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English Honors Thesis

"Wonderful Expression": Essays on the Dramatic Works of Oscar Wilde

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Abbreviations

LWF – *Lady Windermere's Fan*

AWONI – *A Woman of No Importance*

AIH – *An Ideal Husband*

TIOBE – *The Importance of Being Earnest*

DG – *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Letters – *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*

Introduction

Oscar Wilde is remembered in the public and academic consciousness as many things. He was a persecuted homosexual. A whimsical Irishman in a sober Englishman's society. A flamboyant and contrary figure in the perceived tight-laced world of the Victorians. His clever aphorisms are quoted and misquoted in epigrams and on tote bags anywhere the English language is spoken. In the following essays, however, Wilde is first and foremost a playwright. Of all the forms in which Wilde wrote, theatre is one of the most complicated to discuss. Unlike essays, novels, poems, or articles, plays are not meant to be interpreted solely from the text. They are meant to be performed. Therefore, to study a play from a purely literary standpoint is to study it incompletely. Yet in their fully produced form, plays are ephemeral and ever-changing. Because of this stumbling block, it is simply easier to strip away the performance aspect and consider Wilde's plays as we might consider any of his other writings. Practically, however, this is not helpful.

The following collection of essays strives to explore the dramatic works of Oscar Wilde from a dramaturgical perspective, embracing the historical contexts, the literary merits, and the performative nature of Wilde's plays. He wrote across several media, each chosen deliberately to achieve his goals. On one hand, Wilde hoped that theatre would earn him fame and fortune, a desire that had remained unfulfilled by his writing prior to the 1890s. Theatre was risky: productions were expensive, and though writing for the stage could prove lucrative, financial success depended on the length of the run, the percentage of seats sold, and the tastes of the audience. Yet despite the fact that playwrighting did not come easily (as evidenced by his early

failures and confessions of playwriting struggles¹), he kept at the form until he developed a formula that not only brought him the penny and praise he craved, but resulted in several literary masterpieces. He left us with Western stage classics that are produced over and over again by theatres across the globe.

Many studies focus on Wilde the man instead of Wilde's art. Of course, the two are inextricable, especially in Wilde's case. Wilde's life was his art: "I've put my genius into my life; I've put only my talent into my works," he once said.² His very existence was performance art, a self-aware identity construction as fabricated as the dandies Wilde wrote for the stage. Wilde did not just write art, he lived it. Born to Irish parents, Wilde attended Trinity College in Dublin and later went on to the University of Oxford. It was there that Wilde truly began to develop his decadent persona and his intellectual ideas. He was particularly influenced by Walter Pater, a professor Magdalen College and renowned essayist, who encouraged Wilde's literary exploration into the world of aestheticism, a style that continued to influence Wilde for the rest of his career.

Wilde's writing career was a winding journey through media. He wrote poetry both as a student and later in his life, developed essays and lectures he took on tour, published fairy tales, and tried his hand at journalism as the head of *The Woman's World* for a time.³ He wrote his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, after a decade of unsuccessful and fragmented plays. The great literary boom of his life followed immediately: the social comedy plays of the 1890s. Most people are familiar with the next step in Wilde's story, his infamous downfall: in 1895 the Marquess of Queensberry accused Wilde of "posing as sodomite" [*sic*], but

¹ In a letter to George Alexander, Wilde noted, "I am not satisfied with myself or my work. I can't get a grip of the play yet; I can't get my people real" (Letters 282).

² Ashley H. Robins, *Oscar Wilde — The Great Drama of His Life: How His Tragedy Reflected His Personality* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 1.

³ This magazine was directed at educated women, and under Wilde's leadership it developed beyond fashion to include an intellectual bent as well. Wilde was the editor, but also maintained a column.

Queensberry was acquitted of the ensuing libel charge and the tables turned against Wilde. He was successfully prosecuted for “gross indecency,” and his trials went down in history. The analysis of Wilde’s life, particularly his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and the resulting trials, are the centerpiece of Wilde studies. In many ways studying Wilde’s personal life and experiences is essential to understanding the texts he left behind. His identity as a queer writer, for example, illuminates possible readings of Algernon’s “Bunburying” in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Yet I believe that too much emphasis on Wilde’s biography can detract from the power that these texts contain themselves. The story of Wilde’s life, his performativity, and the historical context of his plays influences our understanding of the texts, but they need not define the works they inform. There is a fine line between strict textual analysis and overemphasizing context. I hope to successfully navigate it throughout the five essays in this collection.

There have been many wonderful studies on Wilde from many different points of view. The world of Wilde scholars is indebted, for instance, to the work of Richard Ellmann, author of Wilde’s most-recognized biography. Wilde has been studied specifically as an Irish writer by scholars such as Richard Pine and Jerusha McCormick. He has been studied as a queer writer, too, in studies on gender performance and LGBT authors. There are critical essays about all of his writing, including the plays. Wilde scholars including Josephine Guy, Ian Small, Kerry Powell, Christopher S. Nassaar, and Katherine Brown Downey have looked at Wilde’s theatrical work, sometimes focusing on context, sometimes on career, sometimes on individual plays. My work builds on their varying approaches to develop a general dramaturgical understanding of Wilde’s playwriting career and style.

Each of the following essays approaches Wilde’s dramatic works from a slightly different angle. All work under the assumption that although the works can (and should) be subject to

academic study, they are also plays that were meant to find a home on the stage. I hope in writing these essays I can bring the world of Wilde scholarship closer to the world of performance, to make it accessible to theatre artists who work with these texts in a practical way. I attempt to balance academic scholarship with accessible language and relevant ideas that may help theatre artists produce a more engaging and thoughtful product.

This collection begins with an examination of the theatre world in which Wilde wrote, contextualizing him in his time period and considering who his inspirations might have been. From there, I continue the discussion of Wilde's writing style through the next three essays. In Chapter 2 I analyze the dramatic shift in style that is evident when comparing Wilde's early "failure" plays of the 1880s to the successful social comedies of the 1890s. Chapter 3 takes into account Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was published between the composition of the aforementioned sets of plays. Chapter 4 focuses on a particular play, *Salomé*, which is a fascinating case study, as it was written in the same year as *Lady Windermere's Fan* but is stylistically similar to Wilde's earlier work. The collection ends with an essay on the increasingly popular production choice to modernize Wilde's plays while keeping the original text; this process that has the potential to be rewarding, but also requires serious dramaturgical considerations.

Oscar Wilde was more than a witty man in fabulous dress: the amount of scholarship that has been dedicated to his writing is enough evidence of that. His plays, even the social comedies, are not simple pieces of fluff. They are powerful satires, full of deeper meanings and controversial ideas veiled (sometimes only thinly) by humor and farce-like comedic moments. Theatre artists producing Wilde's work are no doubt uncovering those meanings and ideas through performance, and a dramaturgical background on Wilde's career as a dramatic writer can

enhance those discoveries. My goal in writing these essays has been to explore Wilde's plays from a dramaturgical point of view and present my own discoveries in a way that will open doors, stir ideas, and encourage discussion in the theatrical process that is staging Wilde.

Chapter 1

Influence and Contemporaries: Wilde's Place in the Victorian Theatre Landscape

It is difficult to determine how Wilde's plays fit into the theatre of their original time and place. The big names that theatre history remembers from the late nineteenth century are—with little variation—Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Chekhov, and Wilde.¹ Yet these were certainly not the only playwrights of the age, nor were they the most popular. Wilde scholar Kerry Powell compiled an appendix of playwrights working in London in the 1890s that features names unrecognizable to modern theatre historians.² Powell's collection of names and descriptions serves as a resource and starting point in the attempt to paint a picture of the historically elusive Victorian West End.

Sydney Grundy, not Oscar Wilde, was regarded as London's best playwright of the time. Ironically, Grundy openly scoffed at the work of Wilde and Shaw, only to be forgotten in their shadows. The most popular play of the decade, Brandon Thomas's *Charley's Aunt*, outran *Lady Windermere's Fan* 1,469 performances to 197.³ London theatres were flooded with adaptations, both authorized and unauthorized, of popular novels and stories. Liberal translations of foreign plays found their way into the English theatre scene, alongside the popular genres of farce and melodrama. There were many female playwrights, some writing under male pennames, but others who were perfectly public about their gender. From the information that Powell has compiled, we can conclude that the London theatre scene was diverse, vast, and full of playwrights who were more commercially popular than Wilde, but whose names are no longer remembered.

¹ Though notably Anton Chekhov's work did not filter into the English theatre until after Wilde's death.

² This appendix, from which I have derived the following information about the Victorian theatre landscape, can be found in Powell's book *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*.

³ Kerry Powell. *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

This is not to say that Wilde, Shaw, Ibsen, and Strindberg were not key players in the Victorian theatre scene. Shaw privately wrote that “there are only two literary schools in England today: the Norwegian school and the Irish school,” referring to himself, Wilde, and Ibsen.⁴ Of course, Shaw’s personal opinions on his own significance should be taken with a grain of salt, but he did, as a critic, have a comprehensive understanding of the theatre scene on the whole. Shaw was generally favorable in his reviews of Wilde’s work and often defended Wilde’s plays against criticism. (The glaring exception is Shaw’s review of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which he considered to be funny, but “heartless.”⁵) Shaw’s early 1890s plays were of a more political and serious nature than Wilde’s, but with *Arms and the Man* in 1894, Shaw developed a more satirical style.⁶ Even so, Wilde’s social comedies were of another world—both in their depiction of class and in tone. The two playwrights shared a mutual respect for one another, often exchanging plays and swapping compliments from a distance.⁷ It is possible, as John A. Bertolini suggests, that the shift in Shaw’s style in the mid 1890s was an attempt by Shaw to carve out a separate niche “in the shadow of Wilde’s successes,” for Shaw’s earlier plays had been met with lukewarm reception compared to the social comedies of his fellow Irish playwright.⁸

All of this is to say that although the theatre world to which Wilde belonged is not easily reconstructed by modern scholars, it was obviously a vibrant industry that produced season after season of new plays. Victorian playwrights could make good money—after all, fame and fortune

⁴ Shaw quoted in Charles A. Carpenter, “Oscar Wilde, 1854-1900: A Descriptive Chronology of His Plays, Theatrical Career, and Dramatic Theories,” *Modern British, Irish, and American Drama: A Descriptive Chronology, 1865 – 1965*. Binghamton University. Web. Strindberg was not Norwegian, but it is possible that Shaw included him with Ibsen as both were Scandinavian playwrights.

⁵ Shaw’s review of *Earnest* was published in the 23 Feb. 1895 issue of *The Saturday Review*.

⁶ His satires, like Wilde’s social comedies, could be viewed by the general audience as simply witty and enjoyable plays. These audiences missed the deeper message that Shaw sought to put on the stage (Evans 35).

⁷ *Letters*, 332; 339.

⁸ John A. Bertolini, “Wilde and Shakespeare in Shaw’s *You Never Can Tell*,” *Shaw* 27 (2007), 158.

are the reasons Wilde provided for embarking on his playwriting career.⁹ Yet as Wilde learned in New York, the profits of a play depended greatly on the length of the run. Wilde scholars Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small speculate that, had all of the nibbles at Wilde's early plays been one hundred percent fruitful, he would have made about £7,400 in 1883 as a dramatist. The approximate earnings of £2,700 were, while nothing to scoff at, not quite the fortune that Wilde knew was possible to attain in the theatre.¹⁰ Evidently, *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* left theatre managers (and audiences) unsatisfied; Wilde was unable to even find a producer for the pair in England. The box office success formula was one that Wilde had yet to determine.

Despite the essentially Wildean nature of the form he eventually perfected, Wilde constructed his plays under the influences of historical literary precedent and the work of his contemporaries. The powerful, unavoidable influence of Ibsen was introduced by Shaw, who sent Wilde a copy of his critique, "The Quintessence of Ibsenism."¹¹ Both Scandinavian writers, Strindberg and Ibsen, contributed to what Shaw called "a new theory of drama," that brought realism to the stage and required critical audience comprehension.¹² Strindberg's direct impact on Wilde's own work is not as evident as Ibsen's, as his plays were typically more experimental and character-centric than either Ibsen's or Wilde's, intentionally lacking the realistic naturalism of the latter two. Wilde's interaction with Ibsen's texts was also mediated by translation; the Norwegian scripts were only available in English through the work of theatre critic and translator William Archer, who supported not only Ibsen, but later Wilde himself.

⁹ Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-01.

¹¹ *Letters*, 317.

¹² Judith Evans, *The Politics and Plays of Bernard Shaw*. Jefferson (NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2003), 20-21.

Wilde greatly admired Ibsen's work and aspired to match or rival it in some way.¹³ Yet Ibsen's influence is not immediately recognizable in Wilde's social comedies, primarily because of the starkly different tone. The key similarity between the great works of the two playwrights is the unexpected—or at least, the untraditional—endings manufactured by strong-willed women: Nora breaks the code of Victorian femininity by leaving her husband and child instead of reuniting with them, and Mrs. Erlynne successfully reenters a notoriously unforgiving society. The key difference is the way in which each playwright deals with truth: in an Ibsen play, lies are revealed to clear the air, even at the cost of disrupting social norms, while Wilde's characters ultimately opt to maintain a façade that is—as Mrs. Erlynne cautions—not better than reality, but certainly safer.

As mentioned earlier, Wilde often denied having any influences at all. In a defense of *Salomé* sent to the *London Times*, Wilde notoriously denied that he ever wrote anything for a specific performer.¹⁴ Powell observes that Wilde suffered “anxiety of influence,” a phrase coined by Harold Bloom to refer to an artist's fear of unoriginality.¹⁵ Wilde was, according to Bloom, conscious of his inability to escape this anxiety in his poetry, so it is a reasonable assumption that Wilde the playwright was particularly aware of his reliance on past and present writers.¹⁶ Perhaps it was his anxiety of influence that led him to so loudly proclaim that he *had* no influences—or at least no influences from the recent past. Wilde admitted that he did have some literary guides: “setting aside the prose and poetry of Greek and Latin authors, the only writers who have influenced me are Keats, Flaubert, and Walter Pater.”¹⁷ Yet in that same interview, he

¹³ Wilde expressed a desire to become the “English Ibsen” (Powell 2). While he did not accomplish that goal, he would likely be more pleased to know he is remembered simply as Oscar Wilde.

¹⁴ *Letters*, 336.

¹⁵ Powell, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 6-7.

¹⁷ “Interview,” 732. See next footnote for details.

asserted outright that “not a single dramatist in this century has ever in the smallest degree influenced me”.¹⁸

It was a bold claim—and an untrue claim, one that he himself did not even believe.

Wilde’s friend Robert Ross, in his introduction to the 1912 edition of *Salomé*, relates an exchange he and Wilde had on the topic:

Wilde complained to me one day that someone in a well-known novel had stolen an idea of his. I pleaded in defence [*sic*] of the culprit that Wilde himself was a fearless literary thief. “My dear Robbie,” he said, with his usual drawling emphasis, “when I see a monstrous tulip with *four* wonderful petals in someone else’s garden, I am impelled to grow a monstrous tulip with *five* wonderful petals, but that is no reason why someone should grow a tulip with only *three* petals.” That was Oscar Wilde.¹⁹

The amusing anecdote proves the writer recognized that his work was not created in a vacuum. Whether he liked to admit it or not, Wilde’s plays incorporated the traditions and dramatic forms of his predecessors and participated in a dialectic with his contemporaries. All this, Wilde acknowledged, was acceptable. What was unacceptable was not improving upon the existing work from which one borrowed.

At the height of his dramatic success, Wilde’s method of improvement was challenge the established traditions and expectations. Even if Wilde was not heavily influenced by other writers, as he liked to purport, his audiences certainly were, conscious or unconscious. The only reason that Wilde’s plays worked in subverting the expected is that the audience went into the theatre with expectations based on their previous experiences. He worked with existing Western literary precedents but those precedents were, as Powell aptly puts it, “transfigured in its

¹⁸ These come from an 1895 interview for the *St. James’s Gazette*. It is worth noting here that the quote that often accompanies this statement (“My works are dominated by myself”) is often unfairly taken out of context—it was, in fact, in response to a question about the characters speaking like Wilde. Additionally, Wilde does admit that two playwrights of the nineteenth century have interested him: Victor Hugo and Maurice Maeterlinck.

¹⁹ Ross, xxx.

rewriting.”²⁰ This transfiguration is evident in his social comedy plays above all others. In them, Wilde upsets the audience’s expectations, using established plots and tropes from contemporary and traditional plays but subverting their typical resolutions.

An example of this can be found in *An Ideal Husband*. The “perfect man” was a concept that Wilde’s contemporaries were exploring before his 1895 production.²¹ Wilde’s play was different in how the corruption of that man plays out—while other imperfect male protagonists are found out completely, his Sir Robert Chiltern escapes more or less unscathed. Wilde takes a different approach to depicting the façades of society and the issue of truth than his contemporaries, including Ibsen. Inevitably, in an Ibsen drama, the right people uncover the hidden truths—fraudulent acts are made known, children discover their true parentage, spouses learn of their partner’s infidelity—and the results are often fatal. The triumph of truth and virtue were important elements of the Victorian moral code, but they have deep roots in classical dramatic structure. Wilde makes use of some of drama’s oldest devices in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, for instance: the abandoned child of *Oedipus Rex*, the rival woman of *Medea*, the screen scene of Sheridan’s *School for Scandal*. What sets his work apart from that of his predecessors is his inversion of how the audience expects the play to conclude.

Traditionally, theatrical devices such as the examples listed above are resolved through truth or revelation: the parent and child are reunited, the rival women have a showdown, and that which is hidden becomes visible. In classical dramas like *Oedipus Rex*, the action of the play hinges on individuals fighting to discover truth and ultimately succeeding in revealing the tragedies and lies that have been buried. In the end, sins are punished and all secrets are revealed. Wilde, however, does not allow the truth to bring the plot to the anticipated climax in such a

²⁰ Powell, 5.

²¹ Powell, 148.

complete way. Dramaturgically, his plays are satisfying because they take advantage of dramatic irony and turn classical structure on its head. Audience members must instead wait, watch, and wonder who will know what by the end of the play, all the while playing secret-keepers themselves.

The plot of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the first commercially successful play that Wilde wrote, revolves around three key secrets: that Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother, that Lady Windermere intended to leave her husband for another man, and that Mrs. Erlynne was in Lord Augustus's house to rescue her daughter. In the traditional handling of these secrets, Mrs. Erlynne's identity would be revealed to Lady Windermere, Lord Windermere would be informed of his wife's near-adultery, and Lord Augustus would uncover Mrs. Erlynne's lie. These discoveries would require both Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere to be permanently cast out of society for their crimes.

Yet that is not how the play concludes. Wilde deals with truth more lightly than his contemporaries. The imagined conclusions above might suit an Ibsen play, in which the truth must out and consequences must be faced. Instead, the audience experiences a dramatic climax through frustration: there is no release of tension brought on by truth, and the liars need not answer for their lies. In the world of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, society is saved through deception, and all those privy to secrets deem it best to keep them. The play is exciting because the audience cannot predict the outcome based on precedent. The pleasure of watching comes from the dramatic irony of knowing the lies and—better yet—knowing which characters are privy to which truths. It's a game the audience gets to watch unfold on stage.

Playwrights, especially those writing comedy, must wrestle with Wilde as Wilde himself wrestled with the poets and playwrights before him. His West End successes are comedies of manners, tales which draw on class distinctions to develop humor. Wilde's work was the Victorian iteration of a genre which started with Ancient Rome's Menander and snaked through time via Johnson's comedies of humors, Molière's French farces, and Sheridan's Restoration comedies. Wilde proliferated this genre and pulled the comedy of manners from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth. His plays are stepping stones in English comedy without which there would likely be no Noel Coward, no British sitcom as they exist today.

Even more significant than his influence on English comedy, however, is the impact Wilde made as a satirist. His plays were exceptional in that they walked the fine line between being popular and critical. He addressed the same social issues as Ibsen but was received by his audiences with laughter and approval instead of censorship and criticism. Shaw may have expressed frustration with the similar responses his plays received, but Wilde had managed to more-or-less achieve his goals as a playwright: he wrote work that was commercially successful while maintaining a critical nature. The social comedies may not have been as blatantly critical as the more serious work of Henrik Ibsen, but it was more subversive, and its lasting reputation demonstrates its power as a well-constructed, meaningful addition to the canon of Western dramatic literature

Chapter 2

Switching Styles: The Development of Wilde's Playwriting, 1880s – 1890s

The general public knows that Oscar Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*. A large segment of the population could probably name his other social comedies if hard-pressed (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*). A smaller number of people might mention *Salomé*, but beyond that, the number of titles that could be attributed to Wilde would drop sharply. Yet there are a handful of additional dramatic endeavors that preceded his well-known works. Their lack of coverage may be in part due to their lack of note—the social comedies were great successes, and *Salomé* was at the center of a public censorship controversy, but *Vera; or, the Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua* were mediocrities, failing or succeeding quietly.

What is fascinating about examining these two plays in the context of the rest of Wilde's theatrical career is that they are of a complete other world than the successful social comedies, more in line with the nature of *Salomé* than any of Wilde's other broadly recognized works.¹ These two early plays, though they are regarded as failures² are integral in understanding Wilde's development as a playwright, for they show a "before" with which Wilde's social comedies can be compared as well as traces of themes, archetypes, and idioms he worked with in later compositions.

Vera; or, the Nihilists was Wilde's first play. The plot revolves around two would-be lovers, Vera and Alexis. Vera is the leader of a group of Nihilist revolutionaries in early nineteenth-century Moscow. Alexis is both a member of Vera's group and (secretly) the son of

¹ I say "broadly recognized works" because they are most similar to some fragmented pieces Wilde wrote later in his life; those fragments and their relationships to these two plays is touched on near the end of this essay.

² See Guy and Small, Beckson, Mackie, et al.

the Czar, whom the Nihilists despise on principal. When Vera's brother and comrade Michael kills the Czar, Alexis takes the crown against Nihilist code, and Vera is duty-bound to kill him, believing he not only betrayed her cause, but also her heart. She discovers that Alexis does, however, love her and remain true to the people, and to save his life, she takes her own.

The play was completed in 1881³, and in that year Wilde submitted it to the Examiner of Plays, Edward Pigott. Wilde made personal plans for a semi-public performance of the play, but the production never occurred—some speculate that the content was inappropriate considering the recent assassination of Czar Alexander II⁴, or that the actress who had agreed to play the title role backed out.⁵ Regardless of the reasons, the first production of *Vera* did not occur in 1881, nor did it occur in England. It was two years later, during his tour of the United States, that Wilde finally found a venue and actress to take on his work. *Vera* opened at New York's Union Square Theatre in August, 1883 starring Marie Prescott.⁶

The play, which was originally scheduled for a month-long run, closed after the first week. *Vera* was not received well by the critics. One reviewer, in the *New York Daily Tribune*, called the play

a display of several queer scenes, picturesque at points, but mostly ugly, and by the exposition of a fanciful, foolish, highly peppered story of love, intrigue and politics, invested with Russian accessories of fur and dark-lanterns, and overlaid with bantam gabble about freedom and the people...⁷

³ There is some discrepancy about when Wilde first completed the play – it is likely that *Vera* was completed in its original form some time in 1880, before the assassination of Alexander II.

⁴ Relatively recent; the assassination occurred in March, while Wilde's production was scheduled to take place in December of that same year.

⁵ Guy and Small, 92-93.

⁶ Guy and Small, 99. *Critical Heritage* review, 57.

⁷ *Critical Heritage* review, 57.

Even the positive elements of reviews were lukewarm. The *New York Times* review of the opening night performance was overall negative, but the unknown author of the piece did admit that there was “a great deal of good writing.”⁸ It is worth pointing out, however, that the reviewer did not say “a good deal of great writing,” suggesting that even the well-written portions of Wilde’s play were far from exceptional, a criticism that reappeared in reviews of his next work of dramatic literature, *The Duchess of Padua*.

Following on the heels of *Vera*, *The Duchess of Padua* dates to 1883, but the creation of the play extends slightly farther back in time. Wilde was discussing the potentialities for such a piece with the actress Mary Anderson as early as September, 1882. The play has a historical bent as *Vera* does, this time taking place in Italy during “the latter half of the sixteenth century.”⁹ The play is written in blank verse and hearkens back to Jacobean and Elizabethan drama in its style. The plot follows Guido, a young man who arrives in Padua seeking information about his unknown parentage. A conniving man, Moranzone, explains that Guido’s father was betrayed and killed by the current Duke and convinces the young man to enter the Duke’s court and await a signal to take a bloody revenge. Guido ultimately falls in love with the Duchess of Padua and decides not to kill his love’s husband, only to find that the Duchess has committed the murder in order to be with Guido. Guido initially refuses the love of the murderess, but he takes the fall for the assassination of the Duke, evoking shame and love in the Duchess. She kills herself in the agony of Guido’s impending death, and Guido stabs himself after the Duchess dies in his arms.

Unlike with *Vera*, Wilde was not forced to solicit a theatre after the play had been written. Mary Anderson agreed to play the role of the Duchess and front many of the productions

⁸ *Critical Heritage* review, 56.

⁹ Wilde, *The Duchess*, 52.

costs before even seeing a completed script.¹⁰ Wilde finished writing *The Duchess of Padua* in March, 1883 and awaited Anderson's acceptance, but after a long silence received a definitive "no." Anderson believed that the play would not suit her or any kind of audience, and that anticipated production never saw the stage.¹¹ The play got its premiere in New York City in 1891, under the name *Guido Ferranti* and (initially) without Wilde's name attached.¹² The play received moderate reviews, in which the consensus seems to be that the piece was (not encouragingly) "better than ordinary" but insincere.¹³ *The Duchess of Padua* was not subsequently produced in London, but Wilde already had another work-in-progress on the West End: his soon-to-be famous *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

It is worth giving parenthetical mention to *Salomé*, which was written a decade after the "failures" of *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*. *Salomé* maintains the poetical nature and dark themes explored in the two earlier plays and also reaches back in history for its narrative, depicting a Biblical tale set in ancient Babylon. *Salomé*, too, suffered a difficult production history, but its failure was primarily based in the censorship laws that banned its performance in England. Although written in the same period as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Salomé* is far from the social comedies in which Wilde found fame and more in line with the style and tone of *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*. In terms of Wilde's shift in writing style, tone, and content choices, *Salomé* certainly falls in with the earlier dramas, despite being written alongside the later comedies.¹⁴

Through the development of *Lady Windermere's Fan* for manager George Alexander, Wilde reworked his playwriting technique. Perhaps thinking back to the accusations that his

¹⁰ *Letters*, 124.

¹¹ Ellmann, 223-24.

¹² Guy and Small, 103.

¹³ *Critical Heritage* review, 88.

¹⁴ See Chapter 4 for more on the production history of the play.

early works were insincere, Wilde struggled with his new play, grappling with the difficulties in creating “real” characters.¹⁵ His setting, unlike any previous plays, was the present day, in England, with recognizable characters not based in historical or literary tales. His tone was light, and while the topics were in many cases serious, he treated them with humor and wit. In short, Wilde was creating something utterly different from his early 1880s flops—and it worked.

Wilde learned from his early dramatic endeavors. Early on, when he started writing for the theatre, Wilde admitted he was “working at dramatic art because it’s *the democratic* art, and I want fame.”¹⁶ His other writings had not been thoroughly prosperous, and he turned to the medium of theatre for new hope. Wilde soon came to realize, however, that he would find neither fame nor money in the theatre if he could not figure out the right formula for a successful play. Wilde, though it is nice to consider him as a natural genius, was not a one-draft-wonder,¹⁷ nor was he exempt from the learning curves and development of playwriting. Wilde’s development over the course of his playwriting career can be summarized in how he, in his own words, considered his work, *The Duchess of Padua*. When he first completed the script, Wilde assured Mary Anderson, “I have no hesitation in saying that [*The Duchess of Padua*] is the masterpiece of all my literary work, the chef-d’oeuvre of my youth.”¹⁸ Wilde sang a completely different tune in 1898, when he confided in Robert Ross that “*The Duchess* is unfit for publication...but there are some good lines in it.”¹⁹

All of this talk about switching styles is not to say that Wilde threw away his earlier attempts as useless. He did not abandon the ideas and elements, but learned from them. By delving into the scripts of *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*, one can draw connections to Wilde’s

¹⁵ *Letters*, 282.

¹⁶ Wilde qtd. in Guy and Small, 92.

¹⁷ In fact, his manuscripts provide proof of just how much Wilde edited and annotated his plays, even after they were published or produced.

¹⁸ *Letters*, 136.

¹⁹ *Letters*, 757.

later work. One such example is the character of the articulate and irreverent dandy, for which Wilde is so well-known, both for creating the stage character and performing the identity in life. Throw-away lines and witticisms flow from the mouths of the social comedy dandies like Lord Darlington (*Lady Windermere's Fan*), Algernon (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), and Lord Goring (*An Ideal Husband*). Consider lines like:

There are few things easier than to live badly and to die well.

Experience, the name men give their mistakes. I never commit any.

Hanging is of course a good deal less of a novelty...you know how people get tired of even their best amusements.

If I hadn't thought that you would be useful to me I shouldn't have risked my neck among you, or dined an hour earlier than usual so as to be in time.²⁰

They sound quite fitting for a Wildean dandy, and would not be out of place in one of his comedic success plays. But in fact, these phrases are uttered by Prince Paul, a stand-out character in *Vera* who is clearly a precursor to the Algernons of Wilde's future work.

Another example of how Wilde's earlier works are present in his later plays is the trend of strong female characters. *Vera*, *The Duchess of Padua*, and *Salomé* are named for the women of the story, despite the fact that in both tales, there is a male character who has just as great a claim to the role of protagonist (Alexis, Guido, and Herod respectively). Wilde continues to emphasize women as figures who drive the plot forward in his social comedies: Mrs. Cheveley is pulling the strings in *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Erlynne holds the cards in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and in all four of the social comedies, the female characters have agency. Trapped by society as they are, they have a certain power, and they are women of action and character.

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, "Vera; or, the Nihilists," *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics Limited, 2000), 21; 22; 34.

Since his first play, Wilde has been exploring both how that power is used and how it can be tempered (or endangered) by female emotion. Vera is madly in love but does not allow her love to blind her to her duty; on the other hand, she does not allow her duty to blind her to her love. The Duchess, too, struggles between sensible action and passionate love. Salome's lust (for it cannot be called love) drives her to action, not passivity, and she uses the feminine powers which she possesses to take what she desires. The fact that these women are essentially defined by their relationship to men makes them problematic by today's standards for feminism, but in the Victorian age of well-behaved wives and mothers who allowed choices to be made by others, Vera, the Duchess, and Salome are remarkable ladies. Their legacy lives through many of Wilde's Victorian female characters, and the recurring theme of women making difficult choices and setting love aside lives through Lady Windermere and Lady Chiltern. They—like Vera—do not allow their love for their husbands to blind them, nor—like the Duchess—do they ultimately eschew forgiveness and sacrifice. These women are connected across Wilde's plays, despite their different settings and styles.

In addition to the practical elements that Wilde took from his previous work, the themes and archetypes upon which he built, the early "failures" of *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* taught Wilde about what actors, managers, and audiences wanted. The critiques of his melodrama in *Vera* and his outdated format in *The Duchess of Padua* told him that audiences wanted modern work with a strain of sincerity. It cannot be said that Wilde completely obliged, as his social comedies cannot be strictly labeled "sincere," but the striking difference between his early failed plays and his later successful comedies signals that Wilde knew his initial instincts were not quite on point. Also, he did get a taste, through the one-week run of *Vera* in New York,

of the kind of money to be made in the theatre—if, and only if, the show is good enough to stay open.

Wilde's dramatic works include incomplete scenes and plays, and the fragmented dramas like *La Sainte Courtesaine* and *A Florentine Tragedy* are similar in style to *Vera*, *The Duchess of Padua*, and *Salomé*. They are significant, however, because *La Sainte Courtesaine* and *A Florentine Tragedy* were both started (though neither ever completed) during 1893, in the middle of Wilde's West End success run.²¹ The short, fragmented plays focused on themes of confused or warped love, similar to those of Wilde's first two plays. *A Florentine Tragedy* was, like *The Duchess of Padua*, written in blank verse and revolves around the fatal competition between a woman's lover and her husband. It is also, perhaps, more than coincidence that these fragments, closely resembling the earliest work Wilde did in drama, were composed during the absence of Wilde's beloved Alfred Lord Douglas, whose presence is consistently referred to as being detrimental to Wilde's writing and creative abilities.²²

Starting with the production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde turned away from the kinds of plays he had written in the past; at least, he stopped trying to get such plays produced. He focused his playwriting efforts instead toward his wildly successful social comedy formula, which granted him success after success on the London stage. Wilde had worked out what his audiences wanted, and what *he* wanted was to please the public—for without their support and ticket purchases, Wilde could not achieve the fame and fortune he craved. Yet it would be reductive to assume that Wilde scrapped his initial playwriting attempts completely, or that he had determined to write something entirely removed from his earlier work. Yes, the style, the setting, the tone, and perhaps even the target audience were different for the social comedies. On

²¹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 411.

²² See Ellmann, 410-12.

the surface, a play like *Vera* has nothing in common with a play like *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But through paying attention to his early works, those considered failures by even Wilde himself, we can trace the development of a great playwright who found his niche while remaining true to his roots.

Chapter 3

From *Dorian Gray* to *Earnest*: The Intertextuality of Wilde's Novel and Social Comedies

Oscar Wilde claimed that he himself dominated his work, and there is certainly an element of truth to his statement. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wilde often "borrowed" inspiration from others, even if he did not care to admit it, but he also borrowed from himself. It is natural that, as an artist and a writer, Wilde had particular ideas that he wanted to communicate, and that over the course of his life those ideas were refined and reiterated. For him, communication came in every written form available: he wrote poetry, articles, essays, dialogues, plays, and prose. This essay examines the intertextuality between Wilde's only novel, published in 1890¹, and the four social comedies produced in 1892-95. While in style and content the novel and play are at odds, there are certain continuities in character and theme that suggest Wilde ingested the criticism of his novel and created something was true to his artistic and intellectual integrity while catering to his Victorian audience.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in the summer of 1890 by the American magazine *Lippincott's Monthly*. In this original form, the novella reached American and British audiences and garnered mixed reviews. Michael Patrick Gillespie, the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Dorian Gray*, assesses that the magazine novella had a better reception in America, but that British critics were generally disapproving. Primarily the English took issue with the morality of the story and the "account of male friendship that stressed inadmissible homosexual attitudes."² This questionable morality became significantly more problematic for Wilde five years later, when the homoerotic subtext of *Dorian Gray* was used against him in the

¹ The full novel was actually published in 1891, but the story was first produced as a novella in June 1890.

² Michael Patrick Gillespie, "Reviews and Reactions," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), 349.

court case prosecuting him for “gross indecency.” In addition to presenting homosexual subtext, Wilde touched on other vices that were unseemly to his Victorian readership: prostitution, drug addiction, crime, and even murder. The debauchery in which Dorian Gray participates was an affront to Victorian sensibilities. The idea that lurking behind the surface of such a beautiful, wealthy face might be the darkness and ugliness that Dorian Gray comes to possess was threatening, though not unexpected by the Victorian middle-class readership. Despite the critics’ responses (or perhaps because of them), the *Lippincott’s* publication sales in England jumped sharply—whether it was moral or not, Victorians were reading *Dorian Gray*.³

The novel, though it received poor critical reception, was not devoid of good ideas. Many of the sentiments and even the style is reminiscent of Wilde’s early plays, in particular the melodrama *Vera; or, the Nihilists*. Wilde’s core interests in character types and the exposition of façade passed through the unremarkably received *Vera* and *Dorian Gray* to the stage comedies that brought him the fame and fortune he desired (or, at least, it brought him closer to his ideal lifestyle). Gillespie notes that “we should see in the criticism the suggestion that an author should avoid aspects of life that the Victorian middle class simply did not wish to acknowledge or think about.”⁴ In transferring his ideas from a gothic-inspired novel to plays based in the tradition of the comedy of manners, Wilde did just that. Although at first glance *The Picture of Dorian Gray* looks quite unlike *Lady Windermere’s Fan* or any of the other three social comedies, elements of Wilde’s intentions in his novel carry over. Sometimes this is in the form of characterization, or even directly lifting lines from the novel’s text. But in a broader sense, Wilde explores similar themes about the facades that the upper-classes have the luxury to create.

³ Carl Beckson, Introduction, *The Critical Heritage: Oscar Wilde* (London: Routledge, 1997), 8.

⁴ Ibid, 349-50

Aside from change in artistic medium, the most obvious shift from Wilde's novel to his social comedies is that of style and tone. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells the melodramatic tale of a beautiful young man who is corrupted by hedonistic ideas. Yet despite his debauched lifestyle, Dorian Gray maintains a façade of beauty and youth, thanks to an unintentional Faustian deal that allows the ugliness of age and poor morality to be reflected in a portrait rather than Dorian's own true face. The novel itself is notoriously difficult to categorize, but many scholars nestle it in the gothic family, an association emphasized by the starkly conflicting influences of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton on Dorian Gray and the supernatural element of the inexplicable power of the portrait.⁵ The dark, seediness of the underworld of London adds to this style, and the trail of death that Dorian leaves behind (ending with his own suicide) contributes to the shocking nature of the plot and the bleak tone of the novel. Wilde also recognized his work as melodramatic; it was an element of the novel that he criticized (Gillespie 350).

Wilde turned away from melodrama as he approached his first social comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Although this might seem to make sense, based on Wilde's self-criticism referenced above, melodrama was a popular form of theatre in England. For one thing, it was extremely popular in the Victorian era (as it is today) to develop stage adaptations of popular novels like *Lady Audley's Secret*, which had inherently melodrama qualities. Additionally, Kerry Powell's admirable appendix of Victorian playwrights notes that many of the listed writers

⁵ The debate as to whether *Dorian Gray* is a truly gothic novel is ongoing, yet inevitably *Dorian Gray* is mentioned in discussions of Victorian gothic literature, often covered under "urban gothic" (Hughes 199), "decadent gothic" (Beville 64), or "aesthetic gothic" (Riquelme 610). Peter J. Kitson associates the gothic genre with Victorian melodrama, and asserts that *Dorian Gray* does deserve the gothic label (173). Yet the novel is missing key elements of traditional gothic (the character of location, the importance of architecture, the incitement of horror). Beville in particular makes a compelling argument for labeling *Dorian Gray* as gothic, subtle though it may be. My purpose in this essay, however, is not to attempt to firmly categorize *Dorian Gray* by genre, but the novel does possess a tone and style that emits a gothic feeling, and that is an important point to make going forward to compare that text with Wilde's 1890s comedies.

produced melodramas, up through the turn of the century.⁶ Yet Wilde moved away from melodrama to approach comedy. A popular form of comedy at the time, according to Powell's research, drew on the long tradition of French farce. Although Wilde's plays do have some farcical elements (*Earnest* in particular), he looked instead to the more English tradition of the comedy of manners, which focused on the foibles of the upper crust of British society. Wilde was clearly aware that he had the power of satire, the power to make people laugh. Yet just because he lightened his tone toward something lighter does not mean that he lost every essence of his novel.

Lord Henry Wotton is not exactly the first character of his kind; Wilde wrote a similar character in his 1883 melodrama, *Vera; or, the Nihilists*. Lord Henry is, however, a significantly more developed and more widely known iteration of a Wildean archetype than *Vera*'s Prince Paul. He is a Wildean dandy: a character who seems to replicate the character Wilde played in life, full of witty remarks, a flippancy regarding serious topics, and a taste for decadence. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* there is Lord Darlington. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth. Then Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lord Henry fires one-liner after one-liner and spouts endless alternative musings on the nature of life and the way it ought to be experienced. He seems to eschew morality, although his friend Basil Hallward questions the earnestness of all Lord Henry's talk:

I believe you are a very good husband, but that you are ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never saw a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose.⁷

⁶ See appendix in Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 144-159.

⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), 8.

Lord Henry, for all his immoral talk, is an upstanding member of society. Whether he truly believes in New Hedonism or not, he certainly does not practice it to its fullest extent. That lifestyle, and its consequences, is reserved for the impressionable Dorian Gray.

He is perhaps the easiest character for Wilde to transplant throughout the social comedies. After the relative failure of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde composed plays that removed elements of the novel that were unpleasant for the readers—namely Dorian, or what Dorian becomes. A young man who succumbs to a life of seduction, drugs, and crime has no place in a humorous play in the West End. Lord Henry, however, is full of wit and contrary opinions but essentially harmless. His character, unlike Dorian, can be transplanted. His scenes in the novel with other well-to-dos are acceptable. The Wildean dandy is perhaps the character for which Wilde is known best, not least of all because it is an archetype he actively performed himself.

There are also the quotes and paraphrases in the plays taken from his earlier novel, generally associated with the dandy characters that follow in the footsteps of Lord Henry Wotton. It is doubtful that Wilde necessarily expected his audience to recognize them as intertextual elements. In fact, it is impossible to say whether Wilde himself was pulling from previous writings (in this case, his novel) in order to strengthen the connection and dialogue of his 1890s works, or if he was simply borrowing the best of one to augment another. In her contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Jerusha McCormack asserts that

examination of the ways [Wilde] composed (such as the drafts of his plays) suggests that he began with a series of witty phrases, jokes or puns and shuffled them around between characters – and even between other texts. Once he had coined a phrase, it was likely to reappear anywhere.

The reappearing phrases do tend to come out of the mouths of the same Wildean archetypes, however. Lord Henry Wotton's one-liners and other fragments appear throughout the social comedies, as evidenced by the following comparison list, in which each comedy is represented.

From *Dorian Gray*:

I never talk during music--at least, during good music. If one hears bad music, it is one's duty to drown it in conversation. (Dorian, 42)

I don't wish to know anything about them. I love scandals about other people, but scandals about myself don't interest me. (Dorian, 126)

Mrs. Erlynne, a pushing nobody, with a delightful lisp and Venetian-red hair. (147)

When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief. (Henry, 148)

"Moderation is a fatal thing. (Henry, 150)

Women love us for our defects. If we have enough of them, they will forgive us everything, even our intellects (Henry, 149)

How English you are Basil! (Henry, 12)

There is no such thing as good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral--immoral from the scientific point of view. (Henry, 19)

Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing. (Henry, 42)

Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed. (Henry, 43)

From the social comedies:

You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music people don't talk. (Algernon, *TIOBE* 18)

That is why it interests me. My own business always bores me to death. I prefer other people's. (Cecil, *LWF* 139)

(Mrs. Erlynne is a primary character in Lady Windermere's Fan.)

I hear [Lady Harbury's] hair has turned quite gold from grief. (Algernon, *TIOBE* 17)

Moderation is a fatal thing, Lady Hunstanton. (Illingworth, *AWONI* 210)

Women love us for our defects. If we have enough of them, they will forgive us everything, even our gigantic intellects. (Illingworth, *AWONI* 209)

How absurdly English you are. (Cheveley, *AIH* 306)

Lord Illingworth says that all influence is bad, but that a good influence is the worst in the world. (Allonby, *AWONI* 218)

[A cynic is a] man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. (Darlington, *AIH* 143)

Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed. (Illingworth, *AWONI* 205)

Most of the quotes compared above are connected to a Wildean dandy character in some way, and they are typically examples of the witty aphorisms that epitomize Wilde's style.

It is more than the intertextuality of archetype or even quotation that connects the social comedies back to *Dorian Gray*, however. The social comedies are broadly about the masks that the upper-classes donned. *Dorian Gray* has a very obvious manifestation of that facade: Dorian quite literally has the face he shows to the world (his physical features) and the face that shows his true qualities (the painting). But there is another character whose facade is revealed to the reader. Lord Henry builds for himself this image of a wicked man, when in reality it seems he is almost all talk, no bite. These two characters present very different masks, of course: to put it reductively, one is a bad man masquerading as good, the other a good man pretending to be bad. While Dorian Gray presents a very serious threat to society (anyone who seems like an upright man could actually be a murderous and lecherous fiend), the second is not, and in fact people seem to find these irredeemable dandies to be charming. They represent a figure who can provide all the excitement of controversy while never truly threatening the social order. It is unsurprising, then, that Wilde chose to keep the dandy character alive in his social comedies while abandoning the seriousness of a character like Dorian.

Wilde also removed other dangerous elements that permeated his novel. In the social comedies, there are no ambiguous male relationships that seem to blatantly stray beyond the realm of masculine companionship. There are plenty of male friendships in the comedies—Jack and Algernon come immediately to mind. But unlike Basil Hallward, each of these men is caught up in romance with a woman, and though they may care for one another, any declarations of feelings are much more carefully guarded than Basil's profession of adoration to Dorian; neither has to fear, for instance, that society would not understand their feelings toward one another. And although the works still deal with complex social issues, they do not detail the corrupt underworld of Victorian London. If Mrs. Erlynne, for example, ever had anything to do with

prostitution of any kind, we don't know about it. It is quite possible that Lord Illingworth was involved in illicit and illegal activities, but it's not specified. Whether the trouble that "Earnest" gets up to in town is respectable or debase is not exactly clear. The point is that although there might be potential for the darker, poorer, more dangerous side of society to seep into the social comedies, Wilde keeps it at bay by primarily dealing with social problems of particular import to the middle and upper classes, like illegitimacy, political corruption, and female honor.

Though Wilde's 1890 novel and the West End plays that premiered in the years following are different in tone, content, and critical reception, there are enough intertextual elements that brand both works as Wildean. The strongest of these are the dandy characters, so heavily drawn from *Dorian Gray*'s Lord Henry Wotton, who is in turn drawn from Wilde's own performance of himself. Yet at a deeper level, Wilde is addressing the same social problem in both forms: the masks that people wear. In *Dorian Gray*, he presents a horror story for the upper classes, a tale of immorality and the cost of eternal beauty. The social comedies simply satirize, giving his audience an easier pill to swallow while continuing to critique the work in which they live. Was one of these more effective than the other? It is difficult to come down firmly on either side. Wilde's comedies were more critically acclaimed, more widely popular, more lucrative. Yet *Dorian Gray* maintains literary and artistic skill, and questions the power of art as well as the limitations and consequences of society's masquerade. What is remarkable is how despite the stark differences between Wilde's novel and his comedies, both bear the unmistakable mark of their maker. Wilde's essence carries over across tone, medium, and style, and when considered together, his literary work paints a complicated but vibrant picture of a man critique the very social world in which he thrived.

Chapter 4

The Exception of the 1890s: A Study of *Salomé*

With the exception of his fragmented plays and unsuccessful early dramas, *Salomé* is certainly Oscar Wilde's least-known play. This poetic, symbolist drama was originally written in French, likely started during one of Wilde's visits to Paris in 1891. Its creation overlaps with Wilde's first commercial success, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, but the two plays are so different they could have easily come from different playwrights. *Salomé* is a dark, highly stylized piece of drama that does not focus on Victorian upper-class foibles but is instead for a complex and violent retelling of a Biblical tale. The original story, related in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, is little more than a fragment: the gospels briefly mention an unnamed woman who elicits the promise of John the Baptist's head from her stepfather, King Herod. Historic accounts determined that this stepdaughter's name was Salome.

The personage of Salome captivated artists long before Wilde; painters as early as the fifteenth century depicted this mysterious young dancer. In the 1870s, Gustave Flaubert featured Salome in a short story. In Flaubert's retelling, Salome's mother Herodias uses the girl to ensure the execution of John the Baptist. That story inspired Jules Massenet's French opera, *Hérodiade*, in 1881. A decade later, Wilde began to compose his French drama, which shifted the attention and agency from Herodias to her daughter, Salome. In 1891, in the afterglow of *Lady Windermere's Fan* successful opening, Wilde began into production for *Salomé* in London—a

production that the Examiner of Plays, Edward Pigott, made sure never saw the English stage during Wilde's lifetime.¹

Pigott's official concern was Wilde's cast of characters—specifically Iokanaan, who is clearly John the Baptist. Sanctions against the depiction of Biblical characters on stage persisted long after their adoption early in the history of English theatre. As scholar Katherine Brown Downey explains,

The sixteenth-century legislation against the public production of passion and cycle plays, first in Paris and then in London and other European cities, followed a period when European communities had been producing large-scale dramatizations of key biblical narratives at major local events. Suddenly these communities—actors, writers, producers, audiences, church, and state—regulated those performances out of existence. There apparently was a broad consensus that this was the correct thing to do, and the consensus persisted until the end of the nineteenth century²

Pigott cited this law as the reason for *Salomé*'s censorship, but the case for banning the play included more than simply enforcing a sixteenth-century decree. The content of Wilde's *Salomé* had a second component which made it undesirable. Pigott, in one private quote, summarized exactly what he found problematic: Wilde's play was "half Biblical, half pornographic," and neither of those halves was permissible on the English stage.³ Wilde created a sensual Salome and turned the sacred figure of John the Baptist into an objectified sexual object.

Blatant sexuality and Biblical source material had, however, graced the English stage in the form of French dramas. Historically speaking, French dramas had managed to circumvent English sanctions against both erotic material and the depiction of biblical figures. Pigott himself, shortly before *Salomé* was banned, acknowledged that he considered French plays

¹ The Examiner of Plays was a British government employee who monitored scripts and approved them for licensing. Without a license, a play could not be performed. This position evolved from one slightly more familiar to theatre historians, the Master of Revels.

² Katherine Brown Downey, *Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, André Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2004), 2.

³ Quoted in John Russell Stevens, *The Censorship of the English Drama, 1824–1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 112.

differently than English plays. When audience members decided to see a French play, Pigott claimed, they knew what they were getting themselves into (namely, erotic and questionable content). On the other hand, audiences had a certain expectation about the propriety and decency of dramas in the English language. Pigott was "extremely indulgent" when reviewing French plays—in French, by French writers—submitted for production on the English stage.⁴ Despite the fact that the script was in French and the title role was to be played by a Frenchwoman, Pigott apparently did not count Wilde's *Salomé* as a French drama, most likely because Wilde himself was not a Frenchman.

Some scholars make the argument that Wilde, acquainted with the laws of the English stage, attempted to use the French language to dodge the censor. After all, English was Wilde's first language, so what prompted the foray into French? Even in his lifetime, friends and critics questioned why Wilde, so articulate in his native language, would do such a thing. Wilde never satisfactorily answered that question. He simply described *Salomé* as "my strange venture in a tongue that is not my own," that is, an experiment.⁵ He certainly was a Francophile interested in French culture, language, and art, but scholars do offer a compelling argument that he also intended to use the language loophole in Victorian law to get *Salomé* produced in London.

At face value, Wilde's personal reaction to the censorship supports the suggestion that he believed *Salomé* would get past the censor. He expressed disappointment and disgust, promising to abandon England should *Salomé* be refused a license.⁶ Wilde's vocal denunciation of the censorship, in addition to the certainty with which rehearsals had begun, has convinced several scholars that he had fully expected his French play to circumvent the law. Yet Wilde's public

⁴ Pigott quoted in "French Songs," *Era*, 16 June 1894, p. 15.

⁵ Wilde quoted in Joseph Donohue, "Translator's Preface," *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2011), vii.

⁶ Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 35.

outcry against the censorship of his play is not enough to assume that he was surprised. Another possibility exists: Wilde knew his play would not make it through the English censorship system.

Scholars generally agree that Wilde knew the rules, and that he intentionally wrote a play of a blatantly sexual, irreverent nature that he knew would be met with opposition. Did Wilde really believe that composing the text in French would appease Edward Pigott? Or was it a bluff in order to cause a stir over the censorship? It is true that the rehearsal process for *Salomé* had already begun when Pigott issued the ban; that level of dedication to production suggests Wilde did trust (or hope) that the play would see the stage. Yet Wilde's behavior after the censorship is peculiar for a man whose primary goal is reaching opening night: Wilde had the opportunity to meet with the Examiner of Plays and discuss the problematic elements of *Salomé*, a process that would likely produce a revised (but licensed) play. However, instead of approaching Pigott to "remove obstacles which stood in the way of licensing," Wilde insulted the man and forewent negotiation.⁷ Although no one can be entirely sure about his intentions, executing an intentional, public controversy certainly sounds like Wilde. Wilde scholars Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small have reached a similar conclusion: they note that Wilde never offered *Salomé* to the American market that had been so accepting of his earlier work, and they speculate that Wilde never publishing rehearsal copies of the script. He did, however, have an edition ready for publication with remarkable speed.⁸ Whether he believed it would pass Pigott's desk or not, Wilde never claimed that his chosen language for *Salomé* had anything to do with censorship laws. There is no conclusive evidence that he intended anything other than a writing exercise in a language he loved.

⁷ Powell, 35-36.

⁸ Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, Guy, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113.

Yet writing exercise or not, Wilde's language in *Salomé* is peculiar, and certainly not an example of naturalistic French. The language is, for one thing, relative simple. The text, in its Wilde-approved English translation as well as the French, is full of repetition and simple sentences, quite unlike the clever witticisms and complicated monologues of his social comedy characters. Take the opening lines of *Salomé*, for example (original English translation):

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things.⁹

These sentences are somewhat unnatural, less believable than the language used in Wilde's other plays. While viewing the social comedies, the audience would like to think that there are people in the world who speak so well and wittily. The poetic language of *Salomé* does not strike the same chord. Was this unnatural dialogue intentional, or due to a lack of mastery of the French language? Holbrook Jackson notes that

It has been said that Wilde's French, though correct, was not that of a Frenchman. But no less an authority than André Gide has written that Wilde knew French almost perfectly and in speaking it had scarcely any accent. Defects of accent, in any case, could not trouble his written French, and other irregularities would be erased by French friends to whom he could have submitted, and actually did submit, the manuscript. Nor must we underestimate his admitted knowledge of French and familiarity with French literature.¹⁰

Wilde, although he never admitted it, imbued *Salomé* with elements of the French literary and dramatic world.

French symbolism, which was in its prime as Wilde was writing *Salomé*, is particularly clear influence to his work on the play. The movement that had great hold in Paris, and Frenchman Jean Moréas wrote its manifesto, which specified a few key points: firstly, that symbols were not simply allegories or allusions but held emotional content, and secondly, that

⁹ *Salomé* 337.

¹⁰ Holbrook Jackson, "Introduction," *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act* (New York: Heritage, 1945), 9.

symbolists opposed plain language and realistic, matter-of-fact descriptions.¹¹ While Wilde's other plays certainly do not fit into this manifesto, *Salomé* does: the powerful imagery of the moon, the recurring image of redness or blood, and even the veils alluded to in Salome's infamous dance. These symbols can be applied directly to other things—the moon as woman, the references to red blood an omen of death, the veils signifying a reveal of understanding—but they also served to create a powerful and emotional environment in which the action can take place. Even before it becomes evident that the red imagery is a foreshadowing of the bloodshed that will follow, the following exchange creates a sense of danger surrounding Salome:

HEROD. ... Your feet will be like little doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees... No, no, she is going to dance on blood. There is blood spilt on the ground. She must not dance on blood. It were an evil omen.

HERODIAS. What is it to you if she dance on blood? Thou hast waded deep enough therein....

HEROD. What is it to me? Ah! Look at the moon! She had become red. She has become red as blood. Ah! The prophet prophesized truly. He prophesized the moon would become red as blood...¹²

Here, many symbols collide: as Salome prepares to dance, having secured Herod's promise for reward, the moon which has come to be a symbol of woman turns bloody, just as Salome's pale feet will turn red in the spilt blood on the ground. This is just one moment in which Wilde's symbolist influences are evident in his writing.

Yet Wilde's influences can be further specified. Wilde's designer Graham Robertson, hearing the French, told Wilde that its form sounded exactly like Maurice Maeterlinck.¹³ Wilde himself mentioned Maeterlinck when asked about why *Salomé* was in French. He replied,

¹¹ Moréas, Jean. "Le Symboliste." 1886. *Berlol*. Web.

¹² *Salomé* 360-61.

¹³ Powell 47. Maeterlinck was a Belgian contemporary of Wilde's, who wrote his plays in French and ultimately received the Nobel Prize in Literature (1911).

Of course, there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or color to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flamand by grace, writes in an alien language.¹⁴

Wilde himself even cited Maeterlinck as one of the few contemporary writers for whom he had real respect.¹⁵ The fact that he is a recurring reference suggests that it is more than simply the act of writing in "an alien language" that connects the Belgian writer to Wilde's work on *Salomé*.

Maeterlinck developed a dramatic idea called "static drama" that involves puppet-like characters who are moved to action by inner forces greater than intellect. Dialogue was at once simple and symbolic, much like that of Wilde's symbolist experiment.

The "curious effect" Wilde nods to in Maeterlinck's writing is likely the same quality that Jackson notes above: the slightly-askew style that is not inaccurate, but simply unnatural. And sometimes, Wilde confided to Robertson, "a play ought to be in French"—and *Salomé* was such a play.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that the strange dialogue also helps in Wilde's depiction of a strange culture; late-nineteenth century England and France were far removed from the Biblical world of *Salomé*. Language is, of course, one of the most recognizable components of a foreign culture, and recreating that strangeness of language while using a familiar tongue is a useful trick in maintaining the illusion of presenting another culture.

The poetic language continues to be a foreign element today, perhaps even more so now that time has separated us further from not only Wilde's depicted time period, but from Wilde himself. Today, however, playwrights' experiments with English do share commonalities with the language of *Salomé*. One particular example of this is the American playwright Sarah

¹⁴ Quoted in Archibald Henderson, "The Theatre of Oscar Wilde," *The Overland Monthly* (San Francisco: The Overland Monthly Co., 1907), 15.

¹⁵ "Interview," *St. James Gazette* (1895), 372.

¹⁶ Quoted in Powell 53.

Ruhl, whose *Eurydice* dialogue is poetic, symbolist, and unnatural as Wilde's in *Salomé*.¹⁷ It still remains, however, that in popular and commercial theatre audiences expect a manner of speaking that is familiar to them, and it takes time for an audience to settle into a different pattern of speaking, even if they are expecting it, as most theatre-goers expect of Shakespeare.

Yet it is more than unusual language that continues to present complications for *Salomé* today. Concerns about dramatic representations of Biblical characters has not vanished, and there remains discussion about whether art that is irreverent toward sacred objects or people should be allowed. The problem with *Salomé*, then and now, is that it combines the Biblical and sensual, as Pigott's original claim implies, and that the combination is unsettling for audiences. Katherine Downey theorizes that the reason Victorians were concerned about *Salomé* was that it suggested that sensual and vulgar themes could be explored through Biblical stories, creating a contradiction in the minds of Protestants by evoking the repressed, carnal elements of religion.¹⁸

Wilde was interested in creating a play that would make his audience think. To do this, he drew on a story with historical relativity, a term that was coined much later in theatre history by Bertolt Brecht.¹⁹ Wilde purported that "an audience longs to be first out of sympathy, and ultimately in sympathy, with a character they have loved: they desire it; they demand it; without it they are not contented; but *this sympathy must not be merely emotional, it must have its intellectual basis.*"²⁰ Wilde wanted to please audiences, but he also wanted to challenge them.

¹⁷ Ruhl's *Eurydice* does, however, has a whimsical quality that keeps it light, different in tone than *Salomé*.

¹⁸ Downey 143-44.

¹⁹ Bennett uses the following Brecht quote to explain this theory: "If we ensure that our characters on the stage are moved by social impulses and that these differ according to the period, then we make it harder for our spectator to identify himself with them. He cannot simply feel: that's how I would act, but can at most say: if I had lived under those circumstances. And if the play works dealing with our own time as though they were historical, then perhaps the circumstances under which h himself acts will strike him as equally odd; and this is where the critical attitude begins." Essentially, plays can invoke a partially subconscious critical thinking process by requiring its audience to consider the relativity of historical circumstances in decision-making.

²⁰ Quoted in Michael Y. Bennett, "Salome's Tale -- Iokanaan's Telling -- Wilde's Retelling: Historical Relativity and (Un)specificity in Wilde's *Salomé*," *Narrating the Past Through Theatre: Four Crucial Texts* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 44. Bennett's italics.

Salomé was a challenge through not only its controversial material, but through its implicit request that the audience understand the story through the morality scheme of another era. The play depicts an ancient, Biblical world and asks the audience to react and interpret the actions of a young woman from a culture quite unlike their own. Salome is certainly no Lady Windermere, interested in propriety and social decency. She demands what she desires, and uses her limited powers to secure power. She shocks Herod—and likewise shocks the audience—in brashly stating, “I do not heed my mother. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Iokannan in a silver charger.” Moments later, she throws aside all reservations, saying “I demand the head of Iokanaan.”²¹ Wilde’s *Salomé* is a dangerous example of a woman, a shocking comparison to the obedient and virginal ideal to which his Victorian audiences were accustomed.

Wilde’s play has taken several forms since its inception. Wilde never did see *Salomé* produced; the play premiered in Paris while Wilde was serving his two years’ hard labor, and Wilde died before the Richard Strauss opera premiered in England and abroad. The English ban on Wilde’s play came to an end in 1931, with the first public performance of *Salomé* in the Savoy Theatre.²² Directors have continued to explore *Salomé*, but not in the same commercial capacity as Wilde’s more typically palatable social comedies, which dictates the expectations that audiences have when they purchase a ticket to see a play written by Oscar Wilde. Those patrons familiar with Oscar Wilde may be drawn to the theatre by their fond recollections of amusing and light social comedies. Theatres need to not only embrace how different this play is, but to somehow prepare their audience—or intentionally exploit their misguided expectations.

Salomé is not your average walk in the park with Wilde, and theatres have to decide whether to

²¹ *Salomé* 362; 363 (my italics).

²² Samantha Ellis, “*Salomé*, Savoy Theatre, October 1931,” *The Guardian* (26 March 2003).

surprise patrons with that information when the house lights go down. Both approaches have their pros and cons (Wilde would certainly revel in the shock element, but loyal patrons might be affronted), but the gap between audience expectation and actual product must be realized and acknowledged.

Before even considering marketing, theatres and directors need to determine how to approach this play. Part of *Salomé*'s draw to modern theatre artists is the combination of its classical and symbolist roots. The play provides an opportunity for experimental theatres to unabashedly grapple with Wilde. The social comedies typically require more naturalistic specificity and production elements to be accepted by modern audiences, but *Salomé* includes a darker tone and room for artistic license that is more amenable to the experimental theatre scene. A big part of this distinction is in how *Salomé*'s stage directions differ from those in Wilde's social comedies. One example of this is the most energetic moment of the piece, the Dance of the Seven Veils. No details are given about what that dance entails, leaving the moment completely in the hands of director and performer. Similarly, while a social comedy like *Lady Windermere's Fan* specifies blocking and specific actions ("wipes her hands with her pocket-handkerchief, goes to tea table L., sits down"), *Salomé* specifies only the bare minimum of required action to guide the artistic team and far fewer wrylys.²³

Salomé may not be faced with censorship any longer, but the challenges the play provides remain. There are technical and directorial challenges that time has not erased: the Dance of the Seven Veils must be interpreted specifically and then realized on stage, and the severed head of Jokanaan remains a problematic stage element—an inadequate prop could be the difference between a terrifying moment and a comic one. Aside from these and other technical challenges,

²³ Stage direction from *LWF* 100. A "wryly" (noun) is a term for parenthetical directions given to actors from playwrights (through the text) concerning line readings. For example: "MRS. ERLYNNE (*with a note of irony in her voice*): To bid good-bye to my dear daughter, of course" (*LWF* 154).

the play itself maintains the same dangerous elements that Pigott and other English censors feared. There is an inherent clash between sacred and profane in the text: Wilde does not imbue the story of Iokanaan's death with vulgarity, but rather draws out the vulgarity he already sees in the Biblical text. That is what makes the retelling so threatening: the idea that somewhere, in our most sacred texts, there is a dark and profane representation of human nature that has been minimized by years of revision. That fear of darkness in the sacred is not limited to a Victorian audience, and the darkness that Wilde evokes in his text is only one facet of the production. Modern theatre artists have a responsibility to make the whole story, and especially its challenging and frightening aspects, resonate.

Wilde's *Salomé* is a retelling, not a rewriting. It presents a story of another time that was initially ingested (or rejected) through the lens of Victorian understanding. Elsewhere, I have discussed the complications in creating a Wilde play that is set outside of its prescribed time and place. *Salomé* is certainly an exception to almost all these complications. Even though this play is set in a very specific period with historical characters, the nature of the piece lends itself to adaptation and interpretation. Wilde could do with *Salomé* the same thing that modern theatre artists can do with his social comedies: provide an audience with a play that requires recognizing historical relativity. Yet what *Salomé* can do in terms of aesthetic distancing goes beyond Wilde's other plays, because the script lends itself to non-naturalism. Wilde's *Salomé* is one reimagining of one interpretation of the Salome story, and his script can function as a blueprint for modern theatre artists to develop their own retelling of the tale. Because of *Salomé*'s open nature, it demands of a director a vision beyond simply putting on stage what appears in the script. At the same time, it demands of the audience a rapid shift in expectations: this is not the average Wilde play, and the way in which the playwright communicates is far from the

naturalistic world of his social comedies. The original *Salomé* play appears as one point in a line of interpretation, and that spirit of storytelling is one that should be embraced—that is . . . embraced—by the experimental theatre community.

Chapter 5

Modernizing Wilde: Challenges of Updating the Classics

The popular choice to modernize classic drama has extended beyond Aristophanes and Shakespeare to include Oscar Wilde. On stage and on film, directors have been producing Wilde's social comedies in modernized settings while keeping a large percentage (if not all) of the original Victorian text. *Lady Windermere's Fan* in post-war London. *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1970s America. *An Ideal Husband* in modern-day New York City. The plot, characters, and language are essentially the same as in Wilde's original, but the scenic design, costuming, and staging suggest a specific, non-Victorian setting. This modernization as adaptation can be rewarding, but is commonly problematic. It is not a concept that should be approached lightly. Directors and theatres need to consider how inexorably tied the text is to the Victorian era, and they must consider their motives for modernizing in the first place.

It is understandable that directors are looking at modernizing Wilde. Working with a century-old text that is clearly imbedded in its original period can be intimidating, for theatre artists and for audiences. Although it is fairly undisputed that Wilde's themes and the questions he raises through his plays continue to be relevant to modern life, it is equally agreed upon that the specific references and anachronistic language can easily turn into a museum piece. Considering modernization also expands the conceptual possibilities for a production and helps the director answer the question "what makes this production unique?" The solution to the challenge of bringing a Victorian play to life for a modern audience is not necessarily answered by simply transplanted Wilde's text into a different time or place. In fact, attempts to modernize have met with mixed and lukewarm reviews.

As early as the 1920s, people were questioning the modernization of Wilde. An English production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* took Wilde's "present day" setting description to mean their own present day—that is, 1927. A review in *The Manchester Guardian* questioned the choice, which was common at the time, saying:

Thirty years on, one begins to feel that Wilde should be done in the costume of his period—that his wit today needs the backing of the atmosphere that gave it life and truth. ... Wilde's glittering and complex verbal felicities go ill with the shingle and the short skirt.⁷⁷

A more modern example is the 2008 *An Ideal Husband* produced by Red Fern Theatre Company, which placed the Victorian classic in contemporary New York City. *NY Theatre* reviewer Michael Mraz pinpoints the central problem with the modernization:

The update ... never quite seems necessary and, at times, makes the language and characterization a bit awkward. Most of the Wilde text is intact (and it is a wonderful, witty text), while here and there a contemporary word or reference is thrown in. However, every time one of these references is dropped, it sucks the wind out of Wilde's language and sticks out like a sore thumb. It also makes some of our main characters seem hopelessly out of time.⁷⁸

In each of these examples, the reviewer points out a problematic disconnect between setting and language. That argument reappears in reviews of other modernized productions and films, such as *A Good Woman* (based on *Lady Windermere's Fan*), in which "the Wilde-isms are finally more of a distraction, imported from another world and another genre."⁷⁹ *The New York Times* criticized a 2003 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for not trusting the language: "When actions speak much louder than its clever words, 'Earnest' becomes only half-witted."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ "The Importance of Being Earnest—a Case for Period Cosutnes," *The Manchester Times*, May 1, 1927. *The Guardian and Observer Digital Archive*.

⁷⁸ Michael Mraz, "An Ideal Husband," *NY Theatre*, 6 Nov. 2008.

⁷⁹ Derek Elley, "Review: *A Good Woman*," *Variety*, September 19, 2004.

⁸⁰ Lawrence Van Gelder, "Wilde's Victorian Wit Dumbed Down in Drag," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2003.

To borrow from an old phrase, you can take the play out of Victorian England, but you can't take the Victorian England out of the play. Even if a costume designer puts *A Woman of No Importance*'s Gerald Arbuthnot in a 1970s leisure suit, or if a props master equips *An Ideal Husband*'s scheming Mrs. Cheveley with an iPad, the play retains the traces of Wilde's time. The language and the characters bear the unmistakable brand of Victorian England. Turning Robert Chiltern (*An Ideal Husband*) into a Republican Senator, or depicting Algernon (*The Importance of Being Earnest*) as a hipster is disregarding the specificity of Wilde's text, trying to force the characters into roles they were never meant to fill.

Wilde's characters may not be as psychologically realistic as the Ninas and Torvalds of the theatre world, but that does not make more successful time-travelers. Psychological realism helps audiences draw connections across time and plays through the knowledge that humans are intrinsically the same throughout history. Wilde's characters, in contrast, are recognizable not because of their relatable human qualities, but because they are types, types that fit snugly into the Victorian world. The key to making period-pieces relatable and resonant is not a cell phones or a poodle skirt, but truthful acting and a completely understanding of and trust in the text and the historical context of the piece.

Although Wilde's characters are types, they are specifically Victorian types. They are what their society makes them. Their motives for action are dictated by the specifics of their lives. Each character, even those who go against the grain like Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, has a set of intrinsic values that has been hammered into them. Many values are ones we still recognize in today's society—that is one reason Wilde is so relatable—but we cannot pretend that they are identical. Modern-day society does not and cannot create those exact

same characters. While the general "type" prevails, the specificity that makes characters engaging is different.

Modernizers might argue that updating works because it demonstrates how nothing has changed and how Victorian stereotypes remain prominent in modern society. The connection of then and now is admirable, but transferring across time is not as simple as throwing the text onto a setting. A Victorian dandy is not exactly the same as a wealthy CEO's lay-about son. The two figures certainly do share commonalities, and as today's society is distinctly lacking in Victorian dandies, it is perhaps the most reasonable analogy to make. But the point remains that a Wilde dandy such as Algernon is not written as a modern rich boy, and without adapting Algernon beyond mere modernization, there remains a disconnect between his language and his character.

In many of Wilde's plays, modernization also creates issues with plot and believability. For example, what if the incriminating letter the Mrs. Cheveley possesses in *An Ideal Husband* were an email instead? The audience, having a very thorough working knowledge of how digital information can be manipulated and how emails can be accessed and duplicated will have to fight suspend their disbelief that a) Mrs. Cheveley is the only person in possession of this information and b) she does not have the blackmailing material in some other form that she might use later.

Believability of high stakes is complicated as well. The fact that Gerald Arbuthnot is an illegitimate child means something different in Victorian England than it does in modern America (namely that being born out of wedlock is not necessarily damning). It is, of course, possible to account for such discrepancies—considering a time and place (other than Victorian England) where illegitimacy is crucially important, for example—but it is irresponsible for a director to leave the stakes completely in the hands of the actors, however capable they may be.

The average audience member does not need to relate to or identify with the figures in Wilde's plays, but they do need to understand those characters. An actor can convince the audience that Mrs. Arbuthnot is genuinely preoccupied with the legitimacy of her son; but if that preoccupation seems illogical to a modern audience, as it might if set in a modern world, the audience views the character as illogical, a trait not present in Wilde's text.

Another example of an issue that arises in modernizing Wilde is that of cousins Jack and Gwendolyn becoming engaged in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What was then unremarkable is by most modern audiences considered to be socially unacceptable. Displacing Wilde's plays forces the audience to suspend disbelief not to challenge their minds, but to excuse the director and artistic team. In a modern production, it may take the audience out of the play in a spot Wilde did not intend, while the same moment in a period-piece production would be instantly accepted due to the understanding and acceptance of the distant time and place.

These challenges to modernization are not insurmountable, but before theatres even approach the logistics of actualizing the modernization, they should consider their motives carefully. One of the most common motives for modernizing a classic like Wilde's is a desire to represent a theatre as provocative and relevant. The question of how best to incorporate classic plays into a contemporary theatre's season deserves discussion, and modernizing the text is indeed one answer. It is passé, in some ways, to do a straight production of a classic play. Theatres are asking—as they should—*Why are we producing this play? What are we saying and doing that is new?* These are important questions to ask, but they can also create a trap. Time and again, the answer provided is to layer a concept or an interesting twist on top of a text, or (as is the case with modernization) place the text on top of a new context. There are two problems with such practices: this first is that it is an easy way out of developing an original take on the play.

The second is that modernization is a far more complex process than choosing a time and place and running with it.

Modernizing in the manner outlined above is an easy way out of developing a textually based concept and grappling with historical context and content. It is a way out of discovering what is enduring and provocative about this text as a text, without the added layers of what directors, designers, and actors may contribute. A Wilde play can stand on its own. It does require an artistic vision, purpose, skillful design, and orchestration, just like any well-crafted production. What it does not require is a general concept overlaid onto the text rather than incorporated into it. Modernization alone should not be the conceptual engine behind the production. Form should follow function. The play should not be molded into something it is not in order to conform to a concept—the concept should be molded to consider and compliment the text. This does not necessarily rule out modernization. It simply cautions that the idea to modernize should develop organically from the text, not from the box office suggesting that audiences would love a rock ‘n’ roll Wilde production.

Another common justification of modernizing Wilde is the claim that it benefits the audience. An example of this comes from the director of a 2013 production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which was set in 1947 London. The primary justification for the modernization was to keep the play from being a museum piece—the 1890s was, apparently, too historical.⁸¹ 1947, according to this director, was the perfect period to set the play, because it brought the play into the more-recent past while depicting an era in which Wilde's language would not yet be antiquated. The modernization made the play more accessible to audiences, providing them the needed assistance in seeing the relevance to today's world.

⁸¹ Alice T Carter, "Slightly Updated 'Lady Windermere's Fan' Keeps Oscar Wilde At Its Heart," *The Pittsburgh Tribune*, July 12, 2013.

The notion that modern audiences need that kind of assistance is unfair and insulting to patrons of the theatre. Modern audiences don't need to be coddled when watching a Wilde play. They don't need to see Sir Robert Chiltern's Parliament confession through a television monitor to understand that similar situations are present in their own societies. Theatre artists must trust their audiences to be smart. Audiences—whether they realize it or not—come to the theatre to have an experience consisting of more than sitting and looking. The audience's job, when they go to theatre, is to make connections between what they see on stage and what they see in life. Of course there are patrons who attend a play just for a night's entertainment, but part of what makes theatre exciting is the mental exertion the audience is expected to put forth. Modernization walks a fine line between thought-provoking and spoon-feeding; a production that tells audiences how the play is relevant to modern society is less engaging than one that suggests connections and allows audiences to fill in the gaps with their own personal experiences. The successful, stimulating modernization of Wilde's comedies is not impossible, but it takes care and consideration that appear to be lacking in many of the recent productions addressed at the start of this essay.

It is true that theatres must develop concepts for their productions. Choices must be made, and perhaps a modern setting would be more accessible to audiences than its Victorian counterpart. The play may be difficult for some audiences (although one of Wilde's appeals is how clean and sharp his words are), and steps must be taken to ensure a positive audience experience. Yes, it may be prudent to cut the names of specific gentleman's clubs, or to tweak terms that are not commonplace now. It may also be detrimental, as you lose some of the essential command and detail Wilde displays about this upper-crust, Victorian world. And a little aesthetic distancing is not always a bad thing.

Wilde's comedies are difficult to execute well. A part of that challenge certainly does lie in foreignness of the world of the play. But theatre artists must wrestle with the text and timing to create a worthwhile product rather than changing the setting to simplify the play. That does not mean that modernization is never a good idea, or that it cannot be done well. It means that modernization must be thought-out and complete. This might mean moving from general modernization into complete adaptation. What is important is that choices are justifiable, and that a modernization looks carefully at the disconnects that commonly arise and acknowledges them, questions them, and determines whether Wilde's text is truly being served.

Conclusion

When I first started this project, I imagined an anthology of Wilde's dramatic work with essays accompanying each play or fragment. I quickly realized, however, that I did not want to simply write introductions to the plays. Instead, I looked at the world of Wilde scholarship and considered which ideas I was most interested in discussing. What I saw was a lot of biography and exploration of Wilde as an individual. Wilde's charisma and personality is what initially drew me to read his work years ago, so I found it completely understandable that his life was a primary topic of scholarship. I also saw the anthologies whose introductions covered basic historical context and perhaps a small amount of general commentary— that *An Ideal Husband* is about political corruption, for instance, or that *A Woman of No Importance* is about the double-standards that limit women in society. And finally, I found a world of analysis of Wilde's writing itself, which approached his literary work with different frameworks and lenses. Wading through the products of Wilde scholars led me away from creating an anthology of his dramatic works and toward developing broader and more complicated ideas through a series of essays. That is what I hope I accomplished through this collection.

Reaching this goal has proved to be a challenging process in many different ways. As I mentioned earlier, this project underwent several structural changes over its yearlong development, shifting from anthology to play introductions to a collection of thematically similar essays on topics I find compelling and relevant. There was also the ever-existing problem of scope. Wilde studies itself is a growing field, a part of the vast Venn diagram of Western literature. How does Wilde fit into the context of his Victorian contemporaries? What imprint did he leave on the English comedy writers who followed? How do Wilde's plays create a dialectic with the heavyweights of modern drama? Each of these questions opens additional threads of

inquiry beyond the scope of this essay collection. From the beginning, there has never been a moment I worried there was nothing to write about. The question was how to choose.

The purpose of this thesis, beyond my own education and development as a scholar, has been to write essays that are aimed at bringing literary and historical scholarship to a more general audience. Specifically, this meant approaching Wilde's theatrical canon from a dramaturgical point of view, examining the plays with their theatrical context at the forefront of my mind. While not all of the essays focus on production methods like Chapter 5 ("From *Dorian Gray* to *Earnest*") or play-specific history like Chapter 4 ("The Exception of the 1890s"), each was crafted to be accessible and engaging to scholars, students, and artists alike. Each should provide illumination but also encourage questions and conversation. That is the imprint of my dramaturgical training: connecting good scholarship and academic rigor to a practical and accessible use. My work on these essays strives toward that goal, rather than providing a textbook discussion of Wilde's plays.

As I move forward in my personal research, I intend to continue Wilde studies, particularly in relation to theatrical production. Wilde's comedies are classics of the Western theatrical canon that deserve careful consideration in production. Artistic interpretation is fostered and enhanced by analytical and academic study. Bringing the two together—scholarship and performance—is key to creating work that pushes boundaries within the limits of the text. Though his plays are over a century old, we cannot assume that we know all there is to know or that everything has been done already. There is a need to continue studying these plays and this playwright, both through academic scholarship and dramaturgically through performance. Wilde's plays belong on the stage, and it is my hope that these essays, and essays like them, help theatre artists produce smart and informed productions. Wilde's plays have within them the

potential to explore the past, exhibit the present, and pose questions about the future. More than that, they allow readers, artists, and audiences to play. Our job, then, is to channel *Earnest's* Algernon and Wilde himself, and to play with wonderful expression.

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