

WOMEN AS FIGURES OF DISORDER IN THE PLAYS OF OSCAR WILDE

by

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's plays on upper-class Victorian society are set apart from contemporary drama both by their wit and their reappraisal of conventions, particularly in dealing with transgressive women. The fallen woman's prominence in popular culture and the stage during a period of intense suffragism attests to woman's role as a touchstone of moral stability, contemporary plays viewing deviant women as threats to a man's world. Wilde mocks society's confinement of women, fallen or not, into prescribed roles and undercuts customary morality but fears self-determining women's disruptive power. A tool of perceiving this ambivalence is the self-fashioning dandy, who repudiates social constraints and yet foils transgressive women's attempts at self-fashioning. The surface mockery of conventional fears of female aspirations as threats to masculine orderliness conceals a greater fear of female autonomy as a threat to masculinity itself. This study locates the dramatic and moral urgency of Wilde's five major plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Salome* in this conflicting response to the feminine, which also determines his choice of theme and form both in his comedies of manners and symbolic drama.

[Approximately 80,000 words]

CONTENTS

Preface	1
Chapter 1. Introduction: British Theatre of the Nineties and Wilde	5
Chapter 2. The Climate of Opinion	40
Chapter 3. <i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i> : The Mother as Homewrecker	82
Chapter 4. <i>A Woman of No Importance</i> : The Devouring Mother	117
Chapter 5. <i>An Ideal Husband</i> : Woman as Predator	150
Chapter 6. <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> : Creatures of Caprice	180
Chapter 7. <i>Salome</i> : Woman Demonized	211
Chapter 8. Conclusion: Ambivalence and After	245
Bibliography	256

Note on Textual References

The texts of Wilde's plays and other works used in this study are from *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen, 1908), except for *Salome*, the text of which is Lord Alfred Douglas' translation from the French in John Lane's Bodley Head edition (London, 1907). Following the orthography of this edition, the title is unaccented, while the name is accented. As these editions, like the early editions of all other plays cited, carry no line numbers, references are by page numbers in the editions used. Bibliographic entries are given for longer essays or articles by contemporary writers, but not for play reviews or unsigned articles included in the footnotes.

Preface

Wilde's plays have been traditionally recognized as satires on his contemporary world of privileged men and women and the conventions by which they lived. His targets are not particular persons but the character types inhabiting the upper reaches of the world of late Victorian Britain and include all relationships, personal and social, the codes that govern them and the principles on which they were founded, especially those of gender identities and sexual conduct. The re-appraising imagination that informs Wilde's plays shapes itself most constantly around the idea of the feminine, which includes the way both men and women think about women's nature and function. Wilde's mockery analyses the conventionality of the idea in all its ramifications and setting it adrift from the security of received wisdom, invites redefinition. Wilde's work may thus be seen as fundamentally subversive, ranging from poking fun at minor follies to a sustained exposé of hypocrisy of tragic proportions.

Because of this penetrating search for meaning in the social world as well as in the interior landscape of the individual, Wilde's work, both dramatic and non-dramatic, have come to be viewed as standing apart from run-of-the-mill Victorian self-reflection. Yet Wilde is far less of a maverick than he is often claimed to be. Looking closely at his themes, his plot-design and his stage technique, we find that he depended heavily upon the standards of the theatre for which he wrote. The peculiar force of Wilde's drama arises not from his rejection of contemporary theatre, its techniques and its ethos but from his ability to exploit its resources to engender a contrary reading of the world, especially of women's place in it.

It is not surprising that the growing critical awareness of the dynamic of this creative reversal should have encouraged a view of Wilde as a rebel against conventional morality. But it remains to be seen whether his alternative stance warrants placing him so diametrically opposite late nineteenth century views of women as to discover in him a

proto-feminist. While confirming Wilde's rebel status, the present study probes further into the nuances of his concept of women. Taking note of the climate of ideas into which he was born and measuring his indebtedness to the theatre tradition of his time, this study examines Wilde's systematic undercutting of his contemporary ideology of the feminine. In the process, however, it discovers a paradox on a deeper level of idea formation in Wilde's representation of women: while Wilde mocks his society's confinement of women into prescribed roles, he also fears the disruptive power of women's self-determination. Regressing through the gender identities and relations that Wilde dramatizes, we discover a constant tension between the assertion of women's autonomy and fear of women's ascendancy over men. We may therefore locate the dramatic and moral urgency of Wilde's plays in a deep-rooted conflict in his response to the idea of women which determines his choice as much of the themes as the forms of his plays, extending from the society comedy of manners to symbolic drama.

This study begins with two related surveys, chapters 1 and 2, the first taking note of the state of the British stage in the 1890s and of major critical approaches to Wilde. Chapter 2 summarizes contemporary ideas about women, family and social organization, gender relations and sexual morality, set off against the burgeoning rebellion of a new generation of women against these ideas. The discussion of the individual plays and critical responses to them begins in chapter 3 with *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which argues that in this play Wilde redesigns the formula of the fallen woman not only by making her a mother but an unrepentant one. While this reversal of a formula compels the viewer to rethink conventional certitudes such as motherhood and womanly virtue, it still places at the root of potential social disorder women's attempts, idealistic as well as selfish, to assume authority over male domains. The next chapter, on *A Woman of No Importance*, shows how the fallen mother reappears in yet another unusual incarnation, creating the double paradox that the fallen woman is the most virtuous and the best mother the most harmful. Demolishing the conventional constructions of good and bad, Wilde shows how vague

labels and legends can be and questions whether it is the brutally self-serving man or the joyless good woman who has the greatest potential for disrupting lives. In *An Ideal Husband*, the subject of the chapter 5, we see the emergence of the Wildean dandy in his full powers. This chapter shows how by using the dandy's vantage point of detachment, Wilde plays with the familiar figures and motivations of the adventuress, the man with a past, the devoted wife and the selfless friend, in this case, the dandy, to uncover the harm that women's greed as much as rigid idealism can do to a world already weakened by foolish and corrupt men's sins. Chapter 6 finds in Wilde's best-loved play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, also his subtlest treatment of plot and character conventions and his most productive ambiguity about conventional thinking and its exposure. All narrative patterns are turned inside out and all positions of status overturned, including the commanding detachment of the dandy, to create a carnival world. In that world women hold the power over men's fate, including that of providing empowering information, but the potential for disruption of social order is eventually lost to conformity with the comic tradition of ending the action with weddings.

The last chapter on the plays considers *Salome*, perhaps Wilde's most ambitious venture in its symbolist dimensions. One finds in it the reiteration of patterns of action and character from the society plays, such as the high-born lady and the seductress, but this familiarity only emphasizes the alienness of the hidden impulses behind human action, especially the dark power of femininity. This chapter studies the encounter between the familiar and the mysterious in the play as Wilde's demonstration that only through the symbolic reading of the familiar may one enter the rationally unchartable territories of human nature. The critical inferences reached in the discussion of the plays are gathered in the concluding chapter of the dissertation, which returns to the question of Wilde's uncertain location between tradition and individuality, arguing that this ambivalence explains both his enduring interest for students of British drama and his popular image as no more than a brilliant but insubstantial commentator on manners. On the contrary, the

present study finds in his ambivalence a literary strategy for a sustained examination of the world. On this basis it asserts that Wilde's reading of that world is unified by a persistent anxiety over women's potential for unravelling human and social relationships to a degree far beyond the disruptive powers of the transgressive woman defined in the light of conventional and conservative thought.

Chapter 1

Introduction: British Theatre of the Nineties and Wilde

Oscar Wilde's plays appeared towards the end of a century that had gained a reputation for poor quality theatre. "Melodrama!" with all its associations of simplistic morals, lack of depth and cheap effects is the usual term that blankets all drama of the century, whether warranted or not. The traditional critical attitude is that by the last decade of the nineteenth century, with the infusion of a fresh—and foreign—spirit in the person of the Norwegian Ibsen and his promoters, English theatre grudgingly began to inch away from the posturing of melodrama and towards the honesty of realism. But these are large terms that resist simple definitions as categories, and an easy mistake would be to draw fixed boundaries between categories or to define categories loosely. Paradoxically, it is important both to define categories clearly and to allow for crossovers between them. Wilde's plays manage to assimilate the attributes, both formal and material, from a wide range of styles, practices and genres, from drama, fiction and lyric, into finely nuanced theatre events. They act upon viewers and readers on many more levels than the plays of his contemporaries except for the work of Bernard Shaw. However successful other major playwrights of the age might have been in their own time, they have failed to draw the attention of posterity as Wilde continues to do. But while it is a commonplace to think of Wilde as an original who stood out from his contemporaries by virtue of both style and substance, it is also necessary to think of him as a product of his age. In the course of this study his debt to the theatre he helped change will be continually noticed. It is therefore useful to keep the salient facts of British theatre history clearly in mind.

The nineteenth century began with the dramatic tradition of England barely surviving and ended with the theatre hugely popular and artistically varied. By Wilde's time drama as an occupation and the theatre as a profession had undergone enormous changes largely due to unprecedented alterations in England's social, political and economic life but also due to

forces implicit in the nation's cultural and ideological past, advancing on the strength, for instance, both of the rationalist heritage of the Enlightenment and the enquiry into human emotional and spiritual identity during the Romantic revival. An important influence was England's long tradition of links with the literary world of Europe, particularly France, from which the British theatre regularly derived plot and character types. The most visible change in nineteenth century British theatre was its growth in size and status. Popular theatres such as the Adelphi and the Hippodrome were vast structures built to accommodate huge crowds while a prestigious West End theatre like the St. James's was deliberately made smaller to restrict it to select, fashionable audiences, but both kinds were run as complex commercial enterprises. Theatre management had become an art in itself. Drama as a profession had become lucrative after a long time and both playwrights and actors were on the way to gaining public eminence that would eventually lead to the twentieth century star culture. Extraordinary historical changes had taken place and were continuing, most notably Britain's political domination of the world and industrial growth. Of the complicated social consequences of the industrial and capitalist advancement of England, perhaps the most far-reaching was the spread of education, both practical and speculative, accelerated through the phenomenal growth of print culture.¹ Another vital cultural development was the establishment of culture as a discrete enterprise, particularly the evolution of entertainment as an industry fed by the increasing availability of disposable income.² That the theatre would capture the market as the first level of popular entertainment was not surprising, nor that it would become an arena of debate on politics and morality.

¹The literacy rate for males had shot up from 75.4% in 1861 to 93.6% in 1891, while the figures for females for the same years are, 65.3% and 92.7%; T.W. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 199. Between 1871 and 1901 the number of employees in the paper and printing trades had grown from 94,000 to 212,000; Donald Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy: England 1868-1914* (rev. ed. London: Longman, 1994), 85.

²Between 1875 and 1895 prices fell and wages rose, with a reduction in weekly working hours. The share of the growing national income going to wages rose from about 52% in the early 1870 to about 62% in the early 1890s; see Norman McCord, *British History, 1815-1906* (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), 447-51.

In the last third of the century, conditions for the playwright and the actor improved, as, among other things, plagiarism was made harder by legal safeguards, such as the Dramatic Copyright Act (1883), the International Copyright Act (1887) and the American Copyright Bill (1891). In the last third of the century the theatre began to gain a finer literary tone with the original plays of Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Sydney Grundy, Haddon Chambers, R.C. Carton, J. Comyns Carr, James Barrie, Jerome K. Jerome, James Albery, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. Women playwrights such as Mrs. Hugh Bell and Pearl Craigie (under the name John Oliver Hobbes) had minor successes on the West End stages, but created a whole alternate drama dealing with "New Woman" issues, as recent studies have shown.³ But the fantasies and farces popular earlier in the century continued in the writings of Augustus Harris, Charles Brookfield, Harry Greenbank, W. Lestocq, the prolific F.C. Burnand (the editor of *Punch*), and even the critic Clement Scott. The trend towards realism continued with the realistic dialogue of Pinero and Jones. Although Grundy and Albery tended towards adaptations of continental plays, Pinero, Jones, Wilde and Shaw wrote their own plays; they were neither hacks nor men of letters merely dabbling in the theatre. Jones's and Pinero's plays have not stood the test of time quite as well as those of Wilde and Shaw, partly because of their sustained sentimentality and partly because of their lack of courage fully to carry through the criticism of social injustice which they attempted to address in their plays. Russell Jackson points out that in the 1880s Jones, for instance, wrote to "a formula that he no longer believed in"; the formula was simple:

plays should have a love-interest; they should present a satisfying resolution with no practical or ethical ambiguities; there should be little or no irony or cynicism in the author's approach to those characters with whom he expected the audience to

³See the work of Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds. *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992). Tracy C. Davis's studies of the lives of Victorian actresses, particularly in *Actresses As Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London; Routledge, 1991) focus on actresses rather than on female dramatists, but provide invaluable background on theatrical practices in the last third of the nineteenth century.

sympathise, and the characters in question should have unimpeachable moral credentials; plays should be optimistic in outlook; anything unpleasantly specific about birth, death, sexuality, drunkenness or disease should be avoided.⁴

Though skilled dramatists, they have taken second place to the brilliance of Wilde and Shaw who combine a fine dramatic sense with wit and courageous social comment, though in very different ways.

In his *Prefaces to Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Michael Booth emphasizes the sense of evolution that is so strikingly evident in the drama of the nineteenth century, while in *Victorian Theatre*, Russell Jackson reminds us that there are several lines of progress, including those of technology, respectability, democracy and urbanization.⁵ Their work demonstrates that all the lines of development were closely intertwined during this period. The trend towards realism would not have become so advanced without the many new technical advances and inventions, and the dramatists of the later half of the nineteenth century did not create a "new drama" out of thin air but arrived at a drama that was a logical development of what preceded it. The extended and emotional debate on the role of the actor-managers in the progress or lack of it in the drama in various journals including the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Saturday Review*, to name a few, attests to the sensitivity of the theatrical world to charges of serving commercial rather than artistic interests.⁶

In the 1890s, when attempts to create a more literary drama were beginning to achieve greater success, a gap still remained between literary drama and literature, as Henry Arthur

⁴Russell Jackson, ed., *Plays by Henry Arthur Jones*, Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 24.

⁵Michael R. Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980); Russell Jackson, ed., *Victorian Theatre* (London: A. & C. Black, 1989).

⁶The debate was sparked by Oswald Crawford in "The London Stage" in the *Fortnightly Review*, ns. 47 (April 1890), 499-516, and drew defensive responses from Herbert Beerbohm Tree in "The London Stage: A Reply" in the *Fortnightly Review*, ns. 47 (June 1890), 922-31, "The Actor-Manager: A Stage Reply" in the *Fortnightly Review*, ns. 48 (July 1890), 16-19, from Henry Arthur Jones in "The Actor-Manager" in the same issue, pp. 1-16, from Bram Stoker in "Actor-Managers" in the *Nineteenth Century*, 27:160 (June 1890), 1040-51, from Henry Irving in "Actor-Managers" in the same issue, pp. 1052-53, from Charles Wyndham in "Actor-Managers" in the same issue, pp. 1054-58, and from unnamed reviewers in "The Apologia of the Actor-Manager - I" in the *Saturday Review* (21 June 1890), 767-8, and in "The Apologia of the Actor-Manager - II" in the next week's issue (28 June 1890), 795-6.

Jones noted. While Jones asserted that "the art of writing modern English drama is, or should be, an intellectual art,"(109), he also pointed out that "I have not contended that our modern English drama is 'literary' in the sense in which Elizabethan drama is literary" (112).⁷ The twentieth century has not looked kindly on the drama that existed between the time of Sheridan and Shaw, and the period hardly stands out as a time of risks and experimentation. Yet there were many technological and creative experiments, and although not all were successful, the theatre continually worked to improve itself in matter and manner,⁸ for though the theatre was extremely popular, especially with the lower classes, the British public was never uncritical of its quality. It was constantly bemoaned in the press and in books as having reached its lowest level in history. Due to the presence of prostitution and other vices in the theatre buildings themselves, they were shunned by the middle classes and were a favourite subject of condemnation from the pulpit. Always in public view, the theatre had to be responsive to public taste, and while later ages may not have shared that taste, nineteenth century audiences got what they wanted, as Booth points out. The contemporary vote was for a blend of exciting and yet morally edifying action, a preference well served by melodrama. Clement Scott articulated the audience's justification for flocking to melodrama in his much-quoted article in *The Theatre* (March 1888):

The dramatist who trumpets forth the bad, and conceals the good, is unworthy of his calling. The play that belittles and degrades the manhood, and the womanhood, of those who watch it is unworthy of public recognition . . . There is no pleasure in revelling in what is unwholesome and disagreeable. The playhouse is not a charnel house; the drama is not a dissecting knife. When I am asked 'why we go to the play', I should answer thus: Not to enjoy the contemplation of the baseness, and brutality, of life; not to return to our daily work more oppressed, more discontented, more dissatisfied, more heartless, but to believe in hope, in faith, in purity, in honour, in nobility of aim and steadfastness of purpose. We must enforce the good, without showing the bad.⁹

Morally and psychologically distant from the actual world as this drama appeared to be, it insisted on verisimilitude in its presentation. As the century progressed, so did the

⁷Henry Arthur Jones, *The Renaissance of the English Drama: Essays, Lectures, and Fragments* (London: Macmillan, 1895).

⁸Technical progress in the nineteenth century theatre is exhaustively charted in Terence Rees and David Wilmore, *British Theatrical Patents, 1801-1990* (London: Society For Theatre Research, 1996).

⁹Clement Scott, "Why Do We Go to the Play?" *Theatre* (March 1888), 123-124, quoted in Michael R. Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre*, 47.

stage's technical capabilities to create realistic effects, to the delight and approval of audiences. More and more realism was required for the success of a play, be it the spectacular realism of an Adelphi melodrama or the more genteel aping of upper and middle-class interiors of a West End comedy. George Sims's *The Lights O' London* (1881), W. G. Wills's *Faust* (1885) and Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) are only some examples of the types of realistic production that animated the stage and impressed audiences as well as critics. In his description of Wilson Barrett's production of Sims's play at the Princess's Theatre (10 September 1881), Booth reports that "not only was the detail of verisimilitude considered praiseworthy; critics were also much impressed with the management of the crowd in the street, which was compared favourably to the crowd scenes in the recent visit of the Meininger Company to Drury Lane."¹⁰ The special effects of the Walpurgis Night scene in Henry Irving's production of Wills's *Faust* on 19 December 1885 at the Lyceum Theatre were considered by audiences as particularly convincing.¹¹ George Alexander's production of Pinero's play at the St. James's Theatre on 27 May 1893 also elicited admiration for its faithful rendering of society drawing rooms and costumes.¹²

However, in the 1890s the British theatre was being subjected to small but effective pinpricks in its complacency. Ibsen and Shaw may have had to have private performances, but they nevertheless reached the public in print and indirectly swayed public taste by influencing such establishment playwrights as Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero. As Booth points out, "after their exposure to Ibsen, critics and playwrights and the intellectual section of the public could never again think in the old ways."¹³ It is true that as yet there was no play on the British stage as original as anything by Ibsen. The dramatists

¹⁰Michael R. Booth, "Introduction," Michael R. Booth, ed. *The Lights o' London and Other Victorian Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxiii.

¹¹Richard Foulkes, *Church and Stage in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 217-20.

¹²Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 54-60.

¹³Michael R. Booth, *Prefaces*, 49.

Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero, and the actors Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm Tree no doubt had a sincere desire for the "renaissance" of the British drama and convinced audiences and traditional minded dramatic critics such as Clement Scott of their originality in creating characters such as Paula Tanqueray and Vashti Dethic, but these were still the familiar female figures speaking a different idiom. The women of Pinero, Jones and Sydney Grundy may have been daring, but they did not dare anything new.

Dramatists continued to recycle stock situations, characters and themes derived from the continent, especially France. A case in point—one of particular significance to the present study—is the popularity of the theme of the fallen woman.

The fallen woman allowed the playwright at once to capitalize on the suspense arising from some dark secret in the character's past and to titillate the audience by associating some nameless naughtiness with that past. It is not therefore surprising that the plot pattern based on the character of the fallen woman should have been one of the commonest on the nineteenth century stage. Briefly, the pattern shows a woman attempting to stay integrated in her social world but prevented from doing so by her guilty past, which makes her an outcast. In a more sensational variation of the pattern, she is a predator attempting to capture wealth and power, which she sometimes does by using a criminal capacity for intrigue, sometimes by flaunting her charms, all of this being again explained by her unsavoury history. Clement Scott and B.C. Stephenson's *Countess Zicka* (from their adaptation of Sardou's *Dora*) is a spy who not only sells state secrets, but has designs on a virtuous married man with a high position in Society.¹⁴ Pinero's fallen woman, Paula Tanqueray (*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*) may have married respectably, but the ostracism by her husband's milieu makes it clear she can never achieve reintegration into Society

¹⁴ Clement Scott and B.C. Stephenson, *Diplomacy: A Play in Four Acts. An English Version of M. Sardou's "Dora"* (New York: Rosenfield Typewriting, 1885?), *English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century 1801-1900*, ed., Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley (New York: Readex Microprint, 1967). First produced at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, 12 February, 1878, it was revived at the Garrick Theatre on February 18, 1893.

which the marriage was supposed to guarantee.¹⁵ One of the most extreme of examples occurs in Grundy's *A Fool's Paradise*, where Beatrice Selwyn, a woman hiding a past, slowly poisons her husband and proposes to her horror-struck former lover that she marry him (now that he himself has inherited wealth and a title) after her husband dies.¹⁶ In both versions of the fallen woman's story, the fallen woman ends up suffering punishment in the form of either expulsion or even death, although the guilty but repentant fallen woman wins reprieve by entering some virtuous occupation such as the religious life. The moral judgment against the fallen woman was so firmly fixed that by the end of the decade drama had acquired a figure expressly employed to deliver it. This is the *raisonneur*, developed especially carefully in Jones's plays. As Russell Jackson has pointed out, "the best of characters" Jones wrote, such as Sir Richard Kato (*The Case of Rebellious Susan*), Colonel Sir Christopher Deering (*The Liars*), and Sir Daniel Carteret (*Mrs. Dane's Defence*), wielded "authority in the world as confirmation of their function as *raisonneur*" gained by their "experience and wisdom, rather than any special idealism" whereby they settle the moral predicament in the plays.¹⁷ The social roots of this common character are beyond the scope of this study, but we may briefly note how its ubiquity is attested to by the exceptions to it.

These exceptions to the patterns we have noted are deliberate inversions that negatively prove common usage. As an example we may cite Frank Harvey's Grace (*Shall We Forgive Her?*), who lives in sin with a ne'er-do-well in Australia, puts her life in danger for a good man (who later protects her secret and her character), becomes an ideal, self-sacrificing wife—just as she was a self-sacrificing mistress before—and is loved by all

¹⁵ Arthur W. Pinero, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray: A Play in Four Acts, Late Victorian Plays 1890-1914*, ed. and intro. George Rowell (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); the St. James's Theatre, 27 May, 1893.

¹⁶ Sydney Grundy, *A Fool's Paradise: An Original Play in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, c.1898); first produced, 7 October, 1887 at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, Greenwich, as *The Mousetrap*, it was revived at the Garrick Theatre, 2 January, 1892.

¹⁷ Jackson, ed., Introduction, *Plays by Henry Arthur Jones*, 14.

the good characters.¹⁸ The character who plots against her is the Puritan housekeeper with designs on her equally puritanical husband, who at first rejects her when he learns her secret but later realizes, persuaded by others around them, that she is true and good. In this play, the *raisonneur* figure serves, not to assert the "age-old law" of the double standard, and to push the fallen woman outside the charmed circle of middle-class morality, but to alert the audience to the irrationality of the inflexible husband who ignores the reality of his wife's character and interprets her according to abstract moral standards. Wilson Barrett and Louis N. Parker's *Sybil*, in a little-known play, *The Black Kitten* (1894), spends all her energies in helping to build a shelter for fallen women.¹⁹ More startlingly, she is fallen because she was raped and made pregnant by her husband, when he was a drunken young rake—he only *forgives* her fallen status when he realizes he himself was her violator. Despite this apparent admission of the real world into the play, its whole tone is cloyingly sentimental, complete with loyal servants, a wise old father and a child found in the snow who turns out to be the child of the hero and heroine.

This deliberate inversion of the pattern sometimes extends even to those women who receive no sympathy from the playwright. Although such characters are usually punished by death or exile, there are some who, puzzlingly, seem to make fairly profitable exits. Grundy's Mrs. Murgatroyd (*A Bunch of Violets*), for example, is a bigamist and a blackmailer who is never found out by her present husband, and although she is no better than her unsavoury first husband, he is the one who pays with his life, while she gets off scot-free.²⁰ Although not a fallen woman, Pinero's Lady Twombly in *The Cabinet Minister* fails every test of ethics but is neither prosecuted for speculating on the stock

¹⁸ Frank Harvey, "*Shall We Forgive Her?*" (New York, : Typescript, 1897) in Nicoll and Freedley, 1967; first produced, 2 April, 1894 at the Alexandra Theatre, Sheffield, it was revived at the Adelphi Theatre on 20 June, 1894 and again at the Olympic Theatre on 26 January, 1895.

¹⁹ Wilson Barrett and Louis N. Parker, *The Black Kitten: A Melo-Drama in Four Acts*. (New York: Library of Congress Licensing Copy, Privately Printed, 1894), in Nicoll and Freedley, 1966. I have been unable to find any record of its performance.

²⁰ Sydney Grundy, *A Bunch of Violets: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1901); the Haymarket Theatre, April 25, 1894.

market with state secrets, and that too in her husband's name, nor forever estranged from her initially disapproving and high-minded husband.²¹ Farces may have been more lax in their moral stances, but *The Foundling's* Tricky Little Maybud serves as yet another example of the fallen woman who gets a reward rather than punishment in the end.²² Though her heavy flirtations with Major Cotton in the play are obviously only one of many such relationships she has, she is rewarded at the end with a respectable marriage, if with the vulgar comic man, Timothy Hucklebridge. The technical (though apparently all-important) illegitimacy of Nina Trevanion in *The Glass of Fashion*,²³ or the full-fledged illegitimacy of Rosamond Athelstane in *Sowing the Wind* do not destroy the husband's love for the tainted wife.²⁴

Whether the fallen woman suffers or prospers in a play, she is undoubtedly one of the main pillars of the nineteenth century dramatic edifice. But popular as she was, the woman without a character but very much with a past, a figure that occasioned titillation and moralizing at the same time, was not quite home-grown but largely imported from France from the 1850s onwards. The presence of this one character alone, which we shall consider more closely later, attests to the volume of adaptations of French plays by British dramatists. Although many of the thousands of French adaptations were made by forgotten playwrights or hack writers, many later successes in playwriting started out with adaptations. This practice continued till the last decades of the century. Even a prominent playwright like Sydney Grundy had a few French adaptations to his name, as had drama critics such as Clement Scott. Although Tom Robertson and others had decided to rescue

²¹ Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Cabinet Minister: A Farce in Four Acts* (Boston: Baker and Co., 1892); Court Theatre, April 23, 1890.

²² W. Lestocq and E.M. Robson, *The Foundling: A Farce in Three Acts* (New York: Typescript, Z. and L. Rosenfield, n.d.) in Nicoll and Freedley, 1967. Kerry Powell has shown that this version, with an almost exact replica of the interrogation scene between Lady Bracknell and Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was written after the authors had seen Wilde's play. However, it was first produced at Terry's, 30 August 1894.

²³ Sydney Grundy, *The Glass of Fashion: An Original Comedy in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1898); the Globe Theatre, 8 September, 1883.

²⁴ Sydney Grundy, *Sowing the Wind: An Original Play in Four Acts* (London: Richard Clay and Sons, n.d.); the Comedy Theatre, 30 September, 1893; revived at the same theatre, 9 March, 1895.

the Britishness of English drama by the 1860s and in fact had begun to insist on originality in dramatic creation, the practice of quick adaptations of French plays continued.

The arrival of Ibsen, yet another continental author, was thus not an unprecedented invasion. Nor should it be a surprise that when his plays began to be known to the British literati from the 1870s, translations of his plays began to be circulated, published and then performed, although performed only privately. Their reception and treatment was indeed different from that of plays by the familiar French dramatists, but the point is that they did find a place in the British theatre. The key difference between translations of Ibsen's plays and of those of Scribe, Sardou or Dumas *filis* was that they were made not by dramatists working in the commercial theatre but by William Archer, a literary critic, and Edmund Gosse, a novelist and poet, and promoted and explained by George Bernard Shaw, then mainly a drama and music critic. This had far-reaching implications for the evolution of drama because private sponsorship of these new plays kept them out of the control of the censor. Since the censor could not force private sponsors to change the plays into adaptations fit for British sensibilities, or to prevent fair translations, the dramatic, moral and social imagination of Ibsen could take root in the British theatre and eventually enlarge its horizon.

But the bastion of conventional taste in British theatre was too strong as yet to fall under the shots that Ibsen's plays were aiming at society. On the contrary, they themselves ran a risk of being falsified in an ethos that did not comprehend or was unprepared for Ibsen's revaluations of the world. When a working playwright such as Henry Arthur Jones attempted, with the most serious of intentions, to translate *A Doll's House*, he could come up only with a rough adaptation, staying within the tradition of British playwrights who automatically censored French plays before the translation could even get to the Censor. The specific salaciousness of French farces, for example, was watered down to mere hints in English problem plays. The unwritten code of British society was in fact a more powerful censor than the official one. So, in Jones's hands *A Doll's House* became

Breaking A Butterfly, and silly little Flora came home and resolved to be a better wife and mother and thus realize herself fully. Other responses from English dramatists to Ibsen's plays were to write parodies, such as James Barrie's *Ibsen's Ghost, or, Toole Up To Date* (1891) and Mrs. Hugh Bell's *Jerry-Builder Solness* (1893). Jones himself discovered the power of the British *social* censor at first hand; Charles Wyndham, who was producing *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), objected when it was made clear that the married Lady Susan had had an affair with another man. Wyndham seemed surprised that Jones, as an Englishman, should have included such an idea in his own play. Though Jones resisted any change, on the opening night Wyndham and the other actors left out the lines that specified Lady Susan's actual wrongdoing. The censor's power was thus supported and extended by people working within the theatrical system. Wilde's own skirmish with the censor over his *Salome* exemplifies the power the censor drew from public taste.

When Wilde stepped into this busy but convention-bound world of the nineteenth century theatre, he arrived with the advantage of having a reputation. He was the only successful dramatist of the time who was already established as a literary figure, having published poetry, essays and a novel.²⁵ He thus formed a bridge between the literary and the dramatic, two categories very much at odds at the time, though not as definitely separated in our time. To be sure, he was not the only literary figure to try his hand at drama, but very few literary figures had written plays that had achieved commercial success. Though Byron's and Tennyson's dramas did not fare too badly, those of other men of letters were less fortunate:²⁶ Shelley, Browning, Eliot, Hardy, and even the painter Alma Tadema had written or were writing plays that succeeded, if at all, better on the page

²⁵Although the novelist Robert Buchanan was also presenting a large number of plays throughout the decade, his plays were generally adaptations of other's work or collaborative works. R.L. Stevenson and William Ernest Henley's play *Beau Austin* was a somewhat controversial success at the Haymarket in November 1890. See Robert Louis Stevenson and W.E. Henley, *Beau Austin, Four Plays Written in Collaboration with W.E. Henley, The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson: Drama*, vol. 23 (Edinburgh: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897).

²⁶Byron's play, *Werner* (1830) was revived by Irving at the Lyceum in 1887, and *Sardanapalus* (1834) was revived sporadically through the century. Tennyson's poetic dramas, *The Cup* (1881) and *Beckett* (1893) were successes at the Lyceum largely due to Irving's charisma.

than on the stage. Henry James, for example, had a resounding failure with his *Guy Domville* (1895) which closed early, after the audience's jeers at the beginning of the run, to make way for a new play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. James, who could see no merit in such a play or such an audience, was too discouraged to try the stage for years to come.²⁷ No doubt this generalization needs some modification, for some writers, such as Dickens, probably the most popular novelist of his century, succeeded with adaptations of his own novels broken up into episodes. Adaptations of novels were often successful, as with Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), one of the most popular novels of the century with many stage adaptations. Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is better known in its dramatic than its fictional form. Earlier in the century, episodes from Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) were dramatized successfully in Dion Boucicault's *The Long Strike* (1866), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) had more than one successful adaptation, some even endorsed by her. In 1887 R.L. Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) enjoyed a sensational success on the stage, especially due to the special effects of the American actor, Richard Mansfield, while Dickens's novels continued to be adapted and performed on the stage. However, none of these had been originally written for the stage, and what made these plays work on the stage was that they were adapted to its exigencies, tuned by a thorough knowledge of dramatic requirements and of the paying audience. Dickens, for example, could work on his own adaptations successfully because he had worked as an actor and so knew the practical aspects of the theatre. His novels were already pictorial and episodic enough for relatively smooth transition to the stage, and the plays that were born from his lengthy novels usually focused on one character or storyline (*Little Em'ly*, *Lady Dedlock's Secret*, *Poor Jo*, *The Hollytree Inn*, etc.). Similarly, when other plays of a literary origin succeeded, they did so because in constructing them action was placed in the foreground

²⁷See James's letter to his brother, William James (2 February 1895), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 183-4.

while subtleties of language and characterization were ignored, which made it possible for the stage version to pile effect upon dramatic effect. Language that was too literary simply bored the audience as did too much dialogue²⁸. Indeed, viewing the first act of *A Woman of No Importance*, critics and audiences were not altogether happy with the characters, who were given too much talk and too little action, which struck them as tedious and pointless, and it was only the melodramatic complement of the play that helped to make it a commercial success. There were some objections to those same melodramatic elements,²⁹ but in general, Wilde's epigrammatic dialogue was seen as a distraction from the real concerns of this play about a fallen woman. Despite this criticism, the primary identity of *A Woman of No Importance* as a play was never erased by Wilde's stylistic exuberance; no matter how it was understood, its success was as a play written directly for the stage rather than as a by-product of a work that had won success in some other incarnation.

In achieving his remarkable success Wilde capitalized not only upon his understanding of the nature of drama as a genre and of the world he was depicting but his instinct for theatre as a concrete event. Like most other successful dramatists, Wilde played to his audience even as he challenged them. Gauging what spectators wanted and what they were capable of comprehending was not the least of Wilde's skills, as we may appreciate when we take stock of what kinds of audience a late nineteenth century dramatist might expect and how theatre people themselves reacted to those on whom they depended for their survival.

Not for the first time in the history of British drama nor the last, playwrights of the 1890s bemoaned the limitations of the audience as a rule. Henry Arthur Jones was bitter

²⁸For example, see reviews and articles on *Beau Austin* in the *Nineteenth Century* (30:174, August 1891, 258-274), *Fortnightly Review* (ns 52, August 1892, 146-167) and *Saturday Review* (14 January, 1893, 45-46).

²⁹In his review of the play, Archer called the end of Act III inferior, saying, "It would be a just retribution if Mr Wilde were presently to be confronted with this tableau, in all the horrors of chromolithography, on every hoarding in London, with the legend 'Stay, Gerald! He is your father!' in crinkly letters in the corner" (*World*, 26 April 1893) rpt. in William Archer, *The Theatrical 'World' For 1893* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), 108.

about the "secondary position assigned by the general playgoing public to the author."³⁰ One notes with interest the qualification, "general." It was conceded that audiences fell into two classes by cultural level, metonymically identified as the stalls and the galleries and representing the class division in British society. The stalls, more expensive than the galleries, would be occupied by educated spectators who expected fine language and finely drawn sentiments, while the galleries would be the place for the less cultivated whose taste lay in broad humour and fast action. So wide seemed the cultural divide between these two classes that at the beginning of the decade, Oswald Crawford saw validation of Disraeli's two nation model of human society in the difference between the two audiences of contemporary plays. It was this difference that he held responsible for the schizophrenic acting and writing he witnessed in West End theatres which were trying to cater to both the stalls and the galleries:

Now there comes a sentence for the educated part of the audience, which galleries take listlessly, or impatiently, or indignantly; now a sentence is spoken for the gallery, a bit of clap-trap, a music-hall enormity, or some low allusion; the galleries shout their approval, and a shudder passes through the ranks of the judicious.³¹

West End audiences in the stalls prided themselves on their difference from the rabble consigned to the galleries and barely tolerated even there. The tastes and character of the "gods" in the galleries are identified in no uncertain terms, as is the reaction of the "educated majority." Crawford's solution, to get rid of the masses by giving them incentives to go away to music halls, follows the same impulse which prompted Covent Garden's attempts to raise prices and do away with the pit at the beginning of the century. These attempts sparked the famous "O.P." (Old Price) riots in 1809 that forced the theatre to give in to the voice of the masses.³² Crawford's suggestion for class separation in the theatre illustrates a real anxiety about social disorder; the working classes had been gaining in power and rights through the century, and the proximity of the masses to the privileged

³⁰Henry Arthur Jones, "The Actor-Manager," *Fortnightly Review* ns.48 (July 1890), 15.

³¹Oswald Crawford, "The London Stage," *Fortnightly Review* ns.47 (April 1890), 502.

³²Despite his usually populist stance, in 1897, Tree considered closing the gallery at Her Majesty's Theatre after opening his new theatre across the road.

classes was becoming intolerable as their voices and opinions seemed to have concrete—and negative—effects not only on political and economic privileges but on the entertainments of the privileged.

That the two audiences were separate was evident not only in the form of the drama but in the dramatic spaces themselves. A class-based spatial separation existed both in and outside the environs of the theatre buildings themselves. The West End was geographically bounded within a small section of London, which spilled over into the residential areas of the privileged classes. Although not all theatres within this small area were fashionable houses, and not all the "West End" theatres fit strictly within these boundaries (e.g., the Prince of Wales's), the core of the West End theatre district was bounded by the Strand, Kingsway, Oxford Street and New Bond Street. The West End, where Wilde's plays were produced, was the home of "legitimate" drama as opposed to the "lower" forms of theatre found in the music halls and other such venues. The "higher" forms of theatre were located in the home turf of the privileged; it was in the areas around the West End that the "Upper Ten Thousand" lived. It was not that lower middle-class and working-class people were completely excluded from attending the theatres of the West End, since affordable seats were available and, according to some upper-middle class audience members, both the content and communication of the drama made major concessions to their tastes and (limited) intellect. However, their separation from the privileged was firmly marked by separate spaces that kept them at a distance from both the stage and the upper classes. To spectators in the stalls, those who sat in the gallery seemed to form one giant entity—the mob—easily characterized as typical voices of misrule, which made their separation from the "civilized" crucial. Their very presence in the same place as the upper classes was an affront to some, such as Crawford, who wished them banished to other theatres on the opposite side of town. Even if managers did not go so far, the separation of the lower classes from the target West End audience was made clear in more than one way. According to W.H. Leverton, stall tickets were simply not sold to potential buyers who did

not fit the bill as gentlemen.³³ In the 1890s, at the St. James's, after complaints from Wilde among others, the physical form of the theatre ticket was changed from the pedestrian and all too democratic common ticket stub to that of the engraved Society invitation, to further enhance the upper class audience's feeling of security, exclusivity and self-celebration. Expensive programmes and refreshments were geared to the pocketbooks of the stalls, not the galleries, since, as Tree noted, nearly 60% of his profits came from the privileged 37% of his audience.³⁴ Even the middle classes visiting from the provinces and suburbs, who apparently made up a large part of the audiences every night, were a source of derision and resentment for some of the metropolitan theatre-going public, as their lack of sophistication allowed lazy writing and as waves of such temporary and uncritical patrons permitted long runs of bad plays, all of which lowered standards and induced stagnancy. If Crawford had his way, the West End theatre's quality and exclusiveness would be protected by ridding its theatres of the gallery element altogether and by holding separate performances respectively for true Londoners and visiting provincials, so that society could maintain its proper order.

While many playwrights and producers privately felt superior to audiences, they were careful to play up to audiences not only by giving them what they wanted but more directly by literally playing to them on the stage. The practice of the author taking his bows before a first night audience had become routine in the exclusive theatres of the West End and he was also expected to be witty and gracious. The private attitude showed clearly in the sentiments of the theatre critic Joseph Knight who likened the author's presence in front of the audience to a feat of courage, when forced to come face to face with the masses. More than that, he called it undignified "on the part of a gentleman of education and refinement to come forward and challenge either the commendation or the censure" of the public: "The expediency of leaving to the gallery the decision on a question of art is open to debate; the

³³W.H. Leverton, *Through the Box Office Window* (London: T.Werner Laurie, 1932), 26, qtd. in John Pick, *The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery* (Eastbourne: John Offord, 1983), 81-82.

³⁴John Pick, *The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery* , 81-85.

inexpediency of inducing men who have achieved a reputation to quit their privacy and present themselves publicly on the stage scarcely admits of discussion."³⁵ He concluded that the practice was left over from a time when most dramatists were actors, not gentlemen, who therefore had to court their audiences' trade by humbly presenting himself to his patrons.

One might see a subtler shade of this superiority in Wilde's treatment of the audience. While the response of the audience to Wilde's first night speech for *Lady Windermere's Fan* seems to have been one of some amusement, many reviewers apparently took this presentation of a persona as an insult, confirming them in their view of Wilde as an outrageous poseur. What is astounding about this response is that, only three weeks before the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Henry Arthur Jones had made substantially the same curtain speech at the opening of his play, *Judah*, at the Avenue:

The *clou de la pièce*, however . . . was Mr. Henry Arthur Jones's little before-the-curtain speech at the close of the entertainment. Never can we forget his delightful ingenuity as he assured his audience that he felt amazement that there was no hissing, such as had marred his enjoyment on the occasion of the first performance of the *Crusaders*, but quite the contrary. The public had endorsed his opinion of *Judah*, which was a very high one, very. In point of fact, *Judah* was a great favourite with him—its author.

The review continued to wish the play a prosperous run, and to rejoice that "there exists at least one man in this frivolous age of ours who takes himself seriously."³⁶ If we compare Jones's speech with Wilde's, we see some startling similarities, particularly surprising because they seem not to have been noticed by theatre historians. Though his own version of a similar speech was perhaps more polished, Wilde was obviously imitative, yet was taken as original and outré, perhaps because he drawled the lines while holding a cigarette:

Ladies and gentlemen: I have enjoyed this evening *immensely*. The actors have given us a *charming* rendering of a *delightful* play, and your appreciation has been

³⁵"Dramatic Gossip," *Athenæum* (3507)12 January, 1895. 57-8.

³⁶"Before the Footlights," *Saturday Review* 6 February 1892, 152. *Judah*, first performed at the Shaftesbury Theatre, 21 May, 1890, was revived at the Avenue Theatre, 30 January, 1892.

most intelligent. I congratulate you on the great success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of the play as I do myself.³⁷

Wilde made sure his speech remained in the public consciousness when he wrote to the *St. James's Gazette*, calling it a "delightful and immortal speech,"³⁸ but he need not have worried about it being forgotten, as it was mentioned by most reviewers and indeed, became the body of the review in some cases.

One might detect a note of snobbery in Wilde's insouciance; nor was he alone in taking this tone. Crawford joined other nineteenth century voices in bemoaning the sorry state of theatre in his time, blaming both the masses and the greedy commercialism of the theatrical world. Like Arnold, he called for a return of Art in capital letters to the centre of social life, to the field of drama in his particular view. Even supporters of the theatre conceded that the material of theatre was not quite high literature. Henry Arthur Jones defended the quality of contemporary drama, differentiating the practicalities of theatre from literature, saying it was unrealistic to expect high literariness on the dramatic stage.³⁹ Jones disagreed with observers such as Crawford and Henry James, who felt that the excessive attention paid to scenic design (particularly at the Lyceum) relegated the actual matter of the play to a minor role.⁴⁰ Instead, Jones located in that very area the "art" they complained of missing, thus not only validating but drawing attention to the difference between literature, which relied on words, and theatre, whose language was composed of physical action as well as ideas. Herbert Beerbohm-Tree went further than Jones in calling theater "more" than literature, and provided an extensive list of failed literary dramatists, though he could not articulate in what way the requirements of successful drama extended

³⁷Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987), 346. This sensational-sounding version is Alexander's; Ellmann quotes a much longer, and possibly more accurate version from the *Boston Evening Transcript* for 10 March 1892, but both versions contain the core idea that Wilde was both surprised and complimentary about the audience's intelligence in understanding his play.

³⁸*The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 312-13.

³⁹Henry Arthur Jones, "The Actor-Manager," 1-16.

⁴⁰Henry James, "London Plays," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1882) rpt. in Henry James, *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872-1901* ed., intro. and notes, Allan Wade (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948); Oswald Crawford, "The London Stage," *Fortnightly Review* ns 47 (April 1890), 499-516.

those of literature.⁴¹ However, agreeing with Crawford's assertion about the superiority of language and style in French drama, Jones admitted the need to strive for refining and strengthening the language of British drama and urged his fellow dramatists as well as actors and managers to aim for a glorious "Renaissance of the English Drama."

By the last decade of the century the debate had expanded beyond the opposing tastes of stall and gallery. Rather, the new opposition was between conservative approval of the conventions of idea and representation in the theatre and the demand of radical followers of European realism. In August 1891, H.A. Kennedy characterized the theatrical world as one of constant debate and tension. Even if, as a new generation of critics and some portions of the audiences felt, the drama itself was mediocre, there was a great deal of dialogue about its state, both in the popular press and in learned articles in serious journals such as the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Fortnightly Review*. The opposition between the old and new was carried to extremes, with the battleground being Ibsen, painted either "snowy white" or "inky black" as H.A. Kennedy said mockingly.⁴² But the battles were not limited to styles of plot or morality, and extended to power hierarchies in theatrical relationships, with major journal debates in which actor-managers defended their right to wield supreme power over actors and playwrights, authors battled against actor-managers and critics, and music-halls demanded their right to the respect reserved for "legitimate" drama and to a territory uninvaded by that drama.

A year later, in August 1892, the *Saturday Review* called the dramatic season for 1891-1892 "one of the most unfortunate known to the annals of our stage."⁴³ William Archer was feeling that British drama was in the doldrums, painting the state of the theatre as extremely precarious, with most of the theatres surviving hand to mouth after repeated

⁴¹Herbert Beerbohm-Tree, "The Actor-Manager: A Stage Reply" *Fortnightly Review* ns 48 (July 1890), 16-19.

⁴²H.A. Kennedy, "The Drama of the Moment," *Nineteenth Century* 30:174 (August 1891), 258-274.

⁴³"The Theatrical Year," *Saturday Review*, 6 August 1892, 167. The irony of this judgment is that, on the alternative stage at least, the already influential plays of Ibsen were steadily presented throughout the dramatical season.

failures of recent productions. He attributed the failures of recent plays to a change in the character of the audience which did not accept crude and formulaic dramas any more. The new sophistication of this "more intelligent class of playgoers," he asserted, had been created by exposure to foreign drama, notably that produced by England's Independent Theatre and France's Théâtre Libre. At the same time, however, Archer could see some light coming to the theatre in the near future as he said,

it is with a sort of trembling hope that one looks to Mr. J. M. Barrie and Mr. Oscar Wilde for serious dramatic work. Mr. Barrie will have to conquer his fatal facility, Mr. Wilde his no less fatal fastidiousness, not to say indolence. . . . There is no doubt, however, that the appearance of these two athletes in the theatrical arena is the most encouraging event of the past season, or of many past seasons. Each is a born-and-bred writer, an *écrivain*; each has ample gifts and opportunities of first-hand observation. Mr. Pinero, Mr. Jones, and Mr. Grundy approached life and literature through the theatre. . . . Mr. Wilde and Mr. Barrie, on the other hand, have approached the theatre through life and literature. They are thinkers, observers, and artists first, playwrights by afterthought.⁴⁴

That Shaw and Archer's views on the stagnant and shallow state of current drama were challenged by most mainstream reviewers, both signed and unsigned, as well as playwrights, is common knowledge. Ironically, as Archer noted, Clement Scott's diatribes against Ibsen and other foreign dramatists made them much more familiar to the public than any positive reviews by supporters. Archer felt that the Old Criticism, as he termed the attitudes of conservatives, was the real force crushing "native produce," because it did not allow the work of English dramatists to produce any truly revolutionary ideas and therefore kept "the whole drama down to one dead level of mediocrity and commonplace."⁴⁵

What this debate indicates above all is a need for bridging the gap not so much between high art and low, but between following conventional formulae for success and inventing new tools and goals. In the matter of language at least, Wilde seemed to set a new standard; whether and how far he also left conventionality behind is one of the first questions asked in the present study. Wilde's audiences at the elite theatres of the West End of London were sophisticated to the extent that they appreciated his subtle (and

⁴⁴William Archer, "The Drama in the Doldrums," *Fortnightly Review* ns.52 (August 1892), 160.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 156.

sometimes unsubtle) wit. But the West End plays that they acclaimed into successes were at heart, as only a few acute contemporaries observed, little different from the melodramas playing at the Adelphi or East End theatres. In terms of dramatic action, Society dramas achieved polish, not originality. Tree characterized the demands of his audiences as being "at once a truer realism and a higher idealism,"⁴⁶ a demand he and other managers attempted to meet by offering high doses of realism in set and costume design and idealism in theme and characterization.⁴⁷ While Wilde's plays did not conform to this strategy, his sparkling dialogue gave the audience the sense of refinement they wished for and blinded them to the moral re-appraisal of the world it insinuated.

The nature of that re-appraisal must be closely examined, for though it rejected the conventional understanding of the world and the theatre, it capitalized on the set theatrical formulae of the time, bridging the customary demand for action, sentiment and spectacle with the incipient urge of the time for fresh thought and style. Recent scholarship has demonstrated Wilde's debt to the popular theatre of his time, much as he preferred only to acknowledge a selective debt to playwrights such as Ibsen.⁴⁸ When we deal with the particulars of Wilde's plays in this study, we shall see how he adopted many of the plot structures, character constructions and rhetorical strategies of conventional British theatre, even though his use of these ingredients from the common storehouse usually led to perceptions not common to his contemporaries.

Precisely because Wilde thrust the commonplaces of contemporary theatre, such as the fallen woman, beyond the reach of conventional moral estimate, his handling of theme and character took on a pervasive ambivalence. One might argue that inconsistencies are

⁴⁶Herbert Beerbohm-Tree, "The London Stage: A Reply," *Fortnightly Review* ns.47 (June 1890), 923.

⁴⁷Though the spectacular character of West End productions, notably those of Irving's, assured large audiences, some spectators felt that the drama itself was sacrificed for the scene. When Henry James complained that the "drama is not acted, it is costumed," he characterized the dangers of overtipping the balance towards pictorial realism on the stage. Henry James, "London Plays" rpt. in *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872-1901*, 164.

⁴⁸See especially Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The chapter, "Wilde and Ibsen" is devoted to Wilde's debt to Ibsen.

integral to realism, although it is by no means certain that Wilde himself would agree that his was the optic of realism, since he deplored, for example, in "The Decay of Lying," modern art's propensity to copy from life. An example of Wilde's play on categories is Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, who seems to fall entirely into the category of the Puritan, when one considers her personality and way of life in the present, but turns out to be the fallen woman as her past rises to catch up with her. She has judged herself as severely as Henry Arthur Jones's *raisonneurs* or Clement Scott could wish, and has followed through with her own sentencing conscientiously, but her passionate hatred of that lifestyle creates an inconsistency. Would someone who had truly reformed feel such anger at her self-imposed life of virtue? Unlike Pinero's Agnes Ebbsmith, she resents having to hide herself away and spend her life as a humble woman. Is her true nature then that of the pleasure-loving fallen woman? What can be said of a woman who does the right thing but resents it bitterly? She has paid the price of her sexual fall, and can therefore be given some sort of reprieve, yet her continued attitude of fury at the world and at Illingworth make her an uncomfortable character. Her goodness is made further debatable when Wilde labels her as a Puritan, by which he means a joy-killing, art-destroying creature.

Muddying the currents of common moral judgment and playing with the tools of theatre, Wilde seems to weave in and out of the received wisdom of popular perceptions of the world, often laughing at common morality but sometimes upholding it. The latter position, we shall see, is difficult to uncover because of the layered complexity of Wilde's art, but often proves to be the ground on which personal relationships are rooted. The idea of constancy, for instance, aligns Wilde with the moral vision of conventional comedy, reiterated as it is in the romantic declarations even of dandies like Lord Goring and Algernon. But the thrust of the plays is towards exploding fixed notions. When we place Mrs. Erlynne, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Cheveley into the category of the fallen, we begin to see difficulties with definitions. What kind of woman is Mrs. Allonby? Can Herodias

and Salomé be included in a discussion of social mores from a particular microcosm of human society? Are there fallen women in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Reviews by contemporary critics show that they sensed this ambiguity. Their attempts to rationalize it into recognizable patterns are particularly interesting as they reveal the historical bases of these characters and help us to understand Wilde's claim to have created original characters. Contrary to that claim, the critics saw the characters as familiar faces, although they accused Wilde of turning them into flat, "puppet" characters who spoke only in one voice, that of the author.⁴⁹ On the other hand, critics found Wilde's characters ambiguous and puzzling because they did not always act like stock characters. Clement Scott was shocked that the fallen mother, Mrs. Erlynne, should "leave forever her daughter unkissed" once they had been reunited.⁵⁰ The reviewer of the *Morning Post* (20 April 1893) expressed surprise at another fallen mother, Mrs. Arbuthnot, for not being a blackmailer, which provides a valuable clue to the customary way of dealing with the fallen woman: any woman who could transgress the sexual mores was capable of every other crime. Wilde's character, Mrs. Cheveley, certainly fell into this category of the vulgar criminal. What separated her from the other fallen women he created, however, was that she is never shown to have an innocent past at any point. Clement Scott's horror-stricken response to the revelation that Mrs. Erlynne is an "unnatural mother" indicates that however fallen a woman was, her true nature would always have to reassert itself so that at the point of whatever sacrifice—and a sacrifice was to be absolutely exacted—she would become a Mother again and embrace her restored status tearfully. Ideally, she would proclaim her motherhood, pay the price for this reassignment of identity and die. Perhaps the lesson to be drawn from this, then, is that those women who have spent at least some of their

⁴⁹This perception was reinforced by Wilde's own attempts to explain his theories about the theatre in such articles as "Puppets and Actors", which was actually a letter he sent to the *Daily Telegraph* (20 February 1892) in which he was trying to correct a misrepresentation of an address he had made to the Playgoers' Club, 7 February 1892. Later that year when Wilde was in trouble with the Censor over *Salome*, he complained about a burlesque based on him, which focused on his supposed attitude to actors and characters: written by Charles H.E. Brookfield and James E. Glover, it was called *The Poet and the Puppets*, and opened at the Comedy Theatre, 19 May, 1892.

⁵⁰*Illustrated London News*, 27 February 1892.

adulthood virtuously are not all bad, having been forced by circumstances to continue on a path of dishonour once they had started on it, and are capable of great acts of goodness. Quite opposite this is Mrs. Cheveley, who has been always bad, according to her childhood witness, Lady Chiltern. This rather bleak view of human nature seemed the truer version of reality to the proponents of the Ibsenian new wave, such as Shaw, who thought it was more realistic to tell the audience that a fallen woman had always been "that kind of woman" than to suggest that her character had changed completely as the result of a foolish act.⁵¹ According to this criterion of consistency, Wilde's characterization of Mrs. Cheveley would qualify for realism despite its one-sided development.

But was realism the goal to which Wilde was aiming? It is difficult to know how Wilde himself felt about his delineation of character since he was famously elusive and would often fit his comments to his particular listener or audience. His mock interview on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, was to his close friend Robert Ross, and was given through a certain persona he decided to project.⁵² How he really felt about a piece of writing is difficult to pinpoint also because he could be unpredictable in his reactions. When Wilde read out *Salome* to Graham Robertson, for example, Robertson assumed many of the lines were meant to be funny, laughed in what he felt were appropriate places, and deeply offended the author.⁵³ When Wilde claimed to have created an entirely new kind of character in Mrs. Erlynne, one wonders just how sincerely he believed this, and how much of this statement was informed by the fact that he had to sell the play to an audience and to a professional theatre group. Wilde liked to give the impression of an airy, superior, dandy-like aloofness from sentimentality and earnestness,

⁵¹In his review of Arthur Wing Pinero's newly published play of 1893, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, (*Saturday Review*, 23 February 1895) Shaw objected to what he saw as inconsistency of characterization in Paula Tanqueray's claim of past innocence, feeling that such a woman could never have been innocent.

⁵²Robert Ross, "Mr. Oscar Wilde on Mr. Oscar Wilde," *St. James's Gazette*, 18 January, 1895, rpt. in *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: John Murray, 1985), Appendix A, 189-196. Hart-Davis believes the interview was a collaboration between Wilde and Ross.

⁵³W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (London: Hamilton, 1931), 136.

but in some of the interactions with other professionals in the theatre and literary/art world, his wounded reactions to being read exactly as that—superiorly parodying a style or character— seem to indicate otherwise. It is true that within the limited scope of the broadly melodramatic pattern followed on the British stage, Mrs. Erlynne's survival and remarriage is unusual, and her statement that it is too much of a bother to be a mother seems either heartless or sensible, depending on one's point of view. But could an author as well informed as Wilde was about contemporary literary thought and dramatic activity outside England really believe he had created a character that was wholly new? Mrs. Erlynne, after all, is no Nora Helmer. Fallen, rejecting mothers were easy enough to find, both in the novel and the drama, such as George Eliot's Alcharisi from *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy's Frou Frou from the play of the same name (1869). Therefore, it is hard to separate Wilde's subscription to his tradition from his innovativeness. Minimizing his debt to the drama and theatre of his time has led some modern critics to read, watch or produce his plays in such a way as to cut out or winnow out the "dross" of the plays—melodramatic elements that do not quite fit into a preconceived view of Wilde's plays as high culture. In this way modern audiences are the opposite of his contemporary audiences, who found his plays puzzling because they took both the melodramatic and the farcical elements seriously, accepting them as valid representations of human experience. The problem with Wilde was that he too included melodrama and farce but seemed to question their usefulness as reflections of reality. Using and striking at convention at the same time created a systematic ambiguity that led review after review by his contemporaries eventually to judge his plays as the unevenly attractive work of a brilliant clown.

That superficial view has given way in recent times to an infinitely varied body of critical and scholarly interest in Wilde. While his life and his wit continue to fascinate popular opinion, scholarship has subjected his aesthetic principles, his conscious or unconscious ideological position, and his craftsmanship to a deepening scrutiny from

perspectives of cultural and historical studies. Recent criticism has concentrated in particular on varieties of the conflict between the individual and society, spread over areas such as the aesthete's claim of freedom confronting stabilizing conformity, the homosexual's alienation, and the conflict between roles imposed by gender and individual identity. Many studies have focussed on the impulse towards the individual's self-fashioning, seen strikingly in the artist-criminal's alienated state which becomes the site of rebellion. Wilde's sensational life may have encouraged this approach; early estimates were mostly biographical and dismissed Wilde's literary worth, even if some claimed to be critical.⁵⁴ More sophisticated biographical support for literary interpretation in studies by Christopher Nassaar, Melinda Knox and Patrick Horan,⁵⁵ has facilitated cultural-historical approaches, and situating Wilde in his context, whether cultural, literary, dramatic, political or sexual, has allowed for new evaluations of his work.

A continuing criticism has been about his derivativeness; Ellmann tells us this was why the Oxford Union rejected his first volume of poems.⁵⁶ Reviewers constantly dredged up parallels in contemporary plays to prove his lack of originality, with some justification, for Kerry Powell has demonstrated Wilde's indebtedness to the common drama he affected to despise.⁵⁷ But criticism has also acknowledged that Wilde's use of the common dramatic stock of his time is an accomplishment, not a defect, in its imaginative adaptation of tradition. Wilde is just like his dandy, who "is not an anarchist who overthrows rules of behavior and discourse; rather, he exploits their logic in order to produce the unexpected (an unexpectedness that conforms, however, to the rules of unexpectedness within that system) and challenges their system from within."⁵⁸ Peter

⁵⁴Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1912) and Arthur Symons, *A Study of Oscar Wilde* (London: Charles J. Sawyer, 1913).

⁵⁵Christopher Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Melinda Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Patrick Horan, *The Importance of Being Paradoxical: Maternal Presence in the Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Associated Universities Press, 1997).

⁵⁶Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 139-141.

⁵⁷Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵⁸Sima Godfrey, "The Dandy as Ironic Figure," *Sub-Stance* 36 (1982), 28.

Raby uses the modern term "intertextuality" to validate Wilde's echoes of contemporary theatre,⁵⁹ but the value of "imitation" was recognized by at least one contemporary, J. Comyns Carr, for whom a "fearless spirit of imitation, born of the worship yielded to the achievements of an earlier time, may . . . be claimed as the hallmark of genius."⁶⁰

In short, far from finding him inferior to his contemporaries, as did St. John Ervine and James Agate,⁶¹ modern critics are reading him as manipulating the same resources as his contemporaries but to entirely different artistic and philosophical ends. Not an out and out propagandist like Shaw, Wilde is nevertheless subversive, although that subversiveness is so subtle and layered that its complexity and effectiveness is only recently being uncovered by critics alert to contemporary historical methodologies, such as Regenia Gagnier, Norbert Kohl and Jonathan Dollimore.⁶² Gagnier, for example, finds Wilde engaged in undercutting bourgeois ideology while using its platforms, particularly the marketplace.

Wilde's subversion of the establishment from within has naturally called attention to the outsider persona of the dandy he centres in his playworld, drawing upon the European dandy tradition as well as the contemporary aesthetic tradition. The centrality of the dandy, a figure unusual in the milieu of contemporary society drama chosen by Wilde, has drawn attention to the dandy even in studies not primarily focused on the figure; Rodney Shewan, for example, sees the dandy as the perfect representative of Wilde's essentially paradoxical aesthetic, while Joseph Bristow and James M. Ware see Wilde's dandy as his link with the

⁵⁹Peter Raby, "Wilde's Comedies of Society," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144.

⁶⁰J. Comyns Carr, *Coasting Bohemia* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 4.

⁶¹St. John Ervine, *A Present Time Appraisal* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1951); James Agate, "Oscar Wilde and the Theatre," *The Masque*, 3 (London: Curtain Press, 1947).

⁶²Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, transl. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

aesthetic movement.⁶³ While Regenia Gagnier's focus is on Wilde's commercial relationship to his audiences in *Idylls of the Marketplace*, her analysis depends on an understanding of the self-as-commodity aspect of the dandy's philosophy. Richard Pine places Wilde's self-fashioning within a historical perspective of the dandy tradition, while James Eli Adams connects Wilde's interest in this tradition with emerging redefinitions of maleness at the end of the century, noting that homosexuality was one of several emerging identities.⁶⁴

Wilde's place in gay history has caused him to be viewed in the light of twentieth century gay criticism. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield,⁶⁵ especially the latter, have shown that because the recognition of homosexuality as an identity rather than an act is a modern one that had not yet solidified but was only under construction in Wilde's time, understanding his sexuality is an essential task. Exploring this area, both Richard Dellamora and Ed Cohen see aestheticism's connection to homosexuality as a resistance against the dominant ideologies of utilitarianism and heterosexuality.⁶⁶ An aspect of such resistance is the construction of a private enclave of peers; Ian Small reminds us that Wilde discriminated between audiences so that certain signs were only readable by certain audiences (such as the famous green carnations worn at the first night of *Lady Windermere's Fan* by certain audience members).⁶⁷ But Patricia Flanagan Behrendt's insistent readings of Wilde's plays as homosexual statements perhaps make too strong a

⁶³Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Joseph Bristow, "Dowdies and Dandies: Oscar Wilde's Refashioning of Society," *Modern Drama* 37:1 (Spring 1994) 53-70; James M. Ware, "Algernon's Appetite: Oscar Wilde as Restoration Dandy," *English Literature in Transition* 13 (1970), 17-26.

⁶⁴Richard Pine, *The Dandy and the Herald: Manners, Mind and Morals from Brummell to Durrell* (London: Macmillan, 1988); James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁶⁵Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁶⁶Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁶⁷Ian Small, "Literary Radicalism in the British Fin de Siècle," in John Stokes, *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 210-219.

claim for the existence of a homogenous gay audience ready to recognize meanings created solely for its members.⁶⁸ These studies of Wilde as a locus of the homosexual consciousness necessarily see him as a supreme artist of self-fashioning but speculate on the emotional and social rather than the aesthetic basis of his art. Wilde's identity as an outsider in his society is a traditional critical theme, but modern critics view his estrangement within society not as an anomaly but as part of society's own tradition, although an unacknowledged one and not visible to traditional critical views. Wilde's whole idea of self-fashioning is thus being freshly viewed and brought within a critical practice that recognizes marginality as a central condition of modern society.

Wilde's marginality, seen as a particular sexual orientation, has been taken by some critics as the source of a presumed antipathy to women. Behrendt has accused Wilde of misogyny, particularly in view of his frequent habit of putting disparaging words against women in the mouths of his women.⁶⁹ In her view, Wilde's attitude to gender relations is characterized not so much by ambivalence as by misogyny, which she attributes to his male-centered interests. To that orientation Richard D. McGhee traces what he considers to be Wilde's vehemently anti-marriage stand.⁷⁰ This is perhaps an overstatement, for though there are many imperfect marriages in the plays, they yield no conclusive evidence that Wilde hated marriage in general and even less that he attributed bad marriages to women's nature. Rather, Wilde seems to have been joining a major debate of his time, namely, the troubled state of the institution of marriage in New Woman fiction such as George Egerton's *Keynotes* and *Discords*, in the contemporary theatre in plays such as Henry Arthur Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan* and Sydney Grundy's *The New Woman*, and in journals such as the *Westminster Review*, the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Saturday*

⁶⁸Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

⁶⁹Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988); Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde*, 150-7.

⁷⁰Richard D. McGhee, *Marriage, Duty and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980).

Review.⁷¹ In portraying marriages, good and bad, Wilde then was simply joining the discussion and treating marriage as a social institution that had to be reevaluated.

What Wilde thought was obscured in early studies by the labelling of Wilde as a brilliant but shallow wit and recent critics have attempted to dig down to the intellectual foundations of his art. Recent investigations by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand into Wilde's readings and enquiry into his philosophical leanings by Bruce Haley have shed light on the process and progress of his thinking.⁷² His immersion in the world of ideas both old and new has been extensively studied by John Stokes to show how Wilde continually forged links between his theoretical interests and his practical art of the stage, particularly in relation to E.W. Godwin and Hubert von Herkomer.⁷³ In his study of Victorian drama, Anthony Jenkins places Wilde among his contemporaries as an idealist to be paired with Henry Arthur Jones, though as opposites embodying the aesthetic vs. moral positions.⁷⁴ Katharine Worth's solid study of Wilde's works not only discusses his use of language but offers provocative musical interpretations of the dialogue in *Salome* (where musical parallels are obvious) as well as in *A Woman of No Importance*. Worth and Norbert Kohl are among those who view Wilde as a thinker of substance, in particular as a

⁷¹Mona Caird attacked the feasibility of marriage in "Marriage" and "Ideal Marriage" in the *Westminster Review* (1888). Her views elicited an astounding 27,000 responses, mostly sympathetic, in the *Daily Telegraph* (1890) when the paper invited readers to express their opinions. Caird later developed her criticism in "The Morality of Marriage" *Fortnightly Review* ns.47 (March 1890), 317; Clementina Black disagreed with Caird's extremist position on marriage, but predicted that "marriage will inevitably come to be more readily dissoluble as the ideal of marriage rises" in her article, "On Marriage: A Criticism" in the *Fortnightly Review*, ns. 47, (April 1890), 592. The statistics gathered by Evelyn March-Phillips, "The Working Lady in London," in the *Fortnightly Review*, ns. 52 (August 1892), 193-203, by Clara E. Collett, "Prospects of Marriage for Women," in *Nineteenth Century*, 31: 182 (April 1892), 537-52, and by Alice M. Gordon, "The After-Careers of University-Educated Women," in *Nineteenth Century*, 37: 220 (June 1895), 955-60, demonstrated that the percentage of marriage among educated women was far lower than among uneducated ones, both due to their financial independence and a higher reasoning facility that allowed them to be more discerning in their choice of husband.

⁷²Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of A Mind in the Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Bruce Haley, "Wilde's 'Decadence' and the Positivist Tradition," *Victorian Studies* 28:2 (1985) 215-19.

⁷³John Stokes, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Paul Elek, 1972); *In the Nineties* (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1990).

⁷⁴Anthony Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

radical.⁷⁵ Taking this approach farther, Sos Eltis proclaims Wilde a fully realized rebel, finding him a combination of progressive feminist, anarchic idealist, and enemy to all forms of authority.⁷⁶ Not all critics would go so far as Eltis in claiming for Wilde a radical sensibility proper perhaps to the twentieth century, but Worth and Peter Raby consider him a "modern" writer who anticipated the twentieth century thought-systems of existentialism, absurdism and surrealism. Some critics, notably Philip K. Cohen and Guy Willoughby,⁷⁷ have tried to dismiss Wilde's contemporary evaluation as a decadent dilettante by discovering an earnest, even Christian, moral ethic in Wilde, but it is more common to see him as a modernist for whom questions of morality are irrelevant to his "real" work of challenging essentialism and absolutism.

The growing interest in Wilde has given rise to systematic textual scholarship, which is relatively new but vigorous. The New Mermaid editions of the society plays by Russell Jackson and Ian Small show the careful worker finely tuning his drafts, but also a realist ready to compromise to the demands of the marketplace. Complementing the demonstration of Wilde's working method by textual critics, theatre historians have shown how performance conditions impinged on his plays by investigating the performance history of his plays. Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell provide a wide base of information, carefully analyzed, about the construction of stage images by costume, its social implications, and Wilde's contribution to it.⁷⁸ Following Graham Good's account of early productions of *Salome*,⁷⁹ William Tydeman and Steven Price aim at an inclusive account of European and British productions of *Salome* since the play's inception, thus providing

⁷⁵Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

⁷⁶Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 26.

⁷⁷Philip K. Cohen, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (London: Associated University Presses, 1978); Guy Willoughby, *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde* (London: Associated University Presses, 1993).

⁷⁸Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁷⁹Graham Good, "Early Productions of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*," *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research*, 11:2 (1983) 77-92.

invaluable historical evidence on a play whose authorial intentions are available only at secondhand, this being the only play produced without the direct guidance of the author.⁸⁰ Modern play productions, including several in the 1990s in the West End, have been analysed by Richard Allen Cave and John Stokes.⁸¹ Joseph Donohue and Ruth Berggren's recent reconstruction of the first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is meticulous and of great use to scholars.⁸² In their discussion of Tree's production of this play reconstructed from promptbook evidence, Jackson and Small demonstrate Wilde's instinct in the stage directions to soften the melodramatic emphasis added to some of Wilde's already melodramatic lines, or to ignore altogether some of Tree's nuances, while incorporating the essence of successful effects or interpretive gestures.⁸³

Varied as modern readings of Wilde are, critics are agreed that contrary to charges of escapism, he was not an alien in his world. Indeed, recognizing Wilde's dependence on traditional theatre is essential to understand his way of exposing and examining the conventions by which society was governed, especially the stereotyping imposed upon its members. Even as he recycles old plot and character formulas, he questions the assumptions behind them. Who and what was the artist? And who and what was a woman? Could a woman be an artist as well as a man, or was she in fact the active agent of opposition to the spirit of Art? What made a good woman and what separated her from the bad? Was there an ultimately impenetrable barrier between men and women or could they communicate effectively? Could men and women truly live together in harmony or was the institution of marriage one of slavery? Could the artist—a person with a highly realized individuality—survive within the marital framework, let alone flourish? Were men

⁸⁰William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Wilde: Salome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁸¹Richard Allen Cave, "Wilde Designs: Some Thoughts About Recent British Productions of His Plays," *Modern Drama* 37:1 (Spring 1994), 175-191; John Stokes, "Wilde Interpretations" *Modern Drama* 37:1 (Spring 1994), 156-173.

⁸²Joseph Donohue and Ruth Berggren, *Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest: A Reconstructive Critical Edition of the Text of the First Production, St. James's Theatre, London, 1895* (Gerrard's Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe, 1995).

⁸³Russell Jackson and Ian Small, "Some New Drafts of a Wilde Play," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 30:1 (1987), 7-15.

and women at war? Was the much-discussed system of the double standard inevitable? Was idealism a positive force, or a falsifying delusion, sentimental, superficial and destructive? Not all of these questions can be addressed here but the perception underlying them will. While they derive from a wide diversity of debate on social and moral experience, they are brought within a common focus within Wilde's playworld by his sustained attempt to re-evaluate the received wisdom about the nineteenth century world, a necessary endeavour, for it was a world in transition, social, intellectual and moral.

Benefitting from the cultural-historical trend noted above in the survey of recent criticism, the present study focusses on Wilde's engagement with the subject of women. Without making any claim of feminist or radical enlightenment, this study seeks to argue that in probing the meaning and justification of stability, Wilde turns his critical gaze upon women, their nature and their place in the world as the traditionally identified loci of virtue. This inevitably raises in his drama the question of the woman who lacks virtue, the stock character of the Fallen Woman, and her distance from or proximity to her respectable sisters. While Wilde's plays are not exclusively about women, women's lives are a site where excavation may expose the roots of the discontents of civilization.

Present at the site always as the author's witness and sometimes his alter ego is a stock figure from an older comedy of manners, the urbane man of the world, experienced in its ways but detached from its petty projects: in short, the Dandy. Fitted by birth, training and preference to play the quintessential critic, the Dandy at once exposes hypocrisy and discovers for the audience a higher moral principle issuing from the marriage of the good and the beautiful. Yet, this clearly sympathetic character, whom one is always tempted to see as Wilde himself, also forms the mark of Wilde's laughter as a not infrequent victim of sentimentality and custom. Thereby his representation of the world takes on a sharp edge of self-criticism. That this representation takes shape in Wilde's dramatic practice by persistently tugging at the Woman Question is the general hypothesis with which the present study begins. On that basis this study goes on to argue that the

continuing fascination of audiences with Wilde's plays is occasioned by the constant interplay, indeed the unresolved contest between Wilde's cerebral defense of women and his deep-seated uncertainty about them. The ambivalence thus created keeps the plays permanently in a mode of social and moral enquiry and Wilde in critical perspective.

Chapter 2

The Climate of Opinion

To place Wilde's representation of women in his contemporary social context, it is necessary to take note of the way his age thought about women and formed attitudes to them, to their roles in society as derived from assertions about women's nature, and to the calamities that would follow from failing to conform to those roles. The role of the mother drew particular attention as the highest office a woman could possibly hold. As a cautionary legend, the narrative of the fallen woman, imitated from the French tradition, became a popular one and that of the fallen mother a special variant of it. The popular stage perpetuated the dominant model of the female both by eulogising women who played their appointed gender roles and by condemning those who did not. The theatre made a staple out of the fallen woman in her many forms—adulteress, adventuress, intriguer—but the fallen mother was a figure of particular menace. Wilde took both versions of the fallen woman and while exploiting the dramatic potential of her story by using it to create situations of conflict, both material and moral, he opened to critical re-examination the dominant moral assumptions underlying the condemnation of the fallen woman. This re-examination also implies a deeper doubt about the nature of the feminine and acknowledges its power to overturn the settled order of personal relationships, thereby bringing about disorder in social relationships.

To conservative public opinion, the greatest threat to social stability lay in women's attempts to rewrite their roles, denying traditional assumptions about women's nature. The symbol of the perceived rebellion was the New Woman, whose claims to a share of the public world was considered a transgression of appointed gender roles and a perversion of women's innate nature, demonstrated by the New Woman's repudiation of motherhood as women's ultimate goal in life. In her unnaturalness she was judged to be as decadent as those alienated individuals, the unmanly aesthetes, who were increasingly appearing among

artists and aesthetes. As with fallen women in general, the popular theatre followed conservative opinion in criticizing and ridiculing the transgressive New Woman. One of its most effective instruments for putting her in her place was the *raisonneur* figure, a man of invincible common sense and wit, whose presence in the plays reflects the widespread opposition of the arbiters of public morality to women's claims of freedom.

Despite political uncertainties in Europe and social unrest at home, few elements of public life in the 1890s seemed as troubling as women's uprisings, a fifth column revolution brewing among the "angels in the house." In England, the Women's Movement, whether in the shape of militant suffragism or middle-class women's entry into educational and professional activities, had been escalating for several decades through the activism of Josephine Butler, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and others, resulting in changes in legislation and social action and making the presence of women in the public sphere impossible to ignore. Between 1890 and 1895, the period on which the present study chiefly draws, the debate on women that had begun well before 1890 continued unabated, its pitch actually rising after 1895. It was not just a controversy over women's place and their nature; the mere idea of women having rights was tearing at the fabric of traditional social beliefs and structures.

Forebodings of change were in the air. In 1894, Karl Pearson was speaking of "our present transitional state,"¹ a telling term which implied that the seeming chaos in the order of the society of his day would soon be resolved, and that if society seemed to be headed towards chaos, it was also moving towards some sort of settled order, in this case, that of socialism. The hope he voiced was in fact an antidote to his deeper fear of anarchy. In an England that seemed constantly beleaguered by the demands of various underclasses, including both labourers and women, the dissolution of the nation into anarchy seemed imminent. This spectre, spotlighted long ago in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) was demanding social justice, which Pearson hoped would be achieved because redress was the

¹Karl Pearson, "Woman and Labour," *Fortnightly Review* 55 (May 1894), 572.

rational choice and the government had already responded to many of those demands by passing humane labour acts and other social legislation. He asserted that internal stability had increased and advised the Women's Movement to be moderate and rational in its demands for equal rights. The two broad groups Pearson identified as the principal rebels against the status quo, women and workers of the world, challenged the norm of the privileged few enjoying all socio-economic benefits, whether they were privileged by birth and/or gender. This challenge of fundamental social constructions contained the seeds of social disorder, anarchy and chaos, which would, in the opinion of Pearson and many others, enforce social accommodation and equity. Nonetheless, the threat of chaos loomed large in the British consciousness and women's responsibility for it was gloomily predicted. The Woman Question turned women into an issue of fear and anxiety over women's mounting transgressions against the norm. It is not surprising in this climate of opinion that Wilde should see in the world of the rich and powerful he depicted in his drama the possibility of disorder, nor that women, in positions of privilege or not, should be its source. It is therefore necessary to outline the contemporary concern over the Woman Question and the norm against which women were judged.

The measure of womanly virtue was drawn out of the three roles a good woman was expected to play, those of mother, wife and daughter. As Deborah Gorham and Lynda Nead have shown in their studies, these were roles determined by the life-cycle of the male.² Turning them into templates of conduct was essential to social order, for it was by learning to follow them that a woman might know what was expected of her. Amanda Anderson reminds us that the model was a middle-class one.³ The two important requirements for playing the roles, Lynda Nead notes, were dutifulness and moral purity.⁴

²Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982); Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

³Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 13-14.

⁴Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 12.

William Acton's 1865 idealization was only one of the many that were to haunt the New Women of the 1890s:

. . . a perfect ideal of an English wife and mother, kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and averse to any sensual indulgence, but so unselfishly attached to the man she loves, as to be willing to give up her own wishes and feelings for his sake.⁵

The ideal woman, then, would equate duty with pleasure and surrender her individual identity to live for others, her highest action being self-sacrifice. It was exactly this sort of definition against which the New Woman of the 1890s began to mount their protest, and with good reason, for the force of conservatism had not weakened with time. In 1892, Mrs. Eliza Lynn Linton, one of the most vociferous of conservative women, identified the characteristics of good women as "seclusion, obedience, restraint, modesty." Good women were "demure and homestaying women, dutiful, respectful, self-restrained, and innocently coquettish."⁶ In *East Lynne*, a novel with perhaps the most numerous stage adaptations throughout the latter half of the century, Mrs. Henry Wood lists what the good woman needs: "husband, children, reputation, home, all that makes life of value to woman."⁷

This constantly articulated image of the ideal woman carefully avoided the issue of women's sexuality. The assumption was that the pure woman would be ignorant of sexuality, her ignorance being proof of her innocence, and that a sexually aware woman was a dangerous, as an evangelical physician named Michael Ryan warned:

None can deny that, if young women in general were absolved from the fear of consequences, the great majority of them . . . would rarely preserve their chastity;

⁵William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Psychological Relations*, 4th ed. (1865) 114, quoted in Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 18.

⁶Eliza Lynn Linton, "A Picture of the Past," *Nineteenth Century* 32:189 (November 1892), 802.

⁷Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne* Intro., Sally Mitchell (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 237.

illicit amours would be common and seldom detected—seduction would be facilitated, and prostitution become almost universal.⁸

Although Ryan's declaration dates from much earlier in the century (1837), actions in law and society demonstrated its currency through the century. The passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s and public outrage at the facilitation of divorce from the 1880s were only some of the reactions of conservatism to female sexuality. Those New Women who demanded equal sexual freedom along with men were Ryan's vision of universal disorder come true. In 1894, Karl Pearson equated the survival of his civilization with the maintenance of current norms, predicting chaos if New Women were allowed to gain any more power:

In this respect it is interesting to observe that with our increasing socialistic trend have arisen two quite diverse movements: the one to restrain the sexual freedom of men, the other—of course, less outspoken and less manifest, but very active in many quarters—to give greater sexual freedom to women. The social development of the future will largely depend on which of these movements obtains the upper hand, or, at any rate, on how they are harmonized.⁹

With such an apocalyptic vision of the power of women's sexuality, it was not surprising that various discourses—scientific, religious, political, literary—combined to reinforce the idea that female sexuality was evil. Pearson, identifying himself as a neutral, "scientific" observer, added the evidence of political anthropology to the issue of female freedom:

It is noteworthy that most primitive communities of *socialistic* type are marked by great female license, and the restraint of this license was a chief cause of the survival and superior stability of patriarchal systems.¹⁰

Conservative writers, notably the influential physician William Acton, even denied the very existence of female sexuality, for sexual feelings were considered appropriate only to the male of the species. Men were cast as brutes for their aggressive sexuality while women

⁸Michael Ryan, *The Philosophy of Marriage in Its Social, Moral and Physical Relations; with an Account of the Diseases of the Genito-Urinary Organs which Impair or Destroy the Reproductive Function and Induce a Variety of Complaints; with the Physiology of Generation in the Vegetable and Animal Kingdoms being part of a course of Obstetric Lectures Delivered at the North London School of Medicine*, 1837, 12, qtd. in Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 20.

⁹Karl Pearson, "Woman and Labour," 568.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

were elevated to the spiritual level where they could neither tarnish others nor be tarnished themselves.

Nature was called upon as the ultimate authority to justify the asexualization of women. Those women who did the incomprehensible by surrendering to their sexual feelings, were seen as unnatural and deviant. In the popular mind, nature had made sexual feelings irrelevant to the ideal woman, who knew the coarser side of the natural world only through her maternal function. The law of nature was asserted by constant scientific reinforcement. Acton's assertion in 1865 that a good woman was so "pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and averse to any sensual indulgence"¹¹ was reaffirmed in 1892 by Cesare Lombroso, who spoke for the contemporary medical establishment in saying that "according to Dr. Tait, speaking at the congress of the French Surgical Society, in 1891, even the sexual sensibility of woman is not on par with that of man."¹² Lombroso explains that it is the biological difference in men and women that makes a woman's sexual transgression so much more punishable than a man's. Again, the reasoning is based on the authority of nature; if a normal woman has only feeble sexual feelings or none at all, then a woman who admits to strong sexual feelings is not only abnormal but even ill:

Herein . . . may be found a reason why, at all times, and among all races, adultery should have been regarded and been punished as a so much more heinous crime in woman than in man.¹³

Rarely was it understood that the "idealization of feminine purity was a political weapon," according to Sally Mitchell. The voice that declared in the *Saturday Review* in 1857, "Chastity is merely a social law, created to encourage alliances that must promote the

¹¹William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Psychological Relations* (1865) 114, quoted in Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 18.

¹²Cesare Lombroso, "The Physical Insensibility of Woman," *Fortnightly Review* ns. 51 (March 1892) 356-357.

¹³*Ibid*, 357.

permanent welfare of the race, and to maintain women in a social position which it is thought advisable they should hold,"¹⁴ was crying in the loneliest of wildernesses.

A woman's place was in her home. This dictum was founded on the assertion on the one hand of her frailty and incapacity for the rough and tumble of men's world and, on the other, of her angelic purity. Her ignorance of and disinterest in sexuality, or in what was taken to be the animal part of human nature, denoted a creature who was ethereal and fragile. Woman's greater moral strength could inspire but her physical fragility meant she had to be protected from the terrors of the world. A true woman would know this and never think of abandoning her spiritual duties by leaving the "safe precincts" of her home.¹⁵ This was why Coventry Patmore's image of the "angel in the house" struck such a chord with conservative Victorians.¹⁶ The home became a sacred place, and the increasing number of women's magazines strove to reinforce women's domestic identity.¹⁷ Women were readily admitted as being morally superior to men, but the correlative to that superiority was ignorance. "What is it that gives women their peculiar moral power over men but the greater purity born of their greater ignorance . . . ?" asked Mrs. Linton.¹⁸ The lack of worldly knowledge gave women the spiritual instinct by which they performed their "noblest duty" to guide all those who erred, including both men and women, back to the path of righteousness. Frederic Harrison praised the good woman's moral strength, declaring,

this functioning of woman, the purifying, spiritualising, humanising of society, by humanising each family and by influencing every husband, father, or brother, in daily

¹⁴Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), xiii.

¹⁵Eliza Lynn Linton, "A Picture of the Past," *Nineteenth Century* 32:189 (November 1892), 792.

¹⁶Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*. This long poem, published in 1863 detailed various aspects of the ideal woman, and was a popular wedding present throughout the century, providing both guidelines and inspiration to "good" women. For a full version of the poem and discussion of its effects on Victorian society see Ian Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel: A Study of Coventry Patmore, his Wife Emily, and The Angel in the House* (London: Haggerston Press, 1992).

¹⁷See Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer, and Sandra Hebron, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

¹⁸Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Wild Women. No. I: As Politicians," *Nineteenth Century* 30:173 (July 1891), 87.

contact and in unspoken language, is itself the highest of all human functions, and is nobler than anything which art, philosophy, genius, or statesmanship can produce.¹⁹

Women were confined to the domestic sphere by the argument that the domains proper to the sexes were naturally separate, though complementary. Each sex supported the other, in the practical as well as moral goals of life. According to this principle, men ruled the world even as women guided their moral choices. In personal relations, the woman regulated her own desires (if she had any) and managed to curb the man's aggressive sexuality by domesticating it. The idea of separate spheres of activity for the sexes was repeatedly affirmed throughout the century. John Ruskin spoke for his age when in 1865 he said in *Sesame and Lilies*:

Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other . . . the man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. But the woman's power is not for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision . . . Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but she infallibly judges the crown of contest.²⁰

The ideal had not changed in 1891 when Frederic Harrison and Mrs. Linton spoke of the womanly woman. In July 1891, Linton said:

In the normal division of labour the man has the outside work to do, from governing the country to tilling the soil; the woman takes the inside, managing the family and regulating society. The more civilized a community is the more completely differentiated are these two functions.²¹

Harrison agreed, saying:

Women are by Nature designed to play a different part from men. . . . a part domestic not public . . . this all works best in the Home. That is to say, the sphere in which women act at their highest is the Family, and the side where they are strongest is Affection. The sphere where men act at their highest is in public, in industry, in the service of the State; and the side where men are the strongest, is Activity.²²

Since the woman's greatest strength was maternal love—"the be-all and end-all of woman's life"²³ as one scientific observer phrased it—all her interests and actions had to

¹⁹Frederic Harrison, "The Emancipation of Women," *Fortnightly Review* ns. 50 (October 1891), 447.

²⁰John Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," *Sesame and Lilies* [1865], (New York: William L. Allison, 1895), 150-151.

²¹Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Wild Women. No. I: As Politicians," 81.

²²Frederic Harrison, "The Emancipation of Women," 447.

²³Lombroso, "The Physical Insensibility of Woman," 356.

be driven by that virtue. Lombroso said that "it is . . . an undoubted fact that, the maternal instinct in woman is far more powerful than the erotic tendency."²⁴ Though being a devoted and useful wife was extremely important, the good woman's greatest role was as mother and her greatest act was self-sacrifice for the sake of her children. The universality of the maternal instinct in women was the central tenet of the Victorian construction of the mother, which in turn served as a key trope in the contemporary rhetoric of womanliness.

The rhetoric of motherhood as an institution was commonplace but powerful and persuasive. Lady Jeune said with absolute certainty that,

[The good mother's] sole object is [her children's] welfare, their affection her reward. A good mother is the most unselfish of human beings, and during childhood and youth all that is most precious in her to bestow she lavishes upon them, and for no inconsiderable period she is everything to her children; the embodiment of wisdom, beauty, and love, and beyond her there is nothing perfect or divine.²⁵

La Silvia, the errant mother in Palgrave Simpson's *Broken Ties* (1872), invites the articulation of the good mother's credo when she asks a friend whether she has any regrets about giving up a glamorous career as an opera singer:

Regrets? Why should I? When I see stretched forth those little hands which have so tight a hold on every fibre of our hearts, when I hear those lisping voices striving to murmur the first word of childish endearment, "Mamma!" [Silvia makes a movement] I forget the world and all its gilded toys. All pleasure, happiness, excitement, lie in those eyes which gleam to mine - in those rosy lips which smile responsive to my smile. Ah! Silvia, darling, the most triumphant recall of a delighted audience is not worth one of those sweet dear smiles.²⁶

The imagery applied to a good woman and a good mother was invested with magic: she was the "angel in the house," the "household fairy." She was the being who saved her children from the vicissitudes of life by providing a safe haven and by sacrificing herself when dangers threatened her family. In F.A. Scudamore's sensational melodrama, *Dangers of London* (1890), which was touring the provinces in the early 1890s, the magical power of the Good Mother image is so strong that mere reference to it is enough to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 357.

²⁵ May [Mary] Jeune, "The Revolt of the Daughters," *Fortnightly Review* ns. 55 (February 1894), 270.

²⁶ J. Palgrave Simpson, *Broken Ties* (London and New York: Samuel French, n.d.), Act II, sc. i, 25. It was performed at the Royal Olympic Theatre, 8 June, 1872.

deter men stranded on a raft at sea from cannibalism.²⁷ Indeed, the idealization of the mother was often taken so far as to reach the point of fetishism. Lady Windermere's own idolization of her mother is not far from a neurosis, for she weaves a fantasy around her mother's miniature portrait, carrying it with her as a talisman to protect her from evil.

Although the idealized mother was primarily an ethical model, to the writer she was also a ready-made instrument with which to fashion narratives of conflict. Who better than this epitome of womanly virtue to stand against the fallen woman? For the fallen woman too was part of the generic reading of women. As Deborah Gorham notes, there was a positive/negative dichotomy in images of women. Next to the good woman was always her shadow, the parallel image that might cancel hers.²⁸ The crucial difference between the two was that one was sexually innocent while the other was sexually experienced, thus representing two opposite states of knowledge, each qualified by automatic associations with arrays of moral values: the good woman was "gentle, loving, self-sacrificing and innocent" while the bad woman was "vulgar, self-seeking, lazy and sexually impure."²⁹

The character of the fallen woman, tirelessly chronicled on the stage, made her an ever-present figure amongst the shadows of respectable life. She was a subject of interest to everybody. Medical, social, religious, legal and literary discourses banded together to form a formidable body to denounce her. She was a danger because she was a living representative of the failure of stabilizing institutions, especially that of marriage, and was therefore a receptacle for the anxieties of society. This was a culture that took even the most passive version of the fallen woman, the innocent but seduced young girl, as a threat

²⁷F.A. Scudamore, *Dangers of London*, (Typescript, 1890), *British and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century 1801-1900* ed., Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley (New York: Readex Microprint, 1967). The hero, Frank Forrest, only manages to sway some rough sailors from murder and cannibalism when he reminds them, "You once had a mother," which brings them to their senses so that Forrest can declare victory with the words, "The memory of a good woman has saved that man from madness perhaps from murder!" [Act II, sc.iii, 26]. The reward, in this instance, for allowing the good influence of the mother to prevail is an almost instant rescue. The play was first performed at the Surrey Theatre, 23 June, 1890, after which it toured the provinces.

²⁸Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, 37.

²⁹*Ibid*, 37.

because she was uncomfortable proof of the frailty of an outwardly stable society. For such a culture, sexually active women, whether it was the aggressively alluring society courtesan or the squalid prostitute of the streets, were definite threats to be resisted at the first opportunity. What Amanda Anderson calls the “destabilizing effects of transgressive desire”³⁰ had to be arrested, which required unceasing efforts towards discrediting the fallen woman.

The *Magdalen's Friend and Female Homes' Intelligencer* reflected popular opinion in 1861:

Who can tell the pestiferous influence exercised on society by the single, fallen, woman? Who can calculate the evils of such a system? Woman, waylaid, tempted, deceived, becomes in turn the terrible avenger of her sex. Armed with a power which is all but irresistible, and stript of all which can alone restrain and purify her influence, she steps upon the arena of life qualified to act her part in the reorganization of society. The lex talionis—the law of retaliation is hers. View it in the dissolution of domestic ties, in the sacrifice of family peace, in the cold desolation of promising homes; but, above-all, in the growth of practical Atheism, and in the downward trend of all that is pure and holy in life.³¹

In other words, the fallen woman had become a designated enemy of social values and of stability. This characterization of the fallen woman as a “terrible avenger” of past wrongs was standard fare in the 1890s, at least on stage, where we see Sardou's Countess Zicka in Clement Scott's translation of *Dora (Diplomacy)*,³² Grundy's Beatrice Selwyn (*A Fool's Paradise*),³³ and F.A. Scudamore's Gertrude Weir (*Dangers of London*), to name only the most extreme of vengeful adventuresses. These women actively tried to harm others, especially men and good women, and justified their own wickedness by characterizing themselves as society's victims.

But though the Victorian legend of fallen woman might sometimes see her as a wronged woman, it did not allow her vengeance. The descent of a woman from goddess

³⁰Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, 13

³¹“Popular Objections Considered,” *The Magdalen's Friend and Female Homes' Intelligencer*, vol. 2, 1861, 134, in Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 110.

³²Clement Scott and B.C. Stephenson, *Diplomacy: A Play in Four Acts. An English Version of M. Sardou's "Dora"* (New York: Rosenfield Typewriting, 1885?), *English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century 1801-1900*, ed., Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley (New York: Readex Microprint, 1967).

³³Sydney Grundy, *A Fool's Paradise: An Original Play in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, c.1898).



to whore was rationalized by making it her own fault, which had the advantage of allowing society to absolve itself of any possible guilt. Virtue was correlated with self-control, as Amanda Anderson points out, so loss of virtue was the result of loss of self-control.³⁴ Since women's 'true' nature was taken to be pure and unworldly, the perversion of that innate nature could only be due to a woman's self-defining choice of her animal instincts over her spiritual capital. This fall was from a spiritual to an animal level and signalled primarily by sexual degeneracy. Mitchell explains that "for women whose sexual desires were weak or non-existent the offense had to be deliberate: a conscious and knowing choice of evil over good".³⁵ A woman's decision to leave the safety of the domestic sphere was most definitely a fall—a "downward path, a marked and inevitable one".³⁶

This doctrine of women's purity and fall, turning as it did on the idea of self-conscious choice, could work only in the case of women of refinement and was thus limited by their class positions. Discussing the class dimension to the concept of the fall, Lynda Nead shows that its cautionary rhetoric was mostly directed at the middle and upper classes.³⁷ The lowest classes were already identified as criminal and beyond any significant reach of moral self-definition; not so a middle or upper class woman. She should know better, and therefore if she fell she was rightly cast out of her social class as well as her home. The fallen woman was on a downward path of disease, decay, despair and death, cut adrift from her immediate family and the advantages of her class. What made her fall the more terrible was the fact that it was irrevocable. In *East Lynne* Lady Isabel "found herself plunged into an abyss of horror, from which there was never more any escape; never more, never more" after her fall, and since then "never had she experienced a moment's calm, or peace, or happiness, since the fatal night of quitting her

³⁴Amanda Anderson, 41.

³⁵Mitchell, xi.

³⁶W.R. Greg, "Prostitution," *Westminster Review*, v.53 (1850), 454-455.

³⁷Amanda Anderson believes Nead's assertion distorts rather than clarifies the issue because the prostitute class was itself seen as a microcosm of society with its own hierarchies, in which the condition of fallenness was ascribed to some of these women. However, she concedes that the class element does apply in many cases (*Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, 2.)

home.”³⁸ There was a great deal of rhetoric to enjoin a good woman to steer her fallen sister back to the path of virtue, but little hope of success. It is this rhetoric that Lord Windermere employs when he asks Lady Windermere to help a fellow woman “get back,” and it is countered by the self-righteous Lady Windermere’s matching rhetoric of respectability which interprets any fallen woman’s fate as deserved. Virtuous women were only too ready to keep their distance from their fallen sisters, and the combination of condescension and an often punitive regime of harsh discipline made redemption exceptionally doubtful. Even an imputed fall, resulting from mere suspicion, as in Pinero’s *The Benefit of the Doubt*, could result in irreparable damage to a woman’s reputation and life. The most that a fallen woman could hope for was qualified forgiveness, which could only be given if she agreed to leave the world, whether by secreting herself in a convent or, preferably, by dying.

Once fallen, a woman was cast forever as the “other,” and it took little to be so cast:

In those halcyon days the flirtations of a married woman assumed a horrendous significance; reputation seemed vastly more important than character; a woman with a past could not aspire to a future as well.³⁹

Conduct books and women’s magazines were filled with dire warnings about the dangers that surrounded the virtuous woman, reminding them of how fragile their reputation was. As Nina Auerbach points out in *Woman and the Demon*,⁴⁰ the conversion of woman from innocent angel to knowledgeable demon was all too easy. Lady Windermere finds this out during her brush with danger—another instant, and her life would have been ruined forever. As Lady Isabel discovered, there was a definite line that a woman crossed; she passed “the barrier,”⁴¹ and her well-defined identity was lost.

The irrevocability of a woman’s fall meant that at all costs she had to be removed from contact with the rest of society. To ensure this the fallen woman was construed as a

³⁸*East Lynne*, 237.

³⁹Richard A. Cordell, *Henry Arthur Jones and the Modern Drama* [1932], (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1968), 213-214.

⁴⁰Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 63-108.

⁴¹*East Lynne*, 237.

disease, which, though dangerous, was curable. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, which were passed to control sexually transmitted diseases, focussed the blame and punishment on the prostitute rather than her customer. Victorian society gathered its forces to make the outsider figure, the prostitute and, in effect, any fallen woman, the personification of Disease. So the deviant woman became identified as the carrier of physical as well as moral disease. Much of the contemporary discourse on womanhood, religious and secular, castigated the fallen woman as a social disease, backed in particular by scientific and medical literature. Both Darwinian and Spencerian theories of evolution accepted the idea of the tainting parent which already existed within religious discourse. Scientific credence was given to the possibility of inheriting states of mind, such as propensities to thievery and adultery. It was women's responsibility to keep the lines of heredity pure and unsullied, and any failure in that task might lead to the degeneration of the race. Necessarily, bad women produced bad children. Karl Pearson warned that deviance from the natural, maternal role and duty would result in great harm to society:

It is only in the case of exceptional and picked women that the intellectual worry and ceaseless anxiety of modern professional life, the physical and nervous strain of its many demands, will not be detrimental to the growth of the young life. ... The race must degenerate if greater and greater stress be brought to force woman during the years of child-bearing into active and unlimited competition with man.⁴²

In 1865, William Acton had affirmed the inheritance of taint as a scientific theory:

It seems a hard and unchristian opinion that it is better not to marry the daughter of a divorced woman; but I believe that the sin of unfaithfulness is often inherited, as well as many other family diseases.⁴³

The possibility of the mother's moral substance being passed on to the child made the mother's responsibility the greater. "By the depth and strength of the maternal instinct," said Mrs. Linton, "is the race preserved. . . . Science knows that to admit women—that is, mothers—into the heated arena of political life would be . . . destructive to the physical

⁴²Karl Pearson, "Woman and Labour," 569-70.

⁴³William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 89.

well-being of the future generation."⁴⁴ When even mere intellectual activity would apparently interfere with "natural" processes, if a mother actually broke moral laws, whether it was adultery or something worse, she was unfit to be a parent altogether, particularly in "a race conscious of the vital importance of heredity."⁴⁵ The taint carried by fallen women was doubly powerful and contagious if carried by fallen mothers, and their children were, at best, never allowed to see them, while at worst, they were tarred with the same taint. The currency of this attitude was demonstrated not only in fiction but in law and social practice, as divorced or separated mothers soon discovered.⁴⁶ Mrs. Erlynne and other fallen mothers had not even attempted to abscond with their children or to reclaim them after their departures from their husbands' homes, and Mrs. Erlynne's warning to Lady Windermere about losing her child carried real power because such loaded laws were real. The Countess of Malmesbury said in 1892, "You cannot expect a race to produce able men or beautiful women where the position of the mother is insecure and so far debased" and warned that children without good mothers would become "hard-hearted little monsters."⁴⁷ Wilde's characterization of Lady Windermere echoes the same attitude.

The identification of women's sexual transgression as disease by the sciences both of physiology and heredity had a double effect: it served to instill dread and prescribe quarantine but it also held out the promise of cures though drastic. Removing the cancer

⁴⁴Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Wild Women. No. I: As Politicians," 85-86.

⁴⁵Karl Pearson, "Woman and Labour," 574.

⁴⁶Caroline Norton's (1808-1877) custody battles with her brutal husband earlier in the century might have softened the law somewhat, but the law still remained firmly on the side of the husband. Norton's activism for women's rights began with her attempts to gain custody of her children; as a result of her persistent lobbying of Parliament and the distribution of a pamphlet entitled *Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of Custody of Infants Considered* (Privately printed, J. Ridgway, 1837), the Infant Custody Bill was passed in 1839, giving married mothers limited access to children under seven years. In 1853, married women's legal and financial difficulties were brought to public notice after a creditor sued Norton for her separated husband's outstanding debts, and the ensuing discussions eventually led to the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1882 and 1893, which allowed women greater control over their own finances. Norton's *Letter to the Queen on Lord Cransworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855) seemed to have had a direct influence on the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, several of its clauses owing much to her work.

⁴⁷Susan, Countess of Malmesbury, "The Future of Marriage: A Reply," *Fortnightly Review* ns. 51 (February 1892), 275-6.

from the body politic was necessary but punishment was most effective when sought by the wrongdoer through an agonized awareness of her sin. Although the majority of fallen women died an early death through illness or suicide, first they had to suffer to the satisfaction of the society they might have infected. The more aware the fallen woman was of the meaning of her transgression and her own responsibility for her disgrace, the more complete the punishment.

In *East Lynne*, Mrs. Henry Wood describes the suffering caused by the full awareness of one's sin in no uncertain terms:

. . . The very hour of her departure she awoke to what she had done; the guilt, whose aspect had been shunned in the prospective, assumed at once its true, frightful colour, the blackness of darkness; and a lively remorse, a never dying anguish, took possession of her soul forever.⁴⁸

To drive home the agonies of self-accusation, the author adds the dire warning: "O reader, believe me! Lady-wife-mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awake!"⁴⁹ Dumas *filis*' archetype of the fallen woman, Marguerite Gautier, articulates in *La Dame Aux Camélias* the ultimate risk the fallen woman runs:

And so, whatever she may do, the woman, once she has fallen can never rise again. God may forgive her, perhaps, the world, never. What man would wish to make her his wife, what child to call her mother?⁵⁰

This was the question Pinero had taken up in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* only to answer that any man foolish enough to make such a woman his wife would only bring disaster upon himself and his family.

Repentance seemed a necessary corollary to the awareness and acknowledgment of transgression:

But, the instant the step was irrevocable, the instant she had left the barrier behind, repentance set in . . . it was sharply wounding her with its adder stings: and she knew

⁴⁸Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, 237.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Alexandre Dumas *filis*, *La Dame Aux Camélias*. transl. Edith Reynolds and Nigel Playfair (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), Act III, 140-141. The play was first performed at the Vaudeville, Paris, 2 February, 1852. Various versions of this play were produced in London during the first half of the 1890s, including productions at Her Majesty's Theatre (5 July, 1890), the Prince of Wales's Theatre (3 May, 1894) and Daly's Theatre (27 June, 1894).

that her whole future existence, whether spent with that man or without him, would be one dark course of gnawing retribution.⁵¹

Those who repented were often, though not always, rewarded with forgiveness, if not actual reinstatement. Those who did not repent of their actions, even when made aware of the full extent of their wrongs, were utterly bad, and society could inflict upon them the harshest punishment with a clear conscience. Speaking nostalgically of a morally superior past, Mrs. Linton says with satisfaction: "Even when repentant and forgiven, the Olivias of those resolute days had to bewail their folly in everlasting twilight. They were never reinstated. . . ." ⁵²

Though Mrs. Linton regretfully placed the permanent banishment of deviant women in the past, on the stage at least this continued to be most fiercely current. Thus Lady Audley, a familiar villainess on stage since the publication of Elizabeth Braddon's novel in the 1860s, was punished with madness when the incorrigibility of her character became evident. Those who were truly penitent were allowed to prove their sincerity by either going into a convent, doing good works amongst the poor, or anonymously making restitution to those they had wronged. In J. Palgrave Simpson's *Broken Ties* the woman who had abandoned her husband and child is finally forgiven after her abject self-abasement and her promise to give up her career and "the world," which demonstrates her penitence upon finally learning the lesson that "domestic love [is] true woman's dearest pride." ⁵³

The definitions of good and bad women were so deeply etched into the Victorian ethos that they created a visual code to signify women's moral identity. The respectable woman had no desire to be attractive to men and was happy to dress modestly. The fallen woman, on the contrary, wished to call attention to herself and to attract men, so she dressed extravagantly. A woman's interest in fine clothes was an indication of a frivolous

⁵¹*East Lynne*, 237.

⁵²Eliza Lynn Linton, "A Picture of the Past," *Nineteenth Century* 32: 189 (November 1892), 793.

⁵³*Broken Ties*, Act II, sc.ii, 41.

mind devoted to selfish ends, not to her duties. During the debates on the Contagious Diseases Acts, a chaplain who was interviewed about the significance of finery, said,

. . . I have found it almost a certain criterion . . . if a girl means to do what is right she generally does her hair and dresses in a respectable way, and as soon as ever she begins to give up the intention she commences to decorate and adorn herself.⁵⁴

Mariana Valverde sums up the attitude to dress: false finery is positioned against true rags.⁵⁵ This is why Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley's appearances give them away. Mrs. Erlynne's elegant dress at once arouses suspicions among other women; Lady Plymdale's enquiries about her are centred on her clothes: "Who is that well-dressed woman talking to Windermere?"⁵⁶ Mrs. Erlynne is well aware of the importance of signs. When Lord Windermere tries to make her feel guilty, he cites the portrait on the miniature as evidence of her former innocent state: "It's a miniature of a young innocent-looking girl with beautiful dark hair."⁵⁷ Mrs. Erlynne immediately contradicts him about the validity of this evidence, reminding him that this appearance is merely a sign of virtue, not virtue itself, and therefore no guarantee of sincerity. She puts his "evidence" in its proper place by saying, "Dark hair and an innocent expression were the fashion then."⁵⁸ The fallen woman is often a "painted woman," and this paint functions as a disguise of her "true" self. She is a woman whose face is "dressed, defaced and erased," according to Helena Michie.⁵⁹ The paint on her face not only erases the individual, it proclaims her as false.

The risk of false judgment in relying on external signs was realized by some but was too common to be set aside. Elizabeth Braddon had called attention to the dangers of

⁵⁴ *Report of the Royal Commission upon the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Sessional Papers: House of Commons*, 1871, XIX, 253, 327 in Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse", *Victorian Studies*, v.32 (1989), 176.

⁵⁵ Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery," 181.

⁵⁶ Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play About a Good Woman* (London: Methuen, 1908), Act II, 70.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Act IV, 164.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 62.

reading women as stereotypes when she had offered a villainess, Lady Audley, painted in the colours of an unexpected palette, as noted by Mrs. Linton:

Instead of five foot ten of black and brown, they have gone in for four foot nothing of pink and yellow. Instead of tumbled masses of raven hair, they have shining coils of purest gold.⁶⁰

Mrs. Linton was confused because she needed stereotypes in order to read women and here she missed the set signifiers of the fictional adventuress that we find noted in the accounts of actresses generally cast in such roles and immortalized in Jerome K. Jerome's portrait of the stage adventuress in *Stage-Land* (1889).⁶¹

The readiness of the fallen woman's critics to found their judgments on such superficial evidence reveals much about popular constructions of womanhood. Anderson draws attention to the popular terms for a fallen woman, which provide an important clue to the way in which she was viewed. Ironically, the popular idea of women denied selfhood both to the pure and the fallen, making their identity conditional upon their relationship to men. To traditionalists the pure woman was a wife or a mother (or aspiring to be one); that is to say, she gained an identity only in service to others. The fallen woman lived only for her own (sexual) pleasures, was selfish, uncaring about her relationships with men, and therefore had no "character." The terms for a fallen woman were, significantly, a "woman without a character," a "lost woman," a "woman of the streets," a "public woman"—always without name or individuality. Ruskin emphasizes the fact that a woman is always safe from all "danger and temptation . . . all peril and trial" when she allows herself to be guarded by a man. But if she decides to venture into "rough work in the open world," if, crucially, "she herself has sought it," she can expect no protection from the "anxieties of the outer life . . . the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world."⁶² By severing her approved connections with society, she abdicates all

⁶⁰Eliza Lynn Linton, "Little Women," *Saturday Review*, 25 (1868), 545.

⁶¹Jerome K. Jerome, *Stage-Land: Curious Habits and Customs of Its Inhabitants* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889).

⁶²*Sesame and Lilies*, 151.

claims to the identities afforded by those connections. The existence of relations was a necessity for a respectable woman because, without them, she could not fulfill her roles of mother, wife and daughter. Lady Windermere's belief that her husband is planning a *ménage a trois* with Mrs. Erlynne is partially fed by her sensitivity about her lack of relations. Anderson describes the fallen woman's predicament as a "failure to present or maintain an authentic, private or self-regulating identity."⁶³ The fallen woman was a constant reminder of the instability not only of society but of selfhood itself, an anxiety that was growing greater with the approach of the end of the century. The fear of change was embodied in this figure. According to Auerbach, to be considered virtuous a woman had to be unchanging and knowable, like the chocolate-box angels with whom she was identified.⁶⁴ The fallen woman was by definition changeable; what virtue could she possibly possess?

A particularly persuasive illustration of a fallen woman's lack of virtue was her failure as a mother. Dereliction of motherly duties or, worse, the rejection of maternity was in fact a crime against nature because nature had ordained motherhood as women's highest moral state. Some of the sorriest female figures of nineteenth-century literature were babykillers such as George Eliot's Hetty Sorrel (*Adam Bede*) and Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, (and the less known Jean Creyke of Mrs. Hugh Bell and Elizabeth Robins's *Alan's Wife*).⁶⁵ Women who abandoned their children, such as Lady Isabel Vane and Nora Helmer, were only slightly less wicked. This latter type of mother sometimes did desperately regret their choice and wanted to return to their children's lives. They were unable to do so, except by stealth, as does Lady Isabel Vane and Mrs. Erlynne. It is

⁶³Amanda Anderson, 2.

⁶⁴Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 63-108.

⁶⁵Elizabeth Robins, *Alan's Wife: A Dramatic Study in Three Scenes*. Ed. J.T. Grein. Intro. William Archer. London: Henry and Co., 1893. Although Mrs. Hugh Bell's name appears in J.P. Wearing's list of play productions [*The London Stage 1890 - 1899: A Calendar of Plays, Vol. I: 1890 - 1896* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976)], only Elizabeth Robins's name appears on the published edition. The play was produced at Terry's Theatre, 28 April, 1893.

presumably just punishment of such a woman that at her child's hour of need she is usually not allowed to save her child. This is a formula that Wilde characteristically uses but alters when he lets Mrs. Erlynne, unlike Lady Isabel, save her child, although her inability to reveal herself to her child restates Wilde's loyalty to the formula.

But the fallen woman as mother was more than a mere literary formula. She was the embodiment of the greatest threat to nineteenth century social organization, which held her opposite, the good mother, as the immediate nurturer and protector of moral integrity. Abandoning that role was a betrayal of the gravest proportions, since security was then replaced by instability. As Powell notes, betrayal by the mother was an assault on the most fundamental ideals of family and social order.⁶⁶ Because she was at the core of the "happy English home" which provided the stability and security that made it possible for England to go out to conquer the world, the regulation of the mother became a political matter. Betrayal by the mother was particularly heinous because it carried the unexpectedness of a betrayal from within, and shook the very foundations of society. Thus, leaving instability in her wake, the transgressing mother caused disorder not only in the domestic sphere, but in the world at large. The mother who left the domestic sphere was even more dangerous than the average adventuress who had lost her virtue and had exchanged it for the ability to compete in the male world. A successful transgressive mother such as Mrs. Erlynne proved the unpalatable fact that it was possible to reject the role society had ordained for women. To counteract such lures, fates such as Lady Isabel Vane's were held up as a dire warning to women who were considering leaving their homes; they would lose all hope and security:

Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolve* to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them; pray for patience: pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you so to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death!⁶⁷

⁶⁶Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*, 16.

⁶⁷*East Lynne*, 237.

Since the maternal aspect of the fallen woman is fraught with dramatic possibilities of intense conflicts both psychologically and socially, it is not surprising that it should have drawn the interest of Wilde's contemporaries. Kerry Powell points out that in nineteenth century fiction the unfit father was a popular type, as we can see in characters ranging from Little Dorrit's father to that of Tess. However, on the stage, it was the unworthy mother who dominated. Any transgressions of the mother were treated as incomprehensible, as evidenced by Scott's almost hysterical reaction to Wilde's refusal to provide a happy reunion between the mother and the daughter in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Typically, Wilde takes the legend of the unfit mother from his cultural heritage only to open it to question. His awareness of its potency as a narrative element becomes plain when we see how many of Wilde's fallen women are mothers, or, conversely, how many of his mothers are fallen women. Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Arbuthnot, Herodias, and even Miss Prism are all fallen mothers, although the last is only so by comic misapprehension. The respective plots hinge on them, including Miss Prism, whose parodied dereliction of duty is crucial to the play's crisis as well as to its resolution

If Wilde's representation of women in his playworld raised questions about the prevailing idea of women, his social world showed no such uncertainty, at least on the surface. Good and bad women, as understood in that world, were relatively straightforward and familiar. Their rewards and punishments were also familiar and predictable and there was a consensus that, fair or not, there were rules governing women's behaviour and character. But this changed when some women began to question their roles. These were the "New Women."⁶⁸ When they burst upon the scene, they upset the very foundations of the consensus by questioning the value of the rules and rewards, and by refusing to accept the punishments silently. The New Woman's presence thus opened yet another front in contemporary society's battle to keep its rules inviolate. She

⁶⁸This was a term coined by Sarah Grand in the *North American Review*, May 1894. Despite the efforts of some, such as Eleanor Marx, in championing the causes of working-class women, the New Woman remained mainly middle-class, as Karl Pearson, among others, noted.

was another menace and, like the fallen woman, became a target of disapprobation in the theatre as well as in fiction and popular debate, if not more so. The adventuress or fallen woman was at least a familiar type. Her sexual fall led to financial ruin, which forced her into a more unsavory world so that her character became sullied by grossly commercial motives; Émile Augier's *Olympe* (*Le Mariage d'Olympe*),⁶⁹ G.R. Sims's *Hetty* (*The Lights O' London*),⁷⁰ and Wilde's Mrs. Cheveley think of nothing but jewels and comfort. The fallen woman's other obsession was social restitution, which she often tried to purchase, usually through blackmail, as do Wilde's Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley. However, she was at least comprehensible as her standards of good and bad were recognizable and traditional; it was just that she had sided with the bad. But the New Woman was a more unmanageable creature because her unprecedented demand for self-determination placed her beyond known social types. Her presence was particularly disturbing because she could not be readily defined. As Sally Ledger has pointed out, "The New Woman as a category was by no means stable", especially because the New Women themselves "did not always agree on who or what the New Woman was."⁷¹ As a result, her characterization by playwrights unfamiliar with her was more often awkward than not. So, even in a serious treatment, as in the case of Pinero's *Agnes Ebbsmith*,⁷² she was endowed with some of the characteristics of the usual fallen woman, which were then mixed with the contradictory characteristics of the bluestocking or strident pamphleteer. The mixed signals were not easy to read. Grundy and Jones, for example, managed to diffuse the power of the New Woman by mocking her; Elaine Shrimpton in *The Case of Rebellious Susan* is foolish and pompous and Grundy's cluster of New Women in *The New Woman* is merely a group of

⁶⁹Émile Augier, *Olympe's Marriage* in Émile Augier, *Four Plays*. Trans., and intro., Barrett H. Clark (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1915).

⁷⁰G.R. Sims, *The Lights o' London: A New and Original Drama in Five Acts* in Michael R. Booth, ed. *The Lights o' London and Other Victorian Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁷¹Sally Ledger, *The New Woman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 10-11.

⁷²Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith: A Drama in Four Acts* (London: William Heinemann, 1895); the Garrick Theatre, 13 March, 1895.

plain old maids desperate for a man.⁷³ The judgment on these women is in essence that they are failures as women.

The modern or "New" woman was the woman who challenged norms and fought in the public arena for her rights. She interfered in the political business of the country by campaigning for disenfranchised groups, including her own, she transgressed against social codes by going out into the public arena, she upset the economic balance by entering the workforce. The rights for which she fought—enhanced legal status, education, labour—were milestones on her road to full freedom as an individual and, ultimately, to self-realization. The ideas were of course not new. A hundred years earlier Mary Wollstonecraft had articulated some of the same desires, as reviewers of Millicent Garrett Fawcett's new edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* noted.⁷⁴ Wollstonecraft, like her fin-de-siècle sister, had also demanded the right to develop as an individual and find fulfillment in working together with men to create a stronger, better society. But in the 1890s it seemed that a greater number of women were pursuing their right to reject their homebound lives and to claim their own place outside the "high-walled garden"⁷⁵ of the home. The greater opportunities presented by the possibilities of financial independence and professional training through legislative acts, were instrumental in increasing the number of women who rejected the traditional lifestyles of marriage and family, as the statistics of some New Woman writers showed.⁷⁶ As yet, their numbers were small, but their very existence was proof of real changes in women's lives and an accelerated progress. Evelyn March-Phillips was encouraged by the fact that middle-class women's working opportunities had opened up from governess or companion to a wide variety of

⁷³Sydney Grundy, *The New Woman: An Original Comedy in Four Acts* (London: Chiswick Press, 1894); the Comedy Theatre, 1 September, 1894.

⁷⁴Elizabeth Robins Pennell, "A Century of Women's Rights," *Fortnightly Review* ns 48 (Sept 1890), 408-417; *Saturday Review*, 11 April, 1891, 448.

⁷⁵Eliza Lynn Linton, "A Picture of the Past," *Nineteenth Century* 32:189 (Nov 1892), 791.

⁷⁶Evelyn March-Phillips, "The Working Lady in London," *Fortnightly Review* ns 52 (Aug 1892), 193-203; Alice M. Gordon, "The After-Careers of University Educated Women," *Nineteenth Century* 37: 220 (Jun 1895), 955-960.

occupations. In an article entitled "The Working Lady in London," she listed artists, designers, lecturers on domestic arts, wood-engravers, journalists, secretaries and nurses among the group of newly-trained or university-educated women who were the subject of her study. Women's names could even be found in some of the more specialized professions. For example, the pioneer "lady doctors," Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Dr. Sophia Jex-Blake, were well-known and the useful work on trades unions of Lady Emilia Dilke or the "Lady Assistant Commissioner," Mrs. Amy Bulley, could be encountered in the pages of the *Fortnightly Review*.

According to the reports of March-Phillips and others, women's entry into the workforce had created a whole new breed of independent young women, "latchkey" or "bachelor girls," who lived in boarding houses or shared flats with other working women, creating alternative community structures that were viewed with great suspicion by conservatives. The *Saturday Review*, for example, characterized the individual of this type as a foolish and boring young woman, obsessed by the Woman Question, who had been driven by her unattractiveness into living with a 'chum' and working as a hack journalist or something similar.⁷⁷ Even the otherwise sympathetic March-Phillips agreed that these women's lives were lonely and unwholesome. When women formed any joint enterprise either at work or in the home, the reactions of arch-conservatives was, as Nina Auerbach puts it, that "female communities embody a whirlpool of subhuman chaos which can only sap strength."⁷⁸ Mrs. Linton, perhaps the best known nineteenth-century voice of female conservatism, warned that the "little knot of noisy Maenads" were a threat to "the stability of society and the well-being of the race."⁷⁹ In Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* we can see that Lady Chiltern's participation in a Women's Committee has resulted in great rhetoric but little practical knowledge or action. All that her activism seems to have done is to have

⁷⁷"The Female Bachelor," *Saturday Review* June 2, 1894, 582-583.

⁷⁸Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), 19.

⁷⁹Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Wild Women. No. I: As Politicians," 79.

instilled in her a narrow righteousness. Stubborn in her certitudes, had she insisted on adhering to her own instinct, she would have ruined her husband. She needs Goring to tell her what her instinct *should be*. In *A Woman of No Importance*, the community of women is full of snarling in-fighters who support or betray each other for petty reasons. Their only code is to protect insiders from outsiders, whom they define according to their success at conformity. Mrs. Lynn Linton's criticisms of female communities were harsh, as in the case of her attack on the Girton student community in *The One Too Many* (1893) and on the malevolent influence of women's clubs in *In Haste and At Leisure* (1895; its American edition significantly added the prefix, *The New Woman*, to the title).⁸⁰

As part of the debate on "The Revolt of the Daughters" in *Nineteenth Century* in 1894, Lady Kathleen Cuffe spoke on behalf of the moderate young women of her generation and outlined the main stereotypes about the New Woman:

According to one view, the modern maiden sits wringing her hands all day at home, exhausting herself in querulous laments over her inability to indulge in *Wanderjahre* . . . and filling the surrounding air in general . . . with irritating iterations of the things she would do if she were let.

According to another, her sole occupation consists of reading Ibsen's works, *Dodo*, and the *Heavenly Twins*, and learning by heart quotations from *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* . . .

As to aspirations, our desires to develop our Personality (with a very big P), satisfy the cravings of our souls for something beyond the commonplace (the commonplace of home duties and making the best of our natural surroundings), are inseparable from an equally intense longing to frequent music-halls and possess latchkeys, and a vehement appeal to the poor, much taxed Providence to remove the lingering prejudice against women smoking in public.⁸¹

The prevalence of these stereotypes testifies to the scorn with which the New Woman was received in the popular mind, helped by steady caricatures in the theatre, as noted by Viv Gardner.⁸² The prejudice against her also reveals a deeper unease at the displacement of the comforting image of the woman as the still centre that held home life together. The

⁸⁰E. Lynn Linton, *The One Too Many*, New ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1896); E. Lynn Linton, *In Haste and At Leisure: A Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1895); E. Lynn Linton, *The New Woman: In Haste and At Leisure* (New York: Merriam, 1895).

⁸¹Lady Kathleen Cuffe, "A Reply From the Daughters I," *Nineteenth Century* 35: 205 (March 1894), 437.

⁸²Viv Gardner, "Introduction," Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 2-6, 8-9.

New Woman was mobile, moving freely between the public and private worlds, and thereby seemed to shake the foundations of society.

Characterized as having rejected her family home, she was supposed to have cut herself free from all duty and from all the basic rules of social conduct. She left home and returned when she pleased, with the latchkey that was the disturbing symbol of her independence. Not only did she go out of her home to her place of employment but she went to previously forbidden places of entertainment, such as music halls. She filled her mind with daring new novels and bold new plays and insisted on intellectual conversation. She broke rules of social conduct such as smoking and entertaining or being entertained, unchaperoned, by men. She fraternized with other young women across the different sub-classes of her class. Her mobility was perhaps at the root of all the anxieties that centred on her. Refusing to stay either in traditional roles or environments, she challenged the axiomatic assumptions about them. George Bernard Shaw's Vivie Warren from *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) is the embodiment of this type.⁸³

Nor was the threat to order merely implicit. The one thing New Women had in common was the loud voice with which they challenged the necessity for women to submit to men and demonstrated how women could and should break their silence about their relationship to men. Linda Dowling states that the New Woman was "perceived to have ranged herself perversely with the forces of cultural anarchism and decay precisely because she wanted to reinterpret the sexual relationship."⁸⁴ Emma Frances Brooke's heroine, Jessamine Halliday, utters the wish that she could "topple down the whole hateful fabric of London society."⁸⁵ No wonder the establishment was afraid of the New Woman. What this rebelliousness signified was a demand for self-determination, which was precisely

⁸³George Bernard Shaw, *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant. The First Volume, containing the three Unpleasant Plays* (London: Grant Richards, 1898).

⁸⁴Linda Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33:4 (March 1979), 440-441.

⁸⁵Emma Frances Brooks, *A Superfluous Woman*, (London: Heinemann, 1894), v. II, 89, quoted in Linda Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s," 439.

what unnerved the establishment. In retaliation, the more hysterical conservatives turned the New Woman almost into an agent of the Apocalypse. "Anarchy," the catchword of the 1890s (found in discussions of issues ranging from art and literature to social behaviour and political events), was easily applied to the New Woman. "She is in complete accord with the anarchist",⁸⁶ exclaimed the *Quarterly Review*, while the ubiquitous Mrs. Linton ranted, "Mistress of herself, the Wild woman as a social insurgent preaches the 'lesson of liberty' broadened into lawlessness and license"⁸⁷ The two key words, "insurgent" and "wild," characterize modern women and also explain society's fear of her. Rebellion against socio-political structures and the unleashing of her animal nature would result in the destruction of civilization itself. The *Quarterly Review* compared the New Woman to the "'noble savage' of Dryden and Rousseau"⁸⁸ because she "condemn[ed] law as tyranny." On her part, Mrs. Linton declared,

We know where the prancing desires of the free lovers and the grimmer designs of the woman's rights women would lead us—the one to the destruction of the family by the virtual abolition of marriage, the other to the absolute supremacy of women over men and justice alike.⁸⁹

All these activities were taken to be geared to the self-realization of the modern woman, the emphasis falling on "self." This directly contradicted the traditional definitions of woman, created through her relationships with men as daughter, wife and mother, all of which had in common woman's primary function as that of the care-giver. This traditional women lived her life for and through others. An independent identity was considered irrelevant, useless and obstructive to the fulfillment of her appointed role in society. It was against this discouragement of self-definition that the New Woman was fighting. But since a woman's virtue and worth were located within her usefulness to others, her desire to be useful only to herself was seen as selfish and dangerous to the very stability of her society.

⁸⁶"The Strike of a Sex," *Quarterly Review* 179:358 (October 1894), 293.

⁸⁷Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Wild Women: As Social Insurgents," *Nineteenth Century* 30:176 (October 1891), 596.

⁸⁸"The Strike of a Sex," 293.

⁸⁹Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Judicial Shock to Marriage," *Nineteenth Century* 29:171 (May 1891), 691.

Both supporters and opponents agreed that it was the New Woman's desire for self-fulfillment that was at the heart of her actions, and it was this idea that gained prominence in common rhetoric. While moderates cautiously accepted its limitations, opponents were alarmed that the ideal of self-sacrifice was to be replaced by what they viewed as merely a manifestation of selfishness which would tear apart all the threads that held society together. "The whole thing is an epidemic of vanity and restlessness", said Mrs. Linton,⁹⁰ while the *Quarterly Review* dismissed the New Woman's action as the "dilettantism of impulse."⁹¹ The *Saturday Review* frankly found "the now popular phrases about 'owing it to oneself,' 'duty to oneself,' and so on, . . . philosophically impossible and morally disgusting."⁹² Ironically, it was the New Woman's desire to become a more whole, a more fully-realized individual that was interpreted by conservatives as a desire to tear apart society. The apocalyptic rhetoric of conservatism that one finds to various degrees in any time and any society, built up around the New Woman as the ultimate threat in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the greatest menace represented by New Women was their challenge of gender roles. If modern women were allowed to do as they pleased at the expense of home, family and the equilibrium of society, Frederic Harrison warned, it would "degrade them, sterilize them, unsex them."⁹³ Once woman succeeded in overleaping gender boundaries, there would be a domino effect so that men too, would transgress gender codes and then only "the unsexed woman [would] please the unsexed man."⁹⁴ The New Woman was already seen as a mannish female who dressed as unbecomingly and as much like a man as she could, who smoked and insisted on participating in male entertainments

⁹⁰Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Partisans of the Wild Women," *Nineteenth Century* 31:181(March 1892), 464.

⁹¹"The Strike of a Sex," *Quarterly Review* 179:358 (October 1894), 293.

⁹²"The Rights of Women," *Saturday Review*, April 11, 1891, 448.

⁹³Frederic Harrison, "The Emancipation of Women," 451.

⁹⁴Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Partisans of the Wild Women," 461.

such as hunting and shooting or intellectual conversation,⁹⁵ and whose very gestures were now "coarse" and man-like. Cartoons in the ever-unsubtle *Punch* and other popular journals depicted her intimidating men as she sprawled about with a cigarette in her hand and a tie around her neck, or scowled over a book as her apron-clad husband washed the dishes or the baby. Lady Jeune, a regular contributor to the *Fortnightly Review*, asked, "Do we wish to see our girls half men in theory and half women in experience and ignorance?"⁹⁶ Frederic Harrison asserted that "Women must choose to be either women or abortive men,"⁹⁷ and offered his own definitions of true womanliness. The "insurgent wild women" were challenging Nature itself and were "in a sense unnatural" as a result.⁹⁸

For conservatives, the New Woman's preference of a personal career over the cares of domesticity, including the deferral of childbearing, meant her rejection of motherhood altogether and was conclusive proof of her unnaturalness. Lady Jeune assured the general population of women that "no woman knows what real joy is till her babe is laid in her arms". Elizabeth Chapman, in response to Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* said,

What a paradox is here! What a strange inversion of the natural order! How the intellect must have been warped, and the heart embittered, of a woman who could couple such a word as "uninspired" with such an idea as motherhood!⁹⁹

By putting motherhood on hold the New Woman irretrievably cast herself in the mold of the fallen woman. Mrs. Linton summed up the conservative's reaction by applying to New Women the same charge levelled against fallen women when she denounced modern women's "strange reaction against the maternal instinct,"¹⁰⁰ conflating it with the "modern"

⁹⁵Even Shaw could not resist harping on Vivie's "masculinity" in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, as Jill Davis notes in "The New Woman and the New Life," Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 24.

⁹⁶May Jeune, "The Revolt of the Daughters," 275.

⁹⁷Frederic Harrison, "The Emancipation of Women" 452.

⁹⁸Eliza Lynn Linton, ""The Wild Women. No. I: As Politicians" 79.

⁹⁹Elizabeth Chapman, *Marriage Questions in Modern Fiction, and Other Essays on Kindred Subjects* (London: John Lane, 1897), 28.

¹⁰⁰Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Modern Revolt," *Macmillan's Magazine*, December 1870, in *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors*, ed., Susan Hamillto (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995), 179.

girl's "envy of the pleasures, and indifference to the sins, of these women of the *demi-monde* ." ¹⁰¹ The traditionalists' uncomprehending charges of selfishness and frivolousness against the New Woman's serious concerns was a continuing obstacle in any debate between the two groups.

Finding New Women unnatural, their conservative critics immediately discovered "the decadence . . . of thought and principle, which this new ideal of womanhood . . . has brought."¹⁰² By perverting nature through selfishness and an unnatural disregard for the proprieties of womanhood, the "wild women" had aligned themselves to the Decadents eroding society's foundations. Not surprisingly, the New Woman were often linked to the degenerate and the decadent aesthete/artist, who was seen as an equally unnatural, gender-transgressive man, whose perceived effeminacy proved his weakness.¹⁰³ To the conservative, neither persona was a true Man or Woman, and by his or her very existence erased those easily identifiable creatures. Linda Dowling, Sally Ledger and Margaret Beetham have shown that the New Woman was linked to the Decadent because of the degeneracy both were seen as promoting. A society that allowed such people to flourish was a debilitated community. It was "precisely because she wanted to reinterpret the sexual relationship" that the New Woman was "perceived to have ranged herself with the forces of cultural anarchism and decay."¹⁰⁴ Henry Arthur Jones's popular play, *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), makes the most out of this debate (with the case heavily favoured on the conservatives' side) by coupling a New Woman with a Decadent Aesthete.¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰¹Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Girl of the Period," *Saturday Review*, 14 March 1868, in *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors*, ed., Susan Hamilton (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995), 173.

¹⁰²Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Partisans of the Wild Women," 463.

¹⁰³Decadence and aestheticism were often equated though they were not the same.

¹⁰⁴Linda Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s," 440-441. See also, Sally Ledger, "The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism," in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, eds. *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰⁵Henry Arthur Jones, *The Case of Rebellious Susan* in *Plays by Henry Arthur Jones*, Ed., intro. and notes, Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Criterion Theatre, 3 October, 1894.

traditional humour derived from the image of the woman who "wears the pants" is thus made topical. Jones's New Woman corresponds to the stereotype of stridency while the Aesthete is weak and cowardly: both are equally foolish and earnest. But though the popular mind connected these two groups, neither accepted the relationship, and Wilde's use of the dandy/aesthete figure demonstrates the uneasiness of that relationship.

The accusation of promoting decadence by transgressing gender definitions spilled over into the work of artists, as is evident from this review of John Oliver Hobbes (Pearl Craigie)'s novels in 1894:

But the aim of such art as John Oliver Hobbes, so typically feminine in its discreet *décolletage*, is not truth, but effect, and effect of the immediate kind. . . . These are the *procédés* of an art which seems to be the mode of the moment, and which is certainly for its moment amusing. Mr. Oscar Wilde has much to answer for ... there are several literary ladies, of recent origin, who have tried to come up to the society ideal . . . 106

The charge here is that Hobbes was producing bad art because she, like other modern women writers, had taken the gender-transgressive Wilde for her artistic role model.

Repudiating established gender roles was a vital part of New Women's bid for self-realization that drew Mrs. Linton's fire. Though they did not put this into words, what Mrs. Linton and her peers, such as Lady Jeune and Mrs. Oliphant, sensed was that the corollary to the New Woman's "ideal of life for herself ... [as] absolute personal independence" was "supreme power over men".¹⁰⁷ Individual non-conformity was in fact an attack on the general good. Self-realization, as defined by the New Woman, was nothing but pure selfishness. And this brings us back full circle to the model of the fallen woman who had rejected self-sacrifice and devotion to the patriarchal ideal of a woman's role. While the New Woman did not stoop to the base commercial or sexual machinations of the fallen woman, she seemed equally to put herself before all others, while her rejection of the course of life mapped out for her by a patriarchal society was even more

¹⁰⁶"Feminine Fiction," *Saturday Review*, 1 December, 1894, 596.

¹⁰⁷Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Wild Women: As Social Insurgents," *Nineteenth Century* 30: 176 (October 1891), 596.

uncompromising and perhaps more threatening because it was done in the name of principle rather than expediency. Society was not ready to accommodate such bids for self-determination on the part of women.

Few voices broke the traditionalist chorus against women's self-realization. The response to the "Woman Question" in the arts more often than not sided with the moralists, though subtly. In a trend that quickened from the 1860s onwards, images of women in paintings showed the deadliness of the uncontrolled woman. Walter Pater's famous essay on Da Vinci in *The Renaissance* (1873) can be seen as a touchstone for responses to female power in art in the later part of the century: Pater describes La Gioconda's "unfathomable smile, always with a touch of the sinister," the beauty that through "a thousand years men had come to desire" but deeply troubling to "those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity," for she is "like the vampire."¹⁰⁸ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Gustave Moreau, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edvard Munch, Aubrey Beardsley and George du Maurier may seem odd companions, but all of them have a common fascination with larger-than-life women often actively threatening male figures. The inward dreaminess of many of Rossetti's and Burne-Jones's female figures, the remote sensuality of Moreau's paintings of the murderous Salomé, the often vampiric, tormented women of Munch were demoted from the mythic to the seamy by Toulouse-Lautrec's studies of the *demi-monde*, and furnished with sinister laughing masks by Aubrey Beardsley. Du Maurier, a regular cartoonist for *Punch* in the 1890s, offered a series of statuesque women with aggressively jutting jaws intimidating their slim male companions or Society ballrooms.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 130-132.

¹⁰⁹Reinforcing this fear of self-governing women by their very contrast were the consciously didactic paintings of William Holman Hunt (*The Awakening Conscience*, 1853), George Frederick Watts (*Found Drowned*, c.1848-50) and Augustus Egg's series, *Past and Present* (1858) on a woman's fall, which portrayed the consequences of her sexually independent actions and ended, typically, in her death. George Elgar Hicks's triptych, *Woman's Mission* (1863), provides a guide to the ideal.

On the stage dramatists participated in the debate on the Woman Question by creating the "New Woman" or her opposite, the female wit who was almost inevitably the fallen woman. These two were given the opportunity only to prove themselves unworthy of the respect of men which was gained in the end by the most conventional female character in the cast. The desire to return to an old order in which men were not challenged by women is articulated in Sir Richard Kato's diatribe against the "New Woman" in Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan*. He finally silences Elaine Shrimpton, the "New Woman" of the piece, with the following speech:

[There is an immense future for Woman at] her own fireside. There is an immense future for women as wives and mothers, and a very limited future for them in any other capacity. While you ladies without passions - or with distorted and defeated passions - are raving and trumpeting all over the country, that wise, grim old grandmother of us all, Dame Nature, is simply laughing up her sleeve . . . Go home! Nature's darling woman is a stay-at-home woman, a woman who wants to be a good wife and a good mother, and cares very little for anything else.¹¹⁰

The message here is that the ideal woman never wishes to change the balance of power between the sexes and is content to remain within a sharply defined role.

Given Wilde's habitual mockery of conservatism, one might assume that he would be all for the New Woman and her bid for freedom. That assumption would be largely correct though not entirely so, for while Wilde did take a leading role in refashioning women's culture for the new era, in the depths of his dramas his imagination does not always confront female strength with equanimity. In general, Wilde lent a sympathetic voice to the ongoing dialogue about the New Woman. He had, after all, been the progressive editor of the *Woman's World*, for which he wrote and invited serious articles on women's and other issues as well as on literature and art. He and his wife wrote in support of Dress Reform as well, which would bring about changes in a woman's sheer physical ability to move about, an ability that would allow her a more independent lifestyle. But this liberalism perhaps springs more from Wilde's opposition to the enslavement of the individual to conventional morality than from any active sympathy for women's causes. If the position

¹¹⁰Henry Arthur Jones, *The Case of Rebellious Susan: A Comedy in Three Acts*, Act III, 153-4.

Wilde takes seems equidistant from both conservative conventionality and the new establishment that challenges it, it is because both demand the individual's surrender to orthodoxy.

Yet, as a writer deeply enmeshed in the currents of social feeling and thought, Wilde is sensitive to the deep divisions that women's aspirations were creating in his world. His response, typically, is to give free rein to women's voices in his plays. Women's command over speech in the plays has been particularly noted in recent productions which, as noted by John Stokes, "suggest that Wilde's most long-lasting, or prophetic, contribution to feminism was to allow his women to be articulate."¹¹¹ Although his women characters are not primarily New Women, their assertiveness relates them to the persona of the New Woman which is thus included in the concept of womanhood in his plays. Although the New Woman is not seen in all of her varied shapes and often seen only in gentle parody, she is recognizable enough. Lady Chiltern's involvement in political issues discussed by women's associations calls up images of the suffragettes in its sincerity but its effectiveness remains untested. Gwendolen Fairfax's regular attendance at university lectures parodies the New Woman's eagerness to embrace new educational opportunities, which, as Linda Dowling reminds us, was frequently sneered at. When the earnest Hester decries society women's tolerance of men's unreliability and demands equal probity from men and women, she is echoing the New Woman's humourless insistence on moral parity. Yet, even though Wilde is making fun of these misguided enthusiasms of women, his plots attest to the assault that women's ambitions, traditional or novel, comic or serious, were making on men's orderly existence.

If women, old or new, were so problematic a subject, how was one to view them? Equally, if morality was so elusive, through what eyes might one ever try to see the truth? To both questions Wilde's answer was to create the Dandy, an outsider figure who was

¹¹¹John Stokes, *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 179.

present within the play as a privileged observer and almost a choric character because his superior aesthetic sensibility elevated him above the clash of common interests and thus above partisanship in judging women. The uncertainties relating to the Woman Question were an ideal source of tension in creating dramatic situations. In the case of Wilde, they also reinforced the ambiguities intrinsic to his view of the world. In particular, women, whether conservative or "New," could be viewed simultaneously from different viewpoints. The ideal viewing eye for this was the dandy, the aesthete who was at once the advocate and the critic for the rebellion implicit in thinking about women.

The popular theatre's reaction to the New Woman had far fewer nuances than Wilde's, finding her as unambiguously disturbing as did the conservative moralists and setting up a superior combatant to put women in their place. This is a *raisonneur* figure imported from France and featured time and time again in the plays of Pinero, Jones and Grundy. He is the voice of convention who re-establishes the order threatened by the figure of disorder. If necessary, he can be ruthless to the fallen woman, holding her to her past although he never questions men's pasts. He is usually given a set speech or two in which he articulates popular morality or the views of "Mrs. Grundy," as that voice was characterized. "Mrs. Grundy" was unforgiving of even the appearance of sin, and even when the play's action suggested some sympathy for the sinner, her views were the ones that prevailed at the end of the play. Such was this tyranny of stage moralism that although Jones complained bitterly in his preface to *The Case of Rebellious Susan* of having to drop any hint (let alone action on or off-stage) of adultery by Lady Susan Harrabin, he had his *raisonneur* in the play launch a particularly vicious and patronizing diatribe against the New Woman and female independence in general.

True to his practice of reconfiguring the theatrical conventions of his time, Wilde turned the familiar figure of the New Woman's opponent into the more complex figure of the dandy who actually stands against conventional society itself. But while Wilde's dandy repudiates conventionality, he also criticizes what he sees as the New Woman's uncritical

subscription to received ideas of liberation. Here again we see Wilde's use of a figure with a long literary and cultural heritage but transformed into a character peculiar to Wilde. His dandy goes beyond the simple stage requirements of the stage "swell" or "toff," played variously by a juvenile male lead, comic man, minor walk-on or even villain. Among Wilde's dandies we may find variations of these types but his major dandy characters have the *raisonneur's* profile, sometimes partially, sometimes more fully, and function as the play's voice of conscience and its defender of principles. The dandy's instinctive opposition to the sanctimoniousness of the traditional *raisonneur* does not prevent him from playing the same role, which his principled detachment invests with heroic high-mindedness. The dandy as a heroic figure is most fully realized in *An Ideal Husband* though he still exists in isolation. It is only in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that the dandy becomes the norm,¹¹² although at the cost of himself becoming the target of laughter. But it is not only this ability of Wilde's to laugh even at sympathetic characters that sets Wilde's dandy apart from the Jonesian *raisonneur*; a more immediately recognizable difference is that Wilde's character defends a world of alternative perceptions and values rather than the conventional world of late nineteenth century moralists. That is why Wilde's dandy is actively opposed, not only to the vulgar adventuress as the Jonesian *raisonneur* is, but to the rigidly proper woman, disparaged as the Puritan. It is also the reason why Wilde's dandy does not claim superiority just because they are men as Jones' *raisonneur* seems to, for although most of Wilde's dandy's are indeed men, he does show an incipient dandyism in some of his female characters, most notably Mabel in *An Ideal Husband*. The dandy credo is one of aesthetic and moral liberation from thoughtless conventionality. If the dandy seeks to foil transgressive women, it is because both sexual intrigue and self-promoting puritanism are ugly—the worst offence in the dandy's book. Wilde's dandies thus stand on a ground wholly different from the anti-woman personae of

¹¹²See, for example, the work of Epifanio San Juan [*The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967)] and Arthur Ganz ("The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of Oscar Wilde," *Modern Drama*, 3 (1960), 16-23)]. Ganz believes that the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the world of the dandy, where the dandy finally finds his true home.

his contemporaries even though they may represent a critical awareness of women's destabilizing potential. But despite this distinctiveness, their link with tradition remains fast.

Not an invention of Wilde's, the dandy evolved from an older model, that of the cultivated gentleman, and we may trace his origin, as Ellen Moers has done, to the late eighteenth century.¹¹³ The dandy reached his zenith during the Regency era, and was defined by the legendary but low-born Englishman, George "Beau" Brummell (1778-1840), who was held as its supreme example by later writers such as Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier and Honoré Balzac. The attention of so many French men of letters suggests an intriguing hybridity inherent in the dandy, a figure doubly displaced by his class origin and his emulation of French culture. As Jessica R. Feldman and Sima Godfrey note, the classic dandy was "on the divide" between England and France.¹¹⁴ Brummell looked to Paris to create the manner and clothing of the perfect gentleman. The dandy personality was eventually transformed into a philosophy through the response of the French to a biography of Brummell by the Englishman, Captain William Jesse, best seen in Barbey D'Aurevilly's essay, "Du Dandyism et de Georges Brummell" (1845).¹¹⁵ Dandyism continued as a cultural force in the writings and, in some cases, the personalities of Edward Bulwer Lytton, Benjamin Disraeli, Walter Pater and finally Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm in the 1890s.

The dandy arose out of a revolutionary or "confused" age,¹¹⁶ whose social upheavals made it possible for a valet's son to give orders to the Prince Regent, and to prove that birth was no longer a criteria for gentlemanliness. Ellen Moers and Richard Pine both wrestle with the dandy's relation to his society's struggles, looking at his function from two sides of the same coin. Moers's statement that the dandy's "style and pose" justify the

¹¹³Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960).

¹¹⁴Jessica R. Feldman, *Gender on the Divide: The Dandy in Modernist Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹¹⁵J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Du Dandysme et de Georges Brummell* (Paris: Emile-Paul frères, 1918).

¹¹⁶Richard Pine, *The Dandy and the Herald*, 8.

stratification of society¹¹⁷ is questioned by Pine who believes that dandyism's purpose is "to emphasize the breakdown of social difference."¹¹⁸ Pine's kind of dandy is the heroic character who holds a mirror up to society and is an agent of revelation, even a radical.¹¹⁹ His self-fashioning is a step towards the refashioning of his society, for he demonstrates that identity is a deliberately constructed, not essentially ordained, property.

As a philosophy, dandyism provided acolytes with the mystique of an almost unattainable cultural perfection, which made the dandy hard to define and his cultural alignments hard to see. His concern with personal appearance fit well into the Aesthetic movement of late nineteenth century, making the dandy and aesthete interchangeable, at least in popular perception. But dandyism carried implications for cultural politics, for his self-validation by cultivating his appearance questioned essentialism itself, much as Wilde's own revaluation of customary manners and morals did. The dandy's mastery of surfaces promised rich inner depths by its sheer superficiality,¹²⁰ whereby he could claim freedom from the defining terms both of the surface of existence and its depth. Jonathan Dollimore sees in the dandy's attempt to transcend the surface-depth polarity a pattern of transgressive aesthetic, a scheme of resisting essentialism, into which he fits Wilde. At the same time, because the dandy needed society as his theatre, he kept his transgression within bounds as a "conformist rebel," to use Norbert Kohl's term.¹²¹ These attempts to place the dandy within a theoretical framework shows how slippery he is as a category. Sima Godfrey prefaces her discussion with anecdotes about the dandy because she finds examples more easily than definitions.¹²² One may see why: the emphasis being on self-fashioning,

¹¹⁷Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, 12.

¹¹⁸Pine, *The Dandy and the Herald*, 35.

¹¹⁹Sos Eltis's recent study on Wilde characterizes him as a writer with a specifically political and anarchic agenda.

¹²⁰Jonathan Dollimore has pointed out the continuing effectiveness of this strategy in the case of Andy Warhol in the twentieth century. See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 25.

¹²¹Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹²²Sima Godfrey, "The Dandy as Ironic Figure," *Sub-Stance* 36 (1982), 23.

dandyism required no privileges of birth and allowed as many kinds of dandies as there were people. Yet this variety had to be contained within certain rigid rules which, however, were not clear.

The principal rule that all dandies obeyed was the rejection of the mundane. We may also summarize the dandy's generic attributes as individualism, detachment, anti-commercialism and a commitment to art,¹²³ especially the art of life and even more particularly the cultivation of the self as a work of art. These are of course much too broad categories for constituting a definition but the difficulty attests to the imperative underlying dandyism, that of being oneself in one's own image and nobody else's. As Wilde said in "The Decay of Lying": "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of herself."¹²⁴ The critics of the dandy were more united in their condemnation, which negatively adds to our understanding of the dandy. The critics picked particularly on the dandy's vanity, which made him, in Carlyle's memorable phrase in *Sartor Resartus*, a mere "Poet of Cloth."¹²⁵ William Morris was offended by the dandy's pretensions to serving art, for he saw no substance to the claim but only an attitude, and an escapist one at that because the dandy had allied himself with the proponents of art-for-art's-sake.¹²⁶ One might also challenge the dandy's integrity in holding to the ideals generally claimed by him. His anti-commercialism might after all be only a posture rather than a commitment, for self-fashioning often thrives on self-marketing; Brummell's ticket to a life of ease was his success at being a dandy. Wilde himself has not been exempt from the charge of

¹²³Linda Dowling's study of the dandy shows that insofar as the dandy was interested in influencing others, he scorned to be a Merchant of Cheap Prints promoting the "vulgarization of art" and attempted to raise others to his own level of taste as an Apostle of Beauty. The affinity with the Aesthete is obvious. See Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

¹²⁴Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," *Intentions and The Soul of Man* (London: Methuen, 1908), 31.

¹²⁵Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus, On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: J.M. Dent, 1908), 204.

¹²⁶William Morris, "The Art of the People," in *Hopes and Fears for Art and Signs of Change*, intro. Peter Faulkner (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994). In this lecture "delivered before the Birmingham Society of Art and School of Design, February 19, 1879", and published in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882), Morris criticizes the idea of "art for art's sake." The elite's "art" is seen as valueless and weakened by its own intellectualism and preciousness as opposed to the vigorous art of the common man.

capitalizing on individualism and aestheticism.¹²⁷ Even the dandy's detached observation of the world was questioned, for his demonstration of perfection lost meaning unless there was an audience watching it.

As a cultural exemplar, then, the dandy may be a compromised figure, though his—or her, for Wilde does not deny women the potential for dandyism—personal integrity is not usually in question. But this also reinforces his alienation from a stick-in-the-mud society. A perpetual outsider looking in, the dandy is in the privileged position of seeing through the pretensions equally of the privileged and the rebel, even though he himself might be vulnerable to the exposure of his personal or philosophical frailties. The stance particular to the dandy is thus ideally suited to the ironic mode, which sets no limit on laughing at everything, including itself. Given the complexity of the world Wilde was targeting, the dandy was a necessary means of keeping that laughter ringing. In dealing with the subject of women in particular, the dandy's point of view in Wilde's plays offered perspectives never available to conventional society's vision. With respect to women, Wilde's dandy had a special insight, for up to a point the dandy and the woman had certain things in common, such as relying heavily on clothes and manners. But while the dandy's excessive concern with appearance implied a process of self-creation, the woman's aim was merely to put on the masks that made her acceptable in society.¹²⁸ Like the dandy, the woman was a marginal being but while the dandy gloried in his difference, the woman struggled to integrate, thus surrendering her freedom. This difference becomes plain as we weigh the relative functions of dandies and women in the building up of crises and their resolution in Wilde's plays.

¹²⁷Regenia Gagnier, in *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), characterizes Wilde as a consciously commercial self-created product, as does Jennifer Wicke in *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Wicke includes a reproduction of a trade card depicting Wilde next to the famous elephant, Jumbo, who stands in an "aesthetic" pose, holding a sunflower.

¹²⁸As explained by Charles Baudelaire in his essay, "In Praise of Cosmetics," *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 31-34.

Wilde thus gathers the conventional wisdom of his own world around the topically controversial subject of women, especially the unsettled question of women's transgression. In his constant attempt to lay bare unexamined or self-serving principles he systematically bends the conventions of contemporary theatre to yield perceptions of the world contrary to their ordinary signification. In this project Wilde's single most effective tool, and the most constant, is the dandy figure who is best capable of steering a course of emotional and moral discovery because of the dandy's position as an outsider who enjoys the privileges of an insider. This is a figure worth dwelling upon as it seems suspiciously like Wilde himself. But whether that equation holds or not, it is the dandy's uninvolved, or mostly uninvolved, observation that is likely to provide the only independent comprehension of the tangle of emotions and motives in a play. Even those characters who merely simulate the dandy's superior comprehension, such as Jack and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* or Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* penetrate deeper into the meaning of the rules of relationships both personal and social than the common man or woman, no matter how privileged by birth, education or status. If women are to Wilde the predicament, delight and mystery of worldly existence, then the dandy's liberated vision is his tool for discovering how women live in the world and by what attributes peculiar to them. As we examine his plays separately, this complex strategy becomes progressively clearer.

Chapter 3

Lady Windermere's Fan: The Mother as Homewrecker

The popular success of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), the first of Wilde's four society plays, launched his career as a dramatist.¹ Although Wilde had attempted to conquer the stage in the 1880s with *Vera; or, The Nihilist* (1880, produced 1883) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883, produced as *Guido Ferranti*, 1891), neither had been produced in England; both failed when produced in New York. Wilde blamed much of the failure on the producers but modern critics agree with his contemporaries that these early plays are turgid and overly stylized. *Lady Windermere's Fan* marked his conquest of the stage by presenting to the audience a world that was close enough to seem familiar, yet distant in its aura of fashionable high life and at least for that reason fascinating.² Audiences loved *Lady Windermere's Fan* primarily because its wit was scintillating and the costumes so extravagantly brilliant that fashion magazines copied them.³ The mounting of the play at the St. James's made this attractive production possible. George Alexander was rather nervous at his first chance to "put on" a piece intended to draw an aristocratic audience with a convincing reproduction of itself, as he confided to Clement Scott,⁴ but, with the assistance of his wife, Florence, who took charge of the costuming and scenic direction, he set a tone for "St. James's plays,"⁵ which all too often justified Shaw's sneer that a play

¹Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play About a Good Woman* (London: Methuen, 1908). The play opened at the St. James's Theatre on 20 February, 1892 and ran for 197 performances.

²The play succeeded so well that Wilde received £7000 as his share of the profit; see John Russell Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre, 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 78-79. *Lady Windermere's Fan* opened at the St. James's Theatre, 20 February, 1892, and ran for 197 performances.

³See the discussion of the influence of stage costume on the fashionable world in Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8-44.

⁴Joel H. Kaplan, "A Puppet's Power: George Alexander, Clement Scott, and the Replotting of *Lady Windermere's Fan*," *Theatre Notebook* 46:2 (1992), 62.

⁵Florence Alexander's role in her husband's productions is discussed in A.E.W. Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James's Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 233. Accounts of the particular characteristics of a St. James's play can be found in the above book and in W. Macqueen-Pope, *St. James's: Theatre of Distinction* (London: W.H. Allen, 1958).

there would be "a tailor's advertisement making sentimental remarks to a milliner's advertisement in the middle of an upholsterer's and decorator's advertisement."⁶

The ceremonial quality of the first production, whatever the commercial motive behind it, might be seen in retrospect to hint at society's deference to custom and formulas, an implication made explicit in a recent interpretation. In Philip Prowse's 1994 production at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, the staging of *Lady Windermere's Fan* expressed the rote by which society moved, repeating the same, endless patterns. The ball guests glided purposefully in a figure of eight pattern, which led nowhere except back to itself, breaking formation only briefly at times to allow for intrigues or trivial conversations—both receiving equal time and therefore equal importance—so that Society could be seen as the trivial yet inexorable force it was. In a set that reminded one of the too-sweet confectionery with which Mary McCarthy compared Wilde's play,⁷ the pastel-costumed Society women underlined the director's view of Society and its values as petty and superficial. Different in intent from the St. James's aesthetic, this modern rendering nonetheless acknowledged the formalism necessary to image forth Wilde's sense of a Society imprisoned in its own immutable rules.

The contemporary success of *Lady Windermere's Fan* was ironic, because audiences admired it for what were after all superficial elements. Critics deplored the audience's enthusiasm for what they considered to be a shallow and unoriginal play but were themselves unaware of the profound issues of moral definition and gender roles the play raised. On the surface, though, the play seemed simply to exploit the sensationalist elements of the familiar plot of the fallen woman. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* as in other society plays, Wilde seemed only to bring the decadent passions of the renaissance duchess and the burning dilemma of the zealous nihilist to a new arena, Society, where, in the

⁶George Bernard Shaw, *Saturday Review*, 27 February, 1897, rpt. *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (London: Constable, 1932) v. III, 58.

⁷Mary McCarthy, "Gerontion" *Partisan Review* 14:1 (January-February 1947), 62-66.

words of conservatives, "the heroine of the Divorce Court [was] the lioness of the drawing room" and the "harlot and adulteress [were] the ideals of washy sentimentalists."⁸

Mrs. Lynn Linton's extravagant denunciation is not wholly inaccurate if the ubiquitousness of the fallen woman on the 1890s stage is any indication of her popularity, bearing in mind that such popularity was in inverse ratio to her power. But by the 1890s, while the fallen woman was being beaten night after night by the forces of good (or at least of the moral majority), there were questions by non-conservatives about the so-called inevitable fate of the fallen woman. Underlining the conventional moralizing in these plays, the title character of David Christie Murray's play, *The Puritan* (1894)⁹ was so called because of the impossible standards of purity he expected from his wife, as did the hero of Frank Harvey's *Shall We Forgive Her?* (1894). Registering dissatisfaction with the hackneyed morality of plays on the fallen woman, the *Saturday Review* called the bad woman's tragedy in Dumas's *La Femme de Claude* "inevitable clockwork" (21 July 1894), *A Modern Eve's Fate*, an "inevitable tragedy of the gutter" (7 July 1894) and the suffering in "George Fleming" (Constance Fletcher)'s *Mrs. Lessingham* "a monotony of anguish" (14 April 1894). Monotonous it may have been but the discourse on Eve's fate invited scrutiny, and in Wilde's society plays turned into a sustained questioning of the late Victorian ethos, especially social constructions of good and bad as applied to women.

The importance of women in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is indicated by the position of the men in it. Although men hold the ultimate power in the world of the play, for the purposes of the action they are defined by their relationship to women. Lord Windermere is the protective husband-father to Lady Windermere. Lord Darlington is her devoted lover. Lord Augustus is Mrs. Erlynne's dupe. If these men have other identities, we are not made aware of them. As for the other men with speaking parts, Messrs. Graham,

⁸Eliza Lynn Linton, "A Picture of the Past," *Nineteenth Century* 32:189 (November 1892), 793.

⁹D.C. Murray, *The Puritan*, Lord Chamberlain's Manuscript, British Library. While the manuscript gives the name of D.C. Murray as the author, Wearing's playlist gives authorial credit to Henry Murray and John L. Shine as well. There was one matinee performance of this play at the Trafalgar Theatre on 26 July 1894.

Dumby and Hopper, their persiflage shows an obsessive preoccupation with women, dismissive as their comments on women may be. When Dumby denies knowing who Mrs. Erlynne is and goes on to describe her to Lady Plymdale as "an *édition de luxe* of a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market,"¹⁰ his malicious wit is soon found to be a mere ploy to fend off the displeasure of Lady Plymdale. Sizing him up accurately, Mrs. Erlynne guesses that "he is afraid of her," and indeed Lady Plymdale proves to be a jealous mistress whose command he "cannot dream" of disobeying¹¹ Everything the men say or decide has something to do with women. It is not just an accident that much of these men's conversation should be on the tyranny of women: when they are with women, they play the attentive courtier, and when they are in exclusively male company, they show their relief at being free of women by constantly drawing comparisons between men and women, usually to the discredit of women. Lord Darlington plays the "extravagant silly" lover to Lady Windermere by his unceasing declarations of devotion:

I wish I had known it was your birthday, Lady Windermere. I would have covered the whole street in front of your house with flowers for you to walk on. They are made for you.¹²

Placing women at the centre of the play, Wilde compels a re-examination of standard views on women's lives and their nature by inverting the norms both of the theatre and of society, taking aim at one of the most sacred icons of his time, the mother. But instead of starting with an explicit invocation of the icon, Wilde begins with the converse paradigm of female existence, the fallen woman. Because of the familiarity of the narrative of the fallen woman, it is guaranteed to spring the crisis of the play as soon as the wife discovers what she and the audience have good reason to see as her husband's infidelity. The chaste wife is the centre of attention here, which provides a ready explanation of the announcement in the play's title that it is "about a good woman." Yet soon thereafter the focus shifts

¹⁰Act II, 70.

¹¹Act I, 73.

¹²Act I, 4.

decisively to Mrs. Erlynne, the fallen woman, so identified by gossip and her own flirtatious conversation. Is the play then going to be about the wronged wife or the fallen woman? In the course of the play this question about blurred narrative directions is translated into one about blurred moral identities: who is the "good woman"?—the wronged wife or the fallen woman? But to begin with, the play assures the viewer that the narrative formula is being maintained. Wilde keeps the play firmly connected with tradition by using situations, character profiles and sentiments to be found in society and domestic drama of the nineteenth century, on both the British and the French stage.

As in his other society comedies, in *Lady Windermere's Fan* Wilde borrows heavily from the enduring traditions of British melodrama, French boulevard drama and the well-made play, capitalizing upon melodrama's overworked formula of the virtuous young heroine threatened by a shadow from the past, boulevard drama's fondness for husband-wife misunderstandings and the well-made play's careful plot construction. The template is that of the well-made play, a model particularly successful in using the plot of the fallen woman because its careful construction lends a satisfying inevitability to the plot. Perfected by Scribe and Sardou, the well-made play had to follow a rigid process of development, consisting of exposition (often in servants' conversation), conflict (between the hero and opponent or young heroine and older rival), a *peripeteia* (where the hero suffers a temporary reversal), a *scène à faire* (where the opponent is defeated by the revelation of a dark secret, often by means of an object), recognition (where remaining mysteries are cleared up) and denouement (where punishments and rewards are meted out).

To take only one illustration of the long ancestry of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, we may go back to one of the earliest exemplars of the well-made play. The suspenseful scene in the third act of *Lady Windermere's Fan* is reminiscent of a similar scene in Sardou's *Les Pattes des Mouches* (1860), translated as *A Scrap of Paper* (1861).¹³ There too, a young

¹³The adaptation by J. Palgrave Simpson (1861) was revived twice during the 1890s at the Prince of Wales's Theatre (26 February, 1892) and the Avenue Theatre (5 June, 1893). See J. Palgrave Simpson, *A Scrap of Paper: A Comic Drama in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, n.d.). The first production of

married woman finds herself in a bachelor's rooms in a position which becomes compromising when the jealous husband appears there. She must hide, leaving her wiser and nobler friend to compromise herself instead in order to protect her. The young woman leaves a token of her identity, a shawl in Sardou's play, a fan in Wilde's, which is explained away by the friend who claims to have borrowed it. The friend in *A Scrap of Paper* faces serious consequences for her selfless act; just as Mrs. Erlynne loses forever her chance to re-enter Society, the virtuous Suzanne is forced to marry Prosper, the (now reformed) rake. Like Mrs. Erlynne's rescue of her daughter by putting her own reputation in jeopardy, in Sydney Grundy's play *The Glass of Fashion* (1883), the heroine, heavily in debt, is rescued from a compromising position in a rake's rooms by another woman who finishes the scene by being compromised to her own lover.¹⁴

The orderliness of this plot structure made the moral argument clear while it set up easily defined character types in the good woman, set up for a fall or lesson by her unthinking rigidity, the kind, if unimaginative, husband who would turn ugly at her transgression, the fallen/other woman who comes between the two, or the rake who tempts the good woman. This pattern, adopted and endorsed in the many dramatizations of the archetypal moral allegory of the time, *East Lynne*,¹⁵ appeared in many permutations on the 1890s stage. In farces, such as Eille Norwood's *Chalk and Cheese* and H.J. Byron's *Cyril's Success*, this pattern was satirized as the foolish, respectable wife misinterpreted a letter to or from her husband and almost left him.¹⁶ These parodies ignored the grave

the play was at the St. James's Theatre, 22 April, 1861.

¹⁴Sydney Grundy, *The Glass of Fashion: An Original Comedy in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1898); first produced at the Grand Theatre, Glasgow, 26 March, 1883 and revived at the Globe Theatre, 8 September, 1883. Grundy complained to the *Era* (8 October, 1892) about Wilde's perilously close imitation of this same scene in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Grundy's good woman too, had a noble husband who tried to hide the shame of her parenthood from her.

¹⁵First dramatized in America in 1862, Mrs. Henry Wood's novel's most well-known adaptations are by the author and by T.A. Palmer. See Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne: A Drama in Five Acts* (Boston: Geo. M. Baker, n.d.). There are 88 productions of the play listed in Nebile Direkcigil, "An Edition of T.A. Palmer's Dramatisation of Mrs. Henry Woods's *East Lynne*, With a Section on the Theatrical Background," Unpublished PhD thesis, Leeds University, 1975.

¹⁶Eille Norwood, *Chalk and Cheese: A Comedietta in One Act* (London: Samuel French, n.d.); Village Hall, Esher, 6 January, 1888 and revived at Terry's Theatre, 22 June, 1892. H.J. Byron, *Cyril's Success* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Co., 189-); first performed at the Globe Theatre, 28 November, 1868, it

implications of the plot. But the social and moral problems inherent in the situation did receive serious attention in plays such as *Diplomacy* (1878), the English translation of Sardou's *Dora* by Clement Scott and B.C. Stephenson, and Henry Arthur Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), although none of these shared the readiness of Ibsen and Shaw to strike at the foundations of custom, nor did they have Wilde's ability to turn the conventional on its head to create alternative viewpoints.

Wilde's individuality in dealing with Woman as a problem becomes clear on comparing the plot of *Lady Windermere's Fan* with that of Jones's *The Masqueraders* (1894) which, like *Lady Windermere's Fan*, is the story of a woman who almost breaks her marriage vows but is saved from dishonour by the intercession of a good friend. Jones's play depicts an increasingly shocking violation of conventional morality as the heroine declares her total rejection of ideals in marriage and in fact leaves with a man who has loved her for years when he wins her in a card game from her husband in Act Three. Yet in Act Four she is discovered shrinking from him and is eventually won back to her husband and child by her sister, the play thus snatching the victory of morality from the jaws of shame. We may see a parallel here to *Lady Windermere's Fan* but the subtle re-education of Wilde's heroine is replaced by Jones's sentimental celebration of wifely chastity. In place of Wilde's hard negotiation between practicality and impulsiveness, we find Jones valorizing marriage vows on the basis of the vague feeling and "instinct" of a good woman.¹⁷ While Wilde forces a re-examination of the ideas of good and bad women, Jones genuflects before the virtuous wife as the essential woman.

This comparison shows, however, that although Wilde reached for an alternative knowledge of his world in his society comedies, he relied on the common conventions of drama and society to begin his enquiry. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* Wilde used the same pattern as in the well-made melodrama but led to different moral inferences and

was revived at the Criterion Theatre, 25 January, 1890.

¹⁷Henry Arthur Jones, *The Masqueraders: Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones*, ed. and intro., Clayton Hamilton, vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, 1925), Act IV, 268. The play was performed at the St. James's Theatre, 28 April, 1894.

psychological insights. On the surface it differed from the common dramatic stock in nothing but its witty dialogue. "The chief attraction lies in the dialogue," announced the *Athenaeum*, and most reviewers, such as A.B. Walkley, enthusiastically recognized Wilde's wit.¹⁸ Women like Mrs. Erlynne, who had left their husbands for lovers, were plentiful on the London stage, one example being Lady Isabel Vane of the perennially popular *East Lynne*. Those like Lady Windermere who managed to draw back from the brink were just as common, such as Lady Susan Harrabin in *The Case of Rebellious Susan*. The device of hiding behind a screen was both common and old. Variants of the classic scene in *The School for Scandal* where Lady Teazle hides behind a screen to avoid being caught in a compromising position by her husband, appeared regularly in French farce and English drama.¹⁹ Contemporary reviewers of *Lady Windermere's Fan* caught the resemblance with C. Haddon Chambers's *The Idler*,²⁰ which had been playing at the St. James's only recently, and a number of other plays, both French and English.²¹ For example, the *Graphic* compared *Lady Windermere's Fan* to J.W. Comyns Carr's *Forgiveness* (1891)²² while *Black and White* compared it to W. Tristram Outram's *The Red Lamp* (1887) and the *Speaker* to Alexandre Dumas fils' *Françillon* (1887).²³ Sydney Grundy's *May and December* (1887), an adaptation of Meilhac and Halévy's *La Petite Marquise*, the Comedy) also followed "the familiar pattern, with a lady hidden behind a door and brought in at the critical moment to disconcert everybody."²⁴ Wilde himself repeated the same trick in *An Ideal Husband* (1895).

¹⁸*The Athenaeum*, 27 February 1892, 286; A.B. Walkley, *The Speaker*, 27 February 1892, v, 257-8, ed., Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), 119.

¹⁹There were at least five revivals of this play between 1890 and 1895.

²⁰C. Haddon Chambers, *The Idler: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1902); St. James's Theatre, 26 February, 1891. The first performance was at the Lyceum Theater, New York, 11 November, 1890.

²¹*The Speaker*, 27 February 1892, *Athenaeum*, 27 February 1892, *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 9 April 1892.

²²The St. James's Theatre, 30 December, 1891.

²³The *Graphic*, 27 February, 1892; *Black and White*, 27 February 1892.

²⁴"A Play and a Farce," *Saturday Review*, 22 November, 1890, 588. Grundy's adaptation of Meilhac and Halévy's *La Petite Marquise*, first produced at the Criterion Theatre on 25 April, 1887, was revived at the Comedy Theatre on 15 November, 1890.

Wilde exploited convention also in choosing his gallery of characters when he peopled his play with familiar types: a high-minded young heroine, a loving husband, a fallen woman, a loyal friend, and a complement of superficial Society men and women. But it was also in character conception that he revealed his imaginative reconstruction of common types. Some reviewers, as in the *Theatre*, the *Academy* (5 March 1892) and the *Athenæum*, saw Mrs. Erlynne as a daring and innovative interpretation of the fallen woman. The English fallen woman, either wicked beyond redemption or forever repenting her past, was combined with the French courtesan who proved her core of goodness by her self-sacrifice and death. Wilde of course went far beyond the lachrymose celebration of conversions. Mrs. Erlynne does perform a self-sacrificing action which establishes her identity as a loving mother but refuses to give up her life of compromised virtue and accepts the conventional redemption of marriage with gentle mockery.

The nonconformism that Wilde embodied in Mrs. Erlynne's character was both novel and disturbing because it highlighted the narrow choice available to women. Mona Caird mocked the two-dimensionality of women's moral sphere as set out in popular rhetoric by both Old and New Women: "Duty or sin: stern, strict, savage, intolerable duty, or black, polluting, unforgivable sin! These are the women's alternatives!"²⁵ The theatre of the nineties gave women none but these choices, validated by the compliance of the fallen woman herself, as we see in Jones's *The Dancing Girl* (1891)²⁶ Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) and Grundy's *A Fool's Paradise* (1887). In these plays the fallen woman, once exposed as such, is forced to act in one or more of the ways described by Mrs. Erlynne: "to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels."²⁷ By allowing his fallen woman in *Lady Windermere's Fan* to do a good thing without leaving her bad life, Wilde breaks the mould

²⁵Mona Caird, "The Morality of Marriage" *Fortnightly Review* 47 (March 1890), 328.

²⁶Henry Arthur Jones, *The Dancing Girl: A Drama in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1907); the Haymarket Theatre, 15 January, 1891.

²⁷Act IV, 167.

set by Victorian morality and dramatic practice.

This departure was not a simple variation on the theme of the fallen woman but an attack on a current formula, particularly insidious because it used the framework of the well-made play but denied the moral outcome that its logic demanded. Not that the play's subtext was clearly caught by audiences; they were evidently entertained by the play. Justin Huntly McCarthy reports that "the performance delights the spectators."²⁸ Joseph Knight describes an audience that "only ceased to laugh to applaud."²⁹ The difference between audience reception and critical reception was, however, substantial. The *Westminster Review* judged it to be "scarcely a play at all!" and said that Wilde "does not in the least, wish to tell a good story. So the plot does not matter."³⁰ In contrast to admiring audiences, reviewers saw that the play did not quite follow the rigid rules of contemporary drama and were quick to bring up Wilde's shortcomings. Their chief complaint was that Wilde kept Mrs. Erlynne's identity as Lady Windermere's mother a secret even from the audience, thereby tricking them into indicting her as a fallen woman, exactly as he tricked Lady Windermere herself. Even though Knight conceded that the construction was "neat and ingenious"³¹ and the dialogue attractive, he charged Wilde with "deriding and upsetting stage traditions." Knight asserted,

If there is a rule with regard to dramatic composition which has one undisputed acceptance, it is the axiom that the spectator of a comedy, sitting himself in the light, shall be diverted with the struggles and misapprehensions of those who are in the dark.³²

Keeping the audience at a distance by not taking them into his confidence did indeed create the sensational effect of sudden disclosure but it also meant a withholding of partnership with him in forming their judgment and cutting them adrift from dependable formulas. By making the audience navigate a seemingly familiar dramatic form by slippery

²⁸*Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1892, 476.

²⁹*The Athenaeum*, 27 February 1892, 286.

³⁰*Westminster Review*, April 1892, Beckson, 129.

³¹*Ibid*, 286.

³²*Ibid*, 285.

signals and averted expectations, Wilde broke a contract and forced his audience to engage in questions they did not expect.

Yet it was also evident that the presence of interesting characters was one of the attractions of *Lady Windermere's Fan* as was its witty dialogue, however unsatisfactory its plot development might be. Reviewers criticized the play both for using stock characters and situations and for failing to be a well-made play. The 1 April 1892 issue of *The Theatre* considered the play to be more a study of character than a well-rounded plot because it lacked incident. Most reviewers dismissed the plot as unoriginal at best (the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 9 April 1892; the *Speaker*, 27 February 1892; *Moonshine*, 5 March 1892) and at worst, improbable (the *Graphic*, 27 February 1892). The reviews focussed rather on Wilde's language, and though irritated at times by its excesses, saw its superiority to that of his contemporaries.

The striking characterization of the fallen woman commanded attention but while critics recognized Wilde's skill in amalgamating the English and the French models, they thought the result was sensationalist rather than penetrating. Some reviewers dismissed Mrs. Erlynne as a tiresome repetition of a French type,³³ but more found her a puzzle. The *Daily Telegraph's* Clement Scott and others judged the deviance from type a failure of dramatic consistency because one could not be sure how to take her, as a good woman or a bad. A study of first production costumes by Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell testifies to this ambiguity. At the ball, Mrs. Erlynne arrived in a white gown signalling purity, but the material of the gown created a "snake-like sheen" under the lights. In Darlington's rooms "Wilde's bare-armed and *décolleté* heroine confronts a villainess firmly wrapped up in a garment of sound English manufacture."³⁴ Even the casting of Marion Terry, who more often played good women than bad, as Mrs. Erlynne was a subtle warning against

³³A.B Walkley, *The Speaker*, 27 February 1892, v. 257-8, Beckson, 120-22.

³⁴Kaplan and Stowell, 17.

labelling the fallen woman good or bad.³⁵ Wilde also tends to keep the audience constantly disoriented by bending the rules he himself has set up within the play. As Ian Small points out, "motifs such as gardens, . . . at various dramatic moments *within the same play* can denote either innocence or corruption, or on occasions, both."³⁶ Again, Wilde leaves the audience bewildered.

The impact of these mixed signals was heightened by the author's initial concealment of Mrs. Erlynne's identity until the third act. Reviewers testify to the first-night audience's shock at this, a dissatisfaction so serious that both the conservative critic Clement Scott and the actor George Alexander (playing Lord Windermere) managed to persuade a reluctant Wilde to move the revelation to the second act.³⁷ The audience's bewilderment at being unable to place her apparently left them dissatisfied, even resentful, according to the *Graphic* (27 February 1892), the *Daily Telegraph* (22 February 1892) and the *Athenæum* (27 February 1892). Scott described an irritated audience: "For two-thirds of the evening people were asking one another, Who is she? . . . Is this adventuress a mistress or can she be a mother?"³⁸ The mystery admittedly gave "pleasure by teasing our curiosity," in A.B. Walkley's view,³⁹ but the same critic expressed his doubts generally about playwrights

³⁵In one reviewer's opinion, Terry herself was "a little perplexed with the character she [played]," a telling testimony to the play's ambivalence; *The Athenæum*, 27 February 1892, 286. Terry's usual role was that of a "sweet good woman," as remembered by Clement Scott in *The Theatre of Yesterday and To-day* Vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1899), 325.

³⁶Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 115.

³⁷Precisely which night saw the changes is unclear. It is unlikely that Wilde or Alexander could have made the changes directly after the first night because there would not have been enough time between the first and the next performance for following up on the discussions between Alexander, Wilde and Scott. Precisely when the script changes took place is not clear, because of conflicting accounts given by Wilde, Alexander, and reviewers who went to the play later during the run. For a fuller discussion, see *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (hereafter cited as *Letters*), ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 312-13, 26 February 1892; Ian Small, ed., Introduction, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, (London: Ernest Benn, 1980); Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For an account of St. James's, see A.E.W. Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James's Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1935); W. Macqueen-Pope, *St. James's: Theatre of Distinction* (London: W.H. Allen, 1958).

³⁸*Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 1892, 3, rpt., *Wilde: Comedies, A Casebook*, ed. William Tydeman (London: Macmillan, 1982), 48.

³⁹*Speaker*, 27 February 1892, v, 257-8, in Beckson, 121.

withholding vital information from audiences. Writing about the plays of the Ibsen school he complained that "the playgoer does not pay his money to be bewildered to-night, on the offchance that he will be enjoying his reflections to-morrow morning or next week."⁴⁰ For many reviewers, Wilde's careless use of dramatic rules simply resulted in failed construction and "feebleness in character drawing," while by not taking his audience "into his confidence," he was refusing to allow his audience its rightful place as "the conscience of the drama."⁴¹ The fear was that the audience would consider it a mockery of their sensibilities to be manoeuvred into the position of approving Lady Windermere's threat—a fallen woman did deserve public humiliation and perhaps even physical chastisement—only to be told that they had thereby approved of an unthinkable offense against filial bonds. To trick the unsuspecting audience into condemning a woman who later turns out to be the mother of the "good woman" of the play would have brought the play uncomfortably close to the kind of uneasiness about moral certitudes in Ibsen.

That a belated discovery would have been "too harsh, too horrible,"⁴² is a revealing anxiety on the part of the critic and the player about the need to observe the niceties of civilized society and the bonds of nature and duty between mother and daughter. These are denied by the events in the play, which create the poignant paradox that the filial bond glorified by the daughter is unknowingly broken by her, and is broken by the mother only to be strengthened. The only way to resolve the paradox is through the mother's self-sacrifice, made even more poignant by never disclosing the mother's identity to the daughter. Yet at the same time self-sacrifice does not transform the mother because she still remains the canny woman of the world and actually gains an advantage from her self-sacrifice by capturing a husband, and a gullible one at that. Her altruistic act indicates no conversion.

⁴⁰"Some Plays of the Day," *Fortnightly Review* ns. 53 (April 1893), 469.

⁴¹*Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 1892, 3, in Tydeman, 48.

⁴²Wilde to Alexander, *Letters*, 308.

Thus every assertion in the play has its opposite. The bad woman is compassionate, the good woman heartless. The fallen woman's self-sacrifice is also a career move. The husband fitting the philanderer model (by "keeping" a woman) is the model of faithful love. No wonder the title puzzled some commentators, such as Joseph Knight, who impatiently dismissed "A Good Woman" as mere sophistry when he reviewed the published version.⁴³ This systematic ambiguity casts into doubt all acts of judgment which, within the playworld, are entirely formulaic. Lord Windermere subscribes to the common loathing of the fallen woman and never advances beyond that. This is why he wants so desperately to keep Lady Windermere ignorant of Mrs. Erlynne's identity, for only through her ignorance may her bond with the tainted mother be disavowed. Should she discover the close connection with the woman she despises, she would have to face her own guilt in dishonouring the sacred bond between mother and child while simultaneously facing her own tainted inheritance. The shame looming over her becomes the more dramatic if the audience is let into the secret but she is not. On the other hand, by keeping the audience in the dark Wilde was placing them in the position of criticizing a self-sacrificing mother and supporting a transgressive daughter.

The issue, thus, was not really one of plot construction but of respecting conventions of conduct. The purpose of revealing Mrs. Erlynne's identity earlier in the action was to let the audience at once sympathize with the young heroine and absolve her of unfilial conduct. The early revelation also followed contemporary practice. George Taylor reminds us that "the theme of the 'guilty secret' was a common one, from *The Iron Chest* of 1796 to *The Bells* of 1871" in melodrama, "but it was seldom kept a secret from the audience."⁴⁴ Taylor points to the melodramatic tradition's very important "need for semiological clarity,"⁴⁵ which is why the audience, accustomed to melodramatic

⁴³*Athenæum*, 6 January 1894, 26.

⁴⁴George Taylor, *Players and Performers in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1989), 121.

⁴⁵Taylor, 122.

contrivances, would not have been pleased at being left in the dark about Mrs. Erlynne's identity.

Being certain about Mrs. Erlynne's identity was vital for judging her. In a cultural era devoted to icons of morality, a figure such as Mrs. Erlynne was certain to offend. Stereotypes of action and character were so well entrenched in the public mind that they were taken for the truth about humanity and any departure was regarded as a failure to be "true to life." This was exactly Clement Scott's point when he criticized Wilde for portraying a "mother who left her daughter forever unkissed" in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.⁴⁶ This simply could not be true. In a review of sensational fiction Mrs. Oliphant warned her readers that they stood in danger of being alienated from womankind in general if they rejected the ordained role of women and the corresponding definition of femininity. Her warning was echoed by Mrs. Lynn Linton in her infamous essay, "The Girl of the Period."⁴⁷ It was because that valued definition was being put in jeopardy by the image of the wild and passionate heroine of sensational fiction that the conservative Mrs. Oliphant indicted these stories. She judged that the "fleshly and unlovely record" which claimed to represent the feminine soul "as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings" was simply "slander." No less offensive was what according to some women writers was the real nature of the female unmasked. In Mrs. Oliphant's judgment it was not, as it claimed to be, the revelation of a truth suppressed in popular constructions of women but merely an uninformed fantasy and therefore a falsification of womankind. Her rejection of the recasting of the feminine in the new literature of women in effect validated the models of character and conduct established in literature by custom. Similarly, the *Daily Graphic's* review of Wilkie Collins's *The New Magdalen* protested its repudiation of stereotypes:

⁴⁶*Illustrated London News*, 27 February, 1892, in Beckson, 125.

⁴⁷Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's*, 102 (1867), 257-80; Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Girl of the Period," *Saturday Review*, 14 March, 1868, rpt. *'Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': Victorian Writing By Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1995), 172-6.

Every young man who goes to the Broadway Theatre tonight will learn that virtuous women, as typified by Grace Roseberry, are malignant and mean, and that only among prostitutes can be found women worthy to be loved and capable of loving in return.⁴⁸

Two decades later the same protest against dismantling stereotypes was voiced by Clement Scott who took Wilde to task for suggesting that "the very instinct of maternity—that holiest and purest instinct with women—is deadened in the breasts of our English mothers."⁴⁹

Exploding stereotypes is a basic technique by which Wilde challenges popularly uncontested ideas of good and bad, human nature, and particularly, women's nature and roles. The process begins with the affirmation of the model of the good woman, Lady Windermere, who fits the image of the ideal good woman perfectly as a chaste, childlike and unworldly figure, who needs protection. Opposite her Wilde places the model of the fallen woman, Mrs. Erlynne, who is everything that Lady Windermere is not; she is unchaste, adult, worldly, and needs no protection. The irony, seemingly tragic at first but empowering later, is that these moral opposites are mother and daughter.

The mother-daughter relationship forms the basis of Wilde's enquiry into the founding ideals of the society he portrays. As E. Ann Kaplan puts it, the nineteenth century was the "representational heyday" of the mother as the ultimate symbol of self-sacrificing love. In her extensive discussion of Mrs. Henry Wood's 1861 novel, *East Lynne*, Kaplan argues that the popularity of the novel and its many dramatic versions depended upon the unquestioned acceptance of the "paradigms of maternal sacrifice."⁵⁰ In the second chapter of her book Kaplan surveys the vastly complex historical processes that had produced the paradigms, which formed the basis of the virtual deification of the dead mother by an adoring daughter. *Lady Windermere's Fan* capitalizes on simultaneously

⁴⁸"The 'New Magdalen' and Its Lesson," *Daily Graphic*, 17 November 1873, 106, quoted in *The Woman Question: Literary Issues, 1837-1883. The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, Vol., III, ed. Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder (London: Garland, 1983), 167.

⁴⁹*Illustrated London News*, 27 February, 1892, in Beckson, 125.

⁵⁰E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 76-7.

idealizing the mother in the same vein and exposing the moral self-delusion engendered by the sentimentalization of the ideal. Narratives of the mother-daughter relationship are viewed by Marianne Hirsch as central both to the statement of social ideology and contributions to it, especially in effecting "constructions of femininity."⁵¹ Setting nineteenth and twentieth century narratives of the mother-daughter relationship against paradigms derived from ancient Greek mythology, Hirsch shows how they provide room for revaluations of dominant cultural codes.

It is this relationship in *Lady Windermere's Fan* that is placed in jeopardy to bring under question cultural and moral conventions. There are three sets of mothers and children in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The primary pair is Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne. Rodney Shewan has commented on the parallel pair, the Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Lady Agatha Carlisle.⁵² The third pair is Lady Windermere and her own child, Gerard—to whom Lady Windermere is just as indifferent as her own mother once was to her. The Duchess of Berwick is a dutiful mother, but proves it by transferring all responsibility for Lady Agatha on to her rich fiancé. Like Mrs. Erlynne, she is well aware of the reality she knows, namely, that a woman is a commodity, and that her best chance for happiness is to sell herself to the highest bidder. She is speaking the truth when she says that "a mother who doesn't part with a daughter every season has no real affection" (Act I, 31). Also like Mrs. Erlynne, the Duchess is eager to remove her daughter from Lord Darlington's influence, rightly because his attractiveness proves to be dangerous in his dealings with Lady Windermere. In Regenia Gagnier's view, Darlington is not so much a detached dandy as a common rake, ready to "pounc[e] on his friend's wife."⁵³ Without conceding this rather extreme judgment,⁵⁴ we may agree that Lord Darlington's

⁵¹Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 8.

⁵²Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 160.

⁵³Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 120-21.

⁵⁴Richard Ellman (*Oscar Wilde*, London: Penguin, 1987, 343-44) quotes Wilde's protest against the portrayal of Lord Darlington as a rake by Maurice Barrymore in the 1893 New York production.

personality does bring out a uniform protectiveness from these mothers.

By equating the protectiveness of the Duchess and Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde is highlighting the latter's strength as a mother. Thereby he is decisively distancing her from the run of imperfect mothers on the English stage, a common type. While some were merely silly and unwise, others were almost criminal in their transgressions. In Pinero's farce, *The Magistrate* (1885),⁵⁵ the vanity of a widowed mother causes confusion. In a more serious play, *The Cabinet Minister* (1890), Pinero's basically decent Lady Kitty Twombly's attempts to hide her foolishly extravagant debts from her husband land her husband and children in jeopardy and lead her into criminal acts.⁵⁶ In Grundy's *Sowing the Wind* (1893) we hear of a despicable mother, Helen Gray, known as Baby Brabant, a fallen woman who ruins her daughter's chance of a decent life. Other mothers who failed their children included Chambers's Mrs. Seabrook from *Captain Swift* (1888), whose abandonment of her child caused him to become an arch-criminal and eventually led to his suicide.⁵⁷ F.A. Scudamore's Gertrude Weir in *Dangers of London* (1890) is the most extreme of our examples, as, in her exaggerated villainy, she encourages her son in fraud and rape, among other crimes. It is against these two-dimensional images of stupidity and vice that Wilde poses Mrs. Erlynne, and later, Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, as women not to be captured by generalizations.

The emphasis on Mrs. Erlynne's character as that of the good mother is maintained by the sanctifying rhetoric of motherhood in general, which never flags as we go from the Duchess to Mrs. Erlynne. The weight of this valorization makes it all the more shocking that there should be so hideous a violation of the sacred filial bond as Lady Windermere's

⁵⁵Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Magistrate: A Farce in Three Acts* (London: William Heinemann, 1892). First performed at the Court Theatre, 21 March, 1885, it was revived at Terry's Theatre, 13 April, 1892.

⁵⁶Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Cabinet Minister: A Farce in Four Acts* (Boston: W.H. Baker and Co., 1892); the Court Theatre, 23 April, 1890. Although the play is a comedy with many farcical elements, the issue of ethics is explored with some seriousness.

⁵⁷C. Haddon Chambers, *Captain Swift: A Comedy Drama in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1902). First performed at the Haymarket Theatre, 20 June, 1888, it was revived at the same theatre, 15 December, 1890 and again on 15 November, 1893.

threat to strike Mrs. Erlynne. Although her threat is not carried out, it is performed in speech and manner when in the third act she insults Mrs. Erlynne by calling her a woman who is "bought and sold."⁵⁸ The severity of the shock that would have been caused by Lady Windermere actually striking her mother may be imagined from Wilde's letters. Wilde's conviction of the jarring effect of the mere threat of Lady Windermere's words and even of the suspense created by that threat indicates that if the action had been consummated, the perpetrator could never have retained audience sympathy regardless of provocation.⁵⁹ But even if the audience had thought the adventuress a total stranger, it is likely that had Lady Windermere carried through with her action, she would have fallen from a position of total goodness. Women were not supposed to raise their hands. Reviewers of *A Woman of No Importance* thought that the otherwise acceptable fallen woman there was cheapened when she struck her former seducer.⁶⁰ It was unladylike, it was uncontrolled, and it was the same lack of self-control that characterized the stage villain or villainess. In Prowse's 1994 Birmingham production, Lady Windermere struck her husband when he said that Mrs. Erlynne was a clever rather than a good woman, echoing Mrs. Arbuthnot's striking of Lord Illingworth for his ungentlemanliness. Charles Brookfield and J.M. Glover's burlesque, *The Poet and the Puppets* (1892), gives an idea of the vulgarity of Lady Windermere's threat to her husband. Their Lady Winterstock rejects the fan altogether and plans to use her fists to "pummel her until she cannot see"⁶¹ while Lord Winterstock moans, "My hearth's wrecked, and all through my mamma-in-law/The most charming woman that ever I saw."⁶² Comically acknowledging the enormity of disrespect towards a maternal figure, "Lord Wildermere's Mother-in-Law," a satiric poem in *Punch*, focussed on Mrs. Erlynne's identity as a mother-in-law, where Lord

⁵⁸Act III, 114.

⁵⁹Wilde to Alexander, *Letters*, 308.

⁶⁰*Naval Review*, 4 May, 1893; *Graphic*, 29 April, 1893.

⁶¹Charles Brookfield and J.M. Glover (music), *The Poet and the Puppets: A Travestie Suggested by "Lady Windermere's Fan"* (London: Mitchell and Co., [printer], 1892), sc. ii, 17.

⁶²*ibid.* 14.

Windermere's protective actions towards her could be seen as a bizarre sort of traditional respect: "For in spite of blackmail, I have vowed ne'er to fail/ In the duty I owe to my Mother-in-law."⁶³

Although the mother is the stronger figure in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lady Windermere is the nominal heroine of the play because she is the threatened child upon whose fate Wilde hangs the plot. In terms of the moral perceptions within the play her position is clearly not unambiguous. She does not commit any noble or heroic action that might earn her any praise; she is the heroine simply because she fulfills the requirements of a fictional convention that designates the damsel in distress as the heroine. If anything, Lady Windermere's actions are foolish rather than noble or virtuous, despite the intentions she declares. Her reputation for uprightness notwithstanding, her attempts at creating a moral structure in her social world are treated indulgently by those who surround her. Lip service is paid to her, as for instance by the Duchess of Berwick, who announces in Act I that it is only because of Lady Windermere's strict rules of admittance that Lady Agatha is allowed to come to her house. In fact, her attempts at upholding the moral structure of society meet only with the response of adults to a child's game and succeed only as such. Her husband's love for her is the love of a caring parent for his child, an unnatural confinement to infancy. He frequently addresses her as "child" and after their reconciliation in Act IV he actually strokes her hair as he smiles and assures her of her innocence.⁶⁴ In their burlesque of the play, *The Poet and the Puppets*, Charles Brookfield and J. M. Glover mock Lady Windermere's puritanical rigidity by making their version of Lord Windermere, Lord Winterstock, say,

My wife has such curious ideas about
Whom one ought to know (I've not the smallest doubt
She's quite right) but still it is an awful bore
If one may not see one's own mamma-in-law!⁶⁵

⁶³"Lord Wildermere's Mother-in-Law," *Punch* 12 March, 1892, 123.

⁶⁴Act I, 180.

⁶⁵Charles Brookfield and J.M. Glover (music), *The Poet and the Puppets: A Travestie Suggested by "Lady Windermere's Fan,"* sc ii, 14.

Lady Windermere reveals her juvenile ideas when she nostalgically vows to remain true to the aunt who brought her up after her mother's "death":

She was stern to me, but she taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. *She* allowed of no compromise. *I* allow of none.⁶⁶

But her efforts to enforce her values are not taken seriously, as obvious from the fact that she is kept in the dark when a truly serious problem threatens to invade her playworld of morals. This seems inevitable because it is only in a child's world of absolutes that Lady Windermere's rigid rules can apply. Understandably, she reacts with bewilderment to the Duchess of Berwick who treats her as an innocent, calls her "child" and proceeds to tell her the facts of life as regards the realities of Society marriages. When Lady Windermere protests that she married for love, the Duchess pityingly dismisses her expectations of constancy by equating them with childish desires, which she should have long outgrown. She tells Lady Windermere, "Yes, we begin like that"⁶⁷ implying that one's romantic expectations can be retained only if one does not move beyond childhood. She is not really surprised at Lord Windermere's presumed unfaithfulness, and seems to think it high time that Lady Windermere entered the world of adults in which marriage is just a matter of economic and social convenience. Lady Windermere's reaction is the incredulity of a child first encountering the real world: "Are *all* men bad?"⁶⁸

Revealed as a child, Lady Windermere reminds one of Ibsen's Nora, as noted, among others, by Peter Raby who considers that her departure from Windermere's house is "potentially as shocking as Nora's in *A Doll's House*."⁶⁹ The parallel is not exact because the shock value of Nora's departure arises as much from the goal of her journey, that of self-discovery and fulfilment, as from the fact that she was leaving her husband and children. The originality of Nora's decision comes also from its place in the play, where

⁶⁶Act I, 9.

⁶⁷Act I, 28.

⁶⁸Act I, 28.

⁶⁹Peter Raby, "Wilde's Comedies of Society," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed., Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 150.

we are left with the door shut in our face by a woman eagerly facing her potential. The contrast is sharp with a woman begging to be let in after realizing the home is her only sphere, as Lady Windermere does, at least in intent. In J. Palgrave Simpson's *Broken Ties* (1872) the character of La Silvia, who, like Nora, had left her husband and family to pursue self-fulfilment, is encountered at the end, rather than at the beginning of her enterprise, a failed one, which makes it possible for the erring woman to condemn herself by her own words. Wilde's heroine is closer to La Silvia and proves compliant to the dominant ideas of worth rather than to Nora who sets out to discover for herself what is worth searching. She and Nora do suffer in similar predicaments of self-esteem. Both are similarly treated as children in their world but their responses vary radically. Whereas Nora happily acquiesces in playing the child role at first, opting out of taking responsibility for herself, Lady Windermere starts out by seeing herself very much as an adult and by claiming an adult's authority. At the end, their fates are reversed, Nora rejecting the security of the child role, Lady Windermere seeking refuge in it. Nora has a future as an individual, paved with hardship as it may be, but Lady Windermere remains imprisoned in the comfort of hand-me-down notions of worth that Wilde maintains even as he mocks the unexamined paradigms by which society expects one to live.

Treating Lady Windermere as a child, her guardians, that is, her husband and her mother, take all control out of her hands. Her husband sets off the chain of events when he assumes that she will be unable to live with the knowledge of her mother's true fate. Both he and Mrs. Erlynne are in agreement over this, since Mrs. Erlynne bases her blackmail on the same assumption. It is on the assumption of her childlike innocence that she is kept ignorant of the full facts about Mrs. Erlynne's identity, which sparks the near disaster of her elopement with Lord Darlington. Her first attempt to control the situation, which is to refuse Mrs. Erlynne an invitation to the ball, fails because her husband asserts his superior right as the head of the household. Her threat to strike Mrs. Erlynne with the fan is the child's petulant outburst against the adult and again fails. Because the fragility of

her power in the home is made so clear to Lady Windermere, she attempts to reassert herself by fleeing the site of her powerlessness, the "bondage" of her marriage.⁷⁰ But when she tries to enter the adult world by leaving the safety of the domestic sphere, she still cannot achieve autonomy because Mrs. Erlynne takes over the controls of her actions. As her mother, Mrs. Erlynne reasserts her rights and reads Lady Windermere's letter to her husband, claiming her right to invade her child's privacy and treating Lady Windermere as a fractious child incapable of dealing with the world. Lord Windermere patronizingly tells his wife that she can have no conception of the realities of the world outside the domestic sphere: "Child, you and she belong to different worlds. Into your world evil has never entered"(Act IV, 180). With characteristic fatherly concern he protects her innocent ears from the ugly details of Mrs. Erlynne's guilt: "Margaret, if you knew where Mrs. Erlynne went last night, after she left this house, you would not sit in the same room with her."⁷¹ Mrs. Erlynne speaks with similar parental concern because she cannot imagine that Lady Windermere has the ability to survive in the world outside the domestic circle: "why, you are a mere girl, you would be lost."⁷² So potent is the force of this assumption that the child actually conforms to the image constructed for her by the parent figures. The stage directions are revealing: Lady Windermere "bursts into tears and buries her face in her hands" and "holding out her hands to her [Mrs. Erlynne], helplessly, as a child might do" she cries, "Take me home. Take me home."⁷³ The text's infantilization of Lady Windermere could not be more conclusive.

This infantilization of Lady Windermere is graphically caught in Ernst Lubitsch's 1925 film of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.⁷⁴ Visually contrasting childish panic with adult resignation, the film leads up to one particularly telling scene where the childishness of

⁷⁰Act II, 93.

⁷¹Act IV, 152-3.

⁷²Act III, 116.

⁷³Act III, 117.

⁷⁴The main roles were played by May McAvoy (Lady Windermere), Irene Rich (Mrs. Erlynne), Ronald Coleman (Lord Darlington), and Bert Lytell (Lord Windermere).

Lady Windermere is captured in a brilliant image in which she and Mrs. Erlynne are shown together in a moment of anticipation of discovery and exposure. In this scene in Lord Darlington's rooms, pieced together in the film by close-ups, Mrs. Erlynne's face shows weary alarm, while Lady Windermere's shows wide-eyed terror, her inability to act for herself emphasized by her immobility. Frozen by her fear, she has to be literally pushed by her mother to safety.

Lady Windermere's predicament as a lost child is sharpened by Wilde's ironic play on the norm of parental support. The conventional protector of the child, its mother, is here at the root of the upheaval in the child's world. Instead of confirming the traditional rules by which Lady Windermere's world is held together, Mrs. Erlynne's life strikes at them and exposes their fragility. Nor does Wilde's moral irony stop at this exposure. The problem created by Mrs. Erlynne takes Lady Windermere first through a period of infantile helplessness, then juvenile rebellion, to a mature vision of the world. The irony, then, is that Mrs. Erlynne, however unfit a mother she might seem to be as a fallen woman, in fact nurtures her child into maturity and helps her to confront the world with a deeper intelligence than the ready-made rubrics of conventional morality ever can. The Lady Windermere who says:

There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's life to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one may walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice.

I, who had shut my eyes to life, came to the brink⁷⁵

is an altogether different person from the self-approving woman who is convinced that "If we had these 'hard and fast rules,' we should find life much more simple."⁷⁶ If she has grown from child to woman, it is because of the lesson she has received from a fallen woman. This surely is a process that redefines the meaning of bringing up a child.

⁷⁵Act IV, 181.

⁷⁶Act I, 14.

The vision of innocence created by Lady Windermere's child persona is essential to set off its opposite, the fallen woman's tainted worldliness. If Lady Windermere occupies one end of the female identity, at its extreme opposite is Mrs. Erlynne, whose fallen state is a product of her imputed sexual laxity. Apart from creating a moral scale, this contraposition allows Wilde to form the play according to one of the basic plot patterns of drama, the conflict between good and evil. Within the genre in which Wilde was working, this conflict often takes the form of a contest between the innocent heroine and the worldly-wise adventuress, as in Grundy's *A Fool's Paradise* (1887), and Wilde faithfully follows that convention. At the same time he undercuts it by investing the adventuress with a power at once to disrupt and to heal which makes her moral status in the play ambiguous and forces a re-examination of conventional judgments.

To underline the weight of society's judgment against Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde goes to considerable length initially to typecast her by building her up through several layers of information, each showing with increasing emphasis how alien she is to Lady Windermere. Before Mrs. Erlynne even enters the stage, the heroine has been told that she is a woman of dubious morality by no less than three characters. By the rules of Lady Windermere's world, her informants can be relied upon for this judgment, for their own positions in society are beyond reproach. Lord Darlington's sly hints about the existence of a disreputable woman are made concrete by the Duchess of Berwick's gossip, all of which is confirmed by the discovery of the receipts of payment and Lord Windermere's acknowledgment that she is a fallen woman trying to re-enter Society. At the ball, her character is at once clear to all who see her. Her dress, a little too beautiful and expensive to have been acquired respectably, gives her away even before her name is revealed. Lady Plymdale's suspicion that she is "a woman of that kind"⁷⁷ is sparked by the fact that she is so well-dressed. The way the men treat her is also a fair indication of the kind of woman she is, since many, like Dumby, take excessive care to deny any acquaintance with her, or,

⁷⁷Act II, 70.

like Cecil Graham, try to avoid introducing her to respectable women like their aunts.

It is tempting to see in Mrs. Erlynne Shaw's *Mrs. Warren (Mrs. Warren's Profession, 1894)* the conventionally unconventional mother, although the latter is much more practical about her past. The comparison does not entirely hold because Mrs. Erlynne behaves less like a put-on theatrical approximation of the good mother than Mrs. Warren (according to Shaw's own stage instructions) but does end up with an understanding with her daughter, unlike Mrs. Warren, who ends with complete estrangement. Vivie Warren rescues herself from becoming part of a conventional story while Lady Windermere relies on her mother for her rescue. Both dramatists struggle with definitions of good and bad women, especially in women's roles as mothers. Mrs. Warren, who does not know how a conventionally good mother should behave, takes as her model the stage motherliness of a bad woman as represented in the character of Mrs. Murgatroyd of Sydney Grundy's *A Bunch of Violets* (1894).⁷⁸ Wilde's character, on the contrary, remains outside the reach of stereotypes.

Mrs. Erlynne's outsider position is denoted by the images of isolation found in the ballroom and in Darlington's rooms. The extent to which other women accept or reject a new woman in their midst is used as a strong clue to her character. In the Windermere's ballroom, Mrs. Erlynne is at first isolated from all the women who surround her with a palpable atmosphere of hostility.⁷⁹ Lady Windermere cuts her by physically removing herself. Lady Plymdale keeps her distance. The terrible power of Society, which is shown to rest in female acceptance, brings her to a faltering admission: "I am afraid of the women," she tells Windermere, "You must introduce me to some of them."⁸⁰

⁷⁸Sydney Grundy, *A Bunch of Violets: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1901); the Haymarket Theatre, 25 April, 1894. It was an adaptation of Octave Feuillet's *Montjoye*.

⁷⁹Katharine Worth and Peter Raby draw our attention to the original production at the St. James's, which highlighted that isolation in the scene at Lord Darlington's rooms by having a sea of dark-suited men surrounding the bare-armed Mrs. Erlynne. For a fuller discussion see Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 92 and Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 90. Lubitsch's film placed Mrs. Erlynne in the centre of the ballroom, with the guests of both sexes clearly keeping a shocked distance from her.

⁸⁰Act II, 66.

Mrs. Erlynne is an outcast not only in Lady Windermere's view but everyone else's in her circle. The men crack sexual jokes about her, and the women think of her as a courtesan. Even her husband-to-be, Lord Augustus sniggers:

By Jove! you should have heard what she said about Mrs. Erlynne. She didn't leave a rag on her. . . . [Aside.] Berwick and I told her that didn't matter much, as the lady in question must have an extremely fine figure.⁸¹

Lady Plymdale believes "women of that kind are most useful"⁸² as a distraction for her husband so that she herself may stray, an admission that at once affirms the shameful belief that prostitutes are society's sexual safety-valves, and blurs the distinction between the respectable and the disreputable. Mrs. Erlynne's own flattery of Lady Jedburgh and the Duchess of Berwick confirms her as a woman who lives by her wits, using her charm as a weapon. Lady Windermere's stubborn refusal to be swayed by her charm is part of a convention that the innocent heroine has an instinct about a fallen woman, no matter how well she is disguised. Ian Small observes that "the offensiveness of a bad woman to the good was a familiar theme in Society drama."⁸³ An enduring type, the innocent "good young woman" from Alicia Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret*) to Ellean Tanqueray (*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*), Violet Marchant (*A Bunch of Violets*) and Margaret Marrables (*The Fatal Card*) feels an instinctive aversion to the "bad woman," and struggles against the example of others to accept them. Such an uncompromising rejection of an outcast is charged with dramatic possibilities and fully exploited by dramatists when they reveal that the fallen woman is actually related to the virtuous heroine. True to the conventional profile of the high-minded woman, the ingenue shows her total aversion to the polluting presence of the fallen woman by repulsing even the male authority figure's pragmatic attempts to bring about a truce between the two. The obvious irony is that this target of fear and loathing, this person whose intrusion into Lady Windermere's world causes the severest disruption of her life, should be her mother.

⁸¹Act II, 59.

⁸²Act II, 73.

⁸³Ian Small, ed., Introduction, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, xxii.

But a deeper irony is that while it demolishes the idealization of the mother, the play does reiterate the common view of the mother as the self-sacrificing redeemer of her daughter. Although Mrs. Erlynne is an unusual adventuress in her resistance to surrendering to the role of repentant sinner, she does not escape ties to conventionality. She admits that her feelings for her daughter are more powerful and consuming than any other she has ever experienced. The irony is, of course, that this consuming love for a child in the heart of a fallen woman was the defining moral characteristic of the ideal woman deified in nineteenth century popular imagination, especially if it took the form of self-sacrifice. No better proof of maternal love or indeed of virtue all round could be offered than self-sacrifice. The historian and essayist William E. H. Lecky represents the age when he says: "Self-sacrifice is the most conspicuous element of a virtuous and religious character."⁸⁴

Thus, even as Wilde exposes the hollowness of conventional positions, he also ascribes self-sacrifice to the mother as a defining virtue. At the same time, maintaining his fluid shifts between convention and its subversion, Wilde continues to demolish the legend of repentance by making sure that Mrs. Erlynne's self-sacrifice does not bring about her wholesale conversion and turn her into the reformed sinner of popular drama, such as Agnes Ebbsmith (*The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*)⁸⁵ or Dulcie Larondie (*The Masqueraders*). By refusing to mold her to convention Wilde thrusts her upon the spectator's attention as a character who cannot be caught by available definitions of conduct and must always remain the outsider in the world of conventional moral judgments.

Mrs. Erlynne is an outsider in yet another sense, a particularly intriguing one. Her wit, self-control and power of ironic observation are almost good enough to qualify her as one of Wilde's dandies. Like the true Wildean dandy, Mrs. Erlynne pursues an aesthetic

⁸⁴William E. H. Lecky, *The History of European Morals* (1869), vol. II, 3rd. ed. (New York: Appleton, 1884) 282.

⁸⁵Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith: A Drama in Four Acts* (London: William Heinemann, 1895).

rather than moral validation of speech, appearance and action, but does not quite reach the dandy's perfection because her pursuit does not go beyond the posture to reach into character. Nonetheless her aestheticism allows her to stand aside from others, effectively granting her autonomy, while it marks the moral divide between her and her puritanical daughter for whom the only standards are moral ones. Richard D. McGhee argues that Lady Windermere is a "dowdy" (that is, a puritan in Wilde's terms) whose impossible standards of morality force her husband to lie to her.⁸⁶ McGhee is not entirely persuasive about Lady Windermere's influence over her husband, because the standards of morality prevailing within the Windermere universe are as much of the paternalist husband's making as his child-wife's. The identification of Mrs. Erlynne as a dandy is therefore hardly absolute. While she has the manner of the dandy and the dandy's ability to take a detached view of life and of herself, she displays a predatory selfishness which is inconsistent with the aestheticism of the dandy. Despite Wilde's generally sympathetic treatment of Mrs. Erlynne, he reveals moments when she appears as a common adventuress interested only in gain. Her confident statement that she can always "manage the men" appears, in view of her financial blackmail of Lord Windermere and her duping of Lord Augustus, as a courtesan's vulgar boast. To McGhee's interpretation it is therefore necessary to add that Wilde seems deliberately to keep us aware of the cracks in Mrs. Erlynne's dandy mask and the jarring notes in the elegant modulation of her dandy voice.

Still, Mrs. Erlynne is a close approximation of the dandy at least in setting her own rules. For instance, Wilde places her squarely outside the normal construction of marriage. Although she will marry Lord Augustus, her marriage is unlikely to be hailed with joyous celebration in the Windermere's circle as it is not underwritten even by the appearance of romance as the judicious marriage between Lady Agatha and Mr. Hopper is. That this is no conventional marriage is denoted by Lord Augustus's readiness to follow his wife into

⁸⁶Richard D. McGhee, *Marriage, Duty, and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 286.

exile—an act of alienation if ever there was one. Here again Mrs. Erlynne claims her singularity: no woman but she can dispense with Society. In McGhee's view, the society women are neither dandies nor dowdies, because they lack the wit and daring of Mrs. Erlynne and the moral probity of Lady Windermere.⁸⁷ Mrs. Erlynne has her way precisely because as a dandy she recognizes none of the conventions that the average woman mistakes for duty. The essential difference between her and Lady Windermere is that she consistently repudiates the rhetoric of duty while the only language Lady Windermere understands is that of duty. Even when Lady Windermere takes a tentative step outside the learnt confines of her life, she has only to be reminded of her duty to her husband and child to understand the enormity of her action. Her attempt at self-realization by running away and thus staying true to her moral assertions is recognized as feeble and half-hearted by her mother, the dandy-artist, who also recognizes that it is only the language of convention that Lady Windermere can hear. She cannot "be brave" and be herself as Darlington exhorts her to be, because the identity Lady Windermere clings to is built upon the false ideal of her mother.

Mrs. Erlynne is more accurately identifiable as a dandy *manqué* rather than a full-fledged one. She is too self-centred to be believable as a person for whom aesthetic elegance determines both action and motive, the form as well as the substance of conduct. It would also be inconsistent with Wilde's systematic attempt to resist cast-iron categories, as evidenced by his manipulation of the conventional models of the fallen woman. The irony inherent in his own portrayal of the fallen woman simultaneously typecasts her and breaks the cast. All Wilde's fallen women have moments of weakness and poignant recall of their lost innocence, which force a reevaluation of the fixed moral identity created by their present opportunistic, immoral and parasitical actions. Mrs. Erlynne is perhaps the most sympathetic of the three such women in the Wilde canon. She is neither a puritanical

⁸⁷McGhee, 288.

martyr like Mrs. Arbuthnot, nor an actual criminal like Mrs. Cheveley. That her fall has been painful is evident from her words of warning to her daughter; the life of the adventuress is stripped of all pretense to glamour when she paints a grim picture of the daily humiliations she suffers:

You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at — to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don't know what it is. One pays for one's sin, and then one pays again, and all one's life one pays.⁸⁸

That losing her daughter a second time reawakens her pain is evident in her seemingly light-hearted words, "My—heart is affected here,"⁸⁹ words that gain a double meaning from the audience's knowledge of the events of the night before. Mrs. Erlynne as much as admits her feelings for Lady Windermere when she tentatively asks Lord Windermere, "If I said to you that I cared for her, perhaps loved her even—you would sneer at me, wouldn't you?"⁹⁰ In order to leave no doubt about her true feelings, Wilde, in the printed text, explicitly contradicts her words, "I want to live childless still," with the stage direction, "Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh."⁹¹ The alert spectator instantly recognizes the pain that the heroic mother accepts in order to protect her daughter's illusions.

The main reason why Mrs. Erlynne never evolves as a true dandy is that she is too caught up in self-interest which even her one act of self-sacrifice to save her daughter cannot erase. Wilde plays a double game of demolishing stereotypes at once by showing that the fallen woman is not truly fallen and that the mother is not single-mindedly committed to duty. The icon of virtue is as untenable as the icon of vice. The uncertainty of judgment he creates is further enhanced when he offends one of the founding ideas of Victorian justice, that the guilty shall suffer both worldly penalties and the pangs of

⁸⁸Act III, 115.

⁸⁹Act IV, 155.

⁹⁰Act IV, 169.

⁹¹Act IV, 166.

conscience. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* the fallen woman not only suffers no material loss, she actually prospers. The regret she has for her past is easily offset by her capture of a rich and gullible husband.

Thus, the play progresses through a series of ironies. The obvious question, who is the "good woman" of the title, highlights the paradox that the homewrecker is the homebuilder. The mother who had abandoned her child is the same woman who rushes to stand by the child. The woman feared by society as a fallen woman is morally unfallen, but again, not entirely so, because she marries for expediency, not love. Exploring the gap between appearance and reality, Wilde shows that Mrs. Erlynne's compromised position is in truth exactly as innocent as she claims to Tuppy. Spreading the ironic confusion wider, Wilde exposes that protector of marriage as an institution, the Duchess of Berwick, as a woman who can destroy love and family by malicious gossip. In a final exposé of his own game, Wilde renders his use of the typical fallen woman ambivalent by at once inverting the type and conforming to it. He undercuts the convention of the fallen woman by showing her repudiating the expectations from a fallen woman, refusing to creep away into repentant obscurity, and continuing to capitalize on her charms. At the same time he does subscribe to the ethical position inherent in the model by making her repent her past and counsel her daughter against the same mistake.

But this sustained irony is not the play's only impact. A more profound goal towards which it proceeds is that of uncovering the connections between human motivations and their social context. As we follow the characters in the play, we see how the Puritan, inflexible in the beginning, learns to look beyond appearances while her husband, more sympathetic in the first act to "a woman who wants to get back,"⁹² surrenders to appearances in the third. Wilde's tool of recognition is indeed irony but its end is knowledge. The puritan asserts the rule of moral doctrine as an immutable truth but learns that the rule is not universal. It is not accidental that the play should begin on Lady

⁹²Act I, 38.

Windermere's birthday, nor that it is on this day she should first confront reality, read it through the optics of convention, find it a distorting vision, and gain a truer understanding of human nature. The day's significance is deliberately pressed upon the viewer when she tells Lord Darlington, "Yes, I'm of age today. Quite an important day in my life, isn't it?"⁹³ a literal statement that rises to the symbolic power of a trope of moral maturation. The conclusion is again an exercise in irony, for the play concedes its last line to Lady Windermere, the puritan whom it has discredited, situating its insight in her when she tells Lord Augustus, "Ah, you're marrying a very good woman."⁹⁴ At last she recaptures her status as the "good woman" of the play and its heroine, with Wilde laughing at one last joke on the politically correct for whom only the fallen can be good.

The joke against the world is that the expected character alignments prove to be wrong, for the play ends with the inversion of the initial relationship between the good woman and the bad. What began as hostility between rivals ends as co-operation between kinswomen. Striking as the end is, it is not an original invention of Wilde's, for this kind of conclusion was common both in New Woman literature and in conventional rhetoric about women's relationships to other women.⁹⁵ Earlier in the century, Mrs. Sarah Ellis had called on all women to join together to further their common cause of upholding virtue and guiding men towards it.⁹⁶ However, in the conventional view of relationships this solidarity could prevail only among women of the same kind, namely, good women, whose consciousness of virtue distanced them from their fallen sisters. Kate Millett remarks that "one of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron."⁹⁷ This

⁹³Act I, 3.

⁹⁴Act IV, 183.

⁹⁵Examples in fiction are: George Egerton, Olive Schreiner, *Story of An African Farm* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883); *Keynotes* (London: Mathews and Lane, 1893); Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (London: Bliss, Sands & Foster, 1894).

⁹⁶Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1842).

⁹⁷Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), 38.

conventional set of alignment and antagonism is undermined by Wilde when he brings the cynical adventuress and the moralizing heroine together in an exchange consisting of affection on the part of one and admiration on that of the other. This seems closer to the political direction taken by the New Women who were eager to encourage all women, of all classes, to join together against the common enemy, man. In their reckoning, if women could cease being enemies, good women would succeed in converting bad women. Tess Cosslett notes that the coming together of two women was often essential to the resolution of the plot.⁹⁸ Female friendship prevailed over male attempts to divide the female world. The idea is implicit in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for its happy ending is the result of mother and daughter finally ranging themselves together to stand against the male world of double standards. The happy ending is therefore in itself a disturbing closure: it is a challenge to male sovereignty and it is brought about by a woman who is an intruder and quite happy to remain so. The restoration of Lady Windermere's domestic peace is in fact a mere illusion, for its process has shaken the certitudes by which her world is guided.

Through the play's process, then, Wilde takes aim at stereotypes as a way not just of lancing the world's follies but of discovering how people struggle towards self-realization. But his own handling of this demonstration is not without its ironies because although the transformations he portrays do demolish the conventional wisdom of socially constructed moral labels, they actually affirm the legitimacy of the values that stereotypes are designed to protect, such as motherhood and married love. How is Mrs. Erlynne elevated to the status of the self-sacrificing redeemer if not as a mother, and why, if she is not dedicated to saving marriage vows and motherhood? She may not herself attain to the nobility of a marriage of love, but she has a vision of it and fights for it. That this sanctification of marriage and motherhood should come from her rather than from the Duchess of Berwick or Lady Plymdale, underlines Wilde's questioning of society's understanding of principles

⁹⁸ Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), 3.

but does not shake his endorsement of the principles themselves.

Underlying this unexpected countertext to Wilde's exposure of the unreliability of social constructions of good and bad there runs a deeper vein of disquiet. If indeed, as argued above, the play does uphold motherhood and married love as women's highest virtue, Wilde's idea of women's nature is not after all too far from the dominant view of women, and while it liberates women from the tyranny of a shallow social regimen, it does not question the essentialized definition of woman. If there is any rebellion here, it does not penetrate to fundamental conceptions. On the contrary, and to our consternation, we may see a deep-rooted fear of women's ability and propensity for bringing disorder into the world in general and destroying personal relationships in particular. *Lady Windermere's Fan* systematically shows that women enslave men both by innocence and by sex, give in to emotions, launch into rash decisions and lack rationality. Men escape judgment. Despite the play's obvious contempt for the men in it who are nothing but drones, it fails to mark men's responsibility for women's humiliating dependency on men. The play works on several levels: on the surface it exposes the hollowness of the dominant definitions of women but at a deeper level of ethical perception it does endorse the value of women's domesticated identity. Looking still deeper, we may in fact see a fear that women may slip the ties of that identity and unleash irrational impulses characteristic of the female ego. Thus, the exposure of the false ideals and moral definitions in the play remains incomplete because Wilde's understanding here is grounded in a gendered view of the world in which a woman is always of importance but often only as a threat.

Chapter 4

A Woman of No Importance: The Devouring Mother

A Woman of No Importance unfolds as a conflict over loyalties and values brought about by women's imposition of their will upon the world.¹ In this conflict their adversaries are men and the prize is the conversion of a man to their faith. Wilde called it a "woman's play,"² but the phrase identifies the play less as an invention fit chiefly for female consumption and more as a course of events steered by women's will and women's nature. The phrase certainly does not imply any partisanship or even sympathy for women on Wilde's part, for the women in the play are not seen in any favourable light, as Patricia Behrendt notes.³ It is true that no character, male or female, receives any great approval from the playwright, but the sheer number of self-centred and possessive women implies a warning against women. Lady Caroline is neurotic in keeping Sir John tied to herself, Lady Hunstanton is blind to anything but the most superficial social etiquette and gossip, Mrs. Allonby a vicious female rake, Lady Stutfield a sly would-be rake, Hester a moral bully, and Mrs. Arbuthnot a self-dramatizing, self-pitying, possessive tyrant. The last two characters, Puritans in their inflexible moral stance, cause no less disorder in the world than the other women who are more obviously self-serving. One other female influence must be noted here which is easy to overlook but a troubling one nonetheless. This is the absent mother of Lord Illingworth. In Act II we learn that Lord Illingworth's father had told him to marry Mrs. Arbuthnot but that he had refused, apparently because he was influenced by his mother—as "every man is when he is young."⁴ If this is true, it must be added to the

¹Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (London: Methuen, 1908). The play opened at the Haymarket Theatre on 19 April, 1893 and ran for 113 performances.

²Rupert Hart-Davis, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 335.

³Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 152.

Behrendt's discussion of *A Woman of No Importance* concentrates on the dandy's criticism of women and Wilde's negative characterization of women. She attributes this bias to Wilde's homosexuality but her reading of a biographical subtext into the play is not convincingly supported.

⁴Act II, 93.

episode of Mrs. Allonby instigating Lord Illingworth to initiate the seduction of Hester as proof of women's malice towards other women. Not that the men are seen in a complimentary light; Lord Illingworth is an egotistic libertine, Gerald a callow and complacent prig, Sir John and Lord Alfred ciphers, Dr. Daubeny an uxorious nonentity, and Kelvil a self-important fool. However, since men are mostly secondary characters, their faults are not as insistently visible as women's and, barring Lord Illingworth, they make little direct contribution to the plot. Unlike *Lady Windermere's Fan*, where the puritanical young woman's moral initiative is not only defeated but she is herself co-opted into the validation of the patriarchy, in the present play men are utterly vanquished by women's assaults on them, both puritanical and immoral. The only male adversary to the women, Lord Illingworth, is put down in two entirely opposite ways by women; on the one hand he is inveigled by Mrs. Allonby into a disastrous attempt to seduce the puritanical Hester, and on the other, routed by Mrs. Arbuthnot in his designs to alienate their son Gerald from her. It is women who orchestrate all movement in the play and invade the desperately defended world of men.

Whether the view taken of women's power in *Woman* amounts to misogyny, as asserted by Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, is debatable but it is clear that women are not seen here as angels in the house.⁵ The play questions the very idea of labelling women by admitting the same ambiguity about a "good" woman as in *Lady Windermere's Fan* except that it approaches the ambiguity from the opposite end. The earlier play had peeled off the shallowness of conventional judgment on the fallen woman and had confirmed her as the good woman and protective mother. In *Woman* the fallen woman is established for the audience as a good woman from the very beginning, especially because of her puritanical refusal to forget or forgive and her unshaken faith in herself as a martyr. The central irony of the play thus builds over the fallen woman, than whom no woman could be more convincingly virtuous. Although the title of the play gives her little respect by calling her a

⁵Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde*, 150-157.

"woman," which says that she is outside the pale of Society,⁶ even the revelation of her past cannot diminish the respect she commands. The reason is her evident, even ostentatious goodness,⁷ underscored by her Biblical name, Rachel, and her Biblical language. Her stern puritanism in accepting penance and her refusal to take anything from her betrayer protects her from the strict laws of melodrama which always find and punish the fallen woman, like Pinero's Paula Tanqueray and Carton's Janet Felton, who are punished either by death or banishment. Reviewers noted that her strict honour placed her directly opposite the common fallen woman. The *Morning Post* (20 April 1893) for example, noted that she did not use the meeting with Illingworth as an opportunity for blackmail. Her refusal to take the easy path to respectability by marrying Illingworth was commended by most reviewers, such as those in *The Times* (20 April 1893) and the *Telegraph*. (20 April 1893). Her choice was seen as creating a provocative ending, instead of a cheap, popular one, although she did have a predecessor, Lady Isabel Vane, in *East Lynne*, who had rebuffed her seducer in similar language, declaring,

Had you taken this journey on purpose to make me your wife, nay, were the clergyman standing by to perform the ceremony, I tell you, Francis Levison, I would not have you! I can imagine any fate in life better than being compelled to pass it with you. (Sinks in seat exhausted)⁸

⁶Contemporary plays, such as C. Haddon Chambers's *The Fatal Card* (1894) and R.C. Carton's *Sunlight and Shadow* (1890), specially underlined the fact that the fallen woman, the woman outside Society, was referred to as a woman. In *The Fatal Card* the innocent young woman, Margaret, typically has an instinctive aversion to the fallen woman, and is reprimanded by her fiancé, Gerald, who makes the connotation of the word clear, saying, "Now my dear you must not call your future step mother a woman. It is an insult to call a woman - a woman" [*The Fatal Card* (New York: Typescript, 1894), in *English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900*, eds. Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley (New York: Readex, 1967)], Act IV, sc. ii, p. E4. This was produced at the Adelphi Theatre on 6 September 1894 and revived at the same theatre on 16 March 1895. R.C. Carton's fallen woman, Janet Felton, not only underlines her outsider status, but defiantly embraces it by her continuing insistence on being addressed as a woman, correcting the good woman not once, but twice, when called a lady [*Sunlight and Shadow: A New and Original Modern Play in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1900)], Act I, 8; Act II, 38. This was produced at the Avenue Theatre on 1 November, 1890 and transferred to the St. James's Theatre on 31 January, 1891.

⁷This aspect of her character was heavily—and comically—emphasized in Philip Prowse's 1991 Royal Shakespeare Company production. Her cottage was swathed in black drapes, highlighting her exaggerated identity as a woman mourning and thus validating her life.

⁸Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne: A Drama in Five Acts* (Boston: Geo. M. Baker, n.d.), Act III, 27.

But Mrs. Arbuthnot is more complex because underneath her quiet submission to "God's terrible laws"⁹ runs a strong current of passion. It underlies her highly charged language and her possessive love of her son,¹⁰ finally revealing itself in her act of slapping Lord Illingworth. Contemporary audiences had this aspect of her character underlined for them by the debatable image of the actress playing the role, Mrs. Bernard Beere, entering dressed in a clinging black gown (*Telegraph*, 20 April 1893) with her "Magdalen red" hair flaming around her head.¹¹

While the iconography thus created is questionable, the confusion of signals it created was appropriate to the ambiguity implicit in the dramatic conception of a fallen woman who is not fallen, this mother who had to "look on death" for her child,¹² and who at the same time denies her son an independent life. Sos Eltis perceptively remarks that "Mrs. Arbuthnot simply redefines the mother's role, demanding instead that the son sacrifice himself to her."¹³ Is this a nurturing mother after all or a woman driven by a devouring possessiveness? If such egotism is the determining character of that ultimate icon of womanly virtue, a mother, what expectations may we have of women? By making women's virtue so indeterminate, the play reveals at the very least a distrust of women's attempts to control men and suggests that gender relations mean gender conflict.

The unflattering portrayal of women seems to have registered only vaguely with Wilde's contemporaries. The *Chronicle's* (20 April 1893) indictment of all the guests as "heartless" encompassed both men and women, and though the *Naval Review* (4 May 1893) felt the female characters were either cold and cynical (Lady Caroline), amusing but

⁹Act III, 133.

¹⁰A contemporary playgoer, Kate Terry-Gielgud, detected "a strain of sensuality" in Mrs. Arbuthnot's love for her son, in *A Victorian Playgoer*, ed. Muriel St. Clare Byrne (London: Heinemann, 1980), 7.

¹¹*World*, 26 April 1893, rpt. in William Archer, *The Theatrical 'World' For 1893* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), 112. Red hair had been made a sign of the *femme fatale* by the Pre-Raphaelites, while the audience's knowledge of Mrs. Beere's reputation as the English Bernhardt and of her flamboyant private life made an unwarranted correlation between her and the character she was playing.

¹²Act IV, 166.

¹³Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 106.

silly (Lady Hunstanton) or compromised because of their unladylike behaviour (Mrs. Arbuthnot), the *Graphic* (29 April 1893), the *Illustrated Church News* (27 May 1893) and the *Standard* (20 April 1893) were in the majority in identifying any rebuke on Wilde's part as directed towards class rather than gender. The play's epigrammatic and paradoxical style earned high praise, notably from William Archer (*World*, 26 April 1893) but also from reviews in the *Times* (20 April 1893), *Life* (25 April 1893) and the *Saturday Review* (6 May, 1893). The main shortcomings were considered to be the lack of an ingenious plot and the structural skill it required, the absence of which (as in the case of *Lady Windermere's Fan*) displeased reviewers used to the well-made play.¹⁴ The *Observer* (23 April 1893) considered the plot perfunctory while the *Standard* (20 April 1893) condemned it merely as an extended episode rather than a proper plot. The *Daily News* (20 April 1893) and the *Chronicle* complained that the play had no action whatsoever but was simply a string of epigrams (*Naval Review*). A.B. Walkley (*Speaker*, 29 April 1893) felt that the play's shallow plot and characterization proved Wilde's fondness for antithesis, seen clearly in the paradoxical epigrams. The *Sunday Times* (23 April 1893) considered that the epigrams neither advanced the argument nor had any relevance to it. Structurally the play might well be criticized for its many inconsistencies. The plot is a mix of society comedy and melodrama. Archer called it a melodrama, unsatisfactory because its own author did not appear convinced that Mrs. Arbuthnot's problems were inevitable. An uneasy juxtaposition of speech styles and tones reflects this ambivalence in modes. The language of the dandy is characterized by wit, refinement, polish and literariness, which clash with the melodramatic excesses of the Puritans' speeches. Their respective styles also differ functionally, for the dandy's witty speeches are amusing but add nothing to the action while the melodramatically fervent declamation of the Puritans does advance the action.

¹⁴Yet, looking back in 1909, Max Beerbohm (*Saturday Review*, 11 December 1909) stressed that the mechanism of Sardou was particularly evident in this play, as it was in Wilde's other society comedies.

The characters in the play seem drawn from the different genres of melodrama and society comedy to the extent that two different plays seem to be on simultaneously. The brittle, light characters of the Hunstanton set do not know how to react to the melodramatic world that Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot carry around with them. This juxtaposition also seems to jolt Illingworth out of the character of the superior, subtle and impervious dandy, and reduce him to the vulgar speech of the common melodramatic "aristocratic heavy"¹⁵ with his crude parting insult. In the play's concept of character we find a strong trace of melodrama. According to Augustin Filon, a contemporary French critic, melodrama delights in sudden conversions to opposite points of view.¹⁶ Here Hester's inflexible condemnation of the fallen woman changes without any notice to filial admiration for her, nor any articulation of her reasons. Similarly radical and abrupt is Gerald's conversion. The person his mother has molded him into shows himself in his reaction to the story of her fall when it is told in the third person. His judgment at once reverses itself when he discovers the truth. Again, his stubborn insistence on the rightness of a marriage between his parents is too suddenly melted by Hester. Characters with such typical melodramatic traits seem out of place among the figures of society comedy who comprise the Hunstanton set.

The uneven mix of characters from different modes is reflected in its mix of speech idioms and rhythms. The dialogue that "fairly coruscates with diamond-like brilliancy in pure wit, keen epigram, and startling paradox"¹⁷ and characterizes Lord Illingworth most of all but also Mrs. Allonby, is totally rejected by the evangelical solemnity of the language both of Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester, which is common in melodrama. In *The Profligate*

¹⁵Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61.

¹⁶Augustin Filon, *The English Stage: Being an Account of the Victorian Drama*, trans. Frederic Whyte, intro. Henry Arthur Jones (London: Benjamin Blom, 1897). This book was on Wilde's list of books he wished to read while in prison (*Letters*, 423n.).

¹⁷*Sporting Life*, 20 April 1893.

(1889), Pinero's *Janet Preece*, for example, explains the situation of the woman who has fallen. She kneels, saying,

it's my place in the world for evermore; because I'm of no more worth than the clod of earth you turn aside with your foot; because the time has been when I was one of the tempted and not one of the strong.¹⁸

The incompatibility of speech styles shows how uneasily the two dramatic modes mix and how thoroughly the refined sensibilities of society drama are opposed by the turgid passions of melodrama. Although Wilde was credited by some contemporary reviewers with original insights into moral and emotional dilemmas,¹⁹ his debt to melodrama was also evident. The *Standard* (20 April 1893), the *Morning Post* (20 April 1893), and the *World* (20 April 1893) praised the play's "deeper, more original ending" (*Times*) which was a "great and daring departure" (*Sporting Life*, 20 April 1893) from the conventional melodrama or well-made play. However, while praising Wilde's language and often original characterization, some of these same reviewers, especially William Archer, criticized the melodramatic aspects of the play such as the typical "strong curtain" at the end of the third act.²⁰ Coincidence, a staple of melodrama, brings about the action of the play. The complication at the root of plot development in the play is the presence of Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot in Hunstanton at the same time, while Illingworth's choice of Gerald from the hundreds of young men he must know is a coincidence too pat to satisfy probability.

The strongest impress of melodrama is in the conception of the aristocratic villain in *Woman*. Of many exemplars we may cite the aristocratic villain in H.J. Byron's melodrama, *The Lancashire Lass, or Tempted, Tried, and True* (1867). The title itself could be a description of Hester, who may well be the conflation of the virtuous farm girl (Ruth) and the heiress (Fanny), upon both of whom the aristocratic villain's designs fail, as

¹⁸Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Profligate* (London: William Heinemann, 1891), Act III, 90.

¹⁹The highest praise came from William Archer who placed Wilde "on the very highest plane of modern English drama" *World*, 26 April 1893, in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 144.

²⁰See previous note in the Introduction on Archer's reaction to the scene.

Illingworth's upon Hester. Wearing a moustache, a black frock-coat, a flower in his button-hole and carrying a cane, the classic marks of the villain according to Booth,²¹ Byron's villain sets the image for the aristocratic villain. In Pinero's play *The Profligate* (1889) we encounter the dissolute and unrepentant rake, Lord Dangars, Illingworth's double in his view of women. When Dangars is told that his dissolute life makes him unfit as husband to a good woman, he replies: "As for wronging *her*, that's an abstract question of sentiment."²² He is well aware of the double standard, and of the advantage this gives him. "But don't you know that Marriage is the tomb of the Past, as far as a man is concerned?" he exults.²³ The handsome aristocratic libertine went a long way back into nineteenth century literature. In fiction we see Steerforth in Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Alex D'Urberville in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Eliot's Godfrey Cass in *Silas Marner*, and on the stage, the ruthless ravisher Squire Chase in J. B. Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer* (1826), Lord Thornford of Thomas Wilks' *Michael Erle, The Maniac Lover* (1839), and the usurping Sir Walter Beville in T.P. Taylor's *The Village Outcast* (1846). H.B. Baker described the old melodramatic villain as: "that wicked squire in sticking plaster, crinkly boots, black frock, and riding whip—he never moved without a riding whip."²⁴ Later in the century these crude villains developed, as Booth tells us, into elegant men of the world, dandies of an unsavoury sort, with the "scowl, the cynic smile,"²⁵ such as the well-dressed forger in Sir Charles Young's *Jim the Penman* (1886) or Jones's Captain Skinner (alias "The Spider") in *The Silver King* (1882).²⁶ Lord Illingworth is one more incarnation of the type. A photograph of Beerbohm Tree as Lord Illingworth shows

²¹Michael R. Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 46.

²²Act I, 5.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴H.B. Baker, "The Old Melo-Drama," *Belgravia*, 50 (May 1883), 337, quoted in Booth, *English Melodrama*, 125.

²⁵*Saturday Review*, 19 September, 1891, 334.

²⁶Charles L. Young, *Jim the Penman* (London: Samuel French, 1889); Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, *The Silver King: A Drama in Five Acts in Plays by Henry Arthur Jones*, ed. with intro., and notes, Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

him in a well-cut white suit, his dissipated weariness showing in his eyes rather than in his clothes, and the telling mark of a moustache, just as in his previous role as the aristocratic rake the Duke of Guiseberry in Jones's *The Dancing Girl*.²⁷ In "The Face of Villainy on the Victorian Stage", Jennifer Jones tells us that "criminal physiognomists and actors seemed to agree on at least three signs of a criminal nature: dark colouring, dark hair and moustache, and a heavily lined face."²⁸

Wilde draws also upon the more general tradition of nineteenth century theatre in framing the legend of virtue under trial, though with some alterations. For instance, Pinero's very popular *Sweet Lavender* (1888)²⁹ has a similarly virtuous (though sweet rather than self-righteous) fallen woman in Ruth, who does marry the man who sinned against her in her youth. Her impending marriage to this aristocratic former lover is seen as deserved for she does not try to blackmail him into marriage as an adventuress would, but neither does she refuse to do her duty in marrying the father of her child as does Mrs. Arbuthnot. Mrs. Arbuthnot is conventional in her faith in socially ordained morality but her stern observance of it makes her a rebel at the same time because it does not let her patch things up with a wicked man for the sake of social appearances. She judges her seducer; Ruth forgives and therefore gains the only reward of value to a woman, and at the same time, escapes the censure of the critics.

Within the format of society comedy, then, Wilde appears to have tried to fit the readymade templates of melodrama for character, situation and language. This did prop up the action but melodrama's insistence on poetic justice lightened the finely balanced evaluation of human motivation in *A Woman of No Importance*. Although the playwrights of the nineties tried to explore this grey area, melodrama never allowed the bad to escape

²⁷Henry Arthur Jones, *The Dancing Girl: A Drama in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1907); the Haymarket Theatre, 15 January, 1891.

²⁸Jennifer Jones, "The Face of Villainy on the Victorian Stage," *Theatre Notebook* L: 2 (1996), 102.

²⁹Arthur Wing Pinero, *Sweet Lavender: A Domestic Melodrama in Three Acts* (London: Macmillan, 1893). First performed at Terry's Theatre, 21 March, 1888, it was revived at the same theatre, 29 September, 1890.

the inexorable ruling of stage law. Only those playwrights who did not achieve mass performances, such as Ibsen and Shaw, dealt with any success with ambiguous issues. In *A Woman of No Importance* melodramatic events tend to deflect attention from its questioning of moral identities and its ambivalence regarding fallen and good women.

However, even as Wilde uses the plot, character and speech patterns of melodrama, he undercuts them, for instance, in his treatment of a common sentiment of melodrama. Booth points out that "apostrophes to the village are everywhere," in British melodrama.³⁰ The village is pictured as the centre of purity and goodness, in keeping with the familiar literary dialectic between the city and the country, in which the country is always the preserve of goodness. Booth reminds us of the social situation of England during and after the Industrial Revolution when the exodus of country people to factory towns created a strong nostalgia for the country they had left. Melodrama addressed this need with its creation of a storybook countryside with pretty gardens and healthy and honest people. Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot expect to find purity and escape from evil in the country setting of Hunstanton, but instead find that even the country is impure because the city people, such as the Allonbys and Illingworths of the world, have not only invaded the country but seem to rule it. Wilde has turned the tables on conventional melodrama, as he shows that in a setting that broadly falls into the category of the village setting, the pure and good characters are in the minority. The idealization of the village, sacrosanct in earlier drama, is consciously repudiated by Mrs. Allonby, who sneers at the self-conscious wholesomeness of Mrs. Arbuthnot's cottage and of the unthinking sentimentality that such interiors evoke in the popular mind. Here again we see one theatrical world competing against another.

Modern critics, such as Peter Raby and Alan Bird,³¹ have agreed on the whole that Wilde's experiment with different play forms in this play has been unsuccessful, even

³⁰Booth, *English Melodrama*, 123.

³¹Peter Raby, "Wilde's Comedies of Society," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154; Alan Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), 123.

"schizophrenic."³² However, Regenia Gagnier, Anne Varty³³ and Patricia F. Behrendt suggest that this discrepancy in style is a deliberate critical choice by Wilde, who thus creates a new type of play. The excess of epigrams was, Gagnier suggests, "precisely the point Wilde was making about the class"—that there was "too much talk and too little action."³⁴ Varty and Behrendt point to Wilde's own philosophical position "that thought, embodied in the dialogue, is itself a form of action."³⁵ This does not quite answer the charge of irrelevance against the smart talk, especially because the "thought" in the dialogue is not weighty enough to replace action as the play's substance. It ought to be acknowledged that there is in fact quite enough action in *A Woman of No Importance* despite the long stretches of dialogue but the issue of action is not too relevant because the play does not stand on events but on its methodical inversion of common ideas of gender. It targets two such ideas: first, labels such as 'fallen' or 'good' women are shown to be misleading essentialisations of women and utterly unreliable as fixed descriptions of character; and second, the notion of women as subordinate to men is exploded by demonstrating how women actually control men. The play's events, not its dialogue in itself, establish these alternative moral perceptions of the world and thereby affirm the theatrical presence of *A Woman of No Importance*.

Although the brilliance of its dialogue was praised and the subtlety of the relationship between the wronged and the wrongdoer noticed,³⁶ the dominant position of women in *A Woman of No Importance* remained unacknowledged. This is surprising because the key events in the play make women's supremacy quite clear. It is a woman's action that brings the characters together, another woman's command that destroys her son's opportunity for

³²Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 21.

³³Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London: Longman, 1998), 172.

³⁴Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 122.

³⁵Behrendt, 149.

³⁶Caught accurately by William Archer (*op. cit.*) but not correlated with the deeper issue of Wilde's exploration of women's roles and nature.

advancement, while this command and a young woman's predicament that causes the young man to forego advancement. Every critical move is made by women. Illingworth's offer of a job to Gerald may initiate the complication but it is brought about by Lady Hunstanton's instrumentality in bringing the two men together. Gerald's critical discovery of his parentage affords an even more persuasive example of women's agency. The play's most dramatic—and conventional—crisis occurs when in Act III Hester rushes back from the terrace to fling herself in Gerald's arms, crying "Oh! save me—save me from him!"³⁷ This is what turns Gerald against Illingworth and brings about the shattering discovery of their relationship. Both Kerry Powell and Sos Eltis point out Wilde's extensive debt to French drama in the plot of the son discovering that he is illegitimate and that his mother is a fallen woman; Wilde takes the last element for his focus.³⁸ An English source is Palgrave Simpson's *Broken Ties* (1872), although it has a happy ending in the parents' reunion. Until this point Illingworth has triumphed over Mrs. Arbuthnot who has been forced to surrender Gerald to him. So it seems as though it is purely Illingworth's licentiousness that unravels his victory. But here again we see that this catastrophe is in fact a woman's doing, for it was Mrs. Allonby who had deliberately thrust him into the situation by challenging his sexual self-esteem.³⁹

Women's ascendancy is also marked by the way identities are defined in *A Woman of No Importance*. In contrast to the social world in which women are known as persons only in relation to males, in this playworld it is men whose identities are determined by their relationship to women. Gerald is an obvious example but others too are known through their relationship to women. Sir John is only a husband, with no conversation and no occupation outside his wife's sphere. Likewise, although Mr. Kelvil is a politician and the Archdeacon a clergyman, their most demanding roles are played in the domestic arena ruled by their wives. Mr. Kelvil's eight children and wife identify him as a family man

³⁷Act III. 144.

³⁸Powell, *Oscar Wilde*, ch. 4, and Eltis, *Revising Wilde*, ch. 4.

³⁹Act I, 39-40.

above all, while the demands of Mr. Daubeny's invalid wife lock him into his the role of husband. More ironically, Lord Illingworth, the smug predator upon women, appears here not as a public personality but in relationships with women, as a treacherous lover, a failed seducer and suitor, his only attempt to forge an identity as his son's father defeated by women.

Nothing escapes women's clutches and nothing constrains their license. Women order men about and flaunt their taste for promiscuity. Women force men into submission, some by the force of their wealth, social position or sexual allure, others by their moral assertiveness. The subjugation of men starts from the very beginning: Lady Hunstanton sets the action in motion by bringing together such a disparate group of people as Lord Illingworth, the jaded dandy, Mrs. Allonby, the cynical female rake, Lady Caroline, the embodiment of comic possessiveness, Mrs. Arbuthnot, the embodiment of tragic possessiveness, and Hester, the naive outsider. Lady Hunstanton is playing dangerous games by mixing up social order, which lead to far-reaching consequences for some of her guests. Lady Caroline predicts as much, voicing her uneasiness in her remarks that "dear Lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here" and that "Jane mixes too much."⁴⁰ Lady Hunstanton congratulates herself on making Gerald her protégé and feels rewarded by Illingworth's interest in him. It is she who sets in motion the process by which Gerald is offered a job, causing the rift between mother and son. Because of Lady Hunstanton's lack of discrimination in choosing her guests, her most illustrious guest, Illingworth, gains a son only to lose him and is thoroughly humiliated by the two women he least respects in the play.

The other dowager, Lady Caroline, concentrates her energy wholly upon her husband, deciding for him every little detail of his life, from what he must wear to where he must sit. Her obsession with him is not limited to sexual jealousy towards the younger women, although that is a part of it. She wishes to have complete control over him, which

⁴⁰Act I, 2.

is why she is constantly rearranging his very appearance as well as reordering his movements. The completely cowed Sir John is repeatedly given orders about his clothing, for example, which humiliates him in front of the company. The nature of the orders suggests that he is unable to look after himself, and is more a child than a man. Both Lady Caroline and Lady Hunstanton treat him as if he were a wayward pet. As Lady Hunstanton says to Lady Caroline, "You spoil him, Caroline, you do indeed!"⁴¹

The very setting of the play is territory owned by women. From the gardens and rich rooms of Hunstanton to the "humble" cottage of Mrs. Arbuthnot, all the physical spaces in the play are the property of women. It is apparent that even the unseen land described by Hester is going to be the territory of women. At Hunstanton there is evidently no Lord Hunstanton, just as there is no male head of household at Mrs. Arbuthnot's cottage. Despite her absentmindedness, Lady Hunstanton has firm control over her property, the defining attribute of social power. Even in the small matter of the orchid "as beautiful as the seven deadly sins,"⁴² she lays down the law, deciding to speak to the gardener about it, presumably to have it destroyed because she cannot tolerate its association with sin and its existence without her knowledge or permission.

Mrs. Arbuthnot's cottage is the other major setting in the play and is opposite in character to Hunstanton. Mrs. Allonby may scoff at its calculated humility, but its design is both a reflection of Mrs. Arbuthnot's character and a necessity in her precarious situation. Mrs. Allonby and Lady Hunstanton comment on Mrs. Arbuthnot's careful collection of the signs of respectability when they visit her. The signs are specified: "Fresh natural flowers, books that don't shock one, pictures that one can look at without blushing."⁴³ The general requirement for respectability seems to be a "nice and old-fashioned" atmosphere.⁴⁴ Mrs. Arbuthnot's controlling hand and her anxiety to influence

⁴¹Act I, 11.

⁴²Act I, 25.

⁴³Act IV, 152.

⁴⁴Act IV, 150.

her son are evident in the decor itself, revealing as much her ideal of worth as her determination to mold her world to that ideal.

The correlation between property and power is made explicit by Mrs. Allonby when she says that "All men are married women's property."⁴⁵ Women's ownership of property ensures that men are present only as guests, to be invited or banished at the whims of their hostesses. Male presence in this female-owned territory is thus predicated on insecurity. Lord Illingworth is only allowed into Mrs. Arbuthnot's property on sufferance and much of his power is dissipated by his position there. Because they are only on female territory by permission, men have to bow to the rule of women, of which Sir John Pontefract is an extreme example. Even when men own property, as Illingworth does, its potency is cancelled out by women's refusal to assign it value. Illingworth proudly lays out for Mrs. Arbuthnot the attractions, advantages and exclusive glamour of his land in a bid to buy Gerald from her:

He can have Ashby, which is much prettier, Harborough, which has the best shooting in the north of England, and the house in St. James's Square. What more could a gentleman desire in this world?

Mrs. Arbuthnot's sardonic reply, "Nothing more, I am quite sure," shows that she is unmoved.⁴⁶ The offer of this land for Gerald is made in his absence, his mother destroying his opportunity to become a man of property, independent of Hester and herself. Gerald is never even made aware of Illingworth's offer. Although, as Illingworth points out, he would not have been the legitimate heir, as the heir by blood, Gerald could have come into his rightful inheritance and been the master of land on which he belonged. Hester's wealth could have been a subsidiary, not the primary source of income. Whether Gerald would have chosen his father's side by this point may be debatable, but his mother takes no chance by letting him know of the offer and thus allows him no choice. Gerald's one chance to own property is destroyed, and the only property owned by a man is written

⁴⁵Act II, 52.

⁴⁶Act IV, 178.

out of women's plans. The rejection of his land is a particularly effective blow against Illingworth, since his social position has been gained by his good luck in unexpectedly inheriting his property. Men are thus consistently dissociated from the economic base of power.

Every suggestion that men may have some power over women is refuted by both precept and practice. Not only are we shown men in captivity but told that they are and should be. The complacent Mr. Kelvil talks about women as toys for men—disapprovingly, to be sure and perhaps with a glance at Lord Illingworth—but women's action in the play proves otherwise. Their control of men is purposeful and consciously articulated by the tyrants in the after-dinner conversation in the second act. Mrs. Allonby asserts that "it is every woman's duty never to leave them alone for a single moment." Men are seen as always needing to be kept "up to the mark," and even more sinisterly, as "always trying to escape from us." The final duty, as Lady Caroline grimly says, is to "keep men in their proper place," which is, "looking after their wives."⁴⁷ Ideally for them, the sole focus of men's lives should be women. The description of the Ideal Man demonstrates the nature of the tyranny clearly. The object seems to be to rob men of their rationality and to plunge them in a morass of emotion so that they are completely at the mercy of women, who revel in irrationality. This emasculating strategy ensures that the Ideal Man is utterly enslaved to women since the tyranny of emotion over logic makes life completely incalculable and unpredictable. There even emerges a conscious ideology of women's dominion as Mrs. Allonby articulates the credo of the woman of the world in her after-dinner speech:

If we ask him a question about anything, he should give us an answer all about ourselves. He should invariably praise us for whatever qualities he knows we haven't got. . . . And yet he should be always ready to have a perfectly terrible scene whenever we want one, and to become miserable, absolutely miserable, at a moment's notice, and to overwhelm us with just reproaches in less than twenty minutes, and to be positively violent at the end if half an hour, and to leave us for ever at a quarter to eight, when we have to go and dress for dinner. . . . And after a whole dreadful week, during which one has gone about everywhere with one's husband, just to show how absolutely

⁴⁷Act II, 51.

lonely one was, he may be given a third last parting, in the evening, and then, if his conduct has been quite irreproachable, and one has behaved really badly to him, he should be allowed to admit that he has been entirely in the wrong, and when he has admitted that, it becomes a woman's duty to forgive, and one can do it all over again from the beginning, with variations.⁴⁸

Through this exaggerated scenario Mrs. Allonby articulates the subjugation of men that is implicit in Lady Caroline's tyranny over her husband. She considers men the playthings of women, to be manipulated into behaving just as irrationally as women are generally thought to be. Her character is not without precedent, as we find in Boucicault's *London Assurance* (1841), in which Lady Gay Spanker also has an "ideal husband" in her weak little spouse, tellingly called Dolly. Calling her marriage "a horrible state of existence," she complains,

I am never contradicted, so there are none of those enlivening, interesting little differences, which so pleasingly diversify the monotony of conjugal life, like spots of verdure—no quarrels, like oases in the desert of matrimony—no rows...I never have anything but my own way; and he won't permit me to spend more than I like.⁴⁹

The reversal of gender identities outlined by Mrs. Allonby is predicated on getting her "own way." It may be her wishful thinking but underpinned by the idea of an utopia where this inverted gender relationship will be the rule rather than the exception. A graver undertone is heard in the suspicion, based on what we see of gender relationships in the play, that this playworld may be headed towards such an utopia or, from men's point of view, a dystopia.

Mrs. Allonby is the designated seductress and bad woman of the play but Lady Stutfield's rapt attention to the "number of details that are so very, very important" shows Mrs. Allonby is not the only sexual predator here though the only one to flaunt her power.⁵⁰ It is no surprise that by the middle of Act II Lady Stutfield and Mrs. Allonby

⁴⁸Act II, 62-64.

⁴⁹Dion Boucicault, *London Assurance: A Comedy in Five Acts* in Jo Bailey, *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology to Illustrate the Evolution of the Drama* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1966), Act III, 183. First produced at Covent Garden on 4 March, 1841, it was revived at the Criterion Theatre on 27 November, 1890. That Wilde was familiar with the play is evident from the letter to the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph* in which he praised the costuming of the characters in Wyndham's 1890 revival at the Criterion Theatre; Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 283.

⁵⁰Act II, 64.

form a friendship, standing close to one another and holding hands, the picture of mistress and apprentice.⁵¹ Both are manipulative, Mrs. Allonby boldly, Lady Stutfield slyly, and both make sexual conquest the centre of their lives. We cannot be sure how real Mrs. Allonby's scenarios of conquest are but her intent seems clear. In playing the same game Lady Stutfield may be less dramatic but not less purposeful, for despite Lady Caroline's obvious jealousy Lady Stutfield deliberately draws Sir John to herself. These women seem to live for—or in the hope of—sexual conquests.

Added to Lady Caroline's browbeating of her husband, Mrs. Allonby's sexual manipulation forms a blatant statement of female tyranny that might blind the viewer to a less explicit but more powerful form of domination. While it is bullying and sexual bribery that keeps men under women's thumb, the forces that constrain Gerald are virtue and chaste love, the weapons of the good women who deny him the life that he wants and can get. In matters of sexual conduct the good women in the play are as far removed from these corrupt women as possible but no different in claiming men's subjection. Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot are intolerant of moral failings, no matter whose, and not afraid to say so. Neither Hester's youth nor her status as guest prevents her from haranguing her hostess and fellow guests with her moral certitudes. Seeing the world in black and white, she delivers blunt judgments like, "I dislike Mrs. Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say"⁵² or, "If a man and woman have sinned, . . . let them both be branded."⁵³ Mrs. Arbuthnot may be hurt by the personal application of such harsh principles but agrees with them wholeheartedly, not because she believes she has sinned but because she accepts the rules by which the world lives. Sos Eltis points out,

Mrs. Arbuthnot, like Mrs. Erylne before her, eschews repentance, yet, unlike Mrs. Erylne, she does not reject the morality which condemns her but rather continues to wrestle with laws too restrictive to allow room for her own natural passions.⁵⁴

⁵¹Act III, 83.

⁵²Act I, 3.

⁵³Act II, 72.

⁵⁴Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde*, 107.

Mrs. Arbuthnot tells Gerald in a revealing explanation of her life:

For, though day after day, at morn or evensong, I have knelt in God's house, I have never repented of my sin. . . . I would rather be your mother—oh! much rather!—than have been always pure. . . .⁵⁵

Nonetheless, she accepts the life of an outcast because she believes in the absolutist moral order of the Puritan tradition, the same source from which Hester, not surprisingly for an American, draws strength. That is why both of these morally upright women define transgression in terms of the stern dictates of the Old Testament. The awkward silence of the urbane society ladies on being harangued by Hester in Act II shows how hard it is to avoid her moral bludgeoning that uses the Biblical rhetoric of branding sinners and pillars of fire. Mrs. Arbuthnot speaks in the same voice and style to those she wishes to influence. Her alienation from the modern world allies her with Hester who has the stridency of youth and the plain speech of the New England Puritan. Like the other good young women in Wilde's plays, Hester commits herself to a life without compromise. She condemns England as a "leper in purple," a "dead thing smeared in gold."⁵⁶ Such extravagant speech succeeds only in making her audience turn away in embarrassment. These women not only hold very definite views on right and wrong, they also expect others to hold the same views and to act by them, which makes those around them uncomfortable because it invokes the duties sanctified by society even if rarely honoured by it. Moral probity, chastity, loyalty to parent, child and spouse, are considered essential requirements by the Puritans and are specially valued by them because so few try to meet them. Duty becomes even weightier when it is required not only for moral reasons but as proof of emotional commitment. This is the pressure that the good women bring upon Gerald, who capitulates to them because to do otherwise would betray both morality and his commitment to them. Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot do not try to catch men by spreading the sexual net. They do so by moral and emotional blackmail.

⁵⁵Act IV, 168-9.

⁵⁶Act II, 71.

The pressures placed upon Gerald by his mother and Hester are beyond his powers of resistance. His mother issues an ultimatum; he must reject Illingworth to retain her love, and must, as a consequence, agree to remain illegitimate. Hester dictates that he must forgive his mother's transgression if he wishes to have her love, so that the argument he was having with Mrs. Arbuthnot is won for her, not because it is the logical outcome of the argument but because he is given an emotional ultimatum. Caught between the emotional vice, Gerald is so disoriented by the end that he cannot act on his own and plaintively turns to Hester, "you don't tell me what to do now!"⁵⁷

Gerald's predicament is particularly telling because his young life carries promise of a new generation of men in control of the world as the son and heir to the most powerful male figure in the play. He is also the central component of a literary formula. A popular figure on the nineteenth century stage was the young man with a brilliant career before him, who had to overcome obstacles laid in his path by the fallen woman or adventuress. George Meredith had written about this pattern in his *Essay on Comedy* in 1877, as Rodney Shewan has pointed out.⁵⁸ The "very good, innocent young man"⁵⁹ was eventually rescued by an older, benevolent male figure—the *raisonneur*—and was rewarded with the virtuous young woman's love for resisting temptation. This pattern seemed to be a favourite in several plays of the 1890s, including Sydney Grundy's *A Debt of Honour* (1880)⁶⁰ and Pinero's *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*. The bare bones of this formula are evident in *A Woman of No Importance*. The fallen woman, Mrs. Arbuthnot, tries to tie the young man, Gerald, down to a life of dull respectability. When the older man of the world offers him a career opportunity that is beyond his wildest dreams, she

⁵⁷Act IV, 171.

⁵⁸Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977) 159.

⁵⁹George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* ed. Lane Cooper (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1972), 154.

⁶⁰Sydney Grundy, *A Debt of Honour: An Original Play in One Act. Suggested by Scribe's Five Act Comedy, "Une Chaine"* (New York: Harold Roorbach, 189-). The alternate title of this play was *In Honour Bound*, under which name it had matinee performances at the Shaftesbury Theatre (25 July, 1890), the Avenue Theatre (26 June, 1894) and the Princess's Theatre (24 July, 1894).

does her best to prevent his progress, especially because it means a move away from her influence. The formula seems to be working in *A Woman of No Importance* in the beginning but halfway through the play it is turned on its head when the identities of the main contestants, the fallen woman and the *raisonneur*, are reversed. Following Illingworth becomes an impossible choice for Gerald and his prize, Hester's love, is gained only through his loyalty to the fallen woman.

In the revision of the formula we once again see female supremacy, as Gerald's goals are reset by women. Moreover, this is made believable by the fact that Gerald has been created by his mother to the last atom of his being. This of course has its own ironies. For instance, she has instilled in him such a hatred of licentiousness that when she tells him the disguised story of her own ruin he contemptuously dismisses the mythical fallen young woman. Her teachings also bring about his logical reaction to want his parents to marry. But it is her command again that makes him abandon that goal. He is so heavily under the influence of his mother that he falls in love with a younger version of her. The resonance between the two women in his life is disturbing. The same libertine who had ruined his mother long ago tries to "convert"⁶¹ the girl he loves, and in the closing lines of the play Hester becomes Mrs. Arbuthnot's "daughter."⁶² Gerald is locked for life between two women in a relationship that barely escapes being incestuous. His very identity is one defined by women: he is first of all his mother's son and then Hester's lover. His mother jealously separates his identity from his father's, twice interrupting Illingworth to insist that Gerald is her son and no one else's. Even when he discovers his father, his attempt to become the son of two parents fails because of Mrs. Arbuthnot's adamant refusal to relinquish all control over his identity. His identity as a respectable citizen is overturned, again by his mother, when she informs him of his illegitimacy. He is left in a helpless state until his rescue by Hester, at which point his destiny passes once more to a woman's

⁶¹Act II, 84.

⁶²Act IV, 190.

keeping. No doubt he is guided by the noble principles of love and sacrifice but in terms of his freedom of choice he is no less a slave to women than Sir John.

Women's hold on the play is particularly well established by the weight given to women's voices. Women are the main speakers and their voices, varied in pitch and tone, sometimes in harmony, sometimes not, drown every man's voice except Lord Illingworth's, although he too is reduced to silence at the end. Katharine Worth uses musical metaphors and analogies to characterize the voices of the women.⁶³ She sees Mrs. Allonby as a solo virtuoso in a conversational concerto, Lady Caroline as a booming instrument and Lady Stutfield as a minor accompanist with her repetitive chirpings. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester are seen as pitched on one key. Women's voices overwhelm men's. Lady Caroline cuts through and shouts over the inconsequentialities of her husband. He only dares to correct her in minor matters; his corrections are treated as irrelevant. Lady Hunstanton has an amiable, prattling tone, giving the impression of confused and disturbing background noise that cancels the sense of her words as soon as they are out of her mouth:

Lady H: I remember the occurrence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy, or gout. I forget which.⁶⁴

The voices of women are not only idiosyncratic, they are stronger than those of men. Other than Illingworth, none of the men get extended speeches during which they can articulate their credos. Minor male characters such as Sir John or Mr. Kelvil are constantly corrected, shouted down and silenced. Though both are on stage during the third act, they are not asked to relate the subjects of their conversations to Mrs. Allonby and Lady Stutfield. Instead, their voices are silenced and their woman companions speak for them. Every attempt Sir John makes at conversation with other women is aborted by his vigilant wife. Mr. Kelvil's earnestness is dull in contrast to the wit of Mrs. Allonby and Illingworth. Even Gerald rarely speaks more than one line at a time. His priggish and

⁶³Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 102, 108.

⁶⁴Act I, 12.

wholesome voice speaks for popular morality, as does Mr. Kelvil's equally uninspired voice. Men are rarely even left on the stage by themselves, proving women's seriousness about keeping a watchful eye on them. The only occasion when a man—Illingworth—is allowed to hold forth is at the opening of the third act, when he explains the dandy's credo to Gerald. But this respite is not for long, as Lady Hunstanton and the Archdeacon arrive to join them. Illingworth's words are overshadowed at the end of his speech by the silent and foreboding presence of Mrs. Arbuthnot, who appears at the back of the stage. The other occasion when men are left alone occurs off-stage, during the women's after-dinner conversation. Illingworth is the only man who is given a strong voice, long speeches, wit and intelligence. He is the only male who speaks for a male world free from women. However, even he increasingly loses his battles with women, both in the arena of wit and that of morality. On morality he is at a definite disadvantage, because his one weapon of wit is worthless in the world of absolutes, and he has to make his final exit in silence.

But apart from illustrating the power of women's words over men's, voices in the play are differentiated also to mark identities, most strikingly in the case of the Puritans. It is evident immediately on Mrs. Arbuthnot's arrival at Hunstanton, where her speeches begin on a low key but gradually grow in strength and fervour. Her quiet voice makes her stand out from the chattering women around her, while her presence is further emphasized by Mrs. Allonby's description of her as "the lady in black velvet," a grim contrast to the rest of the presumably colourful and lighthearted women.⁶⁵ When she speaks, Mrs. Arbuthnot's voice is bitter and proudly humble, carrying an unspoken reproof in her words, "I am always at work."⁶⁶ But when alone with Gerald and Illingworth, her tone changes from coldness to feverish hysteria. Her long speeches, like Hester's, are ranting lectures similar to the monologues delivered by Wilde's Salome, or any of Sardou's exotic female characters such as Cléopâtre, all of them strong characters. Like Hester, Mrs.

⁶⁵See Kaplan and Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*, 21-26, on the costuming for the first production.

⁶⁶Act III, 117.

Arbuthnot sees her world in a biblical context within which her condemnation of the evils of society fits perfectly and, like puritans of her time, she speaks with visionary passion. In Pinero's *The Profligate*, Leslie Brudenell speaks in the same style of the world's double standard: "Oh, the world has a short memory for a man's disgrace. It is only with women that it lays down scandal, as it lays down wine, to ripen and mature."⁶⁷ She reminds her friend Irene that, to his wife, "a man's past is her pride or her shame, the jewel she wears upon her brow or the mud which clings to her skirts! It is her light or darkness; her life or her death!"⁶⁸ She cries to Illingworth:

Leave me the little vineyard of my life; leave me the walled-in garden and the well of water; the ewe-lamb God sent me, in pity or in wrath, oh! leave me that.⁶⁹

Illingworth's baldly practical response is not surprising. The imagery she employs demonstrates a mind that has not been able to come to terms with the modern world. To advance in the actual social reality, Gerald must leave behind the unreal world that is his mother's refuge. Her over-wrought style alienates listeners, failing to communicate the undeniable sadness of her life by its melodramatic excess. That is why when she describes her anguish in the third person by telling Gerald about the betrayed woman who

will always suffer. For her there is no joy, no peace, no atonement. She is a woman who drags a chain like a guilty thing. She is a woman who wears a mask, like a thing that is a leper. The fire cannot purify her. The waters cannot quench her anguish. Nothing can heal her! No anodyne can give her sleep! no poppies forgetfulness! She is lost! She is a lost soul!

he dismissively answers:

My dear mother, it all sounds very tragic, of course. But I dare say the girl was just as much to blame as Lord Illingworth was. - After all, would a really nice girl, a girl with any nice feelings at all, go away from her home with a man to whom she was not married, and live with him as his wife? No nice girl would.⁷⁰

The difference in rhetoric and style is a defining difference between the society ladies and the two Puritans, Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot, who use biblical and melodramatic

⁶⁷*The Profligate*, Act II, p.57.

⁶⁸*The Profligate*, Act II, p.57.

⁶⁹Act II, 97.

⁷⁰Act III, 142-3.

language, lacking the wit and sophistication of the aristocrats. The language of the two women is so extreme that even Gerald, brought up by one and loved by the other, does not fully understand them. The two sides shut out one another, as we may gather from the reaction to Hester's diatribe against Society in the second act. She is met with a stony snub by Lady Caroline, and a benevolent dismissal of the issues by Lady Hunstanton:

My dear young lady, there was a great deal of truth, I dare say, in what you said, and you looked very pretty while you said it, which is much more important, Lord Illingworth would tell us.⁷¹

Kate Terry-Gielgud noted that the opposing sides did not actually address each other but delivered sermons instead, to which there were no direct responses.⁷² This fits in with general contemporary criticism that Wilde's characters are all copies of him, elegantly but interminably speaking in Wilde's voice, and consequently appearing flat and unrealistic. If there are direct responses, as in the case of Gerald's reaction to his mother's story or to her description of her love for him, they are painfully inadequate. The fervour of Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot is treated with polite and embarrassed dismissal.

The difference between society ladies and the Puritans notwithstanding, they are similar in their dealings with men. Though their techniques differ, their aims do not. Both the idealistic and the cynical women in the play make it their life's chief work to control men, the first group by shaming men morally and emotionally into subjection, the second by nagging or sexual promises. Hester makes no secret of her repugnance at "such views of life"⁷³ as she hears from the Hunstanton set and Mrs. Arbuthnot ignores them almost entirely. Unlike them, these two women form their approach to the world by the highest moral principles, rejecting expediency and personal gain or pleasure. Yet, they transform every contact with men into a contest, a much sharper and graver one than the sport imagined by Mrs. Allonby. Their possessiveness, sanctified though it is by their invocation of moral necessities, is functionally no different from the neurotic jealousy of

⁷¹Act II, 74.

⁷²Kate Terry-Gielgud, *A Victorian Playgoer*, 7.

⁷³Act II, 67.

Lady Caroline. At the same time, the small sideshow of the Archdeacon's anxiety over his wife tells us that the Puritans are not alone in holding men to their moral duty. Wide as the range of women's portrayal is, it leads to the general conclusion that women as a sex seek to enslave men.

This monstrous regiment of women can be resisted only by men who can rise equally above sexual blandishments and emotional appeals, a man who is absolutely secure not only in his social position but in his transcendence over materiality to an aesthetic understanding of life that liberates him from the ordinary rules of society. This profile belongs to the Wildean dandy, a man who has gone beyond substance to the mastery of form, here represented by Lord Illingworth. In his pursuit of the perfect form of speech and manner he matches the typical Wildean dandy, such as Darlington and Goring, and like them he makes claims of rising above the sentimental, the mundane and the utilitarian.

The dandy himself exists on a rarefied, intellectual plane, and he actively opposes the utilitarian ethic, denouncing usefulness and sincerity and proclaiming the supremacy of form over substance. The well-tied necktie or the perfect buttonhole, marks of the sartorial emphasis of the dandy's code, are symbols not of vanity but of non-utilitarian formalism. Assuming the mantle of the champion for men, he tries to set Gerald against women by inoculating him with dismissive epigrams, such as, "women represent the triumph of matter over mind" or "women are a fascinatingly wilful sex."⁷⁴ But a deeper male fear is revealed in his belief that:

The history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts.⁷⁵

Men's response to women's tyranny, as Patricia F. Behrendt points out, is to try to construct a male world and exclude women from it. This need for an exclusive male world is revealed when Illingworth tells Gerald, "Good women have such limited views of life,

⁷⁴Act III, 112, 114.

⁷⁵Act III, 112.

their horizon is so small, their interests are so petty" and Gerald agrees that "They are awfully interested, certainly, in things *we* don't care much about."⁷⁶

The good woman draws strength from the prevailing ideology of gender and virtue, ironically a product of the patriarchy. Mrs. Arbuthnot agrees with Hester that sinners should be punished even down to their children although she knows that "it is one of God's terrible laws."⁷⁷ That ideology set the sexually pure woman as the moral exemplar of womanhood, her virtue highlighted against the licentiousness of the fallen woman, although by the 1890s many in the audience were beginning to tire of the excessively good woman, even to call her old-fashioned.⁷⁸ But the image of the good woman as man's moral anchor was never in question because men's libidinousness was taken for granted.⁷⁹ In *A Woman of No Importance* the polarization of the sexes is shown by making the male champion the exact opposite of the good woman. But the conflict goes farther than a simple contest over a particular prize, in this case Gerald's loyalty. Because Illingworth appears to be a dandy, a man with pretensions to superior aesthetic perception, the conflict has undertones of a philosophical issue, for the dandy's aesthetic validation of action must necessarily oppose the Puritan's moral definition. This aspect of the contest appeared in Illingworth's diatribe against the "puritan ethic" in the original version of the third act but had to be cut at Beerbohm Tree's insistence. In the deleted lines, Illingworth posed the Puritan's ethic against the "modern" world, committing himself implacably to resist the Puritan:

⁷⁶Act III, 109, my emphasis.

⁷⁷Act III, 134.

⁷⁸See George Bernard Shaw's discussion of "The Womanly Woman," in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism in Major Critical Essays: The Quintessence of Ibsenism. The Perfect Wagnerite. The Sanity of Art.* (London: Constable, 1932), 32-41. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* was first published in 1891.

⁷⁹The New Woman rebelled against her "duty" to be a moral anchor for the promiscuous man, and shocked the conventional woman by her demand for male purity. "Is it too much to say that many mothers would be exceedingly shocked if their daughter came to them saying she would like to be assured that the man she was about to marry had no 'past' to bury?", asked Mrs. Blanche Crackanthorpe ("The Revolt of the Daughters," *Nineteenth Century* 35:203 (January 1894), 29. However, on the mainstream stage of the West End, the *raisonneurs* of Jones and Pinero continued to justify the double standard through the 1890s.

Gerald, the real enemy of modern life, of everything that makes life lovely and joyous and coloured for us, is Puritanism and the Puritan spirit *There* is the danger that lies ahead of the age. . . . Do you despise a creed that starves the body and does not feed the soul? Why, I tell you, Gerald, that the profligate, the wildest profligate who spills his life in folly, has a better, saner, finer philosophy of life than the Puritan has. He, at any rate, knows that the aim of life is the pleasure of living, and does in some way realize himself, be himself. Puritanism is the hideous survival of the self-mutilation of the savage, man in his madness making *himself* the victim of his monstrous sacrifice.⁸⁰

Illingworth's view here closely echoes a comment on puritan thinking in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1890:

The Puritan spirit is greatly to blame [for restraints and emphasis on sex] . . . it casts an ugly, self-conscious light upon all things wherein men and women are concerned, creating evil where none need be; it fosters a heated, unnatural atmosphere, and makes artificial sins which are parents of a swarm of unnecessary sorrows.⁸¹

This subversion is the danger that Illingworth finds in the Puritan, whom he correctly identifies as the most determined of all women to rule the world, and resisting whom becomes a question of his survival. The absolute opposition of the dandy-libertine and the Puritan is strikingly metaphorised by stage images. The encounter between Mrs. Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth in the second act is the first in a set of three, the other two showing Illingworth's gradual retreat, first at his exposure at the end of the third act and his final expulsion at the end of the fourth. Each encounter is marked by silence: in Act II Illingworth "starts back in wonder."⁸² In Act III he is again speechless as Hester points her accusing finger at him, and finally, at the play's end he is "dazed by the insult of his punishment."⁸³ The dramatic crux of each of these episodes is marked by a tableau expressing a character's sense of loss. On the stage the tableaux were drawn out, for Wilde evidently trusted Beerbohm Tree's instincts enough to allow this glut of melodramatic vision, although he scaled them down them in the printed text.⁸⁴

⁸⁰Ian Small and Russell Jackson, eds., *Two Society Comedies*, Appendix I, (London: Ernest Benn, 1983), 277.

⁸¹Mona Caird, "The Morality of Marriage" *Fortnightly Review* 47 (March 1890), 323.

⁸²Act II, 85, S.D.

⁸³Act IV, 189, S.D.

⁸⁴Russell Jackson and Ian Small, "Some New Drafts of A Wilde Play," *English Literature in Transition*, 30: 1 (1987), 14-15.

Poised uncompromisingly against Mrs. Arbuthnot by the immediate purpose of capturing Gerald's loyalty but at the deeper level of personal character by moral identity, Illingworth commits himself to battle. In championing male independence from women's interference he draws his strength from his dandy persona which is expected to let him rise above mere sentiment—characteristic of women—to a calm, rational recognition of the most beneficial course of action untouched by the selfishness of which he accuses Mrs. Arbuthnot:

What a typical woman you are! You talk sentimentally, and you are thoroughly selfish the whole time. . . . Rachel, I want you to look at this matter from the common-sense point of view, . . . leaving you and me out of the question.⁸⁵

Illingworth's speech typifies the dandy's conviction that women are irrational and cannot rise above the mundane. The dandy himself exists on a rarefied, intellectual plane, and he actively opposes the utilitarian ethic, denouncing usefulness and sincerity and proclaiming the supremacy of form over substance. The well-tied necktie or the perfect buttonhole, marks of the sartorial emphasis of the dandy's code, are symbols not of vanity but of non-utilitarian formalism and in cultivating the formal perfection of speech and manner Illingworth, like Darlington and Goring, may claim to be seeking liberation from the petty materialism of the world.

But the claim of transcending the mundane is proven false even as Illingworth accuses Mrs. Arbuthnot of sentimentality; "leaving you and me out of the question" is the last thing he plans to do. Capturing Gerald's loyalty becomes for him one more counter in the contest with Mrs. Arbuthnot and he descends to the level of trying to win by bribery rather than rational persuasion. He tempts Gerald with a glittering vision of Society and the subtler lure of modernity,⁸⁶ and Mrs. Arbuthnot with an offer of "whatever allowance you like."⁸⁷ His claim that he is merely thinking of what is best for Gerald is exposed as a

⁸⁵Act II, 95.

⁸⁶Act III, 109.

⁸⁷Act IV, 179.

personal motive when he eventually confesses, "I want my son."⁸⁸ But even that rings hollow, for affection would be incapable of calling one's son one's bastard. His subjection to low passions of this sort prove him unfit for the dandy's status. In his last encounter with Mrs. Arbuthnot he again sneers, "You women live by your emotions and for them,"⁸⁹ but his own conduct there betrays his own subjection to vanity, anger and malice, leading to the vulgarity of his exit speech, an unpardonable transgression of the dandy code.

The dandy persona, then, is a mere facade, not the substance of Lord Illingworth's character, and therefore not a source of strength on which he can draw in his bid to claim Gerald for his world. The play systematically strips Illingworth of his masks of power as it unveils his several identities, from glamorous man of the world to vulgar braggart. Subtly undercutting his claims of power over women, the play shows that his identity shifts according to the way women look at him. His boast to Mrs. Allonby, "Don't you know that I always succeed in whatever I try"⁹⁰ seems empty for a man so dependent on women for self-definition. Lady Stutfield introduces him as a "very, very wicked man" upon his first entrance. For her as for Mrs. Allonby, wickedness is a positive attribute in a man. To Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester, he is the aristocratic villain of the melodrama, who seduces virtuous young maidens. Mrs. Arbuthnot takes care to inform him that she sees him as a victimizer and as the destroyer of her life. She refuses to allow him any part in the "*child* of her shame,"⁹¹ for he has part only in the *shame*.

To Hester, Illingworth is a prime example of the "hideous man with a hideous past,"⁹² of destroying beauty and virtue. He bears out this suspicion in his attack on her and is forever branded by her as a villain. To himself, Illingworth is a suave and successful wit, irresistible to women, but his encounters with women radically change this egotistic self-

⁸⁸Act IV, 181.

⁸⁹Act IV, 185.

⁹⁰Act I, 40.

⁹¹Act IV, 169, my emphasis.

⁹²Act II, 71.

image. His virility is first called into question by Mrs. Allonby with her challenge to kiss the Puritan. Hester's rejection is a further blow. By denying him his son, Mrs. Arbuthnot delivers the final blow, robbing him of the only proof of his virility. The identity of father is offered only too briefly and its loss his worst punishment. His accelerating defeat is particularly well marked by the loss of his primary weapon, his wit. From the deliverer of brilliant epigrams he becomes the vulgar villain of melodrama, attempting to recoup some of the lost ground by throwing "mistress" and the unspoken "bastard" in Mrs. Arbuthnot's face. but there too he is summarily silenced by the worst insult a gentleman could be offered. Kerry Powell complains that Wilde surrendered to the melodramatic tradition of poetic justice by Mrs. Arbuthnot's "stylized revenge" on Illingworth,⁹³ but his punishment in fact marks his undoing at a deeper level by creating a resonance with more confident times. Being struck in the face with a glove by a woman does not lead to the romantic scenario he had fantasized when Mrs. Allonby had asked him in Act One what he would do if Hester struck him similarly. Once more he is bested by his female adversary, this time in his true persona as a vulgar poseur. He concedes his loss with his lingering, regretful sigh and one last, distant look at his son.

The stage is thus left to women to impose their vision of worth on it and to lay down a line of life for their charge, the young man setting out in the world. To the last it is impossible to judge the moral implication of this ending objectively, for the victory of the Puritans obviously saves Gerald from slavery to a moral leper but it also robs him of a chance to confront the world on his own and, what is more, to choose his life for himself. His relief is a compromised one, for he has to leave his natal world and emigrate to America, that haven for "Sixty millions of people, *all* fools!"⁹⁴ This moment, a defining one for the course of the gender conflict we have been following, is a moment of ambiguity. The play breaks the cast of the fallen woman by proving that though Mrs.

⁹³Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, 66.

⁹⁴Wilde to Leonard Smithers, 27 November 1898, in *Letters*, 765.

Arbuthnot's shameful past labels her as one, she is indeed the good woman the Lady Hunstanton knows her to be. But as her contest with Illingworth grows, her saintly garb begins to fray in terms of its effect on her world. In her love for her son there seems to be little consideration for his interests. Worse, it is a consuming passion that does not allow its object any independence of belief or action but altogether assimilates it. In Mrs. Arbuthnot we see the classic interplay between what Freud calls the "only two basic instincts, *Eros* and the *destructive instinct*." While the aim of the first is, Freud says, to "establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus – in short, to bind together," he notes that it may also combine with the destructive instinct as, significantly, in the act of eating, which is "a destruction of the object with the final aim of incorporating it."⁹⁵ There can be no question about Mrs. Arbuthnot's wish to "bind together" with her son; but it is a wish that tends to eliminate his personhood. Nurture becomes consumption.

Nor does this hegemonic control of the young man end with the mother. Frighteningly, it is perpetuated by continuing into Gerald's own generation in the person of the other woman who lays claim to him, the equally passionate Hester. Her demands on him are no weaker than his mother's and are actually restatements of her wishes. Mrs. Arbuthnot will not marry Lord Illingworth; Gerald insists; Hester rushes in and "embracing Mrs. Arbuthnot" she reiterates Mrs. Arbuthnot's decision. The two women virtually merge into one, speaking the same language, holding one another. Most revealingly, Hester declares, "You cannot love me at all, unless you love her also,"⁹⁶ affirming total identity rather than mere alliance, whereby they become mother and daughter and the sole arbiters of Gerald's life.⁹⁷ He cannot move until the women answer his question, "what should I do?"⁹⁸ This subsumption of the male ego within the female will illustrate a far deeper reach of women's power than the petty bullying of Lady Caroline or the sexual teasing of

⁹⁵Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, trans., James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 5-6.

⁹⁶Act IV, 170.

⁹⁷Act IV, 190.

⁹⁸Act IV, 171.

Mrs. Allonby. If on viewing these events men should become apprehensive of women's power, the play has still more fear in store for them: the dissolution of the male persona to the point of irrelevance where men are of no importance.

Chapter 5

An Ideal Husband: Woman as Predator

While male authority has to bow to women's power in *A Woman of No Importance*, in *An Ideal Husband* it is the women who suffer defeat.¹ The two principal female characters in the play, Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley, are moral opposites and have contrary motives but both pose threats to the world of the play by intruding into the traditional male, public, non-domestic sphere and trying to impose their will on it. By the end of the play, their intervention is repelled, leaving male authority shaken but unbroken. The traditional "separate spheres" remain inviolate.

The failure of the female enterprise, as well as the affirmation of traditional concepts of male and female roles, have prompted Patricia F. Behrendt and Philip K. Cohen, among others, to accuse Wilde of misogyny. Wilde's view of women had certainly changed from his days of editing *The Woman's World* and his endorsement of women's fuller participation in running the world. Women in *An Ideal Husband* prove by their action that their claims of authority and self-determination are wholly undeserved. Even the pure-hearted Lady Chiltern is undeserving of the autonomy she claims as part of her vision of a just society. Norbert Kohl believes that Wilde gives no motivation for her change of heart, leaving her characterization inconsistent,² with the spectator suspecting that she is as hypocritical and opportunistic as her husband. Lady Chiltern's meek acceptance of Lord Goring's vision of the nature of men and women is something of a shock, considering her former role as her husband's helpmeet and moral arbiter. Still more disturbing is her verbatim quotation of Goring's words, as though her identity is subsumed in his and she allowed speech only to utter sentiments authorised by him. By contrast, in *A Woman of*

¹Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (London: Methuen, 1908). This opened at the Haymarket Theatre on 3 January, 1895, was transferred to the Criterion on 13 April, 1895 and ran for a total of 124 performances.

²Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: A Conformist Rebel* David Henry Wilson, transl. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 219.

No Importance even the declamatory speeches of Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot are never silenced by male proclamations. Although Lady Chiltern does get the last word in *A Woman of No Importance* it is not an affirmation of female autonomy but male approval of female utterance. Like Katharine at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Lady Chiltern repudiates her former self. Kerry Powell argues that:

to defend his politician against radical demands for male purity, Wilde recultivated an eroding sexual stereotype of the Victorian era—that women are intellectually the inferiors of men, unequipped for ambition and action, but well-suited for the homelike virtues of mercy and love.³

Powell is right that

a more thorough reversal of the "modern" position that Wilde took in his review of Darwinism and Politics, or a more smashing rejection of Ibsen's advanced ideas about women, would be hard to imagine.⁴

At the same time, Powell calls this Wilde's most Ibsenite play, because its hero is like Karsten Bernick in *Pillars of Society*, a respected public figure with a dishonourable secret. The parallel goes deeper, for by raising the question of whether the good in the character is negated by one bad act in the past, Wilde is probing, like Ibsen, the tragic dismantling of ideals by practical necessity. The nature of idealism comes into question in the confrontation between Chiltern's pragmatism and what Shaw called "the mechanical idealism of his stupidly good wife."⁵ Rigidly moral, she finds that each good act carried out by her husband has been devalued and tainted by his one bad act. But in trying to re-educate her, is Goring not compromised by excusing Chiltern's behaviour on what Philip K. Cohen has termed "considerations of gender"?⁶ Ideals and idealism in this play may indeed be the trivialities Shaw so impatiently denounces, but surely the play forces the viewer to ask why they should be so, and that is not trivial at all.

³Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 101.

⁴Powell, 86.

⁵Bernard Shaw, *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (London: Constable, 1932), 11.

⁶Philip K. Cohen *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), 206. Cohen accuses Sir Robert of implicitly arguing that "his gender justifies his behaviour" (205), but ignores Goring's explicit argument in favour of masculine power.

If Wilde is in fact attempting revaluations of idealism, it is tempting to see the play as a sustained satire on the sentimentalisation of reality, which would suggest that he is methodically undercutting the play's resolution and that the happy ending is in fact his sardonic indictment of his characters as deluded or self-serving egoists. But this presumption of subversion seems warranted more by a preconception of Wilde's purpose than by his textual performance. To insist that everything he writes means its opposite cannot be a sound argument. Rather, the position that the present discussion takes is that Wilde's text may be read as an encounter between conventionality and scepticism, from which the former emerges dominant but leaving room for the latter. We must look closely at Wilde's use of conventions, both of the theatre and of social ideology, to discover what room there might be in the play for an alternative view.

The suspicion that Wilde has abandoned ironic scepticism to embrace conventionality is particularly strengthened by his portrayal of women. While he disciplines the women, he allows the fallen man full self-justification. Chiltern is censured, yet not only forgiven but rewarded with limitless self-advancement, his guilt wholly wiped out. This resolution of the crisis was found morally repugnant and superficial by both H.G. Wells and William Archer. Wells caustically commented on the silliness of the Chilterns deciding "that love was the best of life."⁷ Archer finds Chiltern pitiable and hypocritical: "'Ought his old peccadillo to incapacitate him for public life?'—and, while essaying to answer it in the negative, he virtually, to my thinking, answers it in the affirmative."⁸ Lady Chiltern's indictment of his offence is termed inflexible by Goring who expressly asserts men's immunity from women's judgment in Act IV: "Women are not meant to judge us."⁹ Nor is this a matter of mere practical accommodation to him; keeping a man's love by forgiving

⁷Unsigned review by Wells, *Pall Mall Gazette*, January 4, 1895, 3.

⁸Signed review, *Pall Mall Budget*, January 10, 1895, reprinted in William Archer, *The Theatrical 'World' of 1895* (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 15.

⁹Act IV, 228.

him is not just what "all that the world wants of women," but "*should* want of them."¹⁰

The ideal is the same as Coventry Patmore's:

The woman's gentle mood . . .
 . . . does in her accept
 All her own faults, but none of man's.¹¹

and echoes Ruskin's insistence that women must be:

instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fall from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service . . .¹²

This is the lesson Lady Chiltern has to learn because she comes too close to the "insolent pride" of setting herself morally above her husband and paralleling Mrs. Cheveley's presumption in trying to dominate men. Again, the good woman and the bad are both put in their place by the men, Mrs. Cheveley driven back into exile and Lady Chiltern to her husband's side.

So insistent is the play on excluding women from moral agency in the public domain that it loses sight of morality itself. Chiltern is clearly unrepentant for selling a state secret and sorry only for being found out. In Act II, he asks Goring, "whom did I wrong by what I did?" and setting money and power above everything else, he answers Goring's question, "did you suffer any regret for what you had done?" with an unhesitating "No. I felt I had fought the century with its own weapons, and won."¹³ This suggests that he denounces the Argentinian fraud more to keep his wife's love than to quieten his conscience, giving in to female blackmail in a dreadfully ironic sense. Still more troubling is Goring's willingness to support and rescue Chiltern despite his clear understanding of Chiltern's guilt. But perhaps the irrelevance of morality in this man's world is best proven

¹⁰Act IV, 229, my emphasis.

¹¹Coventry Patmore, "Book I: "The Dance: Prelude", "The Angel in the House," in Ian Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel: A Study of Coventry Patmore, his Wife Emily, and The Angel in the House* (London: Haggerston Press, 1992), 115.

¹²John Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," *Sesame and Lilies*, (1865, repr., New York: William L. Allison Co., 1895), 152-3.

¹³Act II, 84.

by the counterattack against Mrs. Cheveley. She is defeated by exactly the same weapon she uses; just as she seeks victory by blackmail, Goring defeats her by threatening exposure of her past theft.¹⁴

The conservative rendering of women in the play suggests a subservience to the conventionality that Wilde mocks elsewhere. It begins at the very basic level of plot, situation and character. The plot is the formulaic narrative of the man with a secret brought close to ruin by the threat of disclosure but saved at the last moment by a fortuitous discovery. Structurally it is uninventive, built around two pairs of lovers, both jeopardized by the same villain: just as Mrs. Cheveley comes between the Chilterns, she also poses a threat to Goring's romance with Mabel by claiming him for her own.¹⁵ At the centre of the action is the time-honoured figure of the loyal friend who is also the *raisonneur* who by his counsel and action brings about the rescue. Accident plays a crucial role in resolving both threats to the Chilterns: Mrs. Cheveley's threat to Chiltern founders upon the chance discovery of the brooch she stole; her despatch to Chiltern of his wife's note to Goring miscarries when Chiltern thinks it is to himself. Even the twist Wilde adds to this pattern, that is, of making Lady Chiltern scorn the subterfuge of leaving Chiltern unenlightened, becomes merely an occasion to reiterate the durability of true love.

In choosing his characters, Wilde is equally loyal to convention. The gallery of characters is familiar, comprising stock characters such as the tainted hero, the pure-souled wife, the vicious adventuress, the loyal friend, the crusty old father, the snobbish butler. Indeed, Wilde introduces characters in his stage directions by deliberately typecasting them. Lady Chiltern is the deified woman of "grave Greek beauty,"¹⁶ Chiltern is the tainted but romantic hero, Goring a "flawless dandy,"¹⁷ Lord Caversham "a fine Whig type,"¹⁸

¹⁴A strong hint of Goring's ruthlessness was given in Peter Hall's 1992 production of *An Ideal Husband*. The battle went from farcical to sexually threatening as Goring, frantically fumbling for the letter, found himself on his knees with his hands under skirt. It reverted to comedy only when the "epitome of form," the butler (summoned by the quick-thinking Mrs. Cheveley) arrived.

¹⁵Act III, 171-4.

¹⁶Act I, 1.

¹⁷Act I, 20.

¹⁸Act I, 4.

Mabel "a perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type,"¹⁹ the Vicomte the ridiculous anglophile,²⁰ and so on.

But the most persuasive sign of Wilde's readiness to accept stereotypes is his uncritical portrayal of the fallen woman. Whereas in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* he forces a reexamination of the stereotyped fallen woman, here he accepts it wholesale. In other plays Wilde turns common presumption on its head: Mrs. Eryllynne has a history of wrongdoing, looks and acts like a fallen woman, but is the self-sacrificing saviour of her daughter by conscious intent. Mrs. Arbuthnot is a still more problematic figure because she is at once the fallen woman and the absolute model of a rigid virtue that weakens life. These are not women whose profile tells all. By uncovering the depth of their character, Wilde weans us from received ideas. By contrast, Mrs. Cheveley is what she is. No surprising revelation awaits the viewer, nor the revision of moral judgment. We know what she is and what she will do; therefore we know how we shall think of her.

In the play's predetermined world, relationships hold no surprise. Love is sentimental and expressed by the rhetoric of adoration. The principal lovers, the Chilterns, place one another above the common clay. Lady Chiltern says: "how I worshipped you! You were something to me apart from common life . . ."²¹ Chiltern declares, "you are to me the white image of all good things."²² Victorian sentimentality holds romance in its glutinous grip both in speech and in allegory: Act I dissolves into darkness with Chiltern echoing Othello's (and Herod's) lines, "Put out the lights, Mason, put out the lights!" and the only light in the gloom shining on "the tapestry of the Triumph of Love." Even Goring the dandy declares his love to Mabel in the approved manner of the sentimental hero, exchanging persiflage for earnestness: "Mabel, do be serious."²³

¹⁹Act I, 5.

²⁰Act I, 4.

²¹Act II, 130.

²²Act IV, 236.

²³Act IV, 206.

In the crafting of *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde's debt to the theatre of his time, both British and French, is evident everywhere.²⁴ One of the first reviews called the play "a thing of shreds and patches, . . . whose only dramatic value was that they have been in use for years past."²⁵ The reviewer of *Sketch* also dismissed it as an "old-fashioned" play "antiquated in method."²⁶ One can see why. From the French school of Sardou and Scribe Wilde borrowed elements like the blackmailing fallen woman and the standard comic situation of characters present in the same room without being aware of each other's presence. Secrets, reunions of long-lost relatives, and the importance of borrowed objects were common to French and English plays. In Émile Augier's *Olympe's Marriage* (*Le Mariage d'Olympe*, 1854), for example, the adventuress Olympe's true character is revealed by her jewels.²⁷ Mrs. Cheveley's duel with Goring over Lady Chiltern's letter echoes the contest between Sardou's Suzanne and Prosper²⁸ over a letter which might compromise the honour of a married woman, and Mrs. Cheveley's concealment in Goring's bedroom is like Clarisse's in Prosper's bedroom.²⁹ The scheming adventuress in search of political secrets might be from *Diplomacy* (1878), the English version of Sardou's *Dora* by Clement Scott and B.C. Stephenson, as Scott noted.

Wilde took a great deal from British melodrama, both in plot design and in characterization, particularly the melodrama of commerce, in framing the plot of *An Ideal Husband*. In Tom Taylor's *Payable on Demand* (1859), the news of Napoleon's

²⁴See Kerry Powell's detailed tracing of the heritage in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁵Unsigned review in the *Morning Advertiser*, January 4, 1895, 5.

²⁶Unsigned review in the *Sketch*, January 9, 1895, 496.

²⁷Émile Augier, *Four Plays*, trans. and intro., Barrett H. Clark (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1915), Act IV.

²⁸J. Palgrave Simpson, *A Scrap of Paper: A Comic Drama in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, n.d.). Simpson's translation of Victorien Sardou's *Les Pattes des Mouche* (1860) was first performed at the St. James's Theatre, 22 April, 1894, and revived at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, 26 February, 1892 and again at the Avenue Theater, 5 June, 1893.

²⁹The device of hiding in order to avoid being compromised was a common enough one in drama, especially in comedy since it created such pleasurable tension and was capable of creating a great moment of revelation as well as of comic embarrassment. The use of this device in French farces as well as in English predecessors such as *The School for Scandal* was noted by contemporary reviewers. Wilde also used it in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

abdication reaches the money-merchant Goldsched a day early so that he can buy shares and earn huge profits, just like the inside information that has made Lord Chiltern and his friends rich.³⁰ The workings of the "City" and the business world were dramatized also in Taylor's *The Ticket-of-Leave-Man* (1863)³¹ and Boucicault's *The Streets of New York* (1857, also called *The Poor of New York*, and later, *The Streets of London*),³² and thereafter, throughout the 1870s, 1880s to the 1890s, in plays such as Sydney Grundy's *A Bunch of Violets* (1894) and particularly in Pinero's *The Cabinet Minister* (1890) where similar prior knowledge of a state secret allows a politician and his wife to make a profit. Conventionalism wins in Pinero's case; the cabinet minister applies for the Chiltern Hundreds.

Although Wilde's borrowings from melodrama were frequent and numerous, they came from the conventions of plot and character, not the moral perceptions of melodrama. Wilde does not express in his plays any sense of what Peter Brooks takes as a major premise in his discussion of the philosophical bearings of melodrama, namely, that it represents a world "subsumed by an underlying manichaeism," and puts the audience "in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things."³³ Nor does the dramatic impact of Wilde's plays readily match the emotional and conceptual profile of melodrama as drawn by Brooks: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety."³⁴ The extremes on which melodrama insists and the polarizations into which it falls are precisely the absolutes of perception and expression that Wilde repudiates.

³⁰Tom Taylor, *Payable on Demand: An Original Domestic Drama in Two Acts* (Boston: Charles H. Spencer, 1871).

³¹Tom Taylor, *The Ticket-of-Leave Man: A Drama, in Four Acts*, in George Rowell, ed. and intro., *Nineteenth Century Plays*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

³²Dion Boucicault, *The Streets of New York: A Drama in Five Acts* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Co., 1888-).

³³Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 4.

³⁴*Ibid.* 11-12.

Wilde's deeper debt is to the character types of melodrama. Listed by Michael Booth, the principal figures are: the Hero, the Heroine, the Villain and Villainess, the Comic Servant-Girl, and the Comic Man.³⁵ The villain might be a crime king, like Spider in *The Silver King* or a corrupt and lecherous squire, such as the Duke of Guiseberry in *The Dancing Girl*, or a foreigner/expatriate such as George Forrester/Marrables in *The Fatal Card*. That by Wilde's time these characters had evolved into common formulas is evident in the memorably satiric and perceptive outlines drawn in *Stage-land* (1889) by Wilde's contemporary, Jerome K. Jerome.³⁶ Lord Chiltern is formed in this general mold of the melodramatic hero, such as Wilfrid Denver of *The Silver King* or Bob Brierly of *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, different only in being actually guilty.³⁷ The innocent heroine, Jerome notes, faces disaster because of her husband's foolishness but matches him in earnestness and lofty diction. As a personification of Virtue, as Grimstead puts it,³⁸ she was an "Angel of Light, a perfect being."³⁹

By contrast, the villain and the villainess are everything bad, in character, speech, action and appearance. The villain and his female counterpart are usually motivated by greed, malice, or vengeance. They are outsiders and often try to gain acceptance with money, blackmail or trickery. Villainy is even more shocking when perpetrated by a woman. Jerome notes that she is often foreign or lives abroad, which is a plain signifier of her loose morals and general wickedness because it means exile from decent society. A whiff of scandal hangs about her. While the villain may assail the young heroine's virtue, the villainess tries to trap the young hero into marriage. Foiled, they strike back venomously. Mrs. Cheveley's final vicious act is to attempt to ruin Lady Chiltern's reputation just because she cannot stand her virtuousness. Her taunts and gloating are

³⁵See Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 190-214.

³⁶Jerome K. Jerome, *Stage-land*(London: Chatto and Windus, 1889) 18.

³⁷On the reason why the accused hero is forgiven, see David Grimstead, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 179-180.

³⁸Grimstead, 172.

³⁹W.S. Gilbert, *Engaged* in George Rowell, ed., *Plays by W.S. Gilbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Act I, 143.

typical of melodrama: "A vein of sneerery must run through [the villain's] voice."⁴⁰ In Samuel B. Judah's *The Mountain Torrent*, the villain exults: "Ha! Ha! Ha! How I banquet in every sigh; each tear is nectar to my soul."⁴¹ Mrs. Cheveley's style is less florid but her laughter is the same: she reads out Lady Chiltern's note to Goring, "laughing"⁴² and tells Lady Chiltern about her husband "with a bitter laugh."⁴³

The villain is painted in unrelieved black to satisfy poetic justice but to serve dramatic effect the villain can never slink away quietly but storm out gnashing his teeth. Mrs. Cheveley's fury at her exit recalls her sisters in villainy. Grundy's poisoning villainess, Beatrice Selwyn cries, "all I have worked for, all I have schemed for, all I have married for, slips through my fingers. . . . And I can do nothing!"⁴⁴ while Scott and Stephenson's Countess Zicka says bitterly:

Pride yourself on your clever plot. Rejoice, if you will, at the degradation of one who might have been as good as any here. A wicked woman has been caught and trapped. As I have suffered, so I shall suffer still, and there is not one in this wide world to pity or to help me.⁴⁵

The villain or villainess has an uncontrollable temper and rages about like Herod in the mystery plays. Mrs. Cheveley breaks into a curse when her brooch becomes her handcuff, with her "thin finger tear[ing] at the jewel to no purpose" like a predatory creature.⁴⁶

In melodrama the villain's viciousness is relieved by the wit and good sense of the comic man and the lively girl. The comic man provides laughter and often inadvertently defeats the villain. Wilde's dandy is too sophisticated to be the comic man and in *An Ideal Husband* Goring is privileged as the key player against the villainess, but he remains the source of humour, though on a higher plane. He is true to type also in stumbling upon the

⁴⁰Bart Kennedy, *Footlights*, 1928, 107 quoted in Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 198.

⁴¹Samuel B. Judah, *The Mountain Torrent* (New York: 1820), 1.51, 42 quoted in Grimstead, 178.

⁴²Act III, 188.

⁴³Act II, 127.

⁴⁴Sydney Grundy, *A Fool's Paradise: An Original Play in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1898) Act III, 48.

⁴⁵Clement Scott and B.C. Stephenson, *Diplomacy: A Play in Four Acts: An English Version of M. Sardou's "Dora"*. Act IV, 26: typescript in Nicoll and Freedley, Box 20.

⁴⁶Act III, 183.

stolen brooch which gives him power over Mrs. Cheveley and negotiate the denouement by accident so common in melodrama. The pattern of minor characters is further advanced by pairing the comic man with the lively girl, usually a lower-class girl such as a servant but in society drama well-placed enough to be the secondary heroine. This is the model for Mabel Chiltern.⁴⁷ Specific parallels appear in Chambers's *The Idler* (Kate Merryweather), Grundy's *The Glass of Fashion* (Peg O'Reilly), Pinero's *The Cabinet Minister* (Imogen Twombly) and Carton's *Sunlight and Shadow* (Maud Latimer). Against the heroine's high seriousness she is innocently irreverent but also level-headed, especially about men. Although she seems unromantic, at the end of the play it is her marriage that seems likeliest to succeed. Unlike Gertrude, who needs a man who stands "apart from common life,"⁴⁸ Mabel declares, "Oh! I wouldn't marry a man with a future before him for anything under the sun."⁴⁹

The comic man and the lively girl of melodrama keep the play on a level of common sense. They spar continually in the Beatrice-Benedick manner, trading good-humoured insults and even an affectionate box on the ear. An early example is in G.F. Taylor's *The Factory Strike, or, Want, Crime, and Retribution* (1838):

Lucy: You're a lump of affectation.
 Timothy: You're as gentle as a dove.
 Lucy: You're as ugly as sin.
 Timothy: You're as beautiful as an angel.⁵⁰

The humour of the comic man and woman matching their wit had lost none of its popularity in Wilde's time, as we see in C. Haddon Chambers' *The Idler* (1891):

Kate: I don't think it will ever be bad form to be rich.
Strong: You relieve my mind immensely. I am really delighted to have met you, Miss Merryweather.

⁴⁷We may see a distant ancestor in the stock character of Isabella in the Commedia dell'arte. According to John Rudlin, she was "flirtatious, provocative, stubborn in turn, so headstrong she usually [got] her own way, even over her father." She could be "something of a prude" and her language was "refined"; she was "never lost for a phrase." See John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994) 115-117.

⁴⁸Act II, 131.

⁴⁹Act II, 108.

⁵⁰G.F. Taylor, *The Factory Strike, or, Want, Crime, and Retribution* (1838), in Michael Booth, *English Melodrama*, 137.

Kate: Why?

Strong: I'm afraid I haven't known you long enough yet to venture to pay you compliments.

Kate: Then you will have known me long enough very soon.⁵¹

Mabel and Goring follow this old formula of badinage and casual wooing on a much more sophisticated level, as noted by Patricia Behrendt,⁵² and thus keep the play anchored to everyday life.

The extent of Wilde's borrowing from tradition was recognized from the beginning. Less commonly noticed was Ibsen's influence on him, although his interest in the new drama might be inferred from his attendance at some of the private productions of Ibsen's plays by organizations such as J.T. Grein's Independent Theatre, and in Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891).⁵³ But Ibsen's influence related more to perception than practice; Wilde followed Ibsen in an awakened awareness of the weakness of formulaic thinking and false idealism while recycling stock characters and situations from the theatre tradition of his time. Even as he writes to formulas both of form and ideology, we may perhaps detect some trace of Ibsen's fascination with received wisdom.

Not that writing to formulas is necessarily a fault. But formulaic representations of the world tend to draw their user into formulaic thinking. It is difficult not to decide that *An Ideal Husband* surrenders entirely to convention when one considers its formulaic treatment of women's role and nature and its compromise on moral issues, or whether the conservative ethic mocks by its excess. Wilde's insistence in his other plays on denying received and fixed truths seems muted here, even reversed by the subscription of the supposed sceptic, the dandy, to the *status quo*. Here he acts in the prescribed dandy manner but compromises his detached critical view of the world to protect that world. As a *raisonneur* figure he is the fallen woman's implacable enemy, utterly dismissive of her point of view. Still more significantly, he battles for established rules not only against her obvious threats but even against the virtuous woman's urgings to men to mend their ways,

⁵¹C. Haddon Chambers, *The Idler: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1902), Act I, 21.

⁵²Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 164, 166.

⁵³Regenia Gagnier and Kerry Powell have noted the bearing of this work on *An Ideal Husband*.

subscribing wholly to the idea of women's nature and role that underlies these fixed rules. Since that idea is the reference point against which women's transgression is measured, is it not validated by the play's action?

An Ideal Husband concurs with the contemporary conservative view that rationality was not one of women's defining attributes. It was excised from the traditional constructions of women by the assumption that women were emotional beings and emotion preempted reason. This image of the emotionally driven woman was supported by scientific theories dear to the nineteenth century. Such theories as phrenology, in which the physical dimensions of the brain were measured and interpreted, led to physiological typings of women that were taken as tangible proof of women's intellectual inferiority. Significantly, both principal female characters in *An Ideal Husband* rely on their intelligence,⁵⁴ which suggests a troubling non-conformity. Intelligence was not what would gain women approval. Speaking biologically of women in 1872, one writer asserts that their "refined sentiments, their native modesty, their sublime unselfishness" was due to sexual selection.⁵⁵ These were not qualities usable in the public domain. Lady Chiltern's inability to consider a "rational compromise," that is, complicity in self-serving cheating, proves her unfit for the logical, practical world.

Beyond the basic attribute of emotionalism, good women were expected to be loving, self-sacrificing, pure and purifying,⁵⁶ and the source of morality at home but unfit for decision-making in the public world. Bad women were the exact opposite of good women in these secondary characteristics. Both good and bad women were constituted by nature's decree, immutable because natural, and therefore its authority justified the politics of gender aimed at defending male territory from women. Necessarily, the 'natural' difference between the sexes assigned separate roles to men and women. These roles, as stated

⁵⁴The exception is Mabel Chiltern but she deliberately upholds the disarming image of the empty-headed pretty girl by engaging in nothing but inconsequential chit-chat.

⁵⁵Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Trübner and Co., 1887), 455.

⁵⁶Capable, in Patmore's phrase of making "brutes men, and men divine" ("The Angel in the House", Book I, "Aetna and the Moon: Prelude," in Ian Anstruther, 112).

explicitly by Goring and acknowledged by the Chilterns, were products of long established conventions that separated the spheres of men and women into the public and the private, respectively ruled by intellect and emotion, as immortalized in Milton's description of Adam and Eve:

For contemplation hee and valor form'd,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace⁵⁷

The ideal woman knew this division required that she was "to be strong, not in mind, but in noble and generous impulses; that, while [men] know best what is expedient, logical, or wise, she should know best what is true, gallant, and right."⁵⁸ Lady Chiltern rushes into her husband's domain because she does not know what is "true, gallant, and right." The boundaries are not to be crossed on pain of the transgressor becoming "unsexed," either effeminate or unwomanly.⁵⁹ Since *An Ideal Husband* cuts its women to this pattern without questioning it, it views any woman who does not conform to it as a threat to a well-ordered home and a stable world.

In holding this view *An Ideal Husband* follows convention. But its distinction as a narrative of female transgression lies in insisting that the good woman is as likely as the bad to transgress, implying that women in general are capable of destabilizing society. That this fear of women infects perception in *An Ideal Husband* is evident not only in the actions of women but the reactions of men and the logic of the unfolding of events. Mrs. Cheveley's wrongdoing is obvious: she invades the male world and challenges male power. It is noteworthy that she is not the only outsider in this social world but the only one utterly rejected. The Vicomte de Nanjac is even more foreign but one can laugh at him as a one-joke parody of foreigners. Mrs. Cheveley elicits only distrust. She uses her

⁵⁷John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed., Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1962), IV, 297-8.

⁵⁸Review of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in "Novels and Novelists," *London Quarterly Review*, 16 (1861), 292, in Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Literary Issues, 1837-1883. Volume III of The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), 89.

⁵⁹See, for instance, Linda Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33:4 (March 1979), 440-441. On gender definitions and boundaries, especially effeminacy, see Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

feminine charms to seduce men like Baron Arnheim and manipulate those like Lord Chiltern. She even turns the supposed female irrationality to a claim for attention:

Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us.
Men can be analysed, women . . . merely adored.⁶⁰

In her calculating attitude as in her ambition she is "unnatural." The play constantly notes her artificiality. Against Mabel Chiltern's "English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type,"⁶¹ Mrs. Cheveley stands as a very un-English flower, the tropical orchid, and a "work of art."⁶² Mabel's dislike seems as much prompted by the obviousness of Mrs. Cheveley's revolt against nature as by sexual jealousy. "I assure you she is coming upstairs, as large as life and not nearly so natural," she announces to Lady Chiltern.⁶³ Goring is positive that Mrs. Cheveley has something to conceal because she wears "far too much rouge."⁶⁴

The idea of nature is important enough in this play to deserve an excursion. Evidently, for Wilde "nature" is not an uncontrolled force but one organized by human perception. The conception of nature as a system organized by human understanding allows and encourages the discovery of generalities as nature's laws which are then taken to be biological as well as social and cultural determinants. Given this concept, the artifice of the dandy or the society lady, like that of the poet, can be easily subsumed under nature. On the contrary, anything that does not fall within the assumed patterns of nature is viewed in *An Ideal Husband* as unnatural. It is in this sense that Mrs. Cheveley is unnatural and thus an adversary not only to the Chilterns but to civil society itself. This typology has the further advantage that thereby her enemies, the Chilterns, are necessarily exonerated and endorsed as upholders of natural decency.

A demand for naturalness may seem inconsistent with Wilde's celebration of style and confirm what Russell Jackson and Ian Small call "the contradiction between Wilde's

⁶⁰Act I, 16.

⁶¹Act I, 5.

⁶²Act I, 7.

⁶³Act II, 109.

⁶⁴Act II, 90.

celebration of masks, poses and insincerity and the high value placed by his plots on candour and honesty."⁶⁵ But the inconsistency disappears when we note that he rejects not nature's spirit but its expression, and like Pope, he would follow nature but only "nature methodized."⁶⁶ This obviously calls for the highest aesthetic judgment but that is what the true poet and the dandy do possess. The poet's art and the dandy's self-fashioning are actually recognitions of nature by the cultivated imagination.

In line with Wilde's understanding of nature as a product of culture,⁶⁷ the dandy must be the finest representative of nature. Nature underpins his flippancy, as it does in Lord Goring, eliciting admiration. For instance, Goring declares, "It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world,"⁶⁸ placing the natural well-spring of the heart against the laboured product of the brain. Grasping nature and interpreting it is a man's job, not a woman's. Frances E. Dolan notes, the poet is usually gendered as masculine and his creation as feminine: "the brazen natural world remains feminine, awaiting its transformation into gold at the poet's touch."⁶⁹ For instance, he attached the greatest value to dress, both men's and women's, but as Laurel Brake has shown, he thought that only men knew the vital import of dress and that their clothes stated a philosophy of life, whereas women's dress implied only vanity.⁷⁰ Women may earn credit by re-fashioning nature in speech, manners and clothing, as Mabel does, but only superficially, and if they violate the presumed dictates of natural morality, as Mrs. Cheveley does, they turn into freaks. The play offers persuasive evidence of this respect for nature. Mabel may speak the language of the dandy but her naturalness remains

⁶⁵ "Introduction," in *Two Society Comedies*, ed. Russell Jackson and Ian Small (London: Ernest Benn; New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), xxxvi.

⁶⁶ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, Pt. 1, in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed., William K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1951) Pt. 1, line 89.

⁶⁷ See Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 117-18.

⁶⁸ Act II, 101.

⁶⁹ Frances E. Dolan, "Taking the Pencil Out of God's Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England," *PMLA* 108:2, 1993, 225.

⁷⁰ Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 132. This is in keeping with Baudelaire's philosophy as noted in an earlier chapter.

unsullied. It is no accident that both Mabel and Mrs. Cheveley are rivals for Goring's attention, for it brings out how different they are. As against Mrs. Cheveley (and other fallen women in Wilde), Mabel is artificial only in manner and language. Her roots in nature are deep enough to make her wish to be a "real wife" to Goring at the end because she knows her boundaries, in fashion as in speech. The point of the deceptive simplicity of Mabel's ball gown, on which Mrs. Cheveley comments disparagingly, is that female reconstructions of nature, though allowed, must be limited and muted.⁷¹ Mrs. Cheveley's reliance on paint for her face and on dresses that are a little too spectacular,⁷² is cause for suspicion because they conceal the "natural" body all too well. Mrs. Cheveley's make-up attempts to defy nature by hiding the decay of her youth, just as her charm of manner attempts to conceal the decay of her morals. In 1840 Mrs. Alexander Walker had denounced cosmetics because: "the painting of the countenance . . . is a sign which deceives, and, what is worse, which is intended to deceive."⁷³

Victorian England regarded face-painting as particularly disreputable in its association with prostitutes and the *demi-monde*. Mrs. Eliza Lynn Linton's description of the "Girl of the Period" in the 1860s shows that even though fashionable women were wearing makeup, it still signified triviality and irresponsibility:

a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face as the first articles of her personal religion - a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses.⁷⁴

⁷¹In their study of the importance of fashion in nineteenth century theatre, Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell alert us to another nuance created by the difference in dress styles between the women. The opposition is not only between nature and artifice, but between the modern and the outworn. Playgoers at the Haymarket in 1895 would have realized that Mabel was dressed by Madame Mary Elizabeth Humble, a court dressmaker known for the chic simplicity of her designs. The fact that Mrs. Cheveley did not realize that Mabel's clothes were at the forefront of fashion, or understand that her own extravagant dresses were both politically incorrect and *passé*, testify to her kinship with the most vulgar of stage villainesses; see Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28-33.

⁷²The *Sketch* of 9 January, 1895 described a garish dress of yellow, scarlet, bright green and cream trimmed with violets, and a green straw hat trimmed with masses of purple and red orchids.

⁷³Mrs. Alexander Walker, *Female Beauty* (New York: Scofield and Voorhies, 1840), quoted in Richard Corson, *Fashions in Makeup: From Ancient to Modern Times* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), 317.

⁷⁴Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Girl of the Period", *Saturday Review*, 14 March 1868.

Mrs. Linton had a particular abhorrence for "false red hair" (the preferred hair colour of the Pre-Raphaelite "stunner") which she paired with the "painted skin"; red hair evidently continued to be one of the signs of the "fast" woman and of a deceitful nature. Mrs. Cheveley's hair is a "Venetian red."⁷⁵

Her attire too signals that modesty is another virtue she scorns, turning scandal to her advantage. Goring notes that Chiltern's efforts to dig up the dirt on her will be useless:

Mrs. Cheveley is one of those very modern women of our time who find a new scandal as becoming as a new bonnet, and air them both at the Park every afternoon at five-thirty. I am sure she adores scandals, and that the sorrow of her life at present is that she can't manage to have enough of them.⁷⁶

Not only in appearance but in her resolute combativeness Mrs. Cheveley perverts nature. And yet she cannot transcend her natural constitution; her vaunted intelligence is only low cunning, not up to male standards. She is not clever enough to notice that Lady Chiltern's note to Goring would fail to incriminate her because it names no addressee.⁷⁷ Foiled in her assaults on decent folks, she reveals what drives her: greed and envy, not reason. For all her combativeness she is brought down by the *donnée* of female nature, her uncontrollable emotions.

Mrs. Cheveley's unnatural personality identifies her as the threatening antithesis to the image of woman that most appealed to popular Victorian morality, that of the pure and innocent "angel" domesticated and dedicated to the interests of home and husband. A living mockery of Milton's, Ruskin's and Patmore's true woman, Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Chiltern for commercial reasons and therefore cannot be accorded the dignity of a defence. At the same time, the malice that sharpens her motivation, a character value culled directly from melodrama, confirms the justice of silencing her and banishing her from the society of all proper men and women. With her greed and malice, she becomes

⁷⁵Act I, 7.

⁷⁶Act II, 90.

⁷⁷Her threat was great because of the fragility of women's honour. The disastrous effect of the slightest suspicion appears in Pinero's play, *The Benefit of the Doubt* (London: William Heinemann, 1895) and George Meredith's novel, *Diana of the Crossways* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885).

merely the "criminal variant"⁷⁸ of the fallen woman, without any of the redeeming qualities of a Mrs. Erlynne. Her offence lacks the veniality of Chiltern's regrettable but (to Goring) understandable lapse, and her self-justification is set aside as the fulminations of a criminal, perhaps a lunatic, for when cornered by Goring, she falls into a "paroxysm of rage" and becomes "dreadful to look at."⁷⁹

If against the fallen woman's criminality the puritanical heroine's principled protest shines forth, it nonetheless misleads. Lady Chiltern's is in fact the worse fall of the two because she is angel to Mrs. Cheveley's demon. Her angelic image is maintained explicitly by her husband, who strives to be worthy of this "white image of all good things."⁸⁰ She herself tries to live up to this image by influencing her husband without understanding that her role must not cross the domestic world into the public. Although her challenge to male authority is not vicious like Mrs. Cheveley's, it is still a bid to usurp male territory because she tries to direct her husband's actions and thereby the nation's political course. The handwriting on Chiltern's letters may be his, but the words are his wife's. Mrs. Cheveley's political interests are explicit; she confesses, "Politics are my only pleasure."⁸¹ Lady Chiltern's motive may not be pleasure but noble principle, yet she too enters the political arena, a male preserve, by joining the Women's Liberal Association, where women "have much more important work to do than look at each other's bonnets."⁸² Not surprisingly, Goring is disingenuously impressed. This is not how the angel in the house is supposed to act; is it any surprise that Lady Chiltern is childless?

The good woman is thus in need of succour on two fronts: the threat of her enemy, and her own transgressive beliefs. Since her husband, her traditional protector, is down and out, her succour can come only from the loyal friend. Goring's rescue act, aimed against the predatory woman as well as the virtuous, proves him to be the arbiter of action

⁷⁸Norbert Kohl, 222.

⁷⁹Act III, 184-5.

⁸⁰Act IV, 236.

⁸¹Act I, 17.

⁸²Act II, 94.

and worth. But it is not always clear whether he is defending the principles by which his world governs itself or simply solving a one-time practical problem. Is he a fixer or a philosopher? The question arises because although he is saddened by Chiltern's unrepentant "No" to his question, "did you never suffer any regret for what you had done,"⁸³ he consents to be Chiltern's staunchest ally. He not only acts on Chiltern's behalf but rationalizes his guilt.⁸⁴ More than a matter of character consistency, Goring's attitude raises the much wider question of ideals and idealism in the play, thrust to attention in the play's very title.⁸⁵

The crisis of ideals corresponds to the crisis in the action. Mrs. Cheveley's assault not only threatens Chiltern's career and domestic life but forces the contradictions inherent in their world out into the open. The obvious result of her threat is to shake the Chilterns' marriage, placing Chiltern in double jeopardy: either he loses his position in the world or he loses his wife's love and respect. The further consequence is that his wife has to lose either her husband or her principles. The play's solution is to effect a compromise: Chiltern does not confess but nor does he obey Mrs. Cheveley's demand; his wife forgives him but gets her wish that he should obey her. Between husband and wife, the husband's gain is the greater because he is saved both from Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail and his wife's disapprobation, the first defeated as a predator, the second as a moralist. He pays no price and seems headed towards a Prime Ministership; his wife relinquishes her claims of moral arbitration. The crisis thus compels several questions. Does the play's happy ending vindicate the advantages of being a man? Are Lady Chiltern's ideals so arbitrary that they are rightly rejected? Are practice and principle contradictory?

It is not as if the affirmation of ideals was alien to nineteenth century England. Women expected their husbands to be honest, strong and faithful. In addition, New

⁸³Act II, 84.

⁸⁴Act III, 99-101.

⁸⁵Powell and Gagnier have noted that the phrase "ideal husband," used by Shaw in discussing Torvald Helmer in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, held great interest for Wilde because he used it in both *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

Women required a clean record both past and present, which made them seem unduly rigid and unforgiving. Since men expected their wives to be pure and selfless but specially forgiving,⁸⁶ a wife insisting on a totally spotless record was associated with New Women's puritanism and counted a failure. This is what disappoints Chiltern who, like Ibsen's Nora, hopes for what she calls a "miracle" from his spouse. A contemporary play simultaneously exemplifying women's demand for masculine morality and the ideal wife's character is Pinero's *The Profligate* (1889), the first version of which ends tragically with the rake committing suicide because he has not lived up to his wife's ideals. But in the revised version that ending is altered to a reconciliation by invoking the ideal of the forgiving wife. Against such exemplars Lady Chiltern seems cold and hard.

It appears then that Lady Chiltern has to retreat because she fails the ideal of wifely forgiveness, not because her ideals are in themselves false. Obviously, the ideal that one should not cheat, or that the guilty should expiate past sins cannot be false, nor can Lady Chiltern be blamed for holding them. Her fault is twofold: first, of trying to enslave her husband to her ideals, and second, of refusing to forgive his weakness. Her redemption depends upon nothing short of abandoning her ideals altogether by forgiving her husband. When at last she does so she is rewarded with Goring's approval. Is the play telling us that ideals are not for this world?

A wider look at Lady Chiltern's world confirms that ideals are unlikely to survive there. If her husband betrays ideals, the minor characters, male and female, subvert or neglect them. The shadowy Baron Arnheim brought corruption first into this circle. The young men, Nanjac and Montford are too slight to carry any weight. Of the servants, Phipps is a distinct presence but only in form rather than in substance. Where will ideals

⁸⁶Idealised as the perfect union of brave and strong man and self-sacrificing and forgiving woman, marriage was coming under increasingly sharper scrutiny in the 1890s. Frank Harvey's *Shall We Forgive Her?*, Malcolm Watson and Mrs. Lancaster-Wallis's *The Pharisee* (reviewed 22 November 1890, the *Saturday Review*, 587) and D. C. Murray's *The Puritan* question the absurd demands of husbands for the purity of their wives. As for the idealised mutuality of marriage, Ibsen shattered the illusion in *A Doll's House*. Also worth noting are the thousands of letters provoked by Mona Caird's famous attack on marriage, indicating major shifts in traditional ideas about marriage.

reside? The ideal of the pure wife is betrayed by the sexual intrigues of society ladies such as Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont who all but admit to their cuckolding of their husbands:

Mrs. Marchmont (With a sigh): Our husbands never appreciate anything in us.
We have to go to others for that!
Lady Basildon (Emphatically): Yes, always to others, have we not?⁸⁷

Not licentious like these ladies, Lady Markby nonetheless finds her husband a trial. All of them find the "perfection" of an ideal husband boring as well as burdensome and Lady Chiltern's "ideal husband" as an absurd icon of virtue best admired in theory. If for Lady Chiltern the ideal husband is a statue on a pedestal, for her peers he is a puppet. As Kohl points out, "the 'ideal husband' is caricatured as a sort of plaything at the mercy of his wife's every whim."⁸⁸ Like Ibsen's Karsten Bernick in *Pillars of Society*, Chiltern is a slave to his wife's ideals. Both for the puritanical Lady Chiltern and her frivolous peers, the ideal husband must be one who can be controlled. Again, the word 'ideal' must be redefined as convenience, respected in form rather than matter. With no correspondence to social reality, Lady Chiltern's ideal blinds her to her world and in turn, to her own moral position.

This seems an indictment as much of the individuals in the play as its social regime. That Wilde consistently exposes society to criticism is a commonplace. But what exactly does he expose in this play? The present study finds that the compromise in idealism is revealed by a two-layered exposure of the playworld. On the first level, Wilde shows that ideals either do not match actual conduct or are not ideals at all. Marriage as an institution turns out to be a convenience rather than an ideal. Lady Chiltern finds to her dismay and Mabel recognizes as a common truth, that a husband as a moral ideal does not exist. The only marriage that promises to be serene will be between Mabel and Goring, and that is because they retreat from the ideal before testing it. To the society ladies an ideal husband is a malleable husband. If 'ideal' means expedient, ideals as cultural constructions stand

⁸⁷Act I, 29.

⁸⁸Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: Works of a Conformist Rebel*, 237.

exposed as hollow. If so, if the idealized husband or wife is a fantasy, then there can be little trust in the prevailing norms of men, women, and marriage on which the ideals are based, such as Ruskin's idealization of the wife in *Sesame and Lilies* as a human being "incapable of error . . . enduringly, incorruptibly good."⁸⁹

At the same time, Wilde notes, the world of *An Ideal Husband* insists on ideals. Discovering its insistence on observing the forms of morality leads Wilde to a second, deeper level of understanding how the world uses ideals. For all the trouble Chiltern has with placing mere men on pedestals, he persists in seeing his wife as a "saint",⁹⁰ the "white image of all good things",⁹¹ a phrase that highlights "image." A subtler but equally uncritical idealization appears in Goring's appeal to Lady Chiltern where he casts men into a heroic image drawn upon "lines of intellect"⁹² thereby confirming the nineteenth century gender stereotype. Wilde shows that whether these are true or false ideals is irrelevant; all that matters is that without such avowals the play's action cannot advance, nor can the world continue as it does. In alerting us that the world insists on respecting good form, Wilde exposes a hollowness far deeper than an individual's delusion because it infects society systemically.

The importance of ideals explains why the play is studded with references to art, tellingly, in stage directions, because there Wilde speaks directly to us. These are clearly not representations. Because art abstracts, it idealizes reality. As a result, these allusions invite us to see people as approximations, thereby making us sensitive to the presence of ideals in the play. The play's opening stage direction has at least five allusions to art objects, and here as in later parts of the text, people are constantly analogized to painting or statuary. Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon are fit subjects for Watteau, Sir Robert Chiltern for Vandyck; Lord Caversham is like a portrait by Lawrence; Mabel Chiltern is like

⁸⁹John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, "Of Queen's Gardens" (New York: William L. Allison Company, 1895), 152

⁹⁰Act III, 162.

⁹¹Act IV, 236.

⁹²Act IV, 228.

a Tanagra statue. The most telling of these descriptions is that of Mrs. Cheveley; she is "A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools"⁹³ an aesthetic judgment calculated to metaphorize a moral one.

Art as allegory was of course not an invention of Wilde's. Noting that "heroines throughout the nineteenth century in both Britain and America were constantly being compared to paintings, sculptures, books, or pieces of music,"⁹⁴ Helena Michie sees the "framing" of women's bodies as a distancing strategy through which women are objectified. Mrs. Cheveley's presence is disturbing because as a product of "too many schools" she resists being placed in any one frame. But to Michie's view of the objectifying function of art we may add that in the idealist tradition art also immortalizes. In this case, Wilde is correlating his characters with artefacts in which the immutability of art forever locks them, forever showing an unchanging face like Keats's Grecian urn. The effect is as much of essentializing human beings as of subjugating them, a perceptual outcome as well as a political.

The strongest hint the play gives that ideals and idealizations are suspect is that they have no practical application. Where then will the defence of the world originate? The problem of survival is central because the play is a narrative of contest and the predicament is multi-layered. The world of the Chilterns is in the predatory woman's grip, its defence demolished by the emasculation of its romantic protagonist, Robert Chiltern. The other possible defender is the good woman. But astonishingly, hate the fallen woman as she may, Lady Chiltern in fact joins her in striking at society's foundations, though from the opposite side, by demanding a reconfiguration of its enabling principles. The responsibility for defence thus devolves upon the one figure, the dandy, whose power lies in being simultaneously of the world and yet independent of it. The one persona that runs as an unbroken thread through Wilde's society comedies, the dandy is specially developed in *An Ideal Husband*, his contribution to plot development expanded and his moral stature

⁹³Act I, 8.

⁹⁴Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 87.

raised. Lord Goring has no personal stake in the heroine as Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* does and his moral integrity places him directly opposite the amoral Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*. He is also different from the comic dandies in the other plays, strongly differentiated, for instance, from Jack and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Ernest*. What sets him apart from all other dandies in Wilde that he is truly not driven by self-interest. Not involved personally in the combat, he becomes its hero by default and also by his strength of character. Because he is at once disengaged and connected, he alone may move freely in the arena unimpeded by the interests that weaken ordinary members of his world. Goring is an insider by virtue of his social status but because he is his own artefact he can stand independently of society if he so chooses. That is why he is effective when society encounters the unknown, in this case a predatory woman who rejects the roles available for women in society. In ironic parallel to the adventuress, he too is something of an outsider as an onlooker but in contrast to her, not a hostile one. Thereby he gains the power of perspective combined with faith in the *status quo*. Not only the defender of his world but also its restorer, he rescues society by expelling disruptive elements, by repairing the rifts caused by them, and still more importantly, by awakening honest self-criticism in his worthy but frail peers. He is the one character who probes into the layers of people's motives instead of looking only at the obvious. It is through his eyes that we discover that Mrs. Cheveley is driven at once by greed as well as envy of goodness, that Lady Chiltern is motivated by honour as well as pride in being her husband's guide, that Chiltern is intoxicated more by power than by money, a moral ailment that is pardonable because common. Thus the dandy's function in this play extends beyond that of the conventional *raisonneur* to a critical insight. His clear sight saves him Mrs. Cheveley's cupidity on the one hand and Lady Chiltern's inflexibility on the other, but more importantly it shows him exactly what is the danger posed by the crisis. His reasons for wishing to foil Mrs. Cheveley or to extract Lady Chiltern's forgiveness for her husband are more complex his friend's. While Chiltern wants to

remove the immediate threat to himself from Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail and his wife's idealization, Goring realizes that the danger posed by women is far greater, because by their claims of authority they threaten the gendered division of the social world hallowed by custom.

The gendering of the world is evident in the conflict itself. The open sexism of Goring's counsel to Lady Chiltern, that "a man's life is of more value than a woman's"⁹⁵ needs no comment. Mrs. Cheveley constantly highlights her powers as a woman when she talks to Chiltern⁹⁶ or launches her seductive wiles against Goring.⁹⁷ She fails because she transgresses the boundaries set for women. Goring can define himself by his dress; she cannot. In a failed parallel to Goring's self-fashioning, Mrs. Cheveley tries to project an unique personality rather than just show off her figure like her other fallen sisters, such as Mrs. Erlynne. But "showing the influence of too many schools," she succeeds in being merely derivative. Her higher ambition makes her doubly dangerous. Yet she can never reach Goring's level because his brilliance is natural while she has to denature herself to acquire a reputation for shrewdness in the traditionally male realms of finance and politics. Her abilities there bear promise at once of independence and of power to shape her world. Women like Mrs. Cheveley "invade and undermine the male subject-spectators; by asserting themselves as creators and subjects, they disrupt social and cosmic order as well as gender hierarchy."⁹⁸

This is precisely what creates the deepest tension and contest in the play. What is ultimately at stake is not the Chilterns' happiness but the integrity of the gendered structure of their world. That is why Mrs. Cheveley, who excels by nature at the power games that men play, must be stopped by a defender who is visibly her superior in every weapon she wields—in speech, in dress, in guile and in pressure tactics. In addition, to make the

⁹⁵Act IV, 228.

⁹⁶Act I, 37-50.

⁹⁷Act III, 171-4.

⁹⁸Dolan, 255.

victory just, the defender is made to seem deserving both by the prevailing standards of morality and by customary gender privilege.

In creating the hero who is a dandy, Wilde has to step carefully. On the one hand this person has to be a plausible representative of the system he defends. On the other, he has to stand out from the common crowd to make his success believable in a situation where another man fails. Wilde reconciles this apparent contradiction by creating a character who is outwardly a rebel but in his heart of hearts very much a representative of his class. His devotion to Lady Chiltern, his contempt for commercial motives⁹⁹, his loyalty to his circle, his affection for his father and, perhaps most significantly, his commitment to the marriage bond reveals his essential subscription to the rules of his world, however well he may disguise his conventionality by outward style. His rebellion remains limited to external signals. His self-fashioning, part of what Jonathan Dollimore calls a "transgressive aesthetic,"¹⁰⁰ is a strategy merely to claim a special place in a world that he accepts rather than creating a new world. Wilde's dandy is no Byronic hero whose discontent with civilization arouses feelings of oppression and leads to alienation.

In order to create a hero who seems to be a rebel but is in fact a staunch defender of the *status quo*, Wilde substitutes style for substance. Personal discipline, central to Arnold's idea of the Christian gentleman, is here transferred to the sphere of dress. Goring's obsession with buttonholes is only an expression of this self-discipline. Rigorous codes of manners are strictly honoured, because the dandy moves only on the surface. Wilde is careful to emphasize this. His stage directions describe Goring as having a "well-bred, expressionless face." He is "clever, but would not like to be thought so," and is "fond of being misunderstood."¹⁰¹ After all, in the words of *The Foundling*, Dick

⁹⁹Here, Wilde's dandy is different from the traditional dandy, who is defined partially by his success as a self-created commodity in the marketplace. Baron Arnheim, on the other hand, could be seen as a sketch of the commercial dandy; significantly, he is dead.

¹⁰⁰Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 8.

¹⁰¹Act I, 20-21.

Pennell, "No man is considered original if his meaning isn't obscure."¹⁰² As Wilde says, being inscrutable "gives him a post of vantage"¹⁰³ but it also gives Wilde himself the advantage of never having to explain the inconsistency of society's critic being society's spokesman.

Wilde diverts attention from the inconsistency in the dandy's relationship to the world most effectively by emphasizing the aesthetic quality of the dandy's persona. The dandy's chief endeavour is to transform himself into a work of art and distance himself from utilitarian goals. The dandy's body, enclosed in beautiful clothes that are unfit for a working life, is a deliberate challenge to the utilitarian ethos and, like Wilde's celebrated dictum that "all art is quite useless," is a refutation of the nineteenth-century tendency to see value only in usefulness. The dandy's method of living accords with his identity as a work of art; he works tirelessly at "existing beautifully." It is by seeing his life as art that Mabel defends Goring's ways to the practical Lord Caversham:

How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?¹⁰⁴

This laughable triviality distracts attention from the compromise that Wilde forces upon the dandy and through him, upon the play. Not only is Goring pulled into partisanship and the maintenance of the social and political system of his world, but also into relinquishing his personal detachment. From an uncommitted observer of the world he develops into its champion and moral arbiter. His ultimate surrender to the commonplace is his imminent marriage. But his aesthetic profile conceals his function of bringing about a denouement fraught with compromise. Goring is right in treating Mrs. Cheveley as a criminal but the focus on her character dims the political and commercial fact central to the world that she is guilty of exactly the offences the power brokers, the Arnheims and

¹⁰²W. Lestocq and E.M. Robson, *The Foundling: A Farce in Three Acts*. Typescript (New York: Z. and L. Rosenfield, n.d.), in *British and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century 1801-1900*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley (New York: Readex, 1967), Act II, 36.

¹⁰³Act I, 21.

¹⁰⁴Act I, 5.

Chilterns commit. Is her offence the greater because she is a woman? But as already observed, Goring's manipulation of Lady Chiltern is even harder to accept in its mindless puerility. It is understandable only if we see it as a version of the fear Goring and Chiltern have of Mrs. Cheveley, that is, the fear that women can make upon men that may prove irresistible, whether sexual, commercial or moral.

The disciplining of women throws the value of idealism into question. The "ideal" in the title is satirized not only as a blindness to the actual conditions of worldly life, but as the exact opposite to idealism, that is, total surrender to expediency. That masculine politics founded on compromise should be validated does not merely set aside false idealism, it denies idealism itself as an ethical option. Lady C's idealization of her husband may be false and she needs to wake up from it but her subsequent advice on expiation is a principled stand; her surrender of it makes idealism irrelevant.

Why does Wilde create this blatant privileging of expediency? It could be either to show up the masculine power structure as constitutionally immoral, or because the voice of idealism is a woman whose idealism, if uncontested, will give her ascendancy. The latter implies that a deep-seated, incurable fear of women motivates the play, specially because it is hard to see why she should be disciplined for her idealism and judged, in Shaw's shallow opinion, as "stupidly good." What is wrong with her ideals? How are they false? It may show an unawareness of what people are like but not the falsity of the ideal itself. If the "ideal" in the title is impossible to find, that is not the fault of the seeker but of the world of expediency ruled by men and closed to women. Lady Chiltern is not cured of a false ideal to wake up to a true one but instructed to reinterpret idealism altogether. The play's comic ending, though it reiterates the classic formula of the romantic comedy that journeys end in lovers' meeting, in fact marriage, comes at the price of women's defeat. Whether it happens with Wilde's approval founded on some deep distrust of women is best left to the considerable psychoanalytical commentary on Wilde. What the text allows the viewer to observe without imputing purpose to the playwright is that though the play's

social action reaches a happy ending as a decisive closure, its moral action remains undecided and thus invites reflection. Wilde's conventional handling of theme, character and action prepares the viewer for this responsibility of reflection on condition that it be realized that Lady Chiltern's abandonment of her principles is the erasure of the feminine perspective, not its broadening.

Chapter 6

The Importance of Being Earnest: Creatures of Caprice

The Importance of Being Earnest is a radical departure from Wilde's other comedies. It holds a unique place not only in Wilde's own dramatic canon but in modern Western drama as a play that sits on many fences, technically, structurally and thematically.¹ Its first performance on 14 February 1895 brought Wilde the delighted acclaim of audiences. Reviewers were enthusiastic from the beginning about its wit and charm but dismissed any likelihood of substantial thought. They agreed that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a different kind of play from Wilde's previous attempts and identified it as his "first farce" in which there was "no trace of solemn theatrical intention."² The *Daily Graphic's* review articulated what seems to have been a universal reaction to the play: "It has not a relish of reason or a sparkle of sanity; it is absurd, preposterous, extravagant, idiotic, saucy, brilliantly clever, and unedifyingly diverting."³ In *The Theatre* William Archer noted the same cleverness, but with some disappointment saw the play as "nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality . . . which imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing."⁴ Archer expected a seriousness of purpose from serious playwrights, which he had in common with his more conservative contemporaries even if he, the *avant-garde* supporter of Ibsen, disagreed on the method and subjects of serious treatment on the British stage. A.B. Walkley called Wilde an "artist in sheer nonsense" and applauded the fact that there was no "discordant note of seriousness" which, in his opinion, had marred the farces of Gilbert.⁵

¹Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: Methuen, 1908). This play opened at the St. James's Theatre on 14 February, 1895 and ran for 83 performances.

²*Daily Telegraph*, 15 February 1895, in William Tydeman, ed. *Wilde: Comedies, A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 63.

³*Daily Graphic*, 15 February 1895, in Tydeman, 64. Note the word "unedifying" which suggests it lacks not only seriousness but the tediousness of the earnest playwright's preaching.

⁴*The Theatre*, 20 February 1895, in *Oscar Wilde, the Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 190.

⁵*The Speaker*, 23 February 1895, in Beckson, 196. In his study of the play in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) Kerry Powell demonstrates *The*

Several reviewers, (The *Daily Telegraph*, and The *Observer*,⁶ for example) called Wilde a jester, and ignored the implications of that judgment, namely, that the jester's humour draws the spectator into the jester's view of the world, often an alternate view. *The Importance of Being Earnest* succeeds precisely because of its "undercurrent of seriousness," which is missing in the average farce of the time.⁷ But contrary to the contemporary view that the play was a "souffle,"⁸ *The Importance of Being Earnest* does deal with serious themes, such as love, marriage, identity, and power, balancing the gravity of these concerns with jesting in what Max Beerbohm called a "perfect fusion of manner and form."⁹ His strategy for doing so is one of systematic inversions of conventional thought and expression, as recent critics have demonstrated. But not as commonly noted is the perception that underlying the subversion of the expected and the customary lies an anxiety about a disordering of the world, particularly by women's claims upon it. That is the focus of the present study.

Unquestionably, the details of the world of the play are grounded in the trivial. More than one contemporary reviewer thought Gwendolen and Cecily utterly shallow for placing such absurd value on a name. The *Observer* grumbled that Wilde's pun on the name "Ernest" was not very funny, and thought the girls "eccentric, if attractive," for their obsession with the name.¹⁰ This was reason enough to identify them as inhabitants of the world of farce, burlesque and the Gilbertian fairyland. As for the men, Algernon's only visible occupation seems to be eating (which in itself is a standard farcical trope), while Jack's is smoking. This triviality of thought and action could only confirm what the middle and lower classes took to be typical of the idle aristocracy especially as it echoed the airy

Importance of Being Earnest's kinship with contemporary farce in detail.

⁶*Observer*, 17 February 1895, 6.

⁷Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, 125.

⁸Unsigned note in *Truth*, 21 February 1895, in Tydeman, 191.

⁹"A Classic Farce," *Saturday Review*, 11 December 1909, rpt. in Max Beerbohm, *Last Theatres: 1904-1910* (New York: Taplinger, 1970), 509.

¹⁰*Observer*, 6.

persiflage of the Wildean dandy treading the boards of Wyndham's at the same time. In *An Ideal Husband* Lord Goring is the archetypal wealthy do-nothing occupied, in Mabel's sympathetic view, with a dedicated if trivial pursuit of form over matter. The joke of course is that Goring's cultivation of the trivial is a protest against the conventional solemnity of his world and conceals a principled moral engagement with life. But what *The Ideal Husband* foregrounds is Goring's mastery of manner to the exclusion of the substance of social life. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* we see the same absorption with manner and form but so heightened as to altogether repudiate reality.

The Importance of Being Earnest is not a realist play although it makes use of the conventions of realism. George Alexander's audiences were used to going to St. James's to be confronted and comforted by their own drawing rooms, with the same kind of people and furniture in them. Alexander prided himself on recreating the decor and fashions of the upper-classes—a task made easier by the fact that he bought real furniture from the furniture-makers to the upper-classes, and engaged the same dressmakers who designed their clothes.¹¹ The types of characters he encouraged playwrights to offer him were also from the upper and middle classes, so that even the characters of the plays he presented functioned as props in his efforts at verisimilitude. Wilde's other society comedies may have fit into this Jamesian scheme of realism, but *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a departure from it. The minority world of wealth and privilege that it presented distanced itself so decisively from common life by its manners and morals that it could be visited only as an escapist dreamworld. That world, no matter how punctiliously recreated at St. James's, could not be conceded reality. It is no wonder contemporary reviewers, even those as acute as Archer and Shaw, found it a mere "filament of fantasy," an outdated farce providing "stock mechanical fun" that was "of nonsense all compact" and "as devoid of purpose as a paper balloon."¹² The author himself had called it a "farcical comedy,"¹³ and

¹¹A.E.W. Mason testifies to Alexander's concern for the "genuine thing" (*Sir George Alexander and The St. James' Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 25. See also Russell Jackson, ed. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Introduction (London: Ernest Benn, 1980), xix.

¹²William Archer in the *World*, 20 February 1895, in Beckson, 190; G.B. Shaw in the *Saturday Review*,

the critics saw it as an entertaining but trivial piece, failing to see the spoof of formulaic theatre, the satire on high society and the interrogation of socially ascribed identities and worth. It was a difficult play to label because it mixed realism with fantasy.

It is worth noting that Alexander evidently appreciated the need for undermining the realistic effects he created scenically because of the two styles of acting typical of farce, restlessness and stolidity, he chose the fevered style and "frantic energy" as the only way that the character could cope with the madness of events around him.¹⁴ Alexander's production and pace of acting as Jack was considered too fast by reviewers, particularly Shaw and Beerbohm.¹⁵ John Gielgud took the other approach in playing the role. He recommended a steady, deliberate pace, playing the role as "straight" as possible, and warned actors against a brittle manner or self-conscious delivery,¹⁶ for the power of the text is destroyed if it is played in a farcical, even pantomime manner. This approach of stolidly accepting incredible events and motives again highlights the fantasy.

In contrast to Wilde's contemporaries, recent critics have found in the play's fantasy a sustained speculation on the making of meaning and value. Michael Booth's apt phrase about domestic melodrama in the earlier part of the century applies well to the playworld of *The Importance of Being Earnest* as "a dream world disguised as a true one," where a mostly unreal content combines with real settings.¹⁷ Norbert Kohl has argued that by using the ordinary speech, objects and other features of the real world in a patently unrealistic manner, Wilde achieved a "continual alienation of reality."¹⁸ Kohl's view echoes the

23 February 1895, in Beckson, 194; A.B. Walkley in the *Speaker*, 23 February 1895, in Beckson, 196; 'H.F.' in the *New York Times*, 17 February 1895, Beckson, 189.

¹³Letters, 369.

¹⁴Michael Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 137.

¹⁵G.B. Shaw, "An Old Play and A New Old One," *Saturday Review*, 23 February 1895, rpt. in *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (London: Constable, 1932), v. 1, 43-44, Max Beerbohm, "The Importance of Being Earnest," *Saturday Review*, 18 January 1902, rpt. in *Around Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 190-191.

¹⁶John Gielgud, *Stage Directions* (London: Heinemann, 1963), 81.

¹⁷Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 120.

¹⁸Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of A Conformist Rebel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 263.

assumptions implicit in most productions of the play, which have traditionally used a realistic setting to underscore the escape of the characters from the regulations of everyday life. But the emphasis on the escape from reality has taken a new direction in recent productions, such as Nicholas Hytner's 1993 production at the Albery, and Terry Hands's 1995 Birmingham Repertory Theatre production (later transferred to the Old Vic) in which the sets renounced verisimilitude. In Hytner's production, Bob Crowley's sets reflected the skewed proportions of the world Wilde was presenting. Bookcases were oversized and their tops curled threateningly over the characters like tidal waves about to break, lurid colours washed the walls and furniture, and garden hedges that reached the height of artifice offered glimpses of impossibly proportioned views. The emphasis on artifice has grown with time. Until 1923 it was performed in modern dress, creating a sense of familiarity, but since then the costuming and the setting have reverted to the fashions of the 1890s.¹⁹ The world of the play has thus become even more closed off, a kind of "Never-Never Land" in which time will always stand still, the only threat will be a shortage of cucumber sandwiches, and the boy will always get the girl.

If *The Importance of Being Earnest* escapes from the practices of the social world, it also laughs at the principles of that world. Moral declarations are mocked as banalities by inserting them at inappropriate moments, or by substituting its substance with some undermining triviality. Miss Prism can respond to the news of Jack's brother's death only by regurgitating proverbs and standard moral clichés such as, "as a man sows, so shall he reap,"²⁰ the puritanism of which is so inappropriate to conventional condolence as to prove her altogether ludicrous.²¹ Lady Bracknell expects a man to have an occupation of some kind, in keeping with the general Victorian ethic that men should be useful contributors to

¹⁹H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde, Plays, Prose and Poems* (London: Macdonald, 1982), 355.

²⁰Act II, 87.

²¹Her reaction can be compared to that of Symperson in W.S. Gilbert's *Engaged* (1877) when he hears of Cheviot Hill's decision to live. See *Engaged* in W.S. Gilbert, *Plays by W.S. Gilbert*, ed., intro. and notes, George Rowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Act III, 168. *Engaged*, first performed at the Haymarket Theatre on 3 October, 1877, had a matinee revival at the Royalty Theatre, 8 July, 1893.

society, but when she elevates smoking to the level of a career, the ethic of usefulness is not only mocked but altogether jettisoned. Morality as practiced in real life holds little value in the playworld. Cecily disapproves of the philanthropic woman she imagines Gwendolen to be, Jack asserts that "a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness,"²² and even Lady Bracknell acknowledges the gap between behaving well and feeling well;²³ in a moral society, the two would presumably be the same.

The banishment of a guiding moral principle from the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not, however, result in sin and corruption. If the play escapes, it escapes into a secure utopia rather than to some underworld of malice and corruption. There are no venal politicians like Lord Chiltern or blackmailing fallen women like Mrs. Cheveley and Mrs. Erlynne. Jordan explains that it is a world without evil; that "the absence of a moral sense . . . does not let loose sin and degradation, because to a large extent these things do not exist, except as unemotional abstractions."²⁴ This is the kind of world in which a serious misdemeanour is no more than stealing your host's sandwiches.

Yet the play does not cancel out reality as it turns to the fantastic. Even as it escapes social reality, it turns a critical gaze upon it, mocking the very conventions of contemporary theatre it uses as its building material. Nor is it true that serious crises of common experience do not occur in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: we do find in it the conventional conceptions of predicament common to drama, such as lovers separated by a parent, the anxiety of illegitimacy, the designs of a seducer upon a young and innocent girl, and a love triangle. But the constant levity of speech and manner conceals these anxieties, while unexpected revelations of character and circumstance eventually erase them altogether. The foundling turns out to be of impeccable ancestry, the seducer's target better

²²Act I, 18.

²³Act I, 24.

²⁴Robert J. Jordan, "Satire and Fantasy in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Ariel*, 1:3 (July 1970), rpt. in *Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), ed. Harold Bloom, 30.

at targetting him, the love triangle a safely parallel pair. As a result the play escapes from the everyday world into a holiday world of almost carnival-like high spirits where no disaster may occur simply because the characters refuse to treat any predicament as one. Because of the methodical denial of anxiety, even the central crisis of the play, that is, the doubt over Jack's identity, is demoted to a game of guessing the person under the carnival mask. Every character in the play is in fact under some threat or the other, trivial or serious, but they are saved not by graduating from delusion to truth but by simply changing the rules of the game. If not having the name Ernest is an insuperable problem, it is resolved by simply changing the name, considered an inalienable and intrinsic property a moment ago. In the playworld, the rules of the everyday world, even the rules of time, are suspended. This suspension of reality is achieved by setting aside the founding conventions of the social world as well as the dramatic representations of that world; for example, the play undercuts both the convention of filial love and the customary rhetoric of that love. Wilde delighted in playing with "platitudes and popular literature," to use Powell's phrase.²⁵ Thus, conventions themselves become the subject of laughter, even though they are the materials of the play.

How conventionality is undercut forms a key question. Is there a designated rebel figure or figures through whose eyes the alternative vision is achieved? In the context of Wilde's work in general, two possibilities suggest themselves. First, the rebel figure may be the dandy, blessed with a superior perception of both moral and aesthetic meaning. Or, the agent of subversion may be a female figure, an outsider by reason of both gender and moral identity, such as the fallen woman and the adventuress. But here again *The Importance of Being Earnest* distances itself from Wilde's other comedies, for the dandies here are so only in manner, not in their understanding of the world, while the play has no fallen woman at all. If conventions seem laughable, they are so because fundamental ideas of value, such as parentage or education, are pushed towards absurdity. But that process is

²⁵Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*, 119.

impelled by the women rather than the men, which gives rise to a darker perception, not often recognized by readers or viewers. The play's cavalier handling of what are supposed to be the ground rules of social life is done by women, and the play suggests that this is so because women are on the one hand irrational, and on the other hand, relentless in their pursuit of what they wish to possess, which explains their readiness to set up as well as set aside conventions to achieve their ends. In this regard *The Importance of Being Earnest* stands in accord with Wilde's society comedies in its underlying apprehension of the unsettling effect women have on the even temper of a world managed by men. While the play does not show the sexual blackmail by which an adventuress controls men, nor the consuming possessiveness of a mother that keeps her son in bondage, it shares with other plays a suspicion of women as essentially unreliable beings. The action of the play builds on the wholly arbitrary fixation of its two young heroines upon the name Ernest. This is the one demand that threatens, much more effectively than the social and financial demands of Lady Bracknell, to prevent the happy outcome of the romantic plot. The absurdity of this demand conceals its force as a potentially insurmountable problem but also defines the women as utterly capricious creatures, charming but disruptive. This subtext of the play, concealed by its overlay of wit and gaiety, was not perceived in Wilde's own time and has drawn attention only in recent years.²⁶

Not that the women in the play are adversaries to their world, because they do act within the overarching framework of social order and harmony, metaphorised by the ancient literary convention of comedy ending with weddings, but at the very least women carry the potential for subversion in their capricious treatment of the world. Under the surface of a holiday from sense and earnestness, then, there runs an apprehension about women that we may glimpse in Wilde's other plays.

The overturning of social norms is not immediately evident and the anxiety relating to

²⁶See Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

women even less so. When the play begins, it gives assurances of a familiar representation of the world by following common formulas of the theatre. To take only some of its conventional features, upper class characters inhabit the comic playworld, complete with all the signifiers of wealth and privilege. Algernon lives in a "luxuriously and artistically furnished flat,"²⁷ drinks champagne, has an urbane servant, and is well-connected. His aunt Lady Bracknell is one of the pillars of upper class society and his friend Jack seems similarly to belong to the smart set. The plot is impelled by the common complication of parental obstruction just after the young lovers have declared their undying love for one another. The dictatorial parent is drawn from Roman comedy as is the theme of two brothers separated at birth which, as in Plautus, becomes part of the resolution even without being a central impulse for action. The chief complication, that of the hero confronted with an arbitrary task, comes not only from drama but from the timeless tradition of fairy tales. Some hints appear also of the comic man and comic woman who provide comic relief in melodrama, although here Algernon and Cecily are made far more prominent than mere supporting figures.

The critical issue here is not that Wilde borrows stock situations and characters from traditional theatre.²⁸ Rather, it is that he takes stock situations and characters and turns them to functions and effects contrary to what tradition had trained audiences to expect. How Wilde creates this discrepancy between expectation and outcome must be understood by examining in detail the major dramatic conventions used in the play so that we may discover what effect—theatrical, sociological or philosophical—this retooling produces.

But first we must take note of one dramatic form to which *The Importance of Being Earnest* bears particular resemblance, namely, the farce. English farce relied heavily on French vaudeville, although more for plot machinery than subject matter. Marital infidelity, the main theme of French farce, did not fit the domestic leanings of British society. The

²⁷Act I, S.D.

²⁸In *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*, ch. 7, Kerry Powell has traced in detail Wilde's use of the common elements of farce by comparing *The Importance of Being Earnest* with Lestocq and Robson's *The Foundling*.

plot both in French and English farce developed through multiple discoveries or reversals, and techniques of complication, such as the unforeseen arrival of relatives, were in common use, as in the uninvited visits of Algernon and his aunt to Jack's country home. Michael Booth considers the defining plot features of nineteenth-century farce to be intrigue, deception, misunderstanding and coincidence, and sentimentality its dominant tone. Kerry Powell reminds us that "long before the nineteenth century, farces had made capital out of lovers' misunderstandings, confusions of identity, and such stock characters as the henpecked husband and domineering woman" and notes that in *The Importance of Being Earnest* "aggressive pranks, quick-paced action, and evasion of moral responsibility produce the distinctive laughter of farce."²⁹ But farce creates much more than the laughter of the ludicrous. In Booth's view farce drives an incomprehensible world to a point of absurdity at which sanity is shocked into reasserting itself:

The best farce is the disciplined expression of moral and domestic anarchy, the plausible and logical presentation of a completely crazy world that all the characters take with the greatest seriousness, a world in which extraordinarily absurd and fantastic pressures on the ordinary individual drive him to the very extremity of his resources and his senses, a world in which he can survive only by pitting the ingenuity of his own insanity against the massive blows of hostile coincidence and seemingly remorseless fate.³⁰

This anarchical world-view, Booth believes, is characteristic of French farce, "uncompromisingly ruthless, savage, and anti-familial, whose very chaos and controlled violence is a kind of moral order of great rigidity." English farce, even when imitating the French and aware of the forces of dissolution underneath social order, softens anarchical conduct and re-affirms domesticity and order. As far as the plot design goes, Booth's profile of the farce fits *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though not its impact. The laughter seems to bear down upon its butt the more heavily because the formulaic structure of the farce makes the target's fate inescapable. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the action is well-ordered and proceeds from cause to effect convincingly once we accept its premisses of character and motive. But having to accept premisses incongruous with

²⁹Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*, 110.

³⁰Michael Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 123-124.

common experience is precisely what Ionesco called "a *disordering*" of reality.³¹ The eventual impact of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, like that of farces in general, is dysfunctional because the forces that move its action defy common sense. But unlike the average English farce it systematically casts doubt upon commonly valorized ideas of personal identity and social integrity. For instance, although it respects the conventional comic ending of matrimonial pairings-off, it refuses to offer any reassurances or platitudes about marriage as an ennobling state. When Jack is surprised that he has been speaking the truth all his life, Gwendolen assures him that he is "sure to change."³² Her calm acceptance of deceit as a desirable habit makes loyalty a doubtful condition of marriage.

Structurally, *The Importance of Being Earnest* employs the principal techniques of farce listed by Booth, such as, the "repetition and accumulation of misunderstanding and coincidence, the reversal of normal expectation, the surprise entrance, the bringing together of characters who at all costs should remain apart, the extreme eccentricity of a minority of characters, the truncation of time so that comic events follow one another with ludicrous rapidity."³³ *The Importance of Being Earnest* creates laughter particularly by reversing the expectations of common experience, as shown in Gwendolen's and Cecily's forwardness in extracting declarations of love, or Algernon's reliance on his social inferior, Lane, to maintain society's moral tone. But the play's most effective tool of reversal is its language, which by the sheer weight of paradoxical epigrams makes the inversion of the norm the chief instrument of perception in the play.

Wilde's systematic inversion of common values extends to his use of the common narrative and character patterns of farce. In casting his play as a farce, Wilde draws upon a wide base of stock situations, characters and structural devices. Both melodrama and farce use the character set of two brothers who embody contrasting qualities, such as virtue and

³¹J Paul Marcoux quotes Ionesco's program note on Georges Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear* (*Puce a l'oreille*). J. Paul Marcoux, "Feydeau and the 'Serious' Farce," in James Redmond, ed. *Farce, Themes in Drama*, 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 134.

³²Act III, 186.

³³Booth, *Prefaces*, 124.

vice, country or city manners, seriousness or levity. They are often rivals in love or politics. Boucicault's mid-century play, *The Corsican Brothers*, was perhaps the most famous and popular of contemporary plays on the twin brothers theme, showing separated twins with an almost supernatural telepathic bond between them. The death of one is telepathically witnessed and later avenged by his brother. A very early play, Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough* (1800), also involved brothers but there they were rivals though finally reconciled. In comedy and farce it was important to have a reconciliation of the brothers, however contrived the plot might have to be in order to accommodate this. The reconciliation of separated brothers is a classic literary and dramatic theme, from Plautus's *Menachmae* to Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and Sidney Grundy's *A Pair of Spectacles* (1890).³⁴ *The Importance of Being Earnest* exploits the theme but Wilde avoids the simple binaries of absolute contrasts in creating Jack and Algernon and pushes the irony farther by having the brothers impersonate their real roles so that fiction turns out to be the truth. The roots of *The Importance of Being Earnest* are too deep and widespread in common narrative traditions to bear enumeration but one particular pattern needs notice. As in all quest narratives, here the hero must pass an ordeal to win the prize, in this case the hand of the woman he loves, as in fairy tales. A similarly familiar and structurally vital character type is the formidable guardian, here that battle-axe of a mother, Lady Bracknell. Wilde has his own parallel in the Duchess of Berwick in *Lady Windermere's Fan* while Pinero has more than one mother very similar to Lady Bracknell. In *Sweet Lavender*, a matchmaking mother makes life difficult for the young man she wants for her daughter, Minnie, and simultaneously tries to stop her daughter from marrying the man she really loves. Like Gwendolen, Minnie finally gives her mother "the slip," as she calls it. In *The Profligate* there is a much more formidable and unpleasant mother in Mrs. Stonehay, who is determined that her daughter should marry the rich and titled but dissolute Lord Dangars. Love and marriage are major motifs in comedy in general and the misogynist or confirmed

³⁴Sydney Grundy, *A Pair of Spectacles: A Comedy in Three Acts* in George Rowell, ed., *Nineteenth Century Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); the Garrick Theatre, 22 February, 1890.

bachelor and the scheming widow or spinster who traps him into marriage are specially familiar to farce. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the entrapment plot is affirmed when Miss Prism captures Dr. Chasuble at the end; but it takes a double twist when Algernon aims merely at a philandering conquest of Cecily only to surrender to her in marriage because she has the more decisive character of the two.

Wilde also takes a hint from the character of the comic man of farce and melodrama.³⁵ Although he does not identify anybody as such in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he brings Algernon close to the persona in his exaggerated concern over dress and his gluttony. In many productions Algernon is dressed in an exaggerated manner, especially when he wears his Bunbury suit. In Terry Hands' 1995 production, Philip Franks as Algernon wore a butter-yellow suit when he visited Jack's country house, underlining his juvenile frivolity. Algernon's obsessive eating is reminiscent of farcical comedies such as J.M. Morton's well-known and often revived *Box and Cox* (1847),³⁶ in which a steak is flung through the window, or Pinero's popular farce, *The Magistrate* (1885), where comic complications are caused by a hungry woman eats the oysters meant for her fiancé. In W.S. Gilbert's *Engaged* (1877), Minnie, one of two women engaged to Cheviot, arrives uninvited to his wedding and proceeds to sit down at the feast, while in Fred Horner's *The Late Lamented* (1891) a host hurries his guest through a meal at breakneck speed without even sitting down himself. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Algernon eats the sandwiches meant for his aunt, snatches muffins out of Jack's hands and drinks the wine Jack had been saving for himself. Of psychological significance as a metaphor for sexual sublimation, eating is a particularly powerful statement, as Powell argues,³⁷ for it takes the play beyond the simple slapstick of farce as a demonstration of an individual's disregard of social conventions, and underlines the anarchic freedom enjoyed

³⁵Booth lists stock characters such as this and those that follow in *English Melodrama*, 198.

³⁶John Maddison Morton, *Box and Cox: A Romance of Real Life in One Act*, in Michael R. Booth, ed., *The Magistrate and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). The play enjoyed a brief revival at the Criterion, 27 February, 1892. It was the source of *Cox and Box* (1867) by F.C. Burnand and Sir Arthur Sullivan.

³⁷Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*, 78.

in the playworld, at least in small matters.

While the situations and character types out of which Wilde erects the structure of comedy in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are traditional, his technique of drawing laughter out of them is not. In his hands all stock devices of plot and character achieve effects contrary to their use within the British comic tradition, for they laugh at such fundamental social goods as parentage, filial relationships, romance and marriage. A ready example is Wilde's treatment of the romantic plot here which shows a significant contrast with his other society comedies. In all of them Wilde authenticates the sentimental tradition of noble and chivalrous love by romantic declarations from which neither men nor women, neither dandy nor solemn public official is exempt. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on the other hand, Wilde makes the conventions of romance themselves the subject of attention, thus creating a discourse about one of the particular discourses of nineteenth century Britain, namely, the set forms of conduct. The story of the romance between Jack and Gwendolen takes shape along lines set by custom, complete with declarations of eternal love in the face of a parent's obstruction. But at this critical point the development takes a contrary turn as Gwendolen matter-of-factly tells Jack that she has no intention of leading a celibate life even though she will love him forever. The standard ideal of constancy is at once demolished. Moving on to Algernon's story we receive one shock after another. His designs upon Cecily are not honourable in the context of Victorian society and thus not romantic at all. Cecily on the other hand seems the typical innocent girl charmingly romanticizing a fictional lover. But that persona is belied by her incisive, businesslike style, by which Algernon is "taken aback,"³⁸ and she too refuses to "wait all that time"³⁹ to marry Algernon. Kisses and embraces, the common signifiers of romance are matters of etiquette rather than passion, as we see in the prim correctness of the young ladies allowing themselves to be kissed:

³⁸Act II, 76, S.D.

³⁹Act III, 169.

Gwendolen. Thank you. You may. (*Offers her cheek.*)

Cecily. Thank you. (*Presenting her cheek to be kissed.*) You may.⁴⁰

Both romance and its conventional rhetoric of undying constancy collapse before the needs of practical life even as the rhetoric is invoked in the breathless hero-worship of Gwendolen and Cecily:

Gwendolen. (*To Jack.*) For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?
Cecily. (*To Algernon.*) To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?⁴¹

The ludicrous incongruity of the task and its rhetoric undercut the whole idea of heroic endeavour here.

A still subtler play on conventional narratives and conditioned responses is made out of the stock character of the fallen woman. There appears to be none in the play—every female character is ostentatiously respectable—until we realize that there must be one waiting in the wings given that Jack's birth seems to be illegitimate. Jack himself believes so when he takes Miss Prism for his mother and launches into a noble forgiveness worthy of Wilde's own defence of Mrs. Arbuthnot: "Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you."⁴² But this at once proves to be yet another misidentification and undermines the tradition of sentimentalizing the fallen woman. The farcical solemnity of Jack's filial protestation underscores Wilde's deflation of the unexamined ideals of the Edwardian world, particularly of the mother as sacred symbol, towards which Wilde had been moving consistently in the earlier plays.⁴³ Playing also with the idea of the adventuress, Wilde has

⁴⁰Act II, 130-31.

⁴¹Act II, 152.

⁴²Act III, 180.

⁴³If we look at C. Haddon Chambers's mother-son reunion scene in *Captain Swift* (1888), briefly revived at the Haymarket in December, 1890, and for a longer run at the same theatre in November 1893, we can see the typical sentimental pattern exploded by Wilde. After an extended section in which the long-lost son's questions, and the abandoning mother's answers spiral towards an inevitable conclusion, the actual moment of revelation consists of "dumb business" and "kneeling," specified in the stage directions. Their reactions are, however, given articulation:

Wilding: My mother!

Mrs. Seabrook (on her knees): Ah, you hate me - you despise me - you cannot forgive me. This is my punishment - I deserve it. I launched you into the world a waif - I denied you a mother's care. I disowned you - I put myself first in everything and now,

Cecily sneer at Gwendolen that she may have "many calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood,"⁴⁴ imputing sexual laxity to her but this too proves false. The humour arises, of course, from the incongruity between reality and its theatrical representation.

This incongruity signals that the playworld does not mirror reality, that it offers an escape from reality, and that instead of demanding the correspondences of the realistic mode with common experience, the spectator must look for the idiosyncratic consistencies of fantasy. Understandably, critical views on *The Importance of Being Earnest* have focussed on its escapist nature. With some exceptions, most notably of Mary McCarthy,⁴⁵ the world of the play has been seen by critics as a never-never land enjoying a holiday atmosphere in the middle of "midsummer madness."⁴⁶ As Powell has pointed out, the setting of a farce was typically a holiday setting—often a seaside resort—where the characters were freed from their everyday regulations.⁴⁷ In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the idea of the holiday is built into the name of its central character, John Worthing. Even before Jack's famous interrogation by Lady Bracknell, an English audience would know that Worthing was the name of a seaside resort. By choosing this name Wilde invites the viewer to correlate escape, entertainment and the play's farcical scheme.

Archer, in his review of the first production, described the play as a kind of fantasy, a judgment that explains the many contemporary comparisons of the play with the works of

when I claim you at last it is to ask a sacrifice from you. I am selfish to the end. Don't spare me.

Wilding: (Lifts her up) How could I hate you? You have been kind to me.

C. Haddon Chambers, *Captain Swift: A Comedy Drama in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1902), Act IV, 53-4.

⁴⁴Act II, 129.

⁴⁵In "The Unimportance of Being Oscar," *Partisan Review* XIV: 3 (May-June 1947), McCarthy sees *Earnest* as a vicious and shallow hell in which "depravity is the hero," (303), an "infernal Arcadia," (304).

⁴⁶Unsigned reviews of the first performance: in the *Daily Telegraph*, 15 February 1895 (Tydeman, 63); and in the *Daily Graphic*, 15 February 1895, in Tydeman, 64.

⁴⁷Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's*, 125.

W.S. Gilbert.⁴⁸ A fantasy world like this does not even have to bow to the laws of the natural world: Cecily can have a romantic proposal of marriage on Valentine's Day, February 14th, meet her fiancé at last in July, and yet be engaged for only three months. All the personages of this fantasy world are always able to speak in complete and perfectly formed sentences; Cecily is right in reprimanding Algernon for coughing while dictating because he is breaking the perfection of form that is the overall principle of the play. In this world, though the sordid subject of money is often mentioned, it does not seem to have any direct bearing upon the lives of the characters. Neither Jack, Cecily, Gwendolen nor Lady Bracknell lack money, and Algy, whose fate to be "more than usually hard up" is evidently permanent, seems magically to survive in an equally permanent state of luxury.⁴⁹ The lack of cucumber sandwiches at tea is due to his own gluttony, and not to anybody's lack of funds. The middle-class characters of the governess and the clergyman, and the lower-class characters of the servants appear to be leading comfortable lives as well at the expense of the upper classes who do not complain, but calmly accept exploitation or even pilferage by their servants as a condition of their world. For them, the many problems of the common world simply do not exist.

The comforting mood of *The Importance of Being Earnest* might have turned it into a nostalgic idyll placed in a remote utopia, had it not been for its self-mockery by the undermining of conventions of plot, character and speech. Besides, utopias may be remote but they invite revaluations of normal experience. Calling to attention recent sociological and literary theories on utopias, especially Bakhtin's, Michael Gardiner reminds us that,

utopias are no longer viewed as fantasies of ideal cities, forms of social organization, or mythical lands which are the product of an individual's creative imagination; rather, they are construed as manifestations of pervasive social and ideological

⁴⁸See 'H.F.,' *New York Times*, 17 February 1895, in Beckson, 188, and an unsigned review in *Truth*, 14 February 1895, in Beckson, 192. Shaw deplored the Gilbertian style, in Beckson, 194-95.

⁴⁹The excised Gribbsby episode did raise the troubling spectre of financial ruin for Algernon but it was countered by Jack's generosity, leaving Algernon unconcerned as always. With the disappearance of the debt collector in the standard three-act version, and indeed, of most of the references to debts and financial embarrassments in the three-act version that is commonly known today, the play's blissful repudiation of the responsibilities of the mundane world becomes even more pronounced.

conflicts with respect to the desired trajectory of social change."⁵⁰

If a carnival atmosphere nurtures the utopian imagination, then it will provide a "vantage-point from which to view our own social arrangements, because these are suddenly illuminated in a new and very different light [by which] present-day society is estranged, rendered unfamiliar."⁵¹ While *The Importance of Being Earnest* may indeed achieve this critical distance, it is difficult to fit the play into the Bakhtinian scene of high-voltage dissolution. True, the characters might be said to wear carnival masques manufactured to social prescriptions, masques such as the Gentleman, the Romantic Heroine, and so on, but no transformation of the Bakhtinian carnival, no transcendence to a revolutionary utopia takes place here because the observance of form is persistently maintained. There is laughter at the privileging of form but not ridicule. Consequently, the substance of social experience is rendered irrelevant and "social change" made unthinkable. For the same reason the play cannot admit the idealistic re-ordering of the world achieved by the different kind of utopia-building envisaged by Tom Moylan who sees a "total utopia" as "indicative of a rationalistic desire to contain the world within a homogeneous conceptual whole, to impose order and system-ness upon a messy and recalcitrant reality, and thereby to exclude difference and diversity."⁵² The play, again, eludes the discipline of categories.

Undoubtedly the creation of a make-believe world in *The Importance of Being Earnest* has deeper implications than plain escapism. Because the play opens up a world where incredible coincidences and unexpected human responses are granted, the expected ways of the familiar world are abandoned and its rules repudiated, as we have seen in the overturning of ideals such as constancy in love. More alarmingly, the norms of power relations in the known world are subverted, as in the parent-child relationship. As in Wilde's other society comedies, the relationship between parents and children, especially

⁵⁰Michael Gardiner, "Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique" in David Shepherd (ed.), *Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference, University of Manchester, July 1991*, *Critical Studies*, 3:2 - 4:1/2 (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 22.

⁵¹Gardiner, 29.

⁵²Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986), quoted in Gardiner, 24.

between mothers and children, is very much in focus here. In the other plays all the young heroines and heroes were in some way deprived of "normal" relationships with parents, because they missed one parent or the other, such as Gerald and Lady Windermere, or because they were orphans, such as Hester Worsley. This pattern is initiated in *The Importance of Being Earnest* only to be broken. Here too parents are absent except for Lady Bracknell but her presence and authority as matriarch and arbiter of family aspirations, children's conduct and public taste exist only to be circumvented. Precisely because she parallels the authoritarian father of Roman comedy, she is the authority figure who must be tricked. Her authority as mother is more apparent than real, for her daughter manages to get her own way without too much trouble, which entirely undermines the fiction of the Victorian parent as tyrant. In a conscious inversion of the norm, Gwendolen claims authority over her mother.⁵³ In fact Lady Bracknell is led a dance by her daughter and her nephew Algernon to the extent of having to follow them to the country, where she proves to be incapable of preventing them from carrying out their designs. Her fiats seem immovable obstacles to young love and to create the basic conflict in the play. But even in the first scene it becomes clear that her decree does not actually run in her world.

Filial relationships are particularly chosen here for overturning norms. The plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is, after all, a plot of the return of the long-lost child, the orphan who has his world restored to him at last. It is a plot seemingly stiffened by the bond between parent and child as in a substantial body of drama dealing with lost children and foundlings performed on the 1890s stage, such as, W. Lestocq and E.M. Robson's *The Foundling* (1894),⁵⁴ the musical called *The Shop Girl* (1894)⁵⁵ by Ivan Caryll and others, and Julian Cross's *A Miser* (1887).⁵⁶ The 1890s had in fact inherited the theme

⁵³Act I, 32. 58.

⁵⁴W. Lestocq and E.M. Robson, *The Foundling: A Farce in Three Acts* (New York: Z. and L. Rosenfield, n.d.); Terry's Theatre, 30 August, 1894.

⁵⁵H.J. W. Dam, *The Shop Girl: Musical Farce*. Music by I. Caryll. Additional numbers by Adrian Ross and L. Monckton (London: Hopwood and Crew, c1895); the Gaiety Theatre, 24 November, 1894.

⁵⁶Julian Cross, *A Miser: An Original Drama in One Act* (London: Samuel French, n.d.); revived at the Globe Theatre, 5 May, 1890.

from plays stretching well back into the century, such as H.A. Jones's *A Bed of Roses* (1882), Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), and Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer; or, The Lost Son* (1826). But in *The Importance of Being Earnest* it is debatable whether a filial relationship is a matter of convenience or emotional necessity. Lady Bracknell regards parents and children as socially valorizing possessions. Between Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen there seems to exist no more than a social dependency. Algernon clearly does not care whether he has parents or not, except that he does not wish to lack social identity. Agreeing with Lady Bracknell about the convenience of having at least one parent, Jack is ready to embrace anybody who might serve. As Powell and Gagnier have pointed out,⁵⁷ Jack is not bothered by his lack of parents until it becomes an obstacle to marriage. Obviously, the parent-child relationship is just one more coin needed for the business of getting what one wants.

Another sacred norm of Victorian morality that the play turns inside out is the other foundational idea of the Victorian family, the value of marriage. Following the major strain of British comedy from the renaissance onwards, Wilde points the action of *The Importance of Being Earnest* towards multiple weddings as the happy ending. If the plot is one of the return of the long-lost child, it is also one of intrigues to bring about marriages. But like the advantages of having parents, the felicity of being married is endorsed not by its moral and emotional sanctification but by sheer expediency, quite devoid of the moral motive worshipped in the typical play of society and family, such as, Henry Arthur Jones's *The Dancing Girl* (1891), Sydney Grundy's *Sowing the Wind* (1893) or Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Cabinet Minister* (1890). The standards Lady Bracknell applies to reject Jack's candidacy for her daughter's hand are set by expediencies of economics and fashion rather than by morality, while the standard by which the young women set their course is so absurd and arbitrary that it does not have even the rationale of expediency. In choosing the mechanics of plot, then, Wilde shows the hollowness of conventional ideals.

⁵⁷Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, 134; Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 115.

Reaching deeper yet we discover that statements and actions are gutted of their truth value in the play, reducing ideals to nonsense. Ideals are seen to be vital to a happy ending when both Gwendolen and Cecily declare their determination to marry none but an Ernest. But the absurdity of that ideal underscores the breathtaking triviality of idealism in the play in the same way that Lady Windermere's inflexible morality underscores the dangers of idealism in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Gwendolen holds an ideal only because she lives "in an age of ideals" as proclaimed by "the more expensive monthly magazines,"⁵⁸ reducing morality to a fashion. The mere declaration of an ideal pre-empts an assessment of it.

Considered closely, what women's idealism means in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a search for a suitable husband. Whether it is Lady Bracknell applying the exclusively practical and shallow measure of financial stability to the choice of a husband, or the young women applying their whimsical and shallow measure of the name 'Ernest,' the women occupy themselves wholly to the task of finding the ideal husband. Their ideals may vary but they come together to construe the ideal husband, paralleling the overarching concern of women in Wilde's other society plays, in which the perfect husband is a central figure in the battle of the sexes and rivalry within each sex that form the action of the plays. As a self-referential joke Wilde actually recycles the name of Mrs. Allonby's husband "Ernest" as the magic signifier of the ideal husband in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What is striking in this discourse of husbands is that their ideal character is defined by women; the specific attribute which makes them ideal is that they follow the rules made for them by women. Both in the women's construction of ideals and in the men's surrender to them, one may see Wilde's common and not always ironic statement of women's intervention in men's lives. The power of that intervention is indicated by the insubstantiality of the ideals pressed upon the men: the ideals themselves do not matter; following ideals does.

⁵⁸Act I, 32. Joseph Donohue lists magazines of this kind in his edition of the play; see Joseph Donohue with Ruth Berggren, *Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest: A Reconstructive Critical Edition of the Text of the First Production, St. James's Theatre, London, 1895* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe, 1995), 148.

What the characters thus affirm is the precedence of fiction over reality, form over substance. This brings us to a specially striking aspect of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Who stands for that affirmation? In the context of Wilde's drama, the ready answer would seem to be that it is the dandy who celebrates form. This certainly seems true when we note that the privileging of style begins in the play with Algernon, a man who fits the dandy persona perfectly in dress, speech and lack of commitment to anything but philandering and eating. Jack is more connected to common human motives but he soon reveals himself as Algernon's equal in living on the surface. Nor are they alone in the unflinching superficiality of their responses to the world. Rather, it is the attitude that prevails in the entire playworld, from Lane the servant to Lady Bracknell, the keeper of Society's standards. As the action unfolds we find in fact that Gwendolen and Cecily are far fitter figures as dandies than the men in their absolute self-reliance and freedom from the conventions of speech and behaviour. Richard D. McGhee sees as them as true artists who know the value of self-realization and "can pass freely from one pose to another," gleefully putting on masks and just as cheerfully changing them whenever they like.⁵⁹ Most modern critics consider that the Wildean dandy had finally found his home in the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Gregor believes that Wilde's problems with the resolution of styles and themes in his other society comedies was a result of being unable to find "a world fit for the dandy to live in."⁶⁰ The world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is just right because it has escaped the hold of social norms and has become an utopia where any inversion is possible. It is a world where the dandy's excessive concern with appearance and form is accepted as normal, without being seen through the lens of a moral vision, a world where "his voice and actions become harmonious [and] the categories of serious and frivolous . . . no longer apply."⁶¹

⁵⁹Richard D. McGhee, *Marriage, Duty, and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama* (Lawrence: Regents Press, 1980), 296.

⁶⁰Ian Gregor, "Comedy and Oscar Wilde" in *Sewanee Review* 74:2 (April-June 1966) reprinted in Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations: Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 12.

⁶¹Gregor, 19.

Since the dandy repudiates the norm, the dandy's self-expression must seek a logic contrary to that of common speech. That is why the paradox dominates the style of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The self-contradiction inherent in a paradox forces the listener to look for alternative perceptions, exposing the failures of truth claims in declarative sentences by inserting into it an alternative claim. Recent critics have noted that the insertion of a new idea into a proverb or conventional maxim exposes whatever inadequacies it has, as well as forcing its audience to realize that the paradox thus created perhaps contains more truth than was expected.⁶² They are certainly not casual concessions to fashion, as Otto Reinert seems to suggest by dismissing the use of paradox in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a kind of "menial service as bright spots in sentimental thesis plays."⁶³ In Ian Gregor's words they are, rather, "attempts to resolve a particular clash between manners and morals"⁶⁴ The "principle of inversion" that Kohl sees as "the behavioral norm," uses paradox as its "verbal expression."⁶⁵ Cecily's dictum that it is vitally "important not to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life"⁶⁶ not only inverts a basic rule of social exchange but devalues the commercial ethic against an aesthetic imperative. Thus paradox undermines the authority of accepted declarations and affirms alternatives. Anthony Gash may be overstating the power of language, "to profane, through laughter, the forbidden symbols of divine and political power is to expose them as *merely* symbols, and thus to throw into doubt the tragic and sacrificial world-view which they enshrine,"⁶⁷ but the assault on certitudes is an indisputable function of speech in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

⁶²Jordan, 12; Patricia F. Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 124; Gagnier, 7-8, 116; Norman Page, ed. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Peterborough: Broadview, 1998), Introduction, 8-9.

⁶³Otto Reinert, "Satiric Strategy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *College English* 18 (October 1956), 15.

⁶⁴Ian Gregor, 11.

⁶⁵Kohl, 263.

⁶⁶Act II, 78.

⁶⁷Anthony Gash, "Carnival and the Poetics of Reversal," in *New Directions in Theatre*, ed. Julian Hilton (London: Macmillan, 1993), 91.

The uncertainty built into the play is best seen in the loosened identities of the male leads, particularly Jack. Both he and Algernon shuffle their identities with the mythical Ernest, but for Jack his unknown parentage altogether robs him of a social identity and a place in his world which recognizes identities in terms of social signifiers such as a good address or membership in institutions. Jack is acceptable to Lady Bracknell because he has a house in Belgrave Square, though on the unfashionable side. Algernon cannot be a liar because he is an Oxonian. For Jack, the name Ernest turns out to be his lifeline to a secure social position. The metaphoric importance of names has been stressed by Peter Raby who believes that "the obsession with the name, and so with form, lies at the play's core."⁶⁸ Names are rightly at the ideological core of a play in which identity connotes not the essence of an individual but his or her situation in a matrix of social approval (or disapproval) made up of often arbitrary and superficial ideals. The fragility of unexamined ideals is nowhere better illustrated than in the primacy accorded to the name Ernest, for it signifies the current posture approved by fashionable society, not the moral, psychological or sociological identity of the person so named.

The importance of names is testified by Wilde's frequent changes of the names of his characters through the many revisions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, undertaken not only because he wished to avoid such gaffes as giving an aristocrat's name to a tradesman.⁶⁹ He used names allegorically as in morality plays and the 18th century comedy of manners, or, in Wilde's own era, in the novels of Dickens and the plays of Shaw. In addition, the names in *The Importance of Being Earnest* suggest the comic disjunction between a name as an idea and as a description of character. The two young men who claim the name Ernest, including the true owner of the name, are far from being earnest. Miss Prism does not analyze the light of knowledge by refraction but obscures it altogether.

⁶⁸Peter Raby, "The Origins of *The Importance of Being Earnest*" in *Modern Drama* 37 (1994), 139-147.

⁶⁹See Coulson Kernahan's testimony concerning Wilde's attention to names in *In Good Company: Some Personal Recollections* (London: John Lane, 1917), 189-235 rpt. in *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. E.H. Mikhail, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1979), 298-323.

Identity being as uncertain as it is in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the characters try to pin it down by objects, from trivial to substantial. The most expressive objects, and the most ubiquitous, are documents.⁷⁰ They ground everyone's reality, are constantly cited as evidence, and vary widely in nature. As well as ordinary documents such as diaries, certificates of illness, calling cards, love letters, three-volume novels, study books, household account books, eligibility lists, Court Guides and Army Lists, unusual objects such as shirt cuffs, sheets of music and cigarette cases are pressed into service as documents. Jack offers certificates of Cecily's childhood illnesses as solid proof of who she is as well as what her character is. Miss Prism's handbag bears the story of her life, functioning almost as her diary. Even muffins and cucumber sandwiches bear testimony, for upon them Algy imprints his heartlessness and greed, as interpreted by Jack. But while some of these 'documents' do have formal credibility, such as Cecily's health records, many others, such as Cecily's diary, are manufactured by the very people whose identity they are establishing, and thus undercut the authority they supposedly provide. If this is the weight of authority by which identity is fixed, then its reliability becomes most uncertain.

Identities shaken from their moorings in the norms of the playworld suggest a deeper instability. We have noted how systematically the play exposes the inversion of norms of belief, speech and action, especially in the dandyism that distinguishes all the principal characters. It might seem that it is in the dandy persona that the overturning of norms might be located. But given that the women in the play possess the hallmark insouciance of the dandy to a greater degree than the men, it is not surprising that theirs should be the primary subversive role. It is evident that women are the holders of power in the play. The central plot complication, Jack's quest for his "true" identity, begins specifically as a result of the wishes of women. In this world women tell men what to do, taking over the traditional domain of men.

⁷⁰See Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, 131.

But if women intervene in men's lives to the point where they become the arbiters of all action in the play, then does it not raise questions about women's fitness to hold such power, and by extension, about women's nature? *The Importance of Being Earnest* consistently suggests a reading of women's character as essentially irrational, fickle and unreliable. The young women fix their happiness on the name 'Ernest'; Lady Bracknell rejects the solid material qualifications of her daughter's suitor on the ground of social prejudice; Miss Prism, an embodiment of female unreliability, has been derelict in her duty by mixing up infant Jack, the child in her charge, with her sentimental novel, the child of her feminine fancy. There are enough examples here of women's whims and folly to assert that the play is brought to the brink of disaster because absolute authority in it is claimed by women, creatures fundamentally irrational. The ideal husbands in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are men who follow an ideal manufactured by the women, even to the extent of changing their names.

It is not that women declare war on social norms. On the contrary, they insist that they are following the accepted forms of social intercourse. But the substance of their thought and action usually defy the expectations raised by the form they follow, as we have noted in their treatment of romance, which in its hard pragmatism is the most unromantic procedure imaginable. This dominance of women in *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been often noted. David J. Parker finds women "generally stronger and more resourceful than the men."⁷¹ This is of course a common feature of farce and burlesque—of a world of "Topseyturveydom"—where the "true" order of the world is reversed, in order to get an easy laugh, and where the reversal is only temporary. The blurring of distinctions between the genders and sometimes the exchange of gender identities through disguise is a common farcical element and its results quite straightforward. Men disguised as women became weakened, and their new feminine manners sat so uncomfortably upon them that they could only be objects of fun. Women who disguised themselves as men (generally commoner in

⁷¹David J. Parker, "Oscar Wilde's Great Farce: *The Importance of Being Earnest*" in *Modern Language Quarterly* 35:2 (June 1974), rpt. in Bloom. 45.

music halls than on the legitimate stage) gained not respect but ridicule because by abdicating the weaknesses of traditional femininity they became only inferior men. By "becoming" the other sex, both sexes lost some apparently essential part of their "natural" core, and the new persons they were, were patently false and alien within the normal world. They could only cause suspicion and were tolerable only within a humorous context. In the late nineteenth-century context, the traditional conception of the result of switched genders fit within the debates about the effeminate Aesthete and the aggressively "masculine" New Woman.

No such drastic gender switching occurs in *The Importance of Being Earnest* but there does seem to be an "inverted code" that places much of the control of the play's events in the hands of the female characters.⁷² Gwendolen and Cecily are particularly strong-minded girls. Jordan points out that these "refined young girls turn out to be hard-headed, cold-blooded, efficient and completely self-possessed and the gentlemen simply crumple in front of them."⁷³ They challenge traditional expectations of their roles as young girls and young heroines while using the language of those roles. Cecily, speaking of her diary, begins with a simper, saying, "it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions," but qualifies it with a practical unsentimentality when she continues: "and consequently meant for publication."⁷⁴ The power of the statement comes from the unexpectedness of the pure young girl's clear awareness of the commodity culture of her society and willingness to take advantage of it, and even perhaps of her own status as a desirable commodity (as a wealthy young girl in such a society). What is more, instead of giving herself up to the role of a passive commodity item, she is quite prepared to take control and market herself. In this way she can be compared with Gilbert's Belinda (*Engaged*) on the money-love correlation made by "innocent" young women.

⁷²Reinert, 15.

⁷³Robert J. Jordan "Satire and Fantasy in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*" in *Ariel* 1:3 (July 1970), rpt. in Bloom, 28.

⁷⁴Act II, 104.

This does not mean, however, that the female characters are not "feminine" according to conventional signals of femininity, concerned as they are with marriage, gossip and appearances. But they do not wait for the men to arrange their lives for them. Neither Gwendolen nor Cecily waits to be proposed to, and Lady Bracknell has a great deal of power in her interference in the lives of the young lovers. Significantly, Lady Bracknell is not a widow forced to take on the role of the controlling parent in the absence of her husband; the constant reminders of his existence serve to emphasize her stronger power. This frequent assumption of masculine authority by women has been taken by some critics, such as Otto Reinert and Camille Paglia, to render the characters altogether sexless because the dominance of form, they argue, erases the human qualities which would identify specific sexuality. Paglia sees the men in *The Importance of Being Earnest* assimilated into "the image of female desire" when they are forced by women to submit to forms of social behaviour and personal relationship. Although Paglia attributes this portrayal of attenuated male power to Wilde's "epicene formalism," her argument addresses the issue of power rather than sexuality. Equating men's loss of initiative with the erasure of their sexuality confuses categories.⁷⁵ The androgyny of Gwendolen and Cecily, Jack and Algy is therefore hard to accept. The domination of men by women seems a political rather than sexual issue on the women's part and there is no structural or rhetorical evidence in the text that men's submission is their emasculation except in the broadest metaphorical sense, a sense validated by assertion rather than argument.

More accurately we may argue that the invasion of male preserves by women on the one hand signifies a world in which inverting the norm has become the norm, and on the other it proves that the agent of this inversion is the transgressive woman. Further, female transgression succeeds precisely because men are controlled by the implicit sexual promises of the women. That is why the rhetoric of their relationship is that of romance, and even

⁷⁵Camille Paglia, "The English Epicene: Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*," in Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 560-61.

though that rhetoric is often belied by the pragmatism of the women, that is, their astuteness in personal politics, its sexual implication always remains valid for the men. Their submission is to women, not to unsexed marionettes.

Of the two young men in the play Algernon is the most radically manipulated by the woman he pursues. In the first place, his philandering designs upon her are destroyed by her on sight and he is drafted into her agenda without a struggle. All his ploys fail before Cecily's determined pursuit of her script. The slight shocks Algernon receives when he tries to charm Cecily are nothing compared to the shock he receives when he tries to propose to her, and discovers that his "ghost" had already done so three months ago! With each new discovery about their imaginary relationship, he slips further and further into an abyss of uncertainty. Cecily has a similar effect as that of Lady Hunstanton in the way she creates an atmosphere of uncertainty. His life seems to have been planned out for him, and he has been handed an alternate life—as Cecily's fiancé—of which he had not been aware. A double life, especially of the sort he has been leading, is acceptable and enjoyable when one is aware of it and in control of it, but it is disconcerting and even somewhat alarming to suddenly discover that an alternate existence has been created. Algernon finds he has been made into the parallel of the romantic stereotype, this time from the woman's point of view, that he had been attempting to impose onto Cecily. Words he never wrote are suddenly in existence in love letters, and purchases he never made are displayed to him in the form of love tokens. He finds himself written, by Cecily, into a tale of romance, and used as if he is a mere component of a formula. It is a pattern too strong and adaptive, for him to escape. It is true that "all good looks are a snare,"⁷⁶ because, though they are willing victims, both Jack and Algy do deliver themselves into a life in which they have every likelihood of becoming powerless and imprisoned within the domestic sphere like Lord Bracknell.

Gwendolen does not take as complete control of Jack's life, but she demonstrates her

⁷⁶Act II, 82.

readiness to do so during the proposal scene. Gwendolen takes aggressive charge of the proceedings during Jack's proposal to her. In a reversal of the cliché in which the blushing young woman expresses bashful surprise at an offer of marriage, and waits for the man to do the talking, Gwendolen accepts her knowledge of Jack's love as a fact, and is too impatient at Jack's stammering approach to prevent herself from interrupting him. His fears that Gwendolen is really a Gorgon awaiting her awakening are hardly unfounded because she will indeed "become like her mother,"⁷⁷

In apprehending that Gwendolen may become another Lady Bracknell, Jack is voicing his fear of an eternally controlling persona. Lady Bracknell is the keeper of Society, the sphinx at the gate whose interrogation must be passed by Jack before he may enter the citadel of privilege. It is therefore not far-fetched, as Joseph Loewenstein charges,⁷⁸ to think of her as the sphinx, at least in her function. She is in fact more than the sphinx. Listing Michel de Certeau's conditions for the 'concept-city', Sarah Bryant-Bertail argues that the keeper of the city is to be identified with the city itself.⁷⁹ The keeper is thus herself the 'city' she is guarding, a conceptually coherent statement if we concede supreme power to the keeper, as everyone in the playworld of *The Importance of Being Earnest* does to Lady Bracknell. She is power personified and Jack fears that this power will pass on to Gwendolen; the signs are already there, for it is by Gwendolen that Lady Bracknell is circumvented.

The passage of power from Lady Bracknell to Gwendolen may be lightly hinted but stated nonetheless. Echoed in Cecily's determined capture of the man she wants, domination then extends into a necessary condition of femininity itself. Even the epistemological convention of taking common experience as reality is constantly set aside by women; Lady Bracknell can alter both the fashion and the side of Jack's house because

⁷⁷Act I, 51.

⁷⁸Joseph Loewenstein, "Wilde and the Evasion Principle," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 84:4 (Autumn 1985), rpt. in Bloom.

⁷⁹Sarah Bryant-Bertail, "Woman and the City: The Semiotics of Embodiment" in *Theatre Research International* 19:2 (Summer 1994), 105. She quotes Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 93-94.

reality is perception, which she controls. Cecily can construct an entirely fictional relationship with 'Ernest' which she then forces Algernon to accept as reality. The play's narrative of female transgression thus develops as a perception of women's nature. The universal experience within the playworld is that women invade men's customary domain and that their enterprise is rooted in an intense and intrinsic desire for power. Ruthlessly pursuing what they wish to possess, women make up or interpret regulations favourable to themselves, turning the world into an unfamiliar and possibly dangerous place. Softly told as it may, the idea is a tocsin of anxiety that relates *The Importance of Being Earnest* to Wilde's other works, particularly *Salome*.

Chapter 7

Salome: Woman Demonized

Salome, the most controversial of Wilde's plays, is so remote in both form and content to his society plays that it seems an altogether alien presence.¹ It is not without some thematic similarities to the two poetic tragedies *The Duchess of Padua* and the unfinished *La Sainte Courtisane*, but stands apart from them because of its striking experimental form and philosophical adventurism, not to speak of its language, French. Like *Salome*, each of these tragedies has an exotic setting and revolves around a passionate woman at once intoxicated by and suffering from a consuming desire for, a man of opposite character. When scorned by him her love turns into a violent will to possess him; in both *Salome* and *The Duchess of Padua*, the only possession possible is in a bond of death. The similarity also extends to central situations. The fatal influence of exoticized womanhood is evident in *La Sainte Courtisane*, where the encounter between a bejewelled woman and a hermit results in the corruption of the man. In *The Duchess of Padua* the beautiful Duchess's twisted love results in Guido Ferranti's betrayal of male bonds and eventually, to his death. The emphasis in these plays, as in *Salome*, is on the mystery of women's sexuality, a risky theme for the time, which may explain why the plays never gained popularity.

Salome suffered neglect in Wilde's lifetime and, banned in England, was produced in Paris in 1896. But unlike his tragedies, *Salome* was rescued from oblivion relatively soon after Wilde's death and has seen a number of revivals, including Steven Berkoff's several productions since 1988.² But when it appeared in 1893, in addition to being censured for its controversial subject and treatment, *Salome* drew criticism as derivative, turgid and

¹All references to *Salome* are to the translation by Lord Alfred Douglas in Robert Ross, ed. *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1907). In the absence of line numbers, page numbers are cited. Following the orthography of this edition, the title is unaccented, while the name is accented.

²For the most complete account of dramatic and cinematic productions of *Salome*, see William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Wilde: Salome, Plays in Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

undramatic, like Wilde's own tragedies and the closet plays of contemporaries such as Michael Field, Browning, and Tennyson. "There is much, I think, in it that is beautiful, much lovely writing—I almost wonder Oscar does not dramatize it," Max Beerbohm is said to have quipped when he read the play,³ and he shared the feeling that the play was undramatic with Wilde's contemporaries, including Robert Ross and Lord Alfred Douglas.

This general estimate ignored that Wilde had founded this play on an aesthetic very different from the academic, Shakespearean model to which the tragedies had been set. Joseph Donohue⁴ and Kerry Powell believe that Wilde was desperate to write a "serious" play and to be taken seriously by his fellow artists rather than be remembered for his society comedies to which, according to friends such as Ada Levenson, he did not attach much serious intent.⁵ This supports Powell's view that one reason for writing the play in French was that Wilde felt his French contemporaries would be more sympathetic than his own countrymen. Powell also demonstrates Wilde's canny understanding of the workings of a censorship system that was willing to overlook controversial (in this case, biblical) subject matter) in plays if distanced by a foreign language. But Wilde's reasons were also artistic; he had realized that in order to write a literary play that was actable, he had to find a more modern poetic mode, unavailable in contemporary England. He had failed with the *Duchess of Padua* because the dramatic style of three centuries past had become meaningless, stale, stagnant and pretentious in the modern context. In *Salome* he turned to a poetic style from a contemporary continental tradition and proved how well it could serve drama.

Although the new direction taken in it seems to put *Salome* at a distance from Wilde's society plays, it also incorporates a surprising number of elements from them as well as from popular West End plays. Structural elements such as an uneasy

³Quoted in Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33.

⁴Joseph Donohue, "Salome and the Wildean Art of Symbolist Theatre," *Modern Drama* 37:1 (Spring 1994), 84-103.

⁵Violet Wyndham, *The Sphinx and Her Circle: A Biographical Sketch of Ada Levenson 1862-1933* (New York, 1963), 110, cited by Joseph Donohue, "Salome and the Wildean Art of Symbolist Theatre," 86.

mother/daughter relationship, the choric presence of party guests and the contest between the good man and the bad woman, are staples of society drama that Wilde uses in *Salome* though in a setting so exotic and a situation so alien to social experience that its connection with West End plays may elude recognition. The play also has a confirmed place within Wilde's society plays in terms of its thematic interests. It is in *Salome* that the confrontation between saint and sinner, between the bad woman and the good man, is stated in its most primal form. In the society comedies transgressions of social codes by women threaten social and personal life but are corrected by the re-assertion of ordained gender relationships and identities, although in the process conventional ideas of good and bad are put to sustained questioning. But in the world of *Salome*, the social code has been decayed by the arbitrary use of absolute power and no social constraints can contain the capricious will of women. Whereas in the ballrooms of the Windermers and the Chilterns female self-assertion either appears as a game or retreats before male judgment, in *Salome* no such inhibitions exist, so that the full force of women's transgressive lust for domination has full and catastrophic play. Women's potential for destruction is a given in the society plays as well as in *Salome*. In the society plays that potential does not come to realization while in *Salome* it does. This continuity demonstrates the unity of Wilde's perception of the world because it connects such dissimilar representations of character and event as *Salome* and the society plays.

As an illustration of this connection we may cite echoes of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which may appear to be a surprising parallel because in its lighthearted and seemingly irresponsible fun this much-loved comedy stands diametrically opposite *Salome* with its death-dealing passions. Yet both plays are underpinned by reflections on power, gender paradigms, personal identity, the importance of art, the crippling effects of utilitarianism and the importance of language, although their modes differ. The tactic in *Earnest* is one of mockery. Wilde creates a setting of total innocuousness, wealth and prettiness being two of the safest props for staging a satiric undercutting of dominant

modes of thought and action. In *Salome* the setting is dark, massive and charged with menace, the expected arena of pain and death where melodrama crosses its limits to reach for the bloody poetry of Jacobean drama (though Wilde was wise enough not to attempt another *Duchess of Padua*). Yet *Salome* is an extension of the society plays, for the threats implicit in them are all carried out here. *Salome* is the society play set in a palpable hell of unrestrained will, with no humour to rescue or distance the victims from their situations in life. Women are not sweet angels of the hearth spiritually soothing and inspiring men to good deeds, but spiteful, nagging hags ever urging their lord and master towards evil, or corrupt virgins buying power with the allure of their bodies. In this world Lord Chiltern would be found out and condemned to a social death, and Lady Windermere would become a second Isabel Vane and lose her husband, home and children. The tragedy is allowed to unfold to its utmost without the *deus ex machina* of motherly feelings suddenly erupting in a blackmailer, or of sudden revelations of past secrets which effectively render a blackmailer powerless. In the society comedies a character may choose a fatal path but is saved from actually treading upon it in the nick of time. Not so in *Salome*, where no option or cancellation is allowed. Salomé refuses the alternative offered by the Young Syrian Captain, Narraboth, of not looking and therefore not doing, unlike Lady Windermere who eventually listens to her advisor and leaves her symbolic Herod's terrace without looking backward at the man who could cause her destruction. The line between comedy in the social plays and tragedy in *Salome* is distinct but connecting.

But the most powerful continuity is that of an instinctive dread of what a woman's will may unleash on the orderly world of men. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* a good woman's insistence on sexual purity nearly destroys her and her loved ones. In *A Woman of No Importance* both good and bad women strive to possess men to the extinction of men's personal identity. In *An Ideal Husband* the virtuous heroine as well as the vicious adventuress try to force their will upon the men in their world, almost destroying it in both its private and public dimensions. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the holiday

atmosphere makes women's consistent capriciousness seem cute but also demonstrates how they drain power from men and rebuild the world in their image, not men's. In *Salome* this apprehension of women's inexplicable power continues. The actual fear with which Salomé is regarded is a more intense feeling than men's need to please women in the social plays but it is the climax of the weaker perception there. This perception is merely an intuition, not a rational inference. That is why it requires the expressive instrumentality of symbols and validates Wilde's experiment.

Wilde's contemporaries, however, found the play unoriginal. Reviewers sneered at what they saw as a continuation of Wilde's derivative habits, calling the play a "mosaic" of many masters, such as Théophile Gautier, Maurice Maeterlinck, Anatole France and Marcel Schwob.

But the voices that breathe the breath of life into *Salomé* are dominated by one voice, the voice of Flaubert. If Flaubert had not written *Salammô*, if Flaubert had not written *La Tentation de Sainte Antoine*—above all, if Flaubert had not written *Hérodiade*, *Salomé* might boast an originality to which she cannot now lay claim.⁶

Salomé was a popular subject both with painters and writers of the Symbolist tradition. Gustave Moreau's series of paintings of Salomé were perhaps the most well-known, and made more famous by the important place they had in Huysmans' Decadent novel, *À Rebours* (1884). Wilde's treatment of the legend placed him firmly in that tradition, although many of his contemporaries saw *Salome* as a mere imitation of Maeterlinck's style. Indeed the basic plot and even the very opening lines of *La Princesse Maleine* (1889) are startlingly similar to Wilde's play, as Kerry Powell has shown.⁷ But we may also note that Wilde himself was fascinated by the theme of beauty's corrupting allure in his unfinished *La Sainte Courtisane*, which opens like *Salome* with a beautiful woman demanding to look upon the hermit who refuses to look upon her. Although the plot seems

⁶*Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 February 1893, 3, in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 136.

⁷Wilde was considering writing the introduction to William Heinemann's English edition (1892) of Maeterlinck's play; see Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 54. Mario Praz categorically states that Wilde derived his style for *Salome* from *La Princesse Maleine* in *The Romantic Agony* (London: Collins, 1960), 332.

to have been moving towards Wilde's characteristic irony in seeing the fluidity of moral categories by making the saint and the courtesan change places as tempter and tempted, the association of beauty, desire and corruption places the fragment close to *Salome*.

In truth, the hostility to *Salome* was due more to its imputed immorality than to its derivativeness, owing not a little to the position that the censor had taken. In the summer of 1892, rehearsals for *Salome* were in full swing with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role when the play became the victim of "Mrs. Grundy." Edward F.S. Pigott, the Examiner of Plays, invoked a law banning the presentation of biblical subjects on the stage. Powell points out that everyone, including Wilde in all likelihood, knew of this law and also would have been aware that Pigott was open to private negotiations about banned subjects. Powell concludes that Wilde's failure to take advantage of this option was part of the same unconscious desire for publicity and victimization that brought about his downfall in 1895.⁸ Much of the scandal associated with the actual content of the play was a result of assumptions imposed upon the character, which were not actually present in the text. The reputation of its author was no small contributor to the expectations of decadence that the reading audience brought to the play. One of the passages to which Pigott objected was the episode of Salomé kissing the head of Jokanaan. His shock seemed to result not only from the gruesomeness of the act itself, but from the taint of sexuality of any kind being associated with a holy prophet. Regenia Gagnier calls Pigott's private letter to Spencer Ponsonby "one of the surviving treats of censorship."⁹

I must send you, for your *private* edification & amusement, this MS. of a 1 act piece . . . written by Oscar Wilde! It is a miracle of impudence . . . [Salomé's] love turns to fury because John will not let her kiss him *in the mouth* —and in the last scene, where she brings in his head—if you please—on a 'charger'—she *does* kiss his mouth, in a paroxysm of sexual despair.¹⁰

Since the British press and the theatrical establishment were generally supportive of the censor, the play's negative reception in the press cannot be separated from the censor's

⁸Powell, 34.

⁹Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 170.

¹⁰John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 112.

ban. It seemed difficult for critics to separate morality from style, ethics from aesthetics. Besides, the Press had long adopted Wilde as a favourite target and ignored the few supporters Wilde had and the larger issue of censorship. Both William Archer and the *Era* sardonically questioned the wisdom of the censor, but they were in a minority. Even the response of Wilde's own friends was not unmixed. In his memoirs, Graham Robertson writes that he offended Wilde when he responded to a reading of the play with what was meant to be a "complimentary chuckle," after an initial uncertainty as to its humorous or serious intent.¹¹ There appears to have been a general initial assumption that the play was a parody, reiterated though rejected by Mario Praz,¹² and judged understandable by Powell when he considers episodes such as Salomé's conversation with the severed head, which he says rests "uneasily on the edge of caricature."¹³

The first 'production,' in a way, was Aubrey Beardsley's drawings for the play, at least in the sense that they equalled the power of Wilde's text and added to the great body of Symbolist and Decadent iconography of Salomé. They were the first visual interpretation that the public received of the written words: they came to life on the page rather than on the stage. At the same time they have exercised a profound influence on the stage. Several stage productions have used his images—his 'costumes' and 'makeup'—as inspirations for their own, from Alla Nazimova in 1922 to Steven Berkoff's first production in 1988. Since more people have seen Beardsley's drawings than a live or filmed production, his 'staging' remains in their minds and becomes the primary instant reference, becoming synonymous with the text in the public mind, as many critics, such as Schweik, Zatlin and Gilbert have noted.¹⁴ Edith Evans's *Lady Bracknell* is a case in point of an outstanding production or performance becoming associated with a play forever.

¹¹W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (London: Hamilton, 1931), 136.

¹²Praz, 332.

¹³Powell, 38.

¹⁴Robert Schweik, "Congruous Incongruities: The Wilde-Beardsley 'Collaboration'," *ELT*, 37:1 (1994); Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Elliot L. Gilbert, "Tumult of Images: Wilde, Beardsley and Salome," *Victorian Studies* 26 (Winter 1983).

Wilde himself was annoyed by the illustrations and it is generally conceded that powerful as images as they are, they have little relevance to the text.¹⁵

Prevented by the censor's ban from staging the play, Wilde did the next best thing by carefully choosing the materials for printing and binding it, thus 'costuming' it in "Tyrian purple." But the ban made *Salome* primarily a book rather than a play, robbing it of its stage appeal. When *Salome* was first staged in England in 1905, five years after his death, at the Bijou Theatre, Bayswater, the audience's reaction was very different from what Wilde's successful society comedies had enjoyed and understandably so because of its very different nature. But the circumstances in which it was presented also contributed to dissatisfaction. Instead of enjoying the play on what Mrs. George Alexander called a "glittering first night" at a West End theatre, where the audience was allowed to participate in the performance by imitating the fine clothes and social manners of the characters on stage, the audience of *Salome* had to attend the play privately. Though the play had gained glamour from its notoriety, that was not the glamour of show business. The production, undertaken primarily to secure copyright, did not help to elicit much excitement. Had the audience seen the play as originally conceived by Wilde, Bernhardt, Robertson and Ricketts (even with compromises forced by a limited budget such as the adaptation of costumes from Sardou's *Cléopâtre*), the response would undoubtedly have been much more favourable, if only for the stage presence of Bernhardt. Both the French production and the first English productions were apparently sadly amateurish, and the lack of a sufficiently passionate and wicked Salomé opposed to a fairly strong Herod succeeded in shifting the audience's perception of the play so that they saw Herod rather than Salomé as the main character. But the lukewarm reception was due also to the historical fact that the time was not right for the genre. Symbolist plays were difficult to stage because their dependence on poetic allusiveness often made them tenuous as stage events. *The Times* correlated *Salome* with Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and characterizing the latter as

¹⁵However, Tydeman and Price (117-18) concede that a few of the drawings have some relevance, as does Gilbert (147).

"intolerably dull as a drama," went on to "express an equally unfavourable opinion" of the former.¹⁶ A theatre that explored "beyond-human forces (spiritual, magical, mythical, etc.)" and functioned as a "poetic, incantatory, allusive"¹⁷ arrangement of symbols did not easily fit into the mood of realistic representation dominating the West End stage.

Though *Salome* made little impact on the English stage, it transferred well to the continental, doing particularly well in Germany. At one time it was performed more than any other English play except the plays of Shakespeare. It gained a double life thanks to the composer Richard Strauss who, enchanted with Max Reinhardt's 1903 production at the Kleines Theater, Berlin, wrote an opera with a libretto from Hedwig Lachmann's abridged German translation of Wilde's play. It is in this form rather than in its original non-musical form that we usually encounter *Salome* today. It is a development that probably would have particularly pleased Wilde because he more than once drew musical analogies to the style of his play. In an interview given to the *Pall Mall Budget* in 1892 he spoke of language as an instrument, and of the French language as a new instrument which he was eager to play,¹⁸ and later specifically likened it to a piece of music in which the recurring motifs of its refrains bound it together like a ballad.¹⁹ The lyric formality of Wilde's style reached its zenith in *Salome*, whose musical qualities were observed from the first, not only by Wilde himself, but by contemporaries like Archer, who saw in it qualities

¹⁶*The Times*, 23 February, 1893 in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 133.

¹⁷Austin E. Quigley, "Realism and Symbolism in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*," *Modern Drama* 37 (1994), 108.

¹⁸Oscar Wilde, interview in *Pall Mall Budget*, 30 June 1892, in E.H. Mikhail, *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan, 1979), v. I, 188. Powell suggests (36) that the musical metaphor of this precious explanation was yet another pose on Wilde's part, cleverly designed to gain publicity, and to demonstrate a purely artistic impulse within himself to his fellow artists, while covering up a shrewd commercial sense that knew there was a better chance of evading the wrath of the censor if a biblical topic, especially treated so luridly, was given the "decent obscurity of a foreign language" as the *Era* put it ("Oscar Wilde's Curtain-Raiser," *Era*, 18 March 1893), 15, in Powell, 36. Wilde also knew that if he wanted an admired actress and box-office draw like Bernhardt ever to act in one of his plays it would have a better chance of being accepted if it were in her own language. Although these sobering speculations are very likely correct, they neither detract from the "wonderful beauty of his answer," nor from its sincerity. The musicality of the play has been evident to more people than the author himself. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that Wilde's statement is partial rather than inaccurate.

¹⁹Rupert Hart-Davis, ed. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 590.

"borrowed from music."²⁰ The musicality of tone in this work was both a part of the Symbolist style and in keeping with the "artificial, musical quality" and "eerie intonation" of Bernhardt's acting style in the 1890s.²¹ The story of Salomé had been explored musically already, for example, in Jules Massenet's *Hérodiade*. But in the early part of the twentieth century it was mostly Wilde's own Salomé dancing to his words without the help of Strauss's music.

The welcome that *Salome* received in France and Germany reflected the approval of the chief exponents of the Symbolist tradition. Both Mallarmé and Maeterlinck were impressed and moved by the play. The deceptively simple style, which was ridiculed by the particularly virulent reviewer of *The Times* as "very like a page from one of Ollendorff's exercises"²² (a popular book of French exercises for students), created a hypnotic power that was appreciated by the French themselves, not the least of whom was Sarah Bernhardt herself, although she might have been attracted to the play because it was similar in style to the enormously popular plays by Sardou in which she always played the leading role, as Powell points out.²³ The English found Wilde's French style wanting, while the French found it entirely adequate as a vehicle of the symbolist aesthetic.

That aesthetic, however, appeared foreign to the largely conservative British taste of the time not only as an unfamiliar and pretentious approach to art but as a threat to wholesome sentiments. The main force arrayed against Wilde's play was the conservative backlash against the alien spirit and manner of the Decadents. The claims of the Decadents to be counted as artists unveiling new reaches of the imagination were dismissed by the conservatives who thought of them as "degenerates." William Ernest Henley, the editor of the *National Observer*, headed a group mostly of writers and dubbed "The Hearties," who "sought to check the course of Decadence" during the 1890s.²⁴ These "Counter-

²⁰William Archer, review in *Black and White*, 11 May 1893, 290, in Beckson, 141-142.

²¹Powell, 46.

²²*Times*, 2 February 1893, in Beckson, 133.

²³Powell, 43-44.

²⁴Matthew Gerard, "Counter-Decadence," *An Encyclopedia of the 1890's: An Encyclopedia of British*

Decadents" included Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard, writers of texts of adventure, manly quest and conquest that excluded women or viewed women as virtual lamias. The basic opposition between Decadence and Counter-Decadence appeared to be one between hedonism and activism, a battle fought primarily in the arena of art (linguistic or visual). The opposition to writers such as Arthur Symons and Wilde was prompted by a growing paranoia about the declining strengths, both mental and physical, of men, especially in the British Empire. This paranoia was fed and confirmed by scientific works such as E. Ray Lankester's *Degeneration* (1880) and Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (translated from the German into English in 1895). Nordau even used Wilde as a specific example of the degenerate, and the translation of his book came at a perfect time to illustrate the retribution awaiting degenerates and those who encouraged degeneracy. The definition of degeneracy was used, as Rebecca Stott explains, as

a means to classify abnormality or perverseness (the criminal, homosexual, prostitute, aesthete, or decadent artist) and inversely a means to articulate the imagined spread of degenerate characteristics threatening moral purity and cultural health. Fundamentally it became a means to enforce prescriptive normality and morality by a scientific demarcation of behavioural characteristics considered challenging to the *status quo* (the work of feminists and radicals of all kinds)²⁵

This moral and physical paranoia battered on the philosophical refusal of the Decadent artist and writer to validate good and bad as worthwhile categories and their insistence on finding beauty in violence, immorality, crime and evil as these notions were understood in conventional society. The rejection of conventional ways of encountering the world turned the Decadent sensibility away from the perceptual tools of rationality to those of symbolic suggestivity. The Decadents wanted to transcend Nature which they conceived as the repository of the obvious, the vulgar and the useful, the source of virtue to the bourgeoisie. So cosmetics and static works of art were preferred to trees and flowers. *Salome*'s setting tries to achieve the same sort of static and artificial quality, translating the

Literature, Art and Culture, ed. G.A. Cevasco (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 126.

²⁵Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale: the Kiss of Death* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 18-19.

natural world into alienated artifice in the same way that a Symbolist painter's paintings commented on classical painting and traditional ways of seeing. Artifice was proof of man's superiority to Nature and the ape ancestor, and the interpretation of life as art afforded a new understanding of both life and art. The symbolist approach to experience was a new way for Wilde to pursue his search for the nature and meaning of the feminine. In his other plays that search depended on the rational process of social analysis and mapping, a process that located irrationality at the core of the feminine but failed to plumb its depths. Symbolist perception promised a way beyond the obvious and the material, elevating understanding beyond moral values to the aesthetic.

The Symbolist artist felt that, in Arthur Symons' terms, he (as well as the world) had "starved [his] soul long enough in the contemplation and the rearrangement of material things" and that it was now time for the ascendancy of the soul. With such an ascendancy, there was a corresponding rise of literature and art "in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream."²⁶ This is a statement that seems neatly to sum up the atmosphere of *Salome*. The Symbolist artist explored the intangible world, which often necessitated the rejection of the laws of the tangible, including those of social order. Considering Wilde's commitment to the dandy's aesthetic of beauty and individuality, it is not surprising that he was attracted to this literary movement.

Austin E. Quigley calls the Symbolist style an "interweaving of words, music, movement, and color." *Salome* incorporates these typically Symbolist elements, relying on "color, rhythm, contradiction, and polyphony."²⁷ The aim of the Symbolist artist was to create and reach an often elusive space that was only possible as a sum of these parts and was intangible and difficult to define. The object of the Symbolist artist was to go beyond realism. Quigley recognizes that the elusiveness of the goal may place the credibility of the style as a disciplined tool into question, and Wilde's adoption of it was indeed questioned

²⁶Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, intro. Richard Ellmann (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), 2-3.

²⁷Quigley, 106.

by his contemporaries and modern critics. That Wilde himself was not unaware of the risk is attested by the fact that although the "narcissistic, self-indulgent and limited elements of the style are undeniably present in *Salome*,"²⁸ Wilde inserts points of self-awareness and criticism within the play. Herodias's pragmatic voice persistently introduces a healthy dose of scepticism into the superstitious, symbol-dependent climate of Herod's court. Even Herod, near the end, turns his back on the allusive mode of interpreting the world when he gasps, "You must not find symbols in everything you see. It makes life impossible" (50). Nonetheless, *Salome* achieves its unique semiotic by the potentials of symbols, not by the naturalistic ordering of events.

The elusive promise of symbols makes referentiality mystical and ethereal in *Salome*. Before she even appears on stage the audience is prepared by the conversation of the soldiers for some otherworldly creature, the images scattered through the opening lines of the play linking her to the heavens and heavenly bodies, especially the moon. The moon, angels and gods are all invoked before the audience is introduced to her. We may note that the characters describe one another by extravagant similes and that as the similes mount in intensity to capture the subject's identity, they leave behind natural objects, turning rather to art objects as reference points, including poetic landscapes. The Young Syrian Captain's imagery for Salomé sets the technique at work: "She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver" (3). His imagination flies from nature to art as he describes her: "She is like a dove that has strayed. . . . She is like a narcissus trembling in the wind. . . . She is like a silver flower" (9). Since in Salomé's eyes the moon is "a little silver flower" (11), the three-way equation—Salomé, silver flower, moon—stands confirmed as a product of the imagination, not nature. Salomé's own descriptions of Jokanaan are the best examples yet, for their self-contradictory fluidity is punctuated by allusions to man-made objects such as eyes that are "like black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry" (18), or a body that is "like a thin ivory statue" (19). A natural object in a simile, "like a moonbeam," at

²⁸Quigley, 108.

once gives way to "a shaft of silver" (19). When Salomé speaks of Jokanaan's body as one "like the lilies of the field" (21), the simile quickly expands into that of a garden, of all works of art the one that subverts nature the most, if we are to believe Spenser and Marvell. Whether Salomé is using as referents "a perfumed garden of spices" (21) or "a whitened sepulchre" (22), she is invoking the artifice of cultural constructions to reach into Jokanaan's being.

Yet, true to symbolist principles, art proves its capacity only to suggest, not to define. Just as Salomé tries one description after another to capture Jokanaan in words, others try to label her, never successfully. Jokanaan fears her, Herod lusts after her, Narraboth adores her. Her beauty remains mysterious, deliberately kept so by the playwright who withholds material evidence at the climactic point of the dance of the seven veils by abbreviating its description to less than ten words. Her beauty is as inexplicable as it is unattainable. She thus becomes a dream figure moving through a dim, nocturnal landscape. It is as if her life is a "waking dream," an idea Strindberg tried to explore in *A Dream Play* in 1901, a play that also contained an orientalized heroine dichotomized into the erotic and the mystic.²⁹ The image of Salomé almost as a somnambulist comes from a whole series of Symbolist images of her. In Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll* (1841) she is seen within the world of the dream, while in the paintings of Moreau she is a dream-like figure moving as through a thick fog to get to John the Baptist's head.

If it is in a dream-state that a woman exercises her mysterious power, then the proper setting for her active existence is the night. We may recall that the one unconditionally fallen woman in the society plays, Mrs. Cheveley, is introduced to the audience in an evening setting. Night is an awe-inspiring time, for the world at the mercy of the vagaries of the moon to illuminate it is a world of uncertainty. The light of the moon is not only

²⁹Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Cima includes two opposing photographs of the same actress, Harriet Bosse, as the same character, the Daughter of Indra. In one, the bejewelled and harshly erotic side dominates (63), while in the other, the woman's body is almost ghostlike, seemingly about to become absorbed into the dark background (87).

fitful, but transforming, so that the clear outlines of the daytime world become blurred—familiar objects become suddenly alien, therefore uncontrollable and therefore threatening. It is easy to make the symbolic leap that connects the clarity born of sunlight to the rationalism conventionally associated with the masculine spirit, and the uncertainty induced by partially illuminated darkness with the irrationality conventionally associated with the feminine spirit.

The correlation with the night and irrationality unceasingly iterates the incomprehensibility of the feminine. As a result, viewers and critics have tended to put their own constructions on the play as well as its central figure, importing readings into the text from a wide variety of discourses on gender and sexuality. Gender identity itself has been found to be an unsettling idea in *Salome*, as evident in Beardsley's illustrations and later interpretations. Beardsley's title page design for the play shows a creature with both female breasts and male genitalia, a suggestion reiterated in *The Woman and the Moon*. Schweik sees the treatment of the faces of Salome and Jokanaan as sometimes androgynous.³⁰ Lindsay Kemp played her in a drag version of the play that was endorsed by many as a powerful interpretation.³¹ The fluidity of gender is, however, an assumption that must be cautiously ascribed to the play, for it is based largely on the knowledge of Wilde's homosexuality that modern audiences inevitably bring to any of his works. This in turn invokes a wide array of cultural stereotypes, ranging from effeminacy to transvestism, that are associated with modern homosexuality.³² In his 1988 biography of Wilde, Richard Ellmann included a bizarre photograph that purported to be of Wilde himself dressed as Salome. Recent scholarship has proved this identification to be a mistake, but its inclusion in a respected biography underlines the eagerness with which people elide homosexuality and androgyny or transvestism, and how easily they assume the existence

³⁰Robert Schweik, 18.

³¹For example, by Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde*, 67.

³²Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Sinfield provides an extended and informative discussion about the complex relationship between these stereotypes and their relationship with modern definitions of homosexual identity.

of one alongside the other.³³

To most critics Salomé remains Wilde's acknowledgment of an entire tradition of imagining a distilled female sexuality. Not surprisingly, the one paradigm to which Salomé is most readily fitted is that of the orientalized *femme fatale*, a figure invested by the *fin-de-siècle* imagination with danger and delight. Mario Praz pointed out that in the Romantic imagination the Orient had become inextricably entwined with sexual license.³⁴ That this association had been rendered "static, frozen, fixed eternally," can be inferred from Edward Said's demonstration of Europe's orientalizing of the East.³⁵ In critical views of Salomé as a fatal woman this trend continues, according to Amy Koritz,³⁶ with whom Marjorie Garber agrees, noting that "the story of Salome and her mesmerizing Dance of the Seven Veils has become a standard trope of Orientalism,"³⁷ Koritz also notes that the "fixing" of the Orient also identifies it as "mystic" or "transcendent and eternal,"³⁸ so that Salomé tends to be invested at once with erotic and mystic force. In the play that force invades the political domain as Salomé bargains with Herod using the mystery of her body as currency. Borrowing Graham Greene's phrase,³⁹ we might say that the politique is the mystique of Salomé's desire and desirability.

The blend of the erotic and the mystic is particularly evident in some of the paintings of Gustave Moreau, one of the primary architects of the Decadent image of Salomé. In *L'Apparition* (1876), for example, Salomé has an ethereal mystical quality despite her half-naked and heavily-jewelled body.⁴⁰ Charles Ricketts recalls Wilde calling Salomé "a

³³Merlin Holland, "Wilde as Salome?" *TLS*, 22 July 1994, 14. The error was first pointed out by John Stokes in the *London Review of Books* in 1992.

³⁴Praz, 231.

³⁵Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 188.

³⁶Amy Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance," in Antony H. Harrison and Beverley Taylor, ed., *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), 252.

³⁷Marjorie Garber, "The Chic of Araby: Transvestism, Transsexualism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation," in Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, ed. *Body Guards* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 228.

³⁸Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance," 253.

³⁹Graham Greene, *The Comedians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 286.

⁴⁰Gustave Moreau, *L'Apparition*, in Carola Hilmes, *Die Femme Fatale: Ein Weiblichkeitstypus in der nachromantischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1990), 107.

mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Sainte Thérèse who worships the moon."⁴¹ Even Huysman's eroticized descriptions of Moreau's paintings admits this hybrid conception. The erotic yet oddly unleshly image of Salomé and her dance rising from Des Esseintes' musings is an uneasy amalgam of the erotic and the mystic identities, though the erotic has primary claim on his consciousness. It is understandable why Wilde saw in Beardsley's interpretations of his play nothing more erotic than a "schoolboy's naughty scribbles."⁴² Wilde's own description of his play as Byzantine incorporated that sense of mysticism of which he spoke to Ricketts, while Beardsley's conception, powerful as it was, did concentrate on the bizarre and the erotic in the story.

Mystic matters, particularly of an oriental cast, compel attention. That is why looking at Salomé is an insistent activity in the play and as insistently noted. Salomé is surrounded by voyeurs, beginning with the Young Syrian Captain, Narraboth, but she herself directs an unwavering gaze at Jokanaan, while Herod tries to capture with his eyes.. In *Private Theatricals*, Nina Auerbach argues that the audience of a play as well as the characters in it define a character by what they see him/her doing and by his/her reactions to what he/she sees.⁴³ This process goes on throughout *Salome*. Who is looking at whom is of endless interest to the characters of Herod's court. But there are few reciprocal gazes and those gazes that are returned are often the precursors of fatality because there is a magic quality to the power of the eye. The gaze of a powerful person is the instrument of death. Both Herodias and her Page warn men not to look at Salomé, knowing instinctively that if she returns her gaze it will be fatal for them. Ironically, it is because Jokanaan refuses to look at Salomé that he is destroyed. He knows that her look will annihilate him morally by enslaving him, but it is his fear of looking at her that angers the goddess, just as it is Narraboth's boldness in looking at her that destroys him. Her power over Herod again is

⁴¹Jean Paul Raymond and Charles Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1932), in Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *The Artist As Critic* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 131.

⁴²Raymond and Ricketts, 131.

⁴³Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 32-33.

marked by the fear of looking as Herod cries: "I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me" (65), in which the indefinite "things" signify the dread of the unknown magnetism let loose in the world by Salomé. She is like a pagan goddess with her whims and fatal attraction. Like Diana and Medusa she destroys men who look on her uninvited. Jokanaan fears her look, perhaps imagining her as a Gorgon whose look can destroy, a fear that is hardly unfounded considering her effect on Narraboth. Salomé is a monster as well as a myth, bringing to life Jack's joke about Lady Bracknell.

Despite the constant looking, things remain stubbornly unseen in the play. The soldiers at Herod's court are puzzled by the fact that the "Jews worship a god that you cannot see" (5) and Jokanaan's constant references to a never-seen "another mightier than I" (5) forms a part of the atmosphere of uncertainty that troubles the superstitious Herod. Koritz reminds us that Salomé is seen before she is heard, while Jokanaan is heard before he is seen.⁴⁴ When we first encounter them, Jokanaan is a disembodied voice, while Salomé is a voiceless body. The relationship of these two characters is at the heart of the action, and the audience's initial introduction to them as partial physical presences underlines their dependence on one another. The one moment of their physical coming-together when she kisses his severed head is invisible, rendering that moment even more powerful. Salomé's last words are spoken in darkness. In her grotesque union with the Other she is turned first into a voice without a body, and then into a body without a voice when the shaft of moonlight illuminates her as an object of horror, which is immediately hidden, crushed under the shields of the soldiers. The body has made a violent and evidently unnatural "incursion . . . into the place of the spirit," an incursion that Narraboth attempted to halt by placing his own body in the path of the person who attempted to cross the mind-body barrier.⁴⁵

Instead of revealing Salomé either as a body or as a spirit, the play's action climaxes

⁴⁴Amy Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance," 254.

⁴⁵Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance," 255.

towards destroying her. This is dictated by the self-preservation of her social environment which comes to know her increasingly as a transgressor of all rules of behaviour and all character roles. She is a child who acts with adult resolution. She is Herodias' daughter but defies her commands and denies her the illusion of supporting her wishes. She is a virgin who dances the dance of a harlot. And finally, she is a human being who turns into a flesh-eating monster as she goes from her desire to kiss Jokanaan's mouth to the act of biting it "as one bites a ripe fruit" (63). Eluding constructions of meaning, she grows progressively terrifying.

Salomé appears the more terrifying when she appears as a child, a delicate creature with "little white feet" that are "like white doves" and "little white flowers" (52) because instead of a child's gentleness she displays the child's unthinking, therefore cruel, willfulness. The Symbolist tradition carried the hint of this cruelty by often eliding Herodias and her daughter and picturing the composite figure as treating the head of the prophet as a plaything gained after a successful tantrum. In Heinrich Heine's poem, *Atta Troll*, the poet, in a dream, sees a laughing Herodias tossing John the Baptist's head in the air like a ball.⁴⁶ In his poem "Hérodiade," Stéphane Mallarmé sees the Herodias/Salomé figure living in a childhood world in which all her actions spontaneously arise from instinct. The acting style and the character-types chosen by Bernhardt, who was Wilde's first choice for the role of Salomé, was described by the *Era* as "an alteration of the spoilt child and the *bête féroce*."⁴⁷ Even though she was seen as a particularly sensual Salomé, Maud Allan's own interpretation of Salomé was of a "naturally spiritual and innocent child" according to Amy Koritz.⁴⁸ The childish qualities of the 'heroine' on the nineteenth century stage, including Wilde's own drama, reaches its most dangerous and negative incarnation in *Salome*.

⁴⁶Heinrich Heine, *Atta Troll: A Summer Night's Dream*, Book 19, verse 29, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, transl. Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982), 459.

⁴⁷*Era*, 18 June 1892, 9.

⁴⁸Amy Koritz, "Dancing the Orient for England," 66.

The terror of childhood's amorality finds an echo in "The Birthday of the Infanta," Wilde's story about another spoilt princess. This short story, inspired by a painting by Velasquez, is set at yet another birthday party at which another alien being, this time a dwarf, is brought out for the entertainment of the spectators. The beautiful little Infanta is as coldly aware of beauty as her counterpart, Salomé, and is as oblivious to the reality of suffering she causes as Salomé. The two young *femmes fatales* are literally mankillers and the Infanta is the childhood past of Salomé. Both the dwarf and Jokanaan, who take themselves seriously, are mocked and torn to death. The repudiation of traditional ideals of female character while housed in ideal female form creates a grotesqueness the male powers find hard to comprehend or tolerate. In the case of Herod, he closes his eyes and orders Salomé's instant annihilation. Although in the biblical accounts Salomé demands the head of John the Baptist on the orders of her mother, in Wilde's version she, like the Infanta, has no need for instruction as her impulse towards the casual destruction of males comes from within. Both she and the Infanta embody the casual cruelty of the child, which relates them to the wild beast. Again we see woman as the unknown beast of the jungle, completely unpredictable and governed only by her moods, permanently poised against the familiar order of social relations.

That Jokanaan's reaction to Salomé's actually innocuous first request is so disproportionately violent attests to the fear she inspires. After all, she only asks him to continue speaking: "Speak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me." When she repeats her request, she even seems eager to submit to him, imploring him: "tell me what I must do" (20). But Jokanaan immediately assumes a sexual guilt in her because of her mother, whose sexual exploits he seems to know in intimate detail and to recite with what is surely a touch of satisfaction and even prurience. He piles the sins of the mother onto the daughter, something that gives added poignancy to her complaint that he would not look upon her. Despite the volition and individuality Wilde gives Salomé, her status has not gone unacknowledged—to Herod, Herodias and Jokanaan (who refuses even to name

her), she is first and foremost Herodias's daughter. Jokanaan not only refuses to look upon Salomé's face, he refuses to see her as an individual, seeing her only as an extension of her mother who in her turn functions only as a symbol for him—a symbol of a feminized spiritual adversary, the more fearsome because of her radiant beauty. The telling Biblical command (Luke 4:8), "Get thee behind me!" (20) makes Jokanaan's attribution of demoniality to Salomé quite clear, but at the same time Wilde hints at some deep confusion within Jokanaan's recognition of her as he repeats the ritual angelic query from John 20:15: "Whom seekest thou" (20). Guy Willoughby suggests that Salomé's lustful approaches to Jokanaan result from Jokanaan's refusal to allow her a non-sexual character. She is forced into a purely sexual language in order to be heard by him, so that her later accusation that Jokanaan took her virginity from her is not altogether unjustified. Willoughby asserts that Jokanaan's quickness to condemn Salomé "indicts him far more than it does her."⁴⁹ In the context of what Peter Raby calls Jokanaan's "exaggeratedly misogynistic reaction,"⁵⁰ the violence of Salomé's words and of her final action seem almost a logical response against the power relations that constrict her will.

The power of the social and political structure that Salomé overwhelms by her will reacts by destroying her body. The political aspects of Salomé's confrontation with her world have been noted by Jane Marcus. She interprets Salomé's desire for Jokanaan's head as a deliberate act of anger against the male writing of female character and role, instead of a purely animal and very much unnatural desire as most critics have seen it. So Salomé's "demand for John's head on a platter" becomes equated with the "door-slamming of Nora, the fury of Hedda and Tess stabbing Alex."⁵¹ Marcus thus gives Salomé's act a place among these seminal points in the history of female fictional action which paved the way for new ways of thinking about women's characters and capabilities. By viewing

⁴⁹Guy Willoughby, *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde* (London: Associated University Presses, 1993), 81.

⁵⁰Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁵¹Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), xix.

Salomé ("the aspiring woman artist") and Jokanaan ("the poet-prophet") as figures who die in order to bring about revolutionary changes in the dominant power structure, Marcus reads the exchange between Salomé and Herod as a struggle for power and thus an event invested with sexual politics. While Marcus's reading provides a powerful insight into the play's thematic and psychological processes, her claim that Salomé's challenge allusively anticipates a particular historical event which is no less than the fall of the Roman empire, allegorizes the contest without any textual evidence in support of such a correspondence. It is hard to discover on what grounds she ascribes to Wilde an intention "to juxtapose the rise of Christianity with the fall of the Roman Empire in order to write in *Salomé* a kind of Christian *Götterdämmerung*."⁵² The play's climax is undoubtedly the male authority figure's defensive action against the woman who has catastrophically disrupted the power structure over which he claims political and sexual sovereignty. The threat Salomé represents to Herod is certainly located in her femininity but it seems a stretch of logic to locate it also in history.

That threat is both explicit and insidious. Salomé's demand for Jokanaan's head establishes her rapacity but her invasion of the male sphere takes place subtly when she challenges the norm of men defining women, moulding women through words. Breaking the male monopoly of word power, she takes control of words and uses them to define others. Gagnier points out that "throughout her catalogue of the parts of Jokanaan's body, her metaphoric flights relentlessly appropriate the man."⁵³ Joseph Donohue sees that by counting the charms of his body, Salomé makes the male body an object of desire, turning the tables on the male who attempts to do the same to her.⁵⁴ Koritz recognizes that

The real dangers Salome represents for the men in this play are not those consequent on desiring a Fatal Woman (a desire indicated in the play by their gaze) but rather those posed by her threatening the invidious distinction between the object of the gaze and the disembodied voice. The exotic princess Salome is no longer only the object of sexual desire; she has demanded possession of the mouthpiece of God.⁵⁵

⁵²Marcus, 9.

⁵³Gagnier, 167.

⁵⁴Joseph Donohue, 98.

⁵⁵Amy Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance," 255.

It is to this "mouthpiece of God" that Salomé's desire is directed. Claiming him as her possession, she re-makes him into a miniature kingdom, filling him with gardens, seas, mountains, forests, mines and towers of ivory (21-22). This is the traditional rhetoric of the male description of women. That a woman has appropriated that rhetoric is a threatening sign of her transgressive power.

Through the play's process Wilde appears to acknowledge that femininity defies the knowledge project of masculine rationality and can be sensed barely, numinously, only through symbols. For the same reason, the fear that Salomé arouses in the play has to be spoken of in mythic rather than analytical terms, by finding correspondences with the cultural archetype of male fears of women, namely, a devouring monster, literally a flesh-eater. That is exactly how Salomé is seen. She desires the body of Jokanaan plainly and reaches ecstasy on tasting his blood (64-66). She is thus the archetypal source of the rapacious *femme fatale*, the "Wild Woman" abhorred by Mrs. Eliza Lynn Linton, who was not only an object of fear for conservative moralists but of terrified fascination for Decadent artists.⁵⁶ In the social context of the nineteenth century the devouring female was the independent female, gaining her strength as a "New Woman," the repository of the anxieties of both the orthodox and the avant-garde. The idea of the woman as predator was underwritten also by the nineteenth century's growing awareness of "the beast within," that is, the instinctual forces of the subconscious. Wilde himself had explored this theme in the *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) in which a beautiful exterior hid a bestial interior, while more biological treatments appeared in R. L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) and Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm* (1897).⁵⁷ In these novels, humanity and bestiality are constantly in conflict even as one merges with the other, and a beast often lies beneath a normal, civilized and often-beautiful exterior. Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll creates a drug specifically to recognize the bestial creature

⁵⁶As shown by Praz in *The Romantic Agony*, Ch. 1, 4 and 5.

⁵⁷R.L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde With Other Fables* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901); Bram Stoker, *The Lair of the White Worm* (London: Arrow, 1911).

he senses lurking inside himself and to separate it from his surface, human persona. Wells plays on the discord between surface and inner identities as he shows a scientist's attempt to humanize animals. Although Wells seems to reverse the usual perception of the beast within the man by making his scientist try surgically to bring out the human within every beast, he concludes by showing the failure of that idea. The correlation between femininity and bestiality is once again affirmed when the "beast folk" are shown to revert to their animal nature, for it is a regression in which the females lead the way: the pioneers in this, I noticed with some surprise, were all females."⁵⁸ Stoker's novel uncovers the beast within a woman, a frightening creature because she belies the spirituality and gentleness attributed to Woman in the patriarchal imagination. Stoker shows us that his beautiful female protagonist is a monster and her grand mansion a slimy and hellish pit into which she is planning to drag and devour men who love her. In the same way, underneath the goddess-like exterior of Salomé lies a creature that prefers "the head of a man that is cut from his body" to fabulous jewels even though it is "ill to look upon."⁵⁹ As an idea of beauty she may never be understood, but as a monster she stands in plain sight.

This idea of the woman as monster is an obvious and much-documented metaphor for the male fear of female sexuality. The metaphor of the devouring female is deeply rooted in folklore and frequently recycled in literature, notable examples being Keats's serpent bride in *Lamia* and Coleridge's monster-woman in *Christabel*. Chris Snodgrass recognizes the continuity of the metaphor in Arthur Symons's "excoriation of the devouring woman"⁶⁰ in Symons's response to the Beardsley illustrations for *Salome*. In a parallel vein of critical response, symbols of destructive femininity have attracted attention, especially Jokanaan's severed head, which has invited psychological analogies to castration, such as those proposed by Christopher Nassaar, Gail Finney and Melinda Knox.⁶¹ Salomé takes over

⁵⁸H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau: A Variorum Text*, ed. Robert M. Philmus (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 81.

⁵⁹*Salome*, 56.

⁶⁰Chris Snodgrass, "Decadent Mythmaking: Arthur Symons on Aubrey Beardsley and Salome," *Victorian Poetry* 28: 3-4 (Autumn-Winter 1990), 91.

⁶¹Christopher Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven:

the myth of Medusa and makes it a story where the Gorgon triumphs. To look at her is to invite death and her own gaze at a man is death-dealing. The usual controlling of a woman by a man's gaze has been reversed to the extent, in Finney's view, that Salomé overturns gender relations, taking the role of Perseus herself and projecting the Medusa role onto Jokanaan. Finney uses Beardsley's drawings of Salomé's relationship with Jokanaan's severed head as evidence; in *The Dancer's Reward*, and especially *The Climax*, the head has particularly snaky locks.⁶²

That Salomé is held in fear is clear from the beginning of the play in the Page's constant warnings to Narraboth. That it is a fear of her sexual magnetism is equally evident in Narraboth's suicidal enslavement and proven by Herod's infatuation. Because this power that drives the action is not amenable to rational analysis, the play leads up to the only display of it possible in the metaphoric event of Salomé's dance of the seven veils. Leaving it undescribed was an essential artistic decision on Wilde's part, for it is by triggering the spectator's own interpretation of it that the dance affirms Salomé as a sexual imaginary rather than a sexual object. The persistent dissatisfaction of viewers and critics with the interpretation of the dance in performance amply illustrates the need to recognize that the dance functions symbolically rather than physically.

From the inception of *Salome* as a performance the dance was identified as one of the two central events of the play, the other being Salomé's kissing of Jokanaan's severed head. It was to be Bernhardt's magical creation but the ban on the play of course put an end to the plan. Wilde never saw Salomé's dance and was unable to advise those who performed it. In Aurélien Lugné Poë's 1896 production in Paris, Lina Munte's dance failed to tap into its power, which must come from its ability to make its audience

Yale University Press, 1974); Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism and European Theatre at the Turn of the Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Melinda Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Joseph Donohue gives a short history of legends of severed heads in his article on *Salome* in *Modern Drama*. In *Sexual Anarchy* (New York: Viking, 1990, 180-81), Elaine Showalter points out that hysteria and decapitation were remarkably frequent in fin-de-siècle writings on sexuality.

⁶²Finney, 70, 77.

uncomfortable, not to excite by its prurience. That it could indeed be disquieting was proved by a later performance, one at the Metropolitan Opera's production of Strauss's opera in January 1903. The audience was apparently enjoying the performance until the moment of the dance which, from the description in the *New York Times*'s review, seems to have been one of its rare, effective executions:

It was the dance that women turn away from and many of the women in the Metropolitan Opera House last night turned away from it. Very few men in the audience seemed comfortable. They twisted in their chairs, and before it was over there were numbers of them who decided to go to the corridors and smoke.⁶³

At the Bijou Theatre the dance was performed by Letitia Darragh whom Max Beerbohm described as more terrified of losing a reputation for respectability than of creating an artistically inferior and unconvincing Salomé:

The actress at the Bijou Theatre was just a young lady—a clever young lady, a conscientious and promising young lady . . . to think that a young English lady in the twentieth century could have been so badly brought up as to behave in so outrageous a manner! . . . There was only one thing for us to do; to strike them both off our visiting lists.⁶⁴

Beerbohm's complaint that her dance was too modern and "rather occidental,"⁶⁵ indicates the growing orientalist expectations of fin-de-siècle audiences. A revealing comment made by Charles Ricketts about Darragh's performance was that it was "begun too soon, over too soon,"⁶⁶ suggesting the actress's anxiety to distance herself from the innate sexuality of the dance. Darragh set the trend for respectable actresses who followed her but it was reversed by the dancer Maud Allan's erotic portrayal of Salomé in Europe from 1906 onwards and more so in London from 1908 in *The Vision of Salome*, a hugely popular dance based on Wilde's play which incorporated both the dance and the kissing of the severed head.⁶⁷ Beerbohm was still not satisfied, mocking Allan's performance as trivial:

⁶³*New York Times*, 23 January 1907.

⁶⁴Max Beerbohm, *Saturday Review* 13 May 1905.

⁶⁵Max Beerbohm, "Salome," *Saturday Review*, 16 June 1906, in *Last Theatres* (New York: Taplinger, 1970), 251.

⁶⁶Charles Ricketts, *Self Portrait...from the Letters and Journals*, T. Sturge Lewis, coll and comp., Cecil Lewis, ed., (London: Peter Davies, 1939), 135.

⁶⁷She was later to perform in J.T. Grein's production of Wilde's play at the Royal Court in 1918, which was seized by an MP, Noel Pemberton-Billing, as an illustration of a German plot to corrupt Britain and started his associate Captain Harold Spencer's crusade against her as the high priestess of the "Cult of the

[Allan] performs around [the head] a mild quasi-Oriental dance, overcomes her repugnance, hears someone coming, puts the head behind her, pops it back in the cistern, dances again, and finally repeats the swoon she did in 'Valise Caprice'.⁶⁸

Christopher St. John was similarly dissatisfied and complained in her review that Allan was a "very earnest young lady with a sincere conviction of her mission" who "dances like a revivalist preacher."⁶⁹

That the dance in performance has never satisfied everybody attests to the need for realizing it imaginatively, as a metaphor, rather than physically.⁷⁰ Audiences and reviewers through the play's performance history have been either bored or shocked by the dance. Performances seem to have alternated between Darragh's boringly respectable dance in 1906 to Agnes Bernelle's lushly sensuous performance in 1954.⁷¹ No performance could match the imaginative rather than physical eroticism achieved by descriptions of the dance in a number of literary treatments of the legend. Perhaps the most famous was in Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1884 novel, *À Rebours*, in which the hero, Des Esseintes, muses on Moreau's portrayal:

With a withdrawn, solemn, almost august expression on her face, she begins the lascivious dance which is to rouse the aged Herod's dormant senses; her breasts rise and fall, and nipples hardening at the touch of her whirling necklaces; the strings of diamonds glitter against her moist flesh; her bracelets, her belts, her rings all spit out fiery sparks . . . the jewelled cuirass . . . seems to be ablaze with little snakes of fire, swarming over the mat flesh, over the tea-rose skin, like gorgeous insects with dazzling shards.⁷²

It is easy to see the difficulty, if not impossibility of realizing such a vision. However, even with the imperfections of most performances, the idea of the dance kept its fascination for many spectators. The performance by Allan that disappointed Beerbohm seemed to other reviewers sensually charged:

Clitoris," i.e., as an "inverted" or lesbian woman; see Tydeman and Price, 80-82.

⁶⁸Max Beerbohm, "At the Palace Theatre," *The Saturday Review*, 4 July 1908, 11.

⁶⁹Christopher St. John, "All We Like Sheep," *The Academy* 2 May 1908, 736, quoted by Koritz, "Dancing the Orient for England," 74.

⁷⁰As evidently intended by Wilde who held that "the actable value of a play has nothing whatsoever to do with its value as a work of art" (*Letters*, 310).

⁷¹Tydeman and Price, (Darragh) 55-6; (Bernelle) 97-8.

⁷²Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À Rebours]*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 64.

Salome dances as one fascinated, slowly advancing towards the head and swiftly receding from it, gradually drawing nearer and nearer, then falling upon hands and knees and gloating, half savagely, half amorously, over it, then pouncing upon it like a hawk upon its prey. Thereafter she dances fear, a quivering, shuddering dance, and finally collapses, a huddled—but still graceful, still beautiful—mass.⁷³

This description puts the dance in the Huysmans tradition, to the evident delight of Alfred Butt, manager of the Palace Theatre where Allan performed. His publicity pamphlet crudely imitated Huysmans to whet the expectations of patrons:

The desire that flames from her eyes and bursts in hot gusts from her scarlet mouth infect[s] the very air with the madness of passion. Swaying like a white witch, with yearning arms and hands that plead, Maud Allan is such a delicious embodiment of lust that she might win forgiveness for the sins for such wonderful flesh. As Herod catches fire, so Salome dances even as a Bacchante, twisting her body like a silver snake ready for its prey, panting with hot passion, the fire of her eyes scorching like a living furnace.⁷⁴

Allan's recent biographer Felix Cherniavsky reports that Allan herself resisted the exclusively sexualized reading of the dance though with little success.⁷⁵ The Russian actress Ida Rubinstein also attempted the role of Salomé but the production designed by Leon Bakst in 1908 in St. Petersburg was banned not only because of what was seen as a blasphemous treatment of a biblical story but because of rumours of a nude finale to the dance. She did present a successful performance in Paris in 1912, in which the dance was choreographed in association with Diaghilev. Her appearance was startlingly close to that of Bernhardt and her performance might have been close to that of Bernhardt. Her "discreet semitic profile, her fabulous almond-shaped eyes and long boyish figure" projected a "seductive oriental image" that appealed to Bakst, whose production was very much in the orientalist tradition.⁷⁶ His designs for the play show that he favoured the "Byzantine" interpretation of the play, although there is a great range within that classification, from an Egyptian-looking huntsman to a Salomé who sometimes looks like a gypsy and sometimes like a Turkish belly-dancer. Another Russian actress, Alla Nazimova, played the role in her 1922 film, in which the dance was again exoticized, even

⁷³"The Drama: The New Dancer," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25 March 1908, 102.

⁷⁴Quoted in "'Maud Allan,' at the Palace," *Truth*, 18 March 1908, 701-702.

⁷⁵Felix Cherniavsky, *The Salome Dancer* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), ch. 5.

⁷⁶Charles Spencer, *Leon Bakst* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 127.

though the production itself was imaginative in its attempt to translate Beardsley's drawings into a three-dimensional form. The most effective interpretations of Salomé's dance seem to have been those that have distanced themselves from conventional orientalizing and sexualization. Lindsay Kemp's 1977 performance stands out as one of the most extraordinary and specially effective, not the least because he was a "middle-aged, balding" man playing an ethereally beautiful young girl. Katharine Worth believes that his performance had the "strength of the vision of Salome in himself" in which he "abandons all theatrical aids,"⁷⁷ creating a vision that reaches beyond the orientalist stereotype within which interpretations of the Dance of the Seven Veils are usually trapped. In Steven Berkoff's 1993 *Salome*, the actress who played Salomé did nothing more imaginative than a strip-tease, but it was a strip-tease done entirely in mime and in slow motion, elevating the dance from the merely vulgar.

The disquiet that the dance creates is followed by the active revulsion at Salomé's play with Jokanaan's severed head, climaxing with the kiss. Like the dance, the kiss too is left unexhibited, as Koritz reminds us, taking place in the darkness before the final, fatal moonbeam picks her out.⁷⁸ Concealment thus becomes an instrument of terror. The kiss has captured the imagination and often the disgust of audiences. Edward Pigott, the Censor who banned the play in 1893, graphically imagined the kiss in performance, as he stated in a letter written to Ponsonby, and it was one of the major factors he took into account when banning the play, failing to realize that the horror of it rises from the audience's compulsion to imagine it. As the play passes from the dance to the kiss, Wilde repeats his technique of locating the kiss in his audience's imagination rather than their sight. The difference, though, is that the dance is wordless but seen while the kiss is invisible but graphically expressed in words. The detailing of it has spawned "fantastic extensions of the play's text in the minds of readers."⁷⁹ An analogy can be drawn with A.B. Walkley's reaction to the

⁷⁷Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 67.

⁷⁸Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance", 255.

⁷⁹Koritz, "Exotic Woman and the Transcendent Dance," 255.

offstage infanticide in Robins and Bells' *Alan's Wife*: although the act was not actually shown on stage, its power was enough to convince the critic that he had seen it with his own eyes.⁸⁰ An act of infanticide or necrophilia is apparently powerful enough to disorient the viewer into seeing or hearing what is not there. But for all its explicitness the description is highly selective, focussing specifically on the biting and the blood, which at once identifies Salomé as the devourer of Jokanaan's body. Keeping the kiss hidden from sight but opening it to words transforms it to a horror story. In passing from the dance to the kiss the play thus moves from the erotic to the horrific, giving free rein to the demon woman in the audience's imagination. The only response can be flight, as Herod realizes, followed by annihilation of the demon.

As an extreme representation of male fears of women, Salomé is an obvious target for erasure. But there is little fundamental difference between her fate and the rejection or recasting that less overtly demonized exemplars of female transgression undergo elsewhere in the cultural context of the play, including Wilde's own plays. The adventuress or bad woman on the British (and French) stage was either exiled (to a convent, an anonymous existence doing good works, or the Continent) or killed (by a lingering illness or suicide). In novels of the time, ranging from *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of D'Urbervilles*, to *Dracula* and *She*, the independent woman was destroyed, in body, spirit, or both, because either the author was acting out a revenge fantasy, or was too cynical about his society to believe she had any realistic hope of survival. Linda Gertner Zatlin⁸¹ believes Herod's motive in ordering his soldiers to crush Salomé to death is more complex than simply the "burst of revulsion" that Elliot Gilbert⁸² sees in Herod. She believes it is an attempt by Herod to "restore patriarchal order." Rebecca Stott has noticed a common image in the

⁸⁰Catherine Wiley, "Staging Infanticide: The Refusal of Representation in Elizabeth Robins's *Alan's Wife*", *Theatre Journal*, 42:4 (December 1990), 432-446.

⁸¹Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 95.

⁸²Gilbert, 154.

final destruction of the evil woman.⁸³ It is an image of encirclement, where the woman lies trapped at the centre of a circle of hostile men, almost as a sacrificial object, transformed from a figurative to a literal scapegoat of male anxiety. From being frighteningly active, she becomes safely passive. Salomé has to die as Lucy Westenra has to in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Only the drastic measure of a ritualized, male-activated death can bring about the rebirth of purity. That purity is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal order since the "pure woman" is part of the foundation of patriarchal power. Munich believes that the perfect kind of virgin for Wilde is a dead one, on the strength of his eulogy to his sister, Isola, in childhood.⁸⁴ Wilde eulogizes the inhuman virginity required by the Victorian ideal of the perfect and good woman in "Requiescat"; his interest in this figure reaches all areas of his work. Salomé's death is necessary to the survival of Herod who fears that he has let loose a power he cannot control and thus must destroy. Because of her scapegoat role, it is also necessary for the death to be public, so that presumably those who will benefit from her expulsion can be reassured of the re-establishment of order as well as satisfied of the existence of justice.

But Wilde shows there can be neither justice nor order in a world where standards are ambiguous and identities undefined. In the hands of rulers such as Herod, laws are prostituted to appetite—for power, for wealth, for sex—and civil society reduced to a Hobbesian state of nature, specially because Herod's Roman masters seem equally corrupt. The ironist may well ask, what might one expect the law of the jungle to produce but wild beasts? Since the ironist also recognizes the beauty of the beast, the perception of identities loses the customary guidelines of ethics and even psychology. We have noted how Salomé is at once many things to many people—child, goddess, whore and beast—though always and above all a woman. This fluidity actually increases with her rise in moral deviance in the eye of the beholder both inside and outside the play. Imagining women in this

⁸³Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 196.

⁸⁴Munich, p.144.

framework is guided by what Dollimore sees as the key concepts of Wilde's aesthetic: "protean and shifting."⁸⁵ The action of *Salome* revolves around change, which leads to reversals. The use of the moon, the most changeable of natural forces, as the primary linking motif, underscores this theme. Even the apparent solidity of social titles turns out to be undependable. Salomé begins and ends with her full title, "Daughter of Herodias and Princess of Judea," but its meaning changes during the course of the play as our view of her changes. Salomé passes from "pale young girl" to "passionate woman" to "demonic destroying angel"⁸⁶ bathed in the blood-red light of the final phase of the moon. She turns from virgin into what Kate Millett has called a "rapist."⁸⁷ From being an innocent young girl, a potential victim of males, she becomes a maddened, lustful woman, a destroyer of males. From being the subject of male gaze at the beginning, she becomes an objectifier, transforming Jokanaan into a mere body part, an object. Like most people, she has multiple roles, as a daughter, a step-daughter, a princess, and inexperienced young virgin, a skillful dancer, a spoilt little rich girl, a desired object, a necrophiliac, a murderess. These many roles cross social, familial, internal border; in this she is no different from any human being. The only roles she consciously chooses are those that involve her actions and abilities—she is a skillful dancer and a murderess. The cognitive dissonance between the artistic, creative and pleasure-giving activity of dancing, and the horrific and destructive act of murder is the paradox that unifies beauty and evil in the icon never fully understood, the demon woman Salomé. In a patriarchal world there is a particular model of acceptable women, in which there is no room for the violence allowed to men (though perhaps only to the very lowest of them). By choosing violence as her art of self-expression, Salomé sets herself beyond the reach of rational images of the world.

Not only the laws but the myths of the civilized world proscribe the association of

⁸⁵Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 10.

⁸⁶Martin Meisel, "The World, the Flesh and Oscar Wilde: Bodily Politics in *Salome* and *Dorian Gray*" *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 16:2 (1992), 123.

⁸⁷Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 152.

violence with the feminine persona. But the society of *Salome* has toppled beyond the edge of an orderly civilization and has decayed into anarchy where neither family nor political relations survive the passion of the moment. It is a world where the claws of the bad woman are no longer sheathed in expensive gloves. At Herod's court the beast within is not far from the surface and its claws draw real blood, unlike the social and psychological wounds inflicted on people in British upper-class society. In the ballrooms of the Windermers and the Chilterns all battles are token and have token results, a phenomenon that is mocked in *The Importance of Being Earnest* with the battle of the tea ceremony. Punishments are social rather than physical. In the world of *Salome*, mankind has degenerated into a more primal, bestial state where it picks up arms again, and its battles are now understood physically. The action planned by Lady Windermere of hitting another woman with her fan is not only never carried through but is, in perspective, the most insignificant of physical attacks. It is the measure of the kind of civilization in which these characters (and their audiences) live that this action, like the action that Mrs. Arbuthnot actually carries through (of slapping Lord Illingworth), is reacted to with the utmost horror. The most violent of the confrontations between good and evil in the world of the society plays takes place between Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring, where he physically traps her with his hands (and her stolen bracelet), and where the veneer of civilization gets rubbed off her. Nonetheless, these episodes show that violence, not only of motive but of action, is implicit in the negotiations in the social world. In the anarchic world of *Salome* violence is the coin for these negotiations which start from as well as lead to treachery, murder and tyranny. Thus, a line of affinity connects the humour of the society plays with the pervasive dread in *Salome*. Common to them is the figure of the woman who refuses to honour the roles set out for her by her world and it is through her effort to mold the world to her will that anarchy is unleashed. On the one hand, Wilde mocks the hidebound world that imposes false fronts upon women; on the other, he dreads the chaos that he senses emanating from women's refusal to live within the moral, emotional and social structures

of masculine design. This ambivalence, a sign of Wilde's changeable aesthetic, is maintained in *Salome* on a more fundamental level of sensibility than in the society plays. There, women transgress against the rules of social conduct; in *Salome* a demonic woman breaks the limits of human identity itself.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: Ambivalence and After

The violent ecstasy of *Salome* marks a point for stopping to ponder over what Wilde says about women. From Mario Praz to Kate Millett cultural historians of the western literary discourse on women have used *Salome* as a milestone in the construction of men's presumed fear of women's sexual rapacity.¹ Designating *Salome* as a major text in that tradition has been undoubtedly facilitated by the exposure of Wilde's homosexuality and the frequent assumption of that sexual orientation as deviance, which may lend too strong a biographical tint to critical evaluation. Admittedly, if we go primarily by the textual facts of the case, there can be no question that Wilde's plays can be legitimately taken—as they are taken here—to comprise a sustained statement on women. Within that corpus *Salome* may be read as a particular response to femininity that is implicit but never made explicit in the other plays. This response is a fear of women that is met by a violent expulsion of the female, returning the world to masculine control. But it is difficult to concede that *Salome* is clear proof of Wilde's psychotic revulsion to women, a revulsion of the kind attributed, for instance, to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) by Elaine Showalter.² The difference between fear and revulsion is perhaps a difference only in degree but it is wide enough to require a qualitative leap, which may not be warranted by the text. In short, the present study argues that Wilde has a serious apprehension about women's power to bend men to their will and to overturn the order of social and personal relationships as prescribed by the dominant male ideologies of stability and gender, but that this apprehension cannot be termed outright hatred. On the contrary, this study notes how systematically Wilde undercuts the claims of these ideologies to truth and justice and valorizes women's self-constructed and autonomous identities.

¹Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; rev. ed. London: Collins/Fontana, 1960), 332-37; Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 152-55.

²Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* (New York: Viking, 1990), 181.

The sexualized violence of *Salome* that has drawn so much comment is thus best seen as only one in a series of readings of women proposed by Wilde in his plays, none of which is necessarily pressed upon the spectator as the final truth about the male reading of women, far less the final truth about women. Since *Salome* falls midway within the chronology of the plays, and since it was both preceded and followed by plays lacking in the intensity of the feeling it generates about the destructive potential of women's nature, no evolutionary thesis about Wilde's conception of women can be supported. If there is no ground to believe that Wilde progresses from apprehensions about women in the society plays to a terrified vision of the castrating, cannibalistic female in *Salome*, then misogyny must be only one of the interpretations to which the critic can be allowed an option. Reduced thus to an optional rather than *the* dominant perception, misogyny is as open to irony as any other categorical statement about women. That is to say, the excesses of *Salome* may well be yet another cultural construction, like the received images of the fallen woman or the adventuress, to which Wilde invites his audience's critical disbelief, reflection rather than subscription, and makes ambivalence a tool of positive scepticism and perhaps even discovery.

Nothing demonstrates Wilde's systematic scepticism in the plays better than the use to which he puts the conventions of nineteenth century theatre. In discussing the plays we have noted how he takes from tradition common structural conventions and character types. The innocent young heroine, the loving husband with a guilty secret, the faithful friend, the fallen woman—all these are hackneyed products of tradition, especially as set within the age-old narrative patterns of romantic melodrama. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, the two plays that deal most insistently with woman's role as wife, Wilde appears to join the conventional celebration of sexual innocence, chastity, and devotion to the husband as women's primary virtues. *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* illustrate the dedication of mothers to their children, while romantic love and the power of social form are asserted in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

But this conformity to narrative and ethical formulas is reversed so consistently by Wilde that his exposure of their hollowness continues to form the basis of Wilde studies, especially in respect of the representation and validation of women's roles and nature. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* we see how the simple outlines of conventional figures of virtue and vice are blurred by the discovery that not only may the typical fallen woman turn out to be a self-sacrificing good woman but be so without giving up her life of the sexual exploitation of men. In *A Woman of No Importance* the icon of female virtue, the mother, proves to be self-sacrificing indeed but one who at the same time sacrifices her child to her own ego. In *An Ideal Husband* the very qualities that make a woman an example of wifely virtue are those that illustrate her pride rather than humility. This interplay between observance of custom and their exposure is itself part of the dramatic action in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one sign of which is the entrenchment of paradox as the tool of perceptual inversion.

In these examples of the undercutting of received wisdom and theatrical formulas we see how Wilde's irony leads to ambivalence rather than to the negative certitude of satire. Wilde sets up conventional images and beliefs simply to knock them down but this in itself does not promote a contrary view. His subject is society and his approach to it one of sustained subversion of conventional morality, as Sos Eltis has argued.³ But closer examination suggests that in the plays a subtler negotiation is going on between author, subject and audience than that of a Jonsonian holding up of a mirror to society. Instead of the classical satirist's technique of finding the truth by dissecting the world, Wilde is either questioning the viability of any representation whatever of the world as the truth, or making it each spectator's responsibility to designate as truth whichever representation she or he will. This open-ended process makes its author's stand ambivalent, not partisan.

The proposition that Wilde exposes the nature of the world but withholds judgment would bear a closer look. Norbert Kohl has called Wilde a "conformist rebel" on the

³Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

ground that Wilde's rebellion takes place within a framework of social organization and values accepted by him.⁴ Kohl argues that the conflict between tradition and individuality remains unresolved in Wilde, who undertakes a re-examination of the social ethos without, however, rejecting wholesale the framework of the world. It is as a critic rather than a revolutionary that Wilde appears to Kohl. The plays do indeed bear evidence of conformism. A striking example is the notorious harangue to which Lord Goring subjects Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, centred on the theme, "A man's life is of more value than a woman's" (Act IV, 228). This assertion constitutes the core of Goring's argument that Lady Chiltern should subordinate her moral principles to her husband's immoral practices and amazingly enough, she does come round to that point of view. Since this conversion saves the stable order of relationships in the Chiltern world and even the political status quo of England (and therefore of the empire on which the sun did not dare to set), the play seems to validate a paternalist message. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* again, the preservation of the family, the sanctity of married love and the chaste woman's childlike innocence emerge as the dominant ideals. By driving the plot towards the triumph of characters who represent these values, Wilde seems to lend credibility to at least some of the moral assumptions in which traditional constructions of the world lie rooted. At the very least, love, self-sacrifice and women's role are affirmed as fundamental moral goods and the cementing force of society. These are traditional values that the plays reiterate. Thereby they follow the ideological pattern of the traditional sentimental comedy in which we find an eventual assent to the rules of relationships that constitute the social contract between men and women. Although constancy and mutuality seem fragile, they do survive as irreducible principles of gender co-existence.

Seen in this light, Wilde might be said to be taking a position after all instead of withholding judgment. What is more, his judgment seems to fall in line with the power relationships that prevail at the historical moment in which he and his works are located.

⁴Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of A Conformist Rebel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Yet this too is open to question. Can one take the Goring thesis seriously as a message valorized in *An Ideal Husband*? Or Mrs. Erlynne's paean to domesticity in Act Three of *Lady Windermere's Fan*? Especially against the accelerating resistance of Wilde's historical period to the idea of women's essential inferiority, or to the ideal of marriage as women's highest end in life, the assertion of these ideas in a satirist's rendering of human relationships seems baffling.⁵ If, as we have noted in some detail in the previous chapters, Wilde resists the typecasting of human beings or of conceiving them as essentialized identities, then the subscription of the plays to socially authorized roles and duties seems at odds with the subversive practice undertaken in them.

This incompatibility could be explained by attributing to Wilde a helpless vacillation between conformity and subversion, but that is not the only explanation nor, in light of the present study, the most persuasive. An explanation more consistent with his constantly ironic exposure of the world is that the re-assertion of conventional ideals is so excessive that it amounts to a parody of conformity. Depicting an authoritarian preaching that ignores alternatives or brushes aside dissent and insinuates or enforces obedience may in itself be a subversive strategy. For example, Goring's voluble advocacy of male supremacy is so extreme and so demonstrably discredited in his own time that its effect can only be that of drawing attention to its absurdity rather than validity.⁶ Such vehement advocacy of orthodoxy on the part of a man who holds himself aloof from common judgment makes his views highly suspect. His declaration is a tactical move rather than a principled one, especially because his analysis of women, as Eltis notes, runs counter to Sir Robert Chiltern's.⁷ It is also compromised in logic because he shifts the ground of debate from moral to practical concerns, bypassing her charges entirely. Therefore, what the play tells

⁵As a measure of the discomfort Goring's advice to Lady Chiltern may cause to the modern viewer one may cite two recent North American productions of *An Ideal Husband* (Seattle Repertory Theatre, April 1998, and the Playhouse, Vancouver, September 1998), which dropped the offending lines altogether.

⁶As Millicent Garrett Fawcett noted, even an opponent to women's suffrage such as Frederic Harrison wholeheartedly repudiated "the brutal egoism of past ages . . . which classes women as the inferiors of men" (*Fortnightly Review* ns 50, November 1891), 673.

⁷Eltis, 164.

us is not that women's inferiority to men is the inevitable inference to be drawn from the play's action; rather, it says that it has to be considered warily as a partisan claim to be evaluated against alternative claims about gender relations. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* the sentimental reunion between husband and wife does not necessarily validate marriage and domesticity as the axes of stable life because their proponent herself, Mrs. Erlynne, has already ironically shown that ideals of virtue are made-up fashions, the façade rather than the substance of identity, when she remarks in the fourth act that an innocent expression was merely a matter of fashion. To take the most extreme case, the literal crushing of Salomé under the shields of soldiers on Herod's orders no doubt reasserts the authority of the established power structure but proves only the rule of brute force, not moral right. Herod, who has had his brother strangled and lusts after his stepdaughter, has as little moral credibility as Salomé. On putting the demon woman and the corrupt ruler side by side we realize that the whole issue of morality has been written out of the play, understandably, because the play explores the experience of beauty and passion, not moral preferences. Even beauty and passion are not authorially established, because the symbolic treatment of the concepts provides the optics of recognition rather than a finished, authorized vision. Once again, the spectator is furnished with the means, not the end of enquiry.

These examples show how consistently Wilde builds a contrary perception precisely in the middle of an apparent inference. Because both that inference and its contradiction are simultaneously derived from the play's process, they stand as choices of equal credibility. That this is a conscious strategy on Wilde's part is clear from his declaration that "A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true."⁸ If the world considers that women can be defined only in their relationship to men, the proposition does not cancel out the playwright's discovery that women can construct themselves independently of men. Granting "truth" simultaneously to opposites distances the viewer from both and thereby

⁸"The Truth of Masks," *Intentions and The Soul of Man* (London: Methuen, 1908), 269.

provides a clearer perspective to both. It is useful to bear in mind that looking at experience from multiple perspectives is part of the Victorian aesthetic, of which a celebrated example is Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69); as Michael Gillespie notes, "the multiplicity inherent in Wilde's canon" emerged from the "pluralistic nature of the cultural context" of the plays.⁹ Wilde himself plays with the idea of truth as a multiplicity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ambivalence is clearly not a mark of uncertainty but an instrument of free enquiry especially in the male project to understand women, in which ambivalence may be the only possible position from which to look across the gender divide.

We must note, however, that as a public discourse Wilde's subversive theatre deals with public constructions of women that bind them to rules and expectations designed to serve male interests. That is why, looking at women's transgressions leads to questioning the validity of the rules they transgress. The action of the plays shows a consistent pattern of progressing towards such questioning: Wilde creates female characters following the conventional types available on the Victorian stage and proceeds to show how women disrupt social order, transgressing the roles and boundaries set for women by society, religion and literature. They march through male domains, appropriating male authority as in the case of Lady Chiltern or, worse, erasing the male identity by enslavement to their own will. This second type of invasion of masculine autonomy is particularly interesting as it spans widely differing emotional terrains, from the sexual wilderness of *Salome* to Mrs. Arbuthnot's jealously guarded secret garden in *A Woman of No Importance* and the carnival world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The threat to male independence is constant though its forms vary. If in *Salome* the transgressive woman literally consumes masculinity to extinction, in *A Woman of No Importance* Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester reduce Gerald's personality to a cipher, and in *The Importance of Being Earnest* women force men's personal and social profiles, including the contested name 'Ernest,' to fit female whim.

⁹Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida, 1997), 17.

Traditional gender roles are thus reversed as in every play the action is moved by women's initiative, men merely reacting to the demands made upon them. Each play seems to be moving towards the reinvention of the world under female authority, creating a crisis for the patriarchal world order and turning gender relations into gender conflict. In this scene of generic gender opposition, the character and motive of the individual transgressor become irrelevant. The noblest motive of the most idealistic woman proves to be just as threatening to men as the greed—financial or sexual—of the most selfish and corrupt woman. In both *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* the security of men's lives is shaken as much by the good women as by the fallen.

In short, women good or bad mean trouble. Put thus, this proposition might seem again to be an ironic display of the narrow-minded masculine fear of losing ascendancy, especially as it is followed by male countermeasures in the form either of manipulation or force. Lady Chiltern is persuaded by invocations of unverifiable claims of male superiority to relinquish her idealistic overreaching and return to her secondary status. Salomé is killed. Because the situation is one of contesting social groups jockeying for advantage, the claims of both groups and the moral values underpinning them are held up to examination for the spectator's judgment. Ordinarily, irony creates an alternate vision and places it above conventional wisdom. In Wilde's plays that alternative is not urged upon the spectator but left as an open choice. For instance, a case could be made for the paternalist position of Goring, Windermere and Illingworth, and even for Herod's brutal reclamation of authority. On the other hand, the same plays build support for women's transgression of their submissive roles in resistance to male double-dealing and expediency. The spectator is left free to judge whichever position seems the most just, or even to steer between them to some other inference, for Wilde's irony does not promote partisanship but creates ambivalence as a mode of critical independence. Ultimately, it is as a tool of learning rather than social engineering that ambivalence functions in Wilde's plays.

While the context for ambivalence remains social, it is not the only frame within which Wilde's response to women in the plays may be captured. Women's attempt to wield authority in the world of male power is an overt threat countered by social ideology or physical force. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* the young heroine is disciplined by asserting the sovereignty of motherhood. In *An Ideal Husband*, one transgressive woman, Mrs. Cheveley, is defeated by force and blackmail, while the other, Lady Chiltern, is brought under control by ideological manipulation. The challenge from these women is easily met because they seek to dominate men in matters of social action. Besides, as argued above, perhaps they should. That possibility should not be unsettling to the cultivated mind. But the erasure of masculinity itself will. It is a contingency not to be ignored when one begins to look for the roots of women's constant urge towards transgressing social boundaries, roots reaching far below the surface of social existence where they are formed by some inalienable conditions of character, not by social forces. Particularly in the plays in which women emerge as the winners, the apprehension seems real, for they win despite the limitations society places upon them and therefore they must be presumed to possess some strength that is their own, not one they draw from the world. With neither wealth nor social eminence to back her, Mrs. Arbuthnot defies the immense power of Lord Illingworth and remakes the world in her own image, locks her son in it and passes the key on to her daughter-in-law, confirming female hegemony as it were in perpetuity. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* it is again the will of women to which men bend, not to their machinations. Indeed, as we see in *An Ideal Husband*, women's machinations always fail. We may recall that Salomé uses no subterfuge but plainly states what she wants. Where women succeed they do so because of an inner strength which is glimpsed but not understood by men.

The plays recognize with varying clarity that women's will exerts an irresistible power that may hold men in thrall. That power is not one granted by society but is an attribute of femininity itself and beyond the control of social apparatuses such as notions of

duty or worth. Social transgressions are merely the surface eruptions of this deep feminine need to dominate. Women's attempts to overthrow restrictions or to seize the initiative in decision-making can be understood as matters of worldly advantage, in essence rational issues and therefore manageable by rational processes. But the plays suggest that women possess a deeper will to power that is not open to reason. That is why in the plays men's standard complaint is that women are unreasonable, unpractical, unrealistic. Lord Illingworth insists in Act Two that Mrs. Arbuthnot is sentimental and lacks common sense, refusing to validate her emotional impulses. But that he senses in her a force greater than rational motivation and fears it becomes evident in his flippant but constant declaration to Gerald in Act Three that women wield the worst tyranny the world has ever known. Under Jack Worthing's apprehensiveness about Lady Bracknell's overbearing social authority lies a fear of being petrified by the woman as Gorgon. It is the extreme of this feminine power that is represented in *Salome*. That no attempt is made to explain it is an acknowledgment that it is beyond the scope of reason. Against this dark, secret force coiled within the female heart the plays pose the controlling power of male reason. If the material expression of male rationality is social organization, that of the feminine will is its precise opposite, chaos in the order of social life. But underneath this external, social and material opposition runs women's continual urge to assimilate men's will into their own, wiping out the masculine identity as an autonomy. This potential tyranny is the more disturbing because, as Illingworth acknowledges, men find they cannot live without it nor bring it under the purview of reason. In short, in forming his conception of women Wilde follows the traditional romantic trope of La Belle Dame Sans Merci just as his near-contemporaries, the Pre-Raphaelites did, although the idea of man's inexplicable deference to woman is of much older vintage, as witness the confession of Milton's Adam that he was "only weak/Against the charm of beauty's powerful glance" even though he knew that Eve was his inferior "in the prime end/Of nature."¹⁰

¹⁰*Paradise Lost*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957), bk. viii, 532-41.

What this power of women may be is impossible to infer from the plays. *Salome* shows and *A Woman of No Importance* hints that it may be sexual, but no textual support for this explanation exists in the other plays unless one were to adopt the vulgar Freudianism of attributing every human event to sexuality. Were we to allow such imprecise speculations, we might as well align Wilde with the feminizing of power itself as in eastern mysticism. Returning to the more verifiable experience of the theatre we may more profitably note that Wilde's constant perception of women's power is of central strategic importance as an indispensable part of his representation of men, women and their world. Put simply, Wilde could not tell his stories about women if he did not hang the crucial moments of the action on the demands women make upon men. It is gender conflict that constitutes dramatic conflict in Wilde's plays, with the result that the ideological as well as emotional focus falls on gender identities. Women's disruptive presence in Wilde's playworld thus provides the plays not only with structural motivation but the emotional suspense of encountering the unknown forces at the core of human nature.

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