "communion" between "that white body" and his "weak heart's desire". Stella "sells herself" to him and, therefore, he buys her in the same way that Symonds bought Angelo. Thus, the speaker concludes, "mine is the shame" (Sonnet 40). Stella is reduced in his mind to "throat, passion, purse to fill", but he cannot stop himself from filling her purse. In the *Memoirs*, Symonds records a similar quandary arising from his ambivalence about Angelo's willingness to have sex with him when he was at the same time living with a woman unmarried and the father of her two children. He admits that he suspected that Angelo's interest in him was related to what he could "get out of" Symonds (518). The morning after his first sexual encounter with Angelo, Symonds fled Venice, unable to "stand the strain of this attraction and repulsion—the intolerable desire and the repudiation of mere fleshly satisfaction" (516). However, he clearly found a way to reconcile these forces and returned to Venice, determined to be a man "whose honour, though rooted in dishonour, might be trusted" (517).

Therefore, "Love's best" for Symonds enabled him to use the fantasy of an unconventional Stella Maris experience to recast his "abnormal desire" as an asset, explaining that going outside the conventions of Victorian propriety led him "to know and appreciate a human being so far removed from [him] in position, education, national quality and physique", and that this "intimacy that began in folly and crime, according to the constitution of society" ultimately became "a source of comfort and instruction" (*Memoirs* 518). In the poem, the speaker evokes the disembodied voice of the Stella Maris to help him to recast his love for Stella in a similarly positive light. He imagines Stella, now dead, returning to him in his sleep as the Stella Maris "aureoled with silver light . . . a breathing statue" in an "act of divination" (Sonnet 60). In the context of Catholic confession, she offers him forgiveness and, through Stella in this guise, spiritual redemption. "Surely 'twas God who willed / this whirlwind where my life was well-nigh lost" the speaker concludes, and he suggests that "where God is, I am, and Thou art" ("Sonnet 62"). The disembodied voice of the Stella Maris has led the speaker to the conclusion that "love, be it high or low", is ultimately "a close bond wedding two selves in one" and, thus, through Stella, he learns that "beauty thus doth bring / man back through love to law no life may shun" (Sonnet 67). Symonds's poetic alter-ego succeeds in achieving what Symonds says in the preface to *Vagabundulli Libellus* he had failed to achieve in *Anima Figura*: he reconciles "what he had ardently desired" with what seemed to be his implicitly disapproving "superior nature", thereby transforming what he feared was profane into a holy, spiritual awakening (x).[3]

Arthur Symons describes John Addington Symonds's autobiographical process in "Stella Maris" as "inebriating", explaining that "it is the only self-expression Symonds fused out of living coal into a consuming fire that smokes and consumes itself" ("A Study" 233). A contemporary of both poets, Francis Gribble, suggests that in making such a comment, Symons was not only "posing" as "aesthetically omniscient", but he was also unconsciously projecting personal fears arising out of the strict Methodist upbringing that left him with an underlying anxiety that he had

[3] See Rigg, "Gendered Poetic Discourse", for a discussion of Symonds's "Stella Maris" in relation to the sonnet sequence as a genre contextualised by gender.

sinned grievously in the free and easy life he was living (135). Like Symonds, Arthur Symons uses poetry as an escape from the double-edged sword of personal anxiety and social censure. His “Stella Maris” appeared in the first volume of the *Yellow Book* in 1895 and was collected that same year in *London Nights*, which Symons dedicated to Paul Verlaine. As Beckson points out, “Stella Maris” was “singled out for abuse” by critics like Philip G. Hamerton, who felt that in using the “most beautiful” tribute to the Virgin Mary as the title of a poem that depicts “a London streetwalker, as a star in the dark sea of urban life”, Symons was showing extremely bad taste (quoted in Beckson 106-7). As Russell Goldfarb writes, Symons “mocks the name of the Virgin Mary” in the title and “exalts the pleasures of sin” in the poem itself (233). His daring and irreverence are perhaps not surprising, for Symons was a man who “could romp with three showgirls at once and could also discuss poetry all night with Thomas Hardy, A.E. Housman or Yeats” (Dirda).

However, Symons was also a poet and critic of merit, and his mission in “Stella Maris” was to reconcile his complex life as a man of letters, a sophisticated critic who “posed” aesthetically and intellectually, with his man-about-town image and raucous reputation. Integrating these two selves was complicated by the fact that he truly respected the social expectations that he defied. From a young age, he struggled with the tension between what he desired and what he felt was expected of him, which were often antithetical. As Roger Lhombreaud explains, “puberty was for [Symons] not a natural development, but a cause of shame which was always to make him feel soiled” (19). These adolescent feelings seem to have been resurrected in Symons “one lovely night” after he had sent Verlaine off to Oxford from Paddington Station, when, explains Beckson, he formed the idea for “Stella Maris”, writing it in Carbis Bay in November 1893. This poem is a “direct homage to Rossetti”, not only in terms of metre, but also in terms of “the hired woman” that closely reflects his “personal experiences” (106). However, the disembodied voice of the Stella Maris in this poem is just as likely to have been inspired by one woman with whom Symons had a lifelong preoccupation, a ballet dancer known as Lydia. She appears as Bianca elsewhere in *London Nights*, and, although Symons saw Lydia for the last time in 1898, she “captivated him entirely”, explains John Munro. When she ultimately rejected him, “he never fully recovered from the shock” (141). Symons carried a photograph of Lydia in his wallet for the rest of his life and, in an unpublished poem that Lhombreaud suggests was probably written after 1931, Symons reveals the extent to which Lydia continued to live in his memory as mentor and muse:

> I immortalized Lydia in my poetry,
> And she was Lesbia . . .
> As Baudelaire did and the perfume thereof
> Like him I sometimes paid the price
> Of what is called a certain sacrifice . . .
> Caught in sins’ own snare
> Of Satan we had both vitality
> And the lust of the flesh and also the tragedy
> Of Love’s despair and his flesh had been fed. (quoted in Lhombreaud 301)

The association of Lydia with “Lesbia” also subtly evokes Baudelaire and his Lesbian poems, thereby emphasising the unconventional sexuality of the woman who, I suggest, contributes to Symons’s development of his soul-saving Stella Maris.

Symons depicts another version of Lilith, a “Juliet of the Night”, that the speaker retrieves from deep in his memory. Through this moniker, he subtly conflates Shakespeare’s iconic figure of sexual innocence and naivety with an experienced prostitute. The three sections of the poem trace the trajectory of the speaker’s re-imagined sexual encounter with Juliet, a process through which he transforms what he calls a “Nuptial night” from the realm of the profane to the realm of the sacred (41). He marvels in the first section that she has come back to him, wondering what has prompted her return that particular night; in the second section he relives their “hour” together; and in the third section he understands that she has returned to lead him to a state of grace linked specifically to the “chance romance” of the past. Like John Addington Symonds, then, Arthur Symons celebrates the power and the beauty of illicit carnal love, and like Symonds as well, he hints that this love has been instrumental to his reaching his “better self”.

The speaker begins with his admission that he has “met / (Ah me!) many a Juliet”, and he suspects that her “heart holds many a Romeo” (40). As the Stella Maris, then, Juliet’s disembodied voice is contextualised partly by Shakespeare’s representation of love that unfolds outside social sanctions; however, it is also contextualised by the Lesbia/Lydia figure linked to Symons’s love of the music hall and of women who blurred the lines between respectability and adventure. “I come to the music-hall for dancing, for singing, for the human harmonies of the acrobat”, Symons explains in “A Spanish Music Hall” in 1892. “And I come for that exquisite sense of the frivolous, that air of Bohemian freedom, that relief from respectability, which one gets here, and nowhere more surely than here” (716). Juliet enters the speaker’s thoughts theatrically as a “Nereid of a moment”, evoking Venus arising out of the sea and underscoring the mythical and mystical qualities of Symons’s non-traditional conception of the Stella Maris. The speaker is both an actor in and a spectator of his performance of the past, and he is safely “separated by a sea of time from a love affair once experienced”, as Jan Gordon suggests (435). The sea itself is a significant feature of this first section of the poem, for the speaker is by the shore at night “where the bright pure expanse of sea . . . seems a reproach” until, as he peers at the “lighthouse light / against the sky, across the bay”, Juliet appears. The speaker’s Stella Maris, costumed as a Nereid, is a perverse and ironic figure that reflects Symons’s decadent perspective on sin.

In the second section, the disembodied voice of the Stella Maris comes out of the speaker’s “drownèd past” to direct his thoughts back to the night he and Juliet “loved each other well”, and as the Stella Maris, she ensures that his voyage toward redemption follows a trajectory that eliminates the need for atonement for a night that represents many other nights (40, 41). He surmises that she has come “to claim / my share of [her] delicious shame” (40). The juxtaposition of “delicious” and “shame” forms a decadent trope characterising this “Nuptial” encounter with a prostitute. In her place as a stand-in for many Juliets of many nights, this re-imagined Juliet allows the speaker to recall the physical sensations of love so that he might recast these sensations in spiritual terms, and he does so through his implied physical communion with the most sacred of Catholic icons, the Stella Maris. In decadent verse that conveys the sensations that he remembers, the speaker relives his sexual union with Juliet:

> I feel
> Your lips deliriously steal
> Along my neck and fasten there;
> I feel the perfume of your hair,
> And your soft breast that heaves and dips,
> Desiring my desirous lips (41)

The repetition of "feel" suggests that the speaker enters into a visionary moment during which he relives the pleasure of Juliet's body as he remembers his physical reactions to the movement of her lips, the "perfume" of her hair, and the sexual "heaves and dips" of her breast. The section concludes with his spiritual awakening through these sensations as he seems to feel again "that ineffable delight / When souls turn bodies, the whole / Rapture of the embodied soul". These final lines cast the sexual encounter with Juliet as a holy moment of redemption in which the whispered voice of the Stella Maris guides the speaker to the same conviction that he has, like John Addington Symonds's speaker, found his better self.

The speaker's reference to the "embodied soul" provides the focus for the third section in which he comes to understand that Juliet has appeared to him in her role as the Stella Maris to characterise their mutual "delicious shame" in spiritual terms consistent with a decadent context. The speaker now sees "that joy, not shame, is *ours* to share, / Joy that we had the will and power, / In spite of fate, to snatch one hour" [emphasis mine] (41). The speaker has been guided by the Stella Maris embodied as Juliet to see their union as an act of courage and daring, and his reward is that the "wraith, with starlight in [her] eyes", an allusion to the Stella Maris's proximity to the heavens, has left him feeling "one with Nature's solitude" (41). His final words reflect his relief and exaltation as he recognises that it is "for this, for this you come to me / out of the night, out of the sea", the referent for "this" being affirmation through the conflation of memory and imagination that he has transformed what he had feared was socially and morally reprehensible into a larger plan devised for him by God and facilitated by the Stella Maris. In this respect, he has come to the same realisation as the speaker of Symonds's "Stella Maris.

The title "Stella Maris", therefore, points to the process through which the speaker in each poem revisits the past to affirm that sexual behaviours censured by Victorian society are not sinful acts in a late-nineteenth-century context, and the autobiographical elements of these poems tell us a great deal about late-nineteenth-century transformative experiences through love and desire. Stella and Juliet, speaking in the voice of the Stella Maris, guide the speakers through metaphorical seas made turbulent by the tension between social conscience and unconventional sexual desire. The endpoint of these journeys is not reached through the conventional Catholic rites of atonement and forgiveness, but rather through the unconventional and decadent acknowledgement of the legitimacy and value of those desires. The context of decadent Catholicism enables the speakers to attain certainty that sexual expression transcends social constraints. The Virgin Mary is the iconic representation of ideal maternity—of unconditional love, wisdom, and kindness; however, her status as the mother of God casts her maternity in a paradoxical light, for she remains sexually pure. These two poetic versions of the late-nineteenth-century Stella Maris clear the way for a redefined understanding not only of the nature of sexual purity but also of "Love's best". As Hiroshi Muto suggests in his discussion of

the disembodied voice as a literary trope, “when what was once familiar to you but has been repressed returns later, it gives rise to an ambivalent emotion of repellent attraction” (2). Perhaps this paradoxical revision of experience best explains the rhetorical process of these poems, as, with the guiding influence of the Stella Maris on their speakers, Symonds and Symons as poets not only perform an act of memory retrieval that legitimises sexual behaviour that was viewed as deviant, but they alter the perception of deviance in their readers and—foremost—in their own hearts.

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