

Paget at Play, or Play in(g) Paget: Decadence, Performance and Play in the Life of Henry Cyril Paget (1875-1905)

LUCIA COWEN

Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening,
lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play.

– Johan Huizinga¹

Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.

– Oscar Wilde²

AT THE *FIN-de-siècle*, the character of Sherlock Holmes was such a sensation that William Gillette, American actor and manager, adapted Conan Doyle's stories into the play, *Sherlock Holmes*.³ The curtains opened on an expectant crowd in September 1901 at the Lyceum Theatre, London. In the audience was the Fifth Marquis of Anglesey, Henry Paget (1875-1905), who was himself an enthusiastic actor, with a group of friends. Immersed in the detective drama, the Marquis was unaware that back at his room at the Walsingham Hotel, Piccadilly, a scandalous case of his own was unfolding. When the Marquis and his friends returned to his suite after the performance, they discovered that there had been a 'shame faced robbery' of his precious jewels.⁴ Dubbed the 'Anglesey Jewel Robbery', the theft of jewels worth £40,000 – in today's money, nearly

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

² Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 4.

³ *Sherlock Holmes*, the four act play by William Gillette was premiered in 1899 at the Garrick Theatre in New York City and, after a successful run on Broadway, the play ran in 1901 at the Lyceum Theatre, London. For further reading of its production see, Allen Eyles, *Sherlock Holmes: A Centenary Celebration* (Harper and Row, 1986) and for further reading on the play see, William Gillette, *Sherlock Holmes, in Plays by William Hooker Gillette*, ed. by Rosemary Cullen and Don B. Wilmeth (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴ *Adelaide Observer*, September 1901, p. 35, The National Archives.

one and a half million pounds – caused a sensation.⁵ News reports covered the illustrious Marquis's theft not only because of the staggering value of the property stolen, but also because of the fascinating and unconventional manner in which the case was conducted, as the Marquis and his friends were recruited to play amateur detectives in the case.

The Fifth Marquis of Anglesey frequently challenged the social norms of his time through his unconventional lifestyle and eccentric public conduct. Public fascination with his reputation for performance and spectacle persisted well beyond his lifetime; some newspaper reports referenced in this article were published after the Marquis's significant financial collapse and subsequent death. This event provided an opportunity for him to defy expectations and to experience the sense of freedom from the constraints of everyday life through decadent and playful means. This article considers: how might reading decadence through play theory prompt us to consider the two concepts' linkages? How did the Marquis use play to complicate notions of the decadent dandy? And what can we learn from the ways in which he used play to re-examine and adapt to the dynamic and restless *fin-de-siècle*? This article will consider how play and decadence – as both connected and distinct concepts – shaped the Marquis's response to the sensational crime. Examining decadence through the lens of play offers new perspectives into the cultural impact of decadence. As shall be discussed, the Marquis, acting as an amateur detective, exemplifies how play and decadence interact, illustrating this performative dynamic in its most pronounced form.

In what follows, I provide an evaluation of the Fifth Marquis as a figure who subverts the traditional concept of the dandy by initiating a dynamic between reality (action) and fiction (play), challenging the distinction between the two. First, I shall take the event of the Anglesey Jewel Robbery as a means of decadent permission for Paget to engage in play and to 'act out' in the real world. The critic Charles Bernheimer describes decadence as both a provocative and 'subversive agency,' rather than simply a sign of cultural decline. Instead, he believed decadence could also act as a challenge to traditional and cultural moral norms.⁶ Expanding on the breadth and scope of

⁵ *Adelaide Chronicle*, 'Behind the Secret Curtain', 1935, p. 46, The National Archives.

⁶ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 5.

decadence in recent scholarly criticism, this analysis will explore how the Marquis displayed unconventional behaviour and challenged the expectations of the aristocracy through his involvement in the investigation. The following section contextualises the incident within its historical moment, examining how the Marquis's various forms of play are entangled with notions of leisure, aristocracy and the permissiveness of play at the heart of the Establishment, while also occupying the (geographic, social and gendered) margins. I shall conclude by considering how these events define the Fifth Marquis as a decadent who used aspects of play to both fragment and develop his sense of self.

Decadence and Play

Recent criticism by David Weir and others has revisited the polyvalent nature of decadence, and despite efforts to clarify its meanings, scholars generally agree on its slipperiness.⁷ As Joshua Polstsky notes, decadence 'never adumbrated a single unified doctrine.'⁸ Decadence in the *fin-de-siècle* was a cultural and literary phenomenon, characterised by its connections with aestheticism, moral decay and a sense of cultural decline. Decadence was often framed as symptomatic of psychological and moral degeneracy, with critics such as Max Nordau pathologising decadence, drawing on Morel's formulation of it manifesting in the individual as 'morbid deviations from the original type.'⁹ Yet, as contemporary decadent scholar David Weir states, 'decadence is more than decline, decay and degeneration.'¹⁰ Recent criticism has examined its performative qualities. Adam Alston considers decadence's relationship to performance by suggesting that 'decadence is performed, particularly if we understand the word

⁷ David Weir considers 'the fact that decadence has been studied using the analytical procedures of such disparate disciplines as eugenics, history, philosophy, psychology, physics, and aesthetics illustrates just how polyvalent the concept of decadence is'. David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Legenda, 2017), pp. 219-28 (p. 219).

⁸ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhhbz3> (accessed 9 January 2026).

⁹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Project Gutenberg, 2016) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51161/51161-h/51161-h.htm>, p. 16, (accessed 18 August 2025).

¹⁰ David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 8.

“perform” in an archaic sense as an “alteration” (*parfoumer*).¹¹ If we look at decadence through such performative praxis, it inevitably invites us to consider its playfulness. After all, the intransitive use of the verb play aligns semantically with performance, both denoting forms of active engagement: ‘to have an effect,’ ‘to act,’ or ‘an action.’¹² The slipperiness and capaciousness of each concept do not allow for a detailed examination within this article; therefore, the focus here will be on addressing how the Marquis performed decadence through decadent play. By play, I am drawing on the core theoretical concepts outlined by Johan Huizinga, highlighting its performative qualities. This will be expanded by exploring its multifaceted nature through theorists such as Brian Sutton-Smith and Roger Caillois, to illustrate how Paget used play to navigate his position in *fin-de-siècle* society.

The theory of play developed by Huizinga provides a useful framework for understanding the aesthetic and philosophical dynamics of decadence. In his seminal work, *Homo Ludens* (1938), Huizinga posits play as a foundational element of culture – an activity sustained by voluntary engagement and tensions between seriousness and frivolity. Huizinga explores the role of play in culture through a separate, bounded space (metaphorical or physical), known as the ‘play-ground’, in which normal rules and realities are suspended and ‘ordinary life’ is set aside.¹³ I contend that decadent art and literature similarly constructed aesthetic ‘play-grounds’: self-contained worlds devoted to artifice and beauty pursued for its own sake, where the self becomes an exercise in performativity. In Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours*, for example, Des Esseintes constructs his own private environment as a ‘playground’ – an artificial sanctuary distinct from the realities of the external world. Within this framework, aesthetic experience in decadent art adheres to its own set of principles: artifice and sensation

¹¹ Adam Alston, ‘Carnal Acts: Decadence in Theatre, Performance and Live Art’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.2 (2021), pp. ii–xxiii (p. ii). For interesting discussions on decadence and performance, see ‘Decadence and Performance’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.2 (2021). See also the first monographic study of decadence in theatre and performance: Adam Alston, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance and the Ends of Capitalism* (Methuen Drama, 2023).

¹² ‘Play’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press [online] https://www.oed.com/dictionary/play_v?tab=meaning_and_use#30106143 (accessed 1 March 2025).

¹³ Huizinga, p. 10.

are regulated by aesthetic considerations rather than moral imperatives.¹⁴ As Potolsky argues, decadence can be understood as a 'dispersed phenomenon arising out of discreet moments of artistic production and receptions [...] forged across space and time.'¹⁵ In this sense, the operations of decadence and play converge: the decadent artist fashions an aesthetic world that consciously resists moral or natural reality. Both decadence and play, in short, create distinct 'play-grounds' of deliberate artifice.

Who was the Marquis? A Playfully Decadent Inquiry

Lord Henry Cyril Paget, who became the Fifth Marquis of Anglesey in 1898, was well-known in *fin-de-siècle* society for his playful nature. His great-grandfather, the first Marquis of Anglesey, was a military hero: a British Army officer and politician who led the charge of heavy cavalry at the Battle of Waterloo and lost one leg to a cannonball. Unlike his predecessors, Henry, his great-grandson, showed little interest in a military or political career, choosing instead to enjoy a life of luxury while dedicating himself to acting. Yet, it was not solely his wealth that brought him notoriety, but rather what he did with it. With an annual income of £110,000 (the equivalent of £9 million today), he was called a 'dandy', the 'handsomest of men', and likened to the archetypal Regency dandy, Beau Brummell (1778-1840).¹⁶ In *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire introduces the dandy as an aesthetic archetype – a man who fashions his existence into a work of art, characterised by immaculate attire, composure and wit, establishing new standards of masculine elegance.¹⁷ Oscar Wilde elaborates on this image, portraying the dandy as an artist and philosopher whose pursuit of beauty and style serves as a platform for intellectual critique. In both conceptions, the dandy surpasses fashion, representing the primacy of art over life and embodying individuality, resistance, and a deliberate aesthetic approach to life.

¹⁴ For further reading see J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (Penguin Classics, 2004) and Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (eds), *Decadence and the Senses* (Legenda, 2017).

¹⁵ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 1.

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, 11 September 1904, p. 6, The National Archives.

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (Phaidon, 1964).

Paget's dandyism is exemplified in the description offered by Welsh architect Clough Williams-Ellis (1883-1978) of an 'Aubrey Beardsley illustration come to life [...] a sort of apparition' and 'a tall elegant and bejewelled creature with wavering, elegant gestures.'¹⁸ Such mannerisms were reminiscent of the Fifth Marquis's contemporary, Robert de Montesquiou, renowned as the 'most notorious dandy of the age.'¹⁹ Paget resided primarily at Anglesey Castle, located on the island of Anglesey, off the north coast of Wales.²⁰ It was here that he indulged in playful, decadent pastimes such as converting the music room of the family chapel into a small theatre, named The Gaiety. Paget also wrote plays that combined elements of comedy and pantomime. He performed them on the grounds of his estate, invariably dressed in glittering gowns dripping with diamonds, as a spectacle for all to see.²¹ Paget's theatrical pursuits extended beyond his home, too, and he participated in a four-week tour of Oscar Wilde's play, *An Ideal Husband*, in 1903, receiving favourable recognition for his convincing portrayal of Lord Goring. These performances remained prominent in public memory, given the relatively recent events of Wilde's trials, imprisonment, and death.²² Contemporary news outlets noted the Paget transition 'from the scene of war to the scene of the stage,' a statement subtly hinting at the diminishing prominence of the family title.²³ This observation cannot be overlooked by its allusion to historical decline. As private theatricals became more common, they began to redefine the conventions

¹⁸ Christopher Simon Sykes, *Black Sheep* (Chatto and Windus, 1982), p. 215.

¹⁹ Timothy Verhoeven, 'A French Dandy in New York: Robert de Montesquiou and American Visions of France in the Progressive Era', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 15.4 (2017), pp. 386–402, (p. 386), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794012.2017.1371458> (accessed 29 July 2025).

²⁰ Plas Newydd was renamed 'Anglesey Castle' by Paget in 1902. For an interesting read on the Marquis, see Viv Gardner, 'Topsy, Tilley and the Faithful Jerry: decadence on display in the performing loves of the 5th Marquis of Anglesey (1875-1905)', <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/5th-marquis-of-anglesey> (accessed 10 April 2025).

²¹ For further reading on historiography of the Marquis and his public performances see, Viv Gardner, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: Recognising and Renegotiating the Scenario in Writing Performance Histories' in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, ed. by Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson (Palgrave, 2016), pp. 60-81.

²² For further reading on Wilde's trials see, Joseph Bristow, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* (Yale University Press, 2022) and for Wilde's wider legacy see Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

²³ *Adelaide Chronicle*, 1935, p. 46, The National Archives.

of public performance; as David Coates writes, 'the theatrical canon was no longer being determined by professional actors [...] but those involved in private and amateur theatricals.'²⁴ Paget's way of life reveals how play and performance could function within the everyday for many late-Victorian aristocrats.

'Is this the stuff that playfulness is made of?'

It would have been no surprise to *fin-de-siècle* society to learn that the Marquis's jewels had been stolen. Paget was renowned for carrying jewels of 'every conceivable description' with him – in fact, it was remarked by one newspaper that the real mystery was 'how it had not happened more often.'²⁵ The Marquis was also known to wear 'brilliants' (diamonds) at almost every occasion, including for his own theatrical productions. In a production of *Aladdin* in 1901 at his theatre in Anglesey Castle, for example, the Marquis was reported to be wearing 'a gauze suit, to which had been fastened literally thousands of brilliants so that he was all of a sparkle whenever he moved.'²⁶ Wearing diamonds and other precious gems during performances garnered significant attention in the press, with reports frequently highlighting Paget's attire and its expense, often overshadowing commentary on his acting skills. The press frequently divulged how much each jewel – from 'magnificent diamonds to glowing emeralds' – cost: a decadent excess likened to the infamous novelist Ouida.²⁷ However, during the Marquis's bankruptcy proceedings in 1904, further scandal arose when it was declared that some of his jewels were, in fact, paste. The press was dismayed by such dramatic conceit, and it gave 'great surprise locally'.²⁸ The Marquis, meanwhile, was far less concerned and declared that he 'knew perfectly well they were paste!'²⁹ Wearing paste and costume jewellery was typical in the theatre for practical reasons. Notably, at the 1890 opening of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Lillie Langtry wore a real jewelled necklace as Cleopatra, drawing public interest and highlighting the blurred line between reality and

²⁴ David Coates, 'Elite Theatricals and the Professional Amateur' in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century British Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Claire Cochrane, Lynette Goddard, Catherine Hindson and Trish Reid (Routledge, 2025), pp. 331-43 (p. 334).

²⁵ *Adelaide Observer*, 'The Marquis of Anglesey', 1901, p. 4, The National Archives.

²⁶ *Perth Times*, 'Jewelled Johnnie', 1904, p. 10, The National Archives.

²⁷ *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 'Lord Anglesey and his Jewels', 1902, p. 2, The National Archives.

²⁸ *Nottingham Post*, 'Marquis of Anglesey Jewels', 1902, p. 3, The National Archives.

²⁹ *The Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 'Pauper Marquis', 1904, p. 2, The National Archives.

performance.³⁰ The Marquis's playful disinterest in the discovery that his jewels were not real can be read through Huizinga's terms: that 'play lies outside [...] truth and falsehood.'³¹ This intersects with Kristen Mahoney's exploration of the definitional diversity of decadence, particularly as it overlaps with camp, in which 'power comes from its refusal to take power seriously.'³² Similarly, Jack Babuscio asserts that camp can be 'subversive' and 'a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all.'³³ Although, as Weir writes, 'camp should not be taken as a definition of decadence,' there are linkages in their nuances.³⁴ The word camp, which was beginning to circulate in subcultural contexts during Paget's era, derives from the French *se camper*, meaning to pose exaggeratedly.³⁵ The Marquis's flippant indifference to his jewels marks a tension between the real and theatrical – on stage and off. For him, the value of jewels is less about their cost than their ability to sparkle through playful decadence.³⁶

To dazzle was to engage in the most decadent performance, and, unsurprisingly, Paget was invariably seen wearing an array of jewels in public. The press was most intrigued by the Marquis's frequent playful interactions with jewels in his everyday life,

³⁰ For more on Lillie Langtry see, Laura Beatty, *Lillie Langtry: Manners, Masks and Morals* (Chatto and Windus, 1999).

³¹ Huizinga, p. 6.

³² Kristen Mahoney, 'Decadence,' *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2016, pp. 637-39 (p. 639).

³³ Jack Babuscio, 'The Cinema of Camp, aka Camp and the Queer Sensibility' in *Gays and Film*, ed. by Richard Dyer (British Film Institute, 1977), pp. 117-36 (p. 128).

³⁴ David Weir, p. 8.

³⁵ For more information and etymology on the word 'camp,' see https://www.oed.com/dictionary/camp_v3?tab=factsheet (accessed 30 June 2025).

³⁶ For an interesting discussion on the subcultural uses of the word 'camp' in this era, see National Archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/stories/earliest-use-of-the-word-camp/#:~:text=and%20gender%20expressions.,Subcultural%20origins,theatrical%20performers%20Fanny%20and%20Stella>. (accessed 1 July 2025) and for further reading into the linguistics of camp see: Chi, Luu 'The Unspeakable Linguistics of Camp', *Jstor Daily*, 6 June 2018 <https://daily.jstor.org/unspeakable-linguistics-camp/> (accessed 3 Aug. 2025) and Julia Stanley, 'Homosexual Slang', *American Speech* 45.1/2 (1970), pp. 45-59.

Paget's sexuality has long been a subject of conjecture; however, in the absence of definitive biographical evidence, any discussion must necessarily remain speculative. Although I do not have space to explore this here, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the broader critical associations between camp aesthetics and queerness.

and journalists deemed him to be an obliging interviewee who (like his contemporary, Wilde) 'willingly [saw] and talk[ed] with all the reporters who called upon him.'³⁷ The public expected a tableau, but Paget playfully flirted with expectation:

The Marquis' greatest excitement it seems is the anticipation of a new [...] jewel from Paris. When I met him this afternoon, he apologised somewhat profusely for his appearance. "I must apologise," he said, "for not appearing before you in peacock blue plush, wearing a diamond and sapphire tiara, a turquoise dog collar, ropes of pearls, and slippers studded with Burma rubies, but I prefer and have always preferred Scotch tweed." I was astonished that Lord Anglesey was as other men are.³⁸

The reporter is notably 'astonished' that the Marquis did not conform to his expectation to appear before him in his usual dazzling manner. In apologising for not wearing an excess of finery, the Marquis reveals an acute self-awareness and adopts an ironic, flirtatious performance. As one 'whose amazing extravagance and fantastic fads as to jewellery and dress [...] was] quite unparalleled', to declare that he prefers tweed subverts expectation, and such distortion underpins his playful persona.³⁹

Dismissing his expensive trifles with a paradoxical lexis of disregard affirms the Marquis's camp capacity to play and distort. As can be seen, journalists were a necessary component of these daily performances. In another example of his flirtatiously performative character, the Marquis questioned one reporter regarding the press's bewilderment over his 'expensive trifles' and declared: 'Journalists interest me as much as I interest them [...] can you tell me why they seemed to regard my possession of a cigarette case studded with diamonds and rubies with such extraordinary surprise?'⁴⁰ Nina Lieberman defines playfulness as the ability to transform something ordinary into something creatively surprising. She proposes that playfulness is a disposition, with playful individuals characterised by qualities such as 'creativity, wit

³⁷ *Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904 p. 5, The National Archives.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *The Referee*, 1904, p. 4, The National Archives.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

and divergent thinking.⁴¹ Frequently described as an artistic figure with a sharp sense of humour, the Marquis clearly relished playful engagement with the media, often transforming predictable interviews into unexpected and subversive performances.

Paget's relationship with his jewels embodies Sutton-Smith's concept of 'frivolous' play, one of the seven rhetorics that reveal play's meaning. Sutton-Smith argues that 'frivolity is potentially the most sacred play of them all [...holding the power] that makes players feel that they can transcend reality.'⁴² The ways in which the Marquis interacts with his 'trifles' – interestingly, the adjective 'trifle' itself is a derivative of the verb 'play' – underscores how he uses frivolous play intentionally to distort the perception of reality and performance, employing camp as a strategy to exaggerate his presence. Oscar Wilde similarly used triviality in his works as his characters engage in Sutton-Smith's 'frivolity' to avoid confronting the complexities of reality through distortion. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894), for example, characters are seen to distort reality to cope with its constraints, such as their obsessive concerns with cucumber sandwiches and proper names, which transform seriousness into absurdity and embody Sutton-Smith's insight that play can function as a form of resistance in disguise. Wilde's inversions of dialogue through Algernon Moncrieff's claim that 'the truth is rarely pure and never simple' expose earnestness itself as a game of masks.⁴³ Similar comparisons can be drawn from Roger Caillois's theory of 'mimicry' – one of his four categories of play. This form of play involves simulation, in which one 'disguises or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another' and where 'pleasure lies in being or passing for another.'⁴⁴ This can be seen in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when characters adopt false identities (Jack as Ernest and Algernon's invention of Bunbury, for example) to navigate society. Thus, by 'playing' at life, Wilde exposes the 'artificial' rules that governed Victorian morality. In an interview with *St James's Gazette* in 1895, Wilde declared: 'we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and

⁴¹ J. Nina Lieberman, 'Playfulness in Play and the Player' in *Playfulness: Its Relation to Imagination and Creativity* (Academic Press, 2014), p. 23.

⁴² Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 213.

⁴³ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* in *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Raby (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 247-307 (p. 258).

⁴⁴ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, Games* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 20.

all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.⁴⁵

The similarities between Wilde's witticisms and those of the Marquis cannot be overlooked: the Marquis's attempt to interview the reporter himself, for example, by questioning the fascination with his 'diamond studded cigarette case' echoes Wilde's declaration in one interview, 'the more the public is interested in artists, the less it is interested in art. The personality of the artist is not a thing the public should know anything about. It is too accidental.'⁴⁶ The double irony in this context lies in the fact that Wilde's personal reputation arguably surpassed the fame of his literary works, yet even his public persona was carefully constructed, serving as an artistic façade, a mask through which he engaged with the world. This is a noteworthy comparison given that the Marquis himself was a figure surrounded by intrigue even as he asserted – through performance – a claim to artistry. In a similar vein, and returning to the case of the Anglesey Jewel Robbery, this incident led to a creative act that shifted the public's attention away from the persona of the artist and towards the aesthetically nuanced and blurred fictional nature of the crime. Indeed, for the Marquis – for whom 'all the world [was] a stage' – creative engagement with the theft became an integral part of his playful and decadent iconography.⁴⁷

Sherlock Holmes and the Missing Jewels

The Marquis's frivolous display of decadent jewels proved too tempting for his valet, Julien Gault. At around midnight on 10 September 1901, the Marquis returned to his hotel suite on the second floor to discover that both his jewels and valet were missing. After quickly informing the police at the Vine Street police station, he returned with Inspector Drew. The subsequent investigation revealed that the valet had met a woman from France named only 'Mathilde' who had persuaded him to steal the Marquis's jewels. Gault had entered the suite while the Marquis was at the Sherlock Holmes production, 'bustled and fidgeted about the apartment a great deal', seized the jewels

⁴⁵ Oscar Wilde, interviewed in 'Interview with Oscar Wilde', *St. James's Gazette*, 18 Jan 1895, p. 3, Archive.org, archive.org/details/1895-01-18-st-james-gazette-oscar-wilde (accessed 2 July 2025).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dusinberre, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ser. (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2006), p. 139.

and carried them out under his shirt in a basket.⁴⁸ When Gault was eventually arrested, he was found with some of the jewels in Dover, and Mathilde had mysteriously vanished, leaving Gault to be sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Rather than despairing, the Marquis seized the moment as an opportunity to stage a new tableau for public consumption, declaring that 'annoyed as he was about his loss he was not going to make himself ill about it'.⁴⁹ The Anglesey Jewel Robbery offered a vivid instance of life imitating art: as the Marquis watched Sherlock Holmes on stage – a play centred on the solving of crime – his own jewels were being stolen in real life.

The Marquis's missing jewels case mirrors Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, blending gravity with playfulness and blurring the line between reality and acting. As Algernon Moncreiff acknowledges, 'one must be serious about something if one wants to have any amusement in life' – a sentiment that captures how the earnestness of 'play' emerged both from the Marquis's investigation itself and the public's intense fascination with the entire affair as a distinctly serious form of play.⁵⁰ The Marquis's use of the theft to justify acting out reality reflects a decadent interest in artificial pleasure as a distinct aesthetic experience. A newspaper report of the crime at the time details how:

On the night of the theft [...] the marquis was entertaining a large party [...] they all returned to the hotel together, and his lordships guests were permitted to hear Inspector Drew's plan propounded to the Marquis for getting on the track of the missing valet. [There was a] gusto with which the lordship entered into the matter [...] and] subject to Inspector Drew's approval, it was decided that they should become amateur detectives and assist Scotland Yard in their search.⁵¹

The Marquis's reaction is characteristically unexpected: instead of being dismayed by the robbery, he is excited and immediately 'entered into the matter'.⁵² Such a description of how the cases' immediate uptake signals a sense of performance and

⁴⁸ 'A Marquis Robbed', *Daily Telegraph*, 1901, p. 4, The National Archives.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 262.

⁵¹ *Lichfield Mercury*, 'The Marquis of Anglesey's Jewels', Sept 1901, p. 4, The National Archives.

⁵² *Ibid.*

action, as, like performance, play is dynamic and ever-changing ('pace' in Huizinga, Caillois and Sutton-Smith). For the Marquis, confronting the theft meant interpreting it as play: much like what Huizinga sees as 'the contrast between play and seriousness [which] is always fluid, [where] play turns to seriousness as seriousness turns to play.'⁵³ By creating an interlude between the frivolous manner in which he accepted the role of detective and the gravity of the theft – £40,000 worth of jewels – the Marquis established an aesthetic space in which the investigation became a 'game.' The Marquis and his friends became the players, each given a Sherlock Holmes role and directed to station themselves at key ports that the thief might use to escape, as 'they all were familiar with his features and could intercept his retreat to France.'⁵⁴

The assignment of Sherlock Holmes roles to each participant created a unique playing space, one that Huizinga terms a 'play-ground': a space that is set apart from the 'ordinary,' governed by its own rules, order and logic.⁵⁵ This multi-player space was equally multi-layered, with participants blurring the lines between the real crime and the fictional performance of detection, all while shaping their actions in imitation of the Sherlock Holmes narratives. Examining this through the lens of play, each port represents 'a play-ground', and when inside each play-ground 'absolute and peculiar order reigns [...as] play creates order into an imperfect world [...] bring[ing] a temporary limited perfection.'⁵⁶ Such an interpretation of play illuminates the linkages to the field of aesthetics, as Huizinga elaborates that 'the profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play [...] seems to such a large extent belong to the field of aesthetics.'⁵⁷ Each participant exists in these spaces both literally and metaphorically, allowing for a 'suspension of normal social life' while simultaneously creating a sense of real-time engagement with the unfolding events and pursuit of the thief.⁵⁸

In a further contribution to the interplay of seriousness and play, it was rumoured in the press that Arthur Conan Doyle was consulted on the case of the Marquis's stolen

⁵³ Huizinga, p. 8.

⁵⁴ 'The Marquis of Anglesey's Jewels,' p. 10.

⁵⁵ Huizinga, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

jewels, reportedly helping Inspector Drew trace some of the jewels back to London.⁵⁹ Notably, the public was more than intrigued by the Marquis's investigation: they were spectators of a 'game.' As Mathew Kaiser emphasises, 'play is at the root of a variety of Victorian cultural phenomena [...] we see it in the burgeoning Victorian entertainment industry, in the celebratization of actors and actresses, those ultimate ludic subjects.'⁶⁰ By reporting on the events and eliciting comments on the case from Conan Doyle, reporters, too, were playing a part by keeping 'the game' in motion. As Sutton-Smith, drawing on Gadamer, argues:

[...] the player doesn't play the game [...] it is, rather, that the game plays the player. Once you begin playing, you are taken over by the things that are serious within the game, regardless of how serious that game is estimated to be in the eyes of the non-playing world.⁶¹

As Sutton-Smith describes, play can blur the line between reality and imagination, creating a liminal space in which a figure such as Paget can transgress the boundaries of the present and explore performative possibilities. The investigation, as part of the 'working world', needed an investigator (Inspector Drew), fitting with Sutton-Smith's description of work as 'obligatory, sober [and] serious.'⁶² Meanwhile, the Marquis and his friends reveal the fluid boundary between play and seriousness by performing the role of detectives with self-aware theatricality and imitating fictional tropes that were familiar to them. Yet the distinction between play and the 'non-playing world' remains blurred, as their involvement in reporting on the event positioned them not just as

⁵⁹ Peter Costello, *Conan Doyle Detective: True Crimes Investigated by the Creator of Sherlock Holmes* (Constable and Robinson, 2001) reports that Conan Doyle traced some of the jewels to London. This report originates with biographer, Charles Higham, who Costello declares as a 'not always reliable biographer, but a writer who was connected with London High Society' (p. 43).

⁶⁰ Matthew Kaiser, *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* (Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

⁶¹ Sutton-Smith, p. 44. Sutton-Smith cites Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Crossroad, 1982; first pub. in German in 1960) emphasising that '[the] players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation through the players', p. 107.

⁶² Sutton-Smith, p. 44.

players, but also as pawns, unwittingly reinforcing the very order they appeared to subvert. Considered in this way, the action of the investigation became an experience of the world. Building on Huizinga's consideration of the linkage between aesthetics and play (fifty-nine years before Sutton-Smith's theory), there is a real sense within the distortion between the crime/game binary of an attempt to create 'perfection' away from the 'imperfect world.'

This article has addressed the ways in which the crime at the centre of the Anglesey Jewel Robbery permitted the Marquis and his friends to 'act' through play in the real world. But what about the leading part in this event? The Marquis took his role so seriously that when the thief – his valet, Julien Gault – was captured, he allegedly shouted: 'Sherlock Holmes! Hurrah!'⁶³ The report continues to note that 'he was more concerned in the methods employed by Inspector Drew [...] in hunting down the valet than he was in getting the stolen jewels restored to him [...] although he regarded one as corollary to the other.'⁶⁴ While Paget evidently revelled in the game's ultimate victory, this second quote reveals that Paget's involvement in the investigation meant more than merely reclaiming his valuables. The play that formed part of the investigation involved several types of participation, going beyond a simple notion of victory.⁶⁵

In an interview after his jewels were stolen, the Marquis inverted expectations of how a robbery victim should behave:

The Marquis is reported to have made the following statement: "Julien, the missing valet, I engaged in France. He came to my hotel about a month ago and I took him on as my valet," remarked his Lordship simply. "Now, here are some curious facts connected with him. He was seen by one of my servants to take impressions of two keys with spiritine. Spiritine is a patent, solid petroleum which I use for heating my shaving water etc. Here is a box of it [...] see how easy it is

⁶³ 'The Marquis of Anglesey's Jewels,' p. 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Georg Simmel highlights the fluidity of social life, showing how the same individual or group can take on very different social forms. Georg Simmel, 'Group Expansion and Development of Individuality' in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. by Donald N. Levine (University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 251-93.

to take an impression. [...] On withdrawing it you see there is a perfect impression."⁶⁶

The Marquis details the case using a vocabulary reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes: from the declarative 'here are some curious facts connected to him' and the consideration of 'spiriting' to take a 'perfect impression'. His excitement is clear, and his 'part' is evident by his Holmes-like language of evidence, demonstration and methodical explanation. Given Holmes's famous rationality, the Marquis's subversion of this performance as part of a true-fictional/real-performed 'staging' of the everyday is doubly subversive. Such dialogue between the journalist and Paget underscores the tensions between what is real (the crime) and what is not (the drama of Sherlock Holmes). Returning to consider Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) underscores the multiplicity of 'rhetorics' through which play is understood, particularly those of frivolity and the imaginary. His emphasis on ambiguity enables a reading of this dialogue as a ludic mode of aesthetic experimentation that deliberately blurs distinctions between seriousness and play.

While other contemporary articles described the Marquis as a 'victim' and gave him a passive role in the theft, the Marquis used performance to shift his portrayal from a crime victim to the leading character. Nikolai Evreinov, theatre playwright, director, and theorist, argued that life itself is inherently theatrical, noting that 'we are constantly playing a part when we are in society.'⁶⁷ Seen in this light, the Marquis's role during the incident was equally fluid and adaptable – shifting like the acts of a stage play. The Marquis was both victim and investigator, but he resisted being confined to a particular role, instead using play and its imaginary spaces to re-cast himself within the play's order. In this sense, the theft allowed for a heightening of the Marquis's everyday performativity: aristocrat, actor, celebrity, collector – all roles with their own rules, costumes and opportunities to subvert through performance. Roger Caillois's concept of 'mimicry' is evident in how the Marquis affirms his identity by 'playing to believe'; he takes on the mask of Sherlock Holmes, fashioning a persona distinct from that of a mere victim. Instead of being a passive victim of theft, he actively reconfigures the event through play to claim the lead role at the centre of its rebellious possibilities.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ 'A Marquis Robbed,' p. 10.

⁶⁷ *Lichfield Mercury*, September 1901, The National Archives.

⁶⁸ Caillois, p. 20.

A Case of Moving Through Play

The Marquis's ostentatious engagement with play and performance was frequently reported in the press due to his elite status, often linking his title to the leisure time it afforded. His activities were frequently described in derogatory terms, such as 'bizarre', 'whimsical', and 'frivolous' fancies. During the *fin-de-siècle*, play was an activity usually associated with triviality and frivolity, and the advent of industrialisation further accentuated the divide between work and play.⁶⁹ Indeed, leisure originally developed among certain aristocratic groups who had the time and resources to pursue it.⁷⁰ For the Marquis, his lineage delineated the entitlement to acquire fanciful objects and pursue a lifestyle that allowed the freedom of play and leisure. Caillois defines such play as 'an occasion of pure waste; waste of time [...] skill and often money.'⁷¹ The connections between waste and the decline associated with decadence cannot be disregarded. The waste and idleness characteristic of decadence are epitomised in the stereotypical dandy, exemplifying '*grande passion* [as a] privilege of people with nothing to do.'⁷² Critics such as Ellen Moers suggest that the 'dandy stood for irresponsibility and inactivity.'⁷³

The Marquis's *grande passion* is the performative play he enacted with his jewelled objects:

A jeweller in the Rue de la Paix told me on one occasion he showed Lord Anglesey a pearl remarking "That, my Lord, is I think as fine as any you possess." Lord Anglesey thereupon ran from the shop, jumped into a waiting brougham, and in 10 minutes came back with a grin of amusement. To the jeweller's surprise

⁶⁹ Sutton-Smith, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Macmillan, 1899) and Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work and Leisure* (Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1964).

⁷¹ Caillois, p. 5.

⁷² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Robert Mighall (Penguin, 2003), p. 40. See also, Verlaine's *Langeur* for a provoking read on the elements of lassitude in the context of decadence. www.poetry.com/langeur (accessed 11 April 2025).

⁷³ Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Viking Press, 1960), p. 13. For more on the dandy, see Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton University Press, 1998).

he pulled out about £40,000 worth of pearl pins and necklaces from his pockets and threw them on the counter. "Talking of pearls," he said, "what about those?"⁷⁴

Such an account of the Marquis utilising his decadent props to create surprise through immediate action – 'he ran from the shop' – presents a subversive depiction of the dandy, shifting from a life of idleness and 'living uselessly' to one characterised by decisive agency.⁷⁵ It also demonstrates an action of excess, both in terms of speed and the accumulated display of objects, in a way that the Marquis tried to outpace even the excesses expected of the late-Victorian dandy. The Marquis positioned himself at odds with the conventional association of the dandy with inertia. Dynamism through play is also exhibited in the Anglesey Jewel Robbery case, which kept the Marquis constantly stimulated by evolving aspects of the performance. In newspaper reports, there is a sense of a race against time, as the Marquis would 'accompany Inspector Drew in his search across the Metropolis' to catch the thief.⁷⁶ Yet again, the Marquis's enactment of the fictional character of Sherlock Holmes illustrates a recurring duality, whereby he performs a character separate from himself. In *The Sign of Four* (1890), Holmes remarks that '[his] mind rebels [...] at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work [...] and I am in my proper atmosphere'.⁷⁷ This sensibility is echoed in Gillette's play of *Sherlock Holmes*, which the Marquis was watching when his jewels were stolen, when Holmes exclaims: 'my whole life is spent in a series of frantic endeavours to escape from the dreary commonplaces of existence!'⁷⁸ Isabel Stowell-Kaplan has examined the similarities between the detective and the stage dandy in *Staging Detection*, noting their shared use of 'active leisure', as they both 'pose and posture in pursuit of their own performative ends'.⁷⁹ The Marquis – described in reports as Inspector Drew's 'able assistant' – illustrates the dynamic engagement in activities that ensued a sense of

⁷⁴ *The Mercury*, 'Last of the Dandies', 1905, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ 'The Marquis of Anglesey's Jewels', p. 44.

⁷⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, ed. by Ed Glinert (Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 13

⁷⁸ William Gillette, *Sherlock Holmes*, p. 227.

⁷⁹ Isabel Stowell-Kaplan, 'A Tell-tale bracelet': The detective and the dandy' in *Staging Detection: From Hawkshaw to Holmes* (Taylor and Francis, 2021), pp. 123-46 (p. 143).

liberation from societal expectations. Huizinga, too, associates the aspect of play linked with leisure as something 'free.'⁸⁰

It could be argued that the Marquis's state of playful energy gestures towards the stimulation of modernity. Max Nordau's apprehension of degeneration describes the '*fin-de-siècle*'s state of mind' as 'a compound of feverish restlessness': a disconcerting assertion of the period's relationship with modernity, which suggests uncontrollable and nervous stimulation.⁸¹ Decadence played a part in the physicality of the time, explicated through symbols of transience: where Pater's 'to burn always with [a] hard, gemlike flame' became synonymous with connections of speed and time.⁸² The processes of navigating space through play are gamified in the 'race to capture' the criminal, as the Marquis and the other players participated in the 'chase': 'from early morning Monday to late evening Thursday his Lordship was exploring with his "Sherlock Holmes", the Mysteries of Soho and other French quarters.'⁸³ Such voluntary engagement in playful activities chosen by the Marquis and his friends calls into question the ways in which the Marquis used play to create his own productive and creative forms of leisure time. Boundaries between leisure and play were increasingly blurred during the *fin-de-siècle*, as aesthetic ideals embraced by decadence – such as the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' – championed the idea that life itself could be approached as an artistic expression. From this perspective, Huizinga's concept of 'play as a form of cultural activity' and how 'play has a tendency to be beautiful' proves particularly relevant, illuminating the Marquis's creative explorations of leisure as a 'productive' and temporally bounded event.⁸⁴ Paget highlighted that, much like the superfluous nature of decadence, his aristocratic background enabled him to both lead a criminal investigation and stay playfully detached from the elite.

The Marquis's sense of momentary play in the case of his missing jewels also offered the potential of a liminoid experience. Victor Turner suggests that liminal experiences in modernist societies were 'replaced by 'liminoid' moments', which are 'an

⁸⁰ Huizinga, p. 8.

⁸¹ Nordau, p. 2, 3.

⁸² Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 120.

⁸³ 'The Marquis of Anglesey's Jewels', p. 4.

⁸⁴ Huizinga, pp. 7-8.

independent domain of creative activity.⁸⁵ There is, for Turner, the sense that the liminoid 'resembles, without being identical with liminal.'⁸⁶ Through this distinction, he associates the emergence of the liminoid with industrial and post-industrial societies, where leisure became increasingly entangled with fears of modernity. For Turner, the liminoid has strong connections with the concept of 'play', a link he underscores by drawing attention to its etymology. Turner interprets the Old English for play, *plegan*, as meaning 'to exercise oneself, to move briskly.'⁸⁷ It also means, according to Webster's Dictionary, to be 'free, as against work's obligatory character', that which is derived from 'action, motion or activity' and has connections with 'performance.'⁸⁸ As such, these liminoid moments are exemplified in the Marquis's play. Such moments also relate to how Sutton-Smith's play theory expands the concept of Turner's 'liminoid,' by acknowledging its ambiguities to explore the transitions between reality and unreality, suggesting that play is an active, powerful pursuit.⁸⁹

Through this lens, the Marquis's Sherlock Holmes detection shares similarities with that of the reality of crime when analysed through a framework of motivation, means and opportunity. Both the thief and the Marquis were motivated by personal desire. The means by which the Marquis could enact the role of Holmes was afforded by his elite status. Gault's means was 'spiritine', to make an impression of the keys to unlock the drawer of a 'receptacle that once held between £60,000 to £70,000 worth of jewellery.'⁹⁰ For play to happen, there must be an opportunity where it 'stand[s] quite consciously outside ordinary life as not being serious, [...] within its own boundaries of time and space'.⁹¹ For the Marquis, this was the opportunity of leisure time afforded by his elite position, enabling him to create his own form of play 'outside ordinary life'. For

⁸⁵ Victor Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology' in *Rice University Studies*, 60.3 (1974), pp. 53-92, (p. 65), <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63159>.

⁸⁶ Turner, p. 64 [emphasis added].

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 65.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 67.

⁸⁹ Turner also reflects on Sutton-Smith's acknowledgement of the liminoid by addressing its potential for creativity: 'What interests me most about Sutton-Smith's formulations is that he sees liminal and liminoid situations as the settings in which new symbols, models, and paradigms arise-as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact.' (Turner, p. 60).

⁹⁰ 'A Marquis Robbed', p. 4.

⁹¹ Huizinga, p.13.

the thief, the opportunity lay in the Marquis's reckless behaviour with his jewels (it was later determined that the drawer to the receptacle on the evening of the crime was, in fact, unlocked: a convenient opportunity and temptation for even the least likely of thieves). It cannot be underestimated that, in the Anglesey Jewel Robbery, play and crime are aligned.

Just as this high-profile theft was resolved, the Marquis transformed the crime into an act of creative expression, attaining emotional catharsis through play. As Sutton-Smith suggests, 'play is a state of mind, a way of seeing and being, a special "mental set" towards the world and one's actions in it.'⁹² For the Marquis, this 'state of mind' was realised within his own version of the 'play-ground,' a conceptual space governed by his own personalised, aestheticised, productive forms of leisure. In this context, play functioned not only as a complex mode of creative socialisation through which he engaged with the *fin-de-siècle* world, but also as a means of exerting control over it, adapting to its anxieties through subversive and decadent means.

Conclusion

Closely investigating the events of the Anglesey Jewel Robbery illustrates the varied ways the Fifth Marquis of Anglesey subverted the status quo. By engaging in forms of play, the Marquis reconfigured the gendered stereotype of the dandy as idle or passive, instead positioning himself as an instigator of action, while simultaneously renegotiating the expectations of his aristocratic identity. Employing decadent tropes to distort and fragment aspects of reality, the incident was both a liberating and creative experience, one that offered an alternative reality away from the governed constraints of Victorian expectations, which the Marquis had already spent much of his life attempting to subvert and defy. Huizinga's observation about the loss of the 'play spirit' in modern life reflects the *fin-de-siècle* concern with cultural decline and fatigue, positioning play and decadence as considered responses to periods of societal crisis. There has been relatively little consideration of the linkages between play and decadence in decadent criticism, yet, the theorists examined here as a means to explore the case of the Marquis's missing jewels, reveal that decadence may be conceived as a cultural form of play – one that enacts pleasure, performance, and excess within self-imposed limits, while simultaneously testing the very boundaries that sustain it. The

⁹² Sutton-Smith, p. 174.

Marquis thus offers an exemplar of this performative relationship between play and decadence, which offers a perspective on the greater attention we could give to play theories in this transitional moment of the late-Victorian and Modernist periods.



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BIOGRAPHY: Lucia Cowen is an AHRC doctoral candidate at Cardiff University. Her thesis examines the complex relationship between Welsh Decadence and her fascinating case study, the Fifth Marquis of Anglesey. Lucia is currently an Associate Teacher at Cardiff University, teaching on the module 'Decadent Men', and her research interests include decadence, performance, camp and the interconnections between decadence and play.

CONTACT: cowenli@cardiff.ac.uk