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OLIVE CUSTANCE (1874-1944)



Atelier G.C. Beresford. *Olive Custance*. 1902. Photograph. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Newark.

Olive Eleanor Custance was born on February 7, 1874, the eldest daughter of Colonel Frederic Hambledon Custance and Eleanor Constance Jolliffe. Her family were wealthy members of the landed gentry, descended from Sir Francis Bacon, and she grew up at their country seat, Weston Old Hall, Norfolk. Given her gender and social status, it is surprising that from an early age Custance began to write poetry and integrate herself into the decadent literary milieu. Her diaries show she identified with and avidly followed the careers of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, and she had a particular penchant for the poetry of Algernon Swinburne. In 1890, at the age of 16, Custance experienced a pivotal encounter with the Decadent poet John Gray at

a London party. She was evidently inspired by Gray's beauty (rumoured to have been the inspiration for Wilde's Dorian Gray) and wrote several poems addressed to a mysterious "Prince of Dreams" who bears a scarcely veiled resemblance to him. Although their encounter was brief, Custance and Gray continued to correspond and he offered her advice about her poetry. Custance also struck up a close friendship with Richard Le Gallienne, who reviewed and praised her work. Her early poetry was supported and encouraged by John Lane, who published her poem "Twilight" in Volume 3 of *The Yellow Book* (October 1894), followed by several more of her poems in later volumes of the magazine.

Custance's first book of poetry, entitled *Opals*, was published in 1897 by Lane's press The Bodley Head. Shortly after this, she received a letter of admiration from Natalie Barney, a Parisian salon hostess who would become notorious for her openly lesbian poetry published in 1900 as *Quelques Portraits-Sonnets de Femmes*. Barney wooed Custance with several love poems and invited her to Paris, where Custance also befriended the symbolist poet Renée Vivien, one of Barney's former lovers. Accounts of this ménage are often contradictory; Barney's autobiography *Souvenirs Indiscrets* (1960) states that she tried to persuade Custance to join her and Vivien in recreating a Sapphic community at Mytilene, but the endeavour was stymied by Vivien's jealousy. However, Vivien's roman à clef *A Woman Appeared to Me* (1904) fictionalises Custance as the "little English poetess Dagmar" and suggests that she and Custance enjoyed a brief love affair. Custance sustained contact with both Barney and Vivien after she moved back to London in 1901, and her diaries and poems suggest she continued to be attracted to and inspired by women.

Custance's most important and long-lasting relationship was with Lord Alfred Douglas, the poet and lover of Wilde. Custance wrote to Douglas in June 1901, praising the "fairy land" of his poems and signing herself as "Opal" (which, as Patricia Pulham notes, refers not only to her debut volume but also to her changeable, flirtatious personality). The two poets began to correspond, playfully using the personas of Fairy Prince for Douglas, and Princess and boyish Page for Custance; alternating these masculine and feminine identities allowed Custance to negotiate Douglas's bisexual desires. They arranged several meetings, but the match was threatened by Custance's disapproving parents and Douglas's tarnished reputation and dwindling funds, a result of his affair with Wilde.

The couple eloped on 4 March 1902 and honeymooned in Paris. This was a particularly busy year for Custance as her second volume *Rainbows* was published in 1902 (again by The Bodley Head) and she gave birth to a son Raymond on 17 November 1902. But although her second volume contained a series of love poems entitled "Songs of A Fairy Princess" dedicated to Douglas as "Fairy Prince," the marriage was not a happy one. Even in its early years, Custance struggled to cope with Douglas's constant litigations and money problems, as well as with feeling distant from her young son. Her next collection of poetry, *The Blue Bird* (1905), was

published through Douglas's friend T. W. H. Crosland's Marlborough Press. Custance received no royalties and ended up buying back the remaining copies.

The deterioration in Custance's writing, brought on by her troubled relationship with Douglas, from whom she separated in 1913, is reflected in her fourth and final volume, *The Inn of Dreams* (1911). The poems are mostly reprints from *The Blue Bird*, and the few new poems express feelings of depression, anxiety, and claustrophobia. However, despite losing custody of her son to her own father (Colonel Custance took charge of Raymond following Douglas's conversion to Catholicism, leading Douglas to take unsuccessful legal action against him), Custance continued to have a relationship with Douglas. In 1932, she moved to Hove, where Douglas was already living. Although they lived in separate houses, they saw each other nearly every day. Custance continued to write and publish poems in local newspapers and journals. Many of these have a patriotic character in light of the Second World War. She died on 12 February 1944.

Olive Custance is one of a group of fin-de-siècle "female aesthete" poets who were "rediscovered" in late twentieth-century scholarship. Nevertheless, she remains relatively unknown even among scholars of the 1890s, except perhaps as the wife of Lord Alfred Douglas. But Custance was in fact connected to several key fin-de-siècle figures and at the heart of the late-Victorian literary scene. Her four published volumes and her contributions to *The Yellow Book* (particularly her "statue" poems, such as "The White Statue" in Volume 11, October 1896) represent a strong, original response to the aesthetic of the period. Moreover, in many ways, her work anticipates the modernist poetics of H.D. and Amy Lowell.

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Selected Publications by Olive Custance

Opals. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1897.

Rainbows. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1902.

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The Inn of Dreams. John Lane The Bodley Head, 1911.

Selected Publications about Olive Custance

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