Performing the Victorian

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Contemporary theater exhibits a fascination with Victorian culture as a vehicle to explore current concerns. The 1990s and early 2000s have brought us several blockbuster musicals based on Victorian materials, such as an opulent revival of *The King and I* (1996), the pop phenomenon *Jekyll and Hyde* (1997), followed less successfully by *Jane Eyre: The Musical* (2000), *Dracula* (2004), and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s mediocre but well-received *The Woman in White* (2004). Both *The King and I* and *Jane Eyre* reach back to their nineteenth-century sources for examples of spirited feminism, appealing strongly to turn-of-the-twenty-first-century audiences. Plays showcasing the wit and tragedy of Oscar Wilde, such as off-Broadway’s *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997) and *The Judas Kiss* (1998), have found an avid audience. These plays highlight Wilde’s iconic function in contemporary culture as the definitive victim of homophobia and the founding father of gay identity. More surprisingly, the life story of Ruskin has inspired two major American stage adaptations that offer a feminist reading of the Victorian era, indicting a patriarchal Ruskin for his marriage’s failure. While playing to more limited audiences than either the hugely popular musicals based on nineteenth-century stories or the widely performed plays about Wilde, both the 1995 opera *Modern Painters* and the 1999 hit off-Broadway play *The Countess* succeeded, one at the packed open-air opera venue in Santa Fe, the other with enthusiastic New York audiences. These two pairs of shows about Wilde and Ruskin that
premiered between 1995 and 1999 highlight the cultural work of contemporary theater to help mold our understanding of ourselves. Tom Stoppard’s acclaimed *The Invention of Love* (1997) also brings both Ruskin and Wilde—as well as its protagonist A. E. Housman—to the stage.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Ruskin’s importance in his own time can hardly be overestimated. His ideas influenced Victorian artists, architects, writers, and social theorists, promoting economic and educational reforms, defending Turner, advancing the Gothic revival, inspiring and championing the Pre-Raphaelites, and indirectly starting the Arts and Crafts movement. Among his most famous acolytes were William Morris, Charlotte Brontë, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mahatma Gandhi, who translated into Gujarati *Unto this Last*, the book Gandhi credited with changing his life. In 1906 the founding group of twenty-nine Labour MPs identified *Unto this Last* as the book that most influenced them, more so even than Marx. But despite the fact that three towns in the United States are named for Ruskin, hardly anyone in America outside of the academy now knows who he was. His relevance, according to current staged versions of his life, is as a sexually repressed and patriarchal madman. Even Ruskin’s renowned eloquence, even his recognized status within these dramas as someone important to the history of ideas, serves only to emphasize his prudish chauvinism. In both cases, Ruskin’s purpose is to allow contemporary audiences to feel good about how far we have come since 1854. As John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff explain in *Victorian Afterlife* about other texts and authors, at work here is “postmodernism’s privileging of the Victorians as its historical ‘other’” (xi). Theater’s glance back at Victorian sexuality allows ours to stand out in greater relief; indeed, these revisions construct a teleology in which present-day sexual relations and sex roles are quite simply more advanced than the Victorians’. Thousands of audience members viewing Ruskin’s repression as quintessentially Victorian find it easy to feel self-righteously complacent about today’s more relaxed sexual attitudes. We construct an identity of liberation antithetical to a fictional Victorian identity, creating an illusion of progressiveness based on a false sense of how far we have come.

In contrast to plays about Ruskin, the recent plays about Wilde that I discuss here offer a model for contemporary audiences to emulate in crafting identities that make room for the possibility of gay existence. Whereas Ruskin on stage acts the pathologically repressed prude allotting us a position of superiority, Wilde on stage acts the archly urbane defender of same-sex love whose apotheosis establishes the viability of gay identity validated by his self-sacrifice. Unlike general audiences at plays about Ruskin, most theater-goers know something of Wilde’s own work. They typically have read or at least
have encountered a reworking of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or have seen a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest,* perhaps even in high school. Movie and television adaptations abound, as do theatrical re-imaginings. While Wilde’s famous epigrams and familiar aesthetic philosophy enter the dialogue of the plays I discuss here, it is not his writing, any more than Ruskin’s, that makes him important in depictions on the turn of the millennium stage, but representations of his sexuality. As valuable a service as such cultural work is in depicting what Martha Ertman calls the “poster child” for gay identity (153), these plays diminish the complexity of their subject. The historical Wilde’s sexuality defies easy categorization and his understanding of his own tragedy has as much to do with losing his art and his children as with suffering martyrdom for love of men. As with Ruskin, Wilde’s usefulness now as stage character depends on pinning him down, flattening him out, taming the wildness—so to speak—of his self-consciously performed persona.

All five shows depend upon a sense of historical accuracy for their appeal, even the Brechtian *Gross Indecency* and even *The Invention of Love,* which takes place in a dream state. All derive their illusory aura of authenticity from the use of life-writing; in addition, both *Gross Indecency* and more briefly the opera *Modern Painters* rely on trial records, highlighting the devastating effect of legal intervention in these men’s lives. Unlike the fantastical *The Invention of Love,* *Modern Painters* and the play *The Countess* draw from Ruskin’s and his wife Effie Gray’s letters and diaries as well as from Ruskin’s autobiography and criticism to depict the Ruskins’ miserable wedded life; likewise, *Gross Indecency* and, to a much lesser extent, *The Judas Kiss* pluck dialogue and incidents from Wilde’s letters, criticism, and historical documents. Appropriately for both Wilde and Ruskin, all of these shows blur to one degree or another the boundary between criticism and art. Yet, in adapting texts that are about ideas into staged representations of a life, all five plays result finally in plots concerning domestic interaction rather than the questions of art and social justice that animate Ruskin’s and Wilde’s own work. All reify current notions of sexual identity as a basic category of existence at the expense of recognizing either nineteenth-century ontological categories or the slipperiness of such categories over time. None of these performances quite fits either Ruskin’s or Wilde’s conception of performative identity.

**Realism and Feminism off Broadway**

Directed and produced by Ludovica Villar-Hauser, this small costume drama ran for over six hundred performances. The Countess depicts the disintegration of Ruskin and Effie Gray’s marriage and the mounting attraction between Effie and their friend, the young Pre-Raphaelite painter whom Ruskin mentored, John Everett Millais, deserving the New York Times’s comment that the play is “erotically charged” (E1). A straightforward, accessible, realistic drama, The Countess focuses tightly on a very short period of Ruskin’s life, from June 1853 to April 1854. While Ruskin omitted his six-year marriage from his autobiography Praeterita altogether, the play uses other kinds of life writing with meticulous care.

Of course, the play takes poetic license for dramatic effect, dropping characters, imagining witty conversation and unrecorded sexual advances, but it follows recorded facts we have about these private lives surprisingly closely. The Countess includes myriad details from published letters and sketches, most notably those found in Mary Lutyens’s book Millais and the Ruskins. Any scholar familiar with these materials will find their continual echoes throughout the script almost eerie, but the temptation to judge these plays based on their factual correctness is a mistake. They do not aspire to the condition of scholarship: they contain no footnotes; they are not
published by university presses. Like the opera Modern Painters, The Countess encourages the audience to take Effie’s side against Ruskin; he comes across in this play as cruel and manipulative. Members of the audience audibly gasp and even hiss when Ruskin berates Effie and disdains her physical person. Those knowledgeable about the importance of the historical Ruskin’s cultural contributions often watch with an increasingly heavy heart while the play’s Ruskin behaves in such an abominably controlling way; some want to defend or excuse the historical Ruskin, futilely taking sides in a case that was decided 150 years ago. The Countess even sparked a hot exchange of letters to the Editor in the New York Times. The power of these productions to incite such a reaction is the very reason to remind ourselves of something obvious: the Ruskin and Effie and Millais in New York or Santa Fe are literary personae, interpreted on stage. Such a play or opera asks us to consider what happens when historical personages become characters, when their own written words become dialogue, when their self-representations become dramas.

Part of the fun of any show based on a true story is that it is supposed to be true. But as representations of history, such plays are at least as false as the letters, diaries, and autobiographies that they come from. While this point may be apparent to literary critics, to many in the audience, the fictionality of life writing is an unfamiliar notion. When giving post-performance remarks after productions of The Countess to audiences eager to know more about Ruskin’s life, I have found it necessary to explain that no one claims that Effie, Millais, and Ruskin lied in narrating these events so crucial to their reputations and their happiness, just that their written experiences come to us as artificial constructs, recalled after the fact and related in artfully crafted words, prepared with rhetorical appeal to persuade readers to understand and agree that each was right in what he or she did. Even diaries involve an effort to make sense of one’s own actions, to clarify motivation, if only to oneself. As James Olney and others have shown, life-writing of all kinds brims with self-justification, failed memories, and misrepresentations. So the first thing to say about all these plays based on autobiography is that their attractive sense of authoritativeness is illusory. This must be true even of the renditions most faithful to their source texts.

In addition, there remains a problem that historians are very familiar with, but that play-going audiences may not realize: any particular collection of manuscripts is pre-selected for the researcher by the collectors. In this case, the group of documents now at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York known as the Bowerswell papers, on which Gregory Murphy based The Countess,
include many manuscripts by Effie, Millais, Ruskin, and their families and friends. But they came from the home of Effie’s parents in Bowerswell, Scotland. The choice of documents Effie’s family collected reflects their concern with vindicating the Grays’ and Millaises’ actions regarding the Ruskins’ annulment and the Millaises’ marriage. While in Britain or America today a wife’s decision to sue for annulment of an unconsummated marriage to one famous man and subsequent marriage to another would not require much justification, the Millaises and Grays certainly felt strongly the need to safeguard their relatives’ reputations. They conscientiously gathered whatever materials they could in that cause.

Beyond the illusion of authenticity provided by basing a play on life-writing, the realistic genre in drama presents additional complexities. A realistic play’s nonexistent fourth wall heightens the effect of verisimilitude because the audience observes seemingly unmediated action. Paradoxically, realistic drama feels more objective than the first-person account of a letter or diary or autobiography. When we pick up documents written by husband and wife in the middle of their marriage’s collapse, we would be naive to imagine they write objectively. But when we watch a play unfold, though based on the same letters, the action comes to us as though unbiased by which hand recorded which incident. But added to the biases inherent in
the source material are the playwright's selections and omissions for dramatic effect, satisfying our expectations for a realistic plot with tidy cause and effect, clear motivations, and psychological verity. Yet such neatness does not exist in life and certainly does not exist in the cacophony of voices percolating in the self-representations of Ruskin, Effie, and Millais. What adds to the audience's sense of realism and objectivity in the portrayal of history is another layer of mediation created by the writer between the historical figures and the performers' action.

Along with the false sense of objectivity that comes with dramatizing autobiography, there is a strange immediacy in the theater that makes an actress playing a real historical person, such as Effie Gray Ruskin, seem more real than the long-dead Effie we meet in her own letters, now obscured by the thick interference of a century and a half gone by. This impression of reality in the theater operates very strongly. The director creates a vision of truth. A living woman a few feet away speaks and schemes and kisses and argues and cries. The audience, transported into an imagined past by the actors' talent or the playwright's skill, willingly forgets how much the most painstaking historical portrayal is still an illusion. For example, Tara Millais, a descendant of Effie's and John Everett Millais's and thus a living embodiment of Effie's DNA, spoke of how wonderful it was in watching this play to see her great-great-grandmother brought to life.13 The unrelated actress's craft creates a palpable illusion of reality.

Evidence that the play uses its realism to reject Victorian patriarchy abounds. The play shows Ruskin and his parents unsympathetically as they try to dominate Effie, dramatizing how powerless she is legally as a married woman in early 1850s England.14 Likewise it demonstrates the problems that arise when people receive too little education in sexual matters, as no doubt happened much more frequently in nineteenth-century Britain than now; there is a certain irony to this, considering that later in his life, Ruskin writes advocating sex education for girls and boys, as we discussed in chapter 3 (34.529). The play reveals, through Ruskin's disillusioned reaction to Effie, that a cultural idealization of women hampers real relationships; conversely, it makes the modern feminist point that when women internalize the dominant culture's expectations for their bodies and find they can not measure up, they believe they are physically defective, inadequate, deformed. In addition, the play provides a strong woman character, Lady Eastlake, who recognizes that there is nothing wrong with Effie, encouraging her to leave Ruskin. Finally, the play's plot provides Effie with the strength to achieve her freedom.

Nevertheless, the play finally does reinforce the Victorian social arrangements and even the Victorian ideology it portrays, more in its
characterization of Effie than of Ruskin. Indeed, the realism and the cachet of authenticity achieved by adapting autobiographical materials perhaps mark the play as patriarchal, despite the playwright Greg Murphy’s stated effort to the contrary. The clearest example is that the play ends by having Effie leave her husband so that she can marry Millais, reinforcing the marriage plot. More pervasively, Effie remains extremely decorous and domestic throughout, acting uneasy in situations that could be construed as compromising; her discomfort protects her position as a gentlewoman in the eyes of the audience because it proves she is not wanton. She spends her time on needlework and sketching, thoroughly suitable nineteenth-century feminine behavior. Effie is visibly agitated in trying to discuss sex even with her champion Lady Eastlake. Her likableness for the audience depends not on her bucking Victorian convention, but on her being a victim of it. The play does not include the historical Effie’s flirtatiousness, her love of parties and gallery openings, the duel challenged over her stolen jewels, the young Austrian officer who squired Effie about Venice while Ruskin was busy writing or sketching, not only because of theatrical time constraints, not only because of focus on the love story between Millais and Effie, but also because these incidents would not show Effie in the light of the oppressed Victorian angel in the house. Outside of that role, as depicted in this play, she would lose even the turn of the twenty-first-century audience’s intense sympathy.

The contemporary audience loves Effie because she satisfies all their expectations for a Victorian heroine. Even the protagonists of Victorian novels take more gambles sexually than this late twentieth-century play gives Effie: virtually any novel by George Eliot or Thomas Hardy will provide examples. *The Countess* does not risk the possibility of ambiguity for her, as though anyone other than a spotless paragon might not work within the Victorian context for a present-day audience. Other than a passionate and guilt-ridden kiss, the play goes to considerable lengths to resist anything that could sully her within imagined Victorian judgment. In other words, the play commits the same “sin” that it claims Ruskin does, idealizing Effie. So even though Murphy’s stated intent is to defend Effie not only from her Victorian detractors, but also from her twentieth-century biographers, to help us understand how isolated and frustrated she must have felt (in which he succeeds admirably), the play exculpates Effie and condemns Ruskin exclusively within current understanding of Victorian terms.

While the play’s defense of Effie as a vindication of her right to a fulfilling sex life seems tremendously modern and feminist and certainly correct, it is in fact no more than what Victorian society had already granted: Effie got her annulment, and Ruskin got ridiculed. So while Murphy suc-
cessfully shows Effie’s untenable position with Ruskin and highlights Victorian women’s vulnerability within marriage, it breaks no new ground; indeed, it recuperates Effie in the most old-fashioned way imaginable. For many years Queen Victoria refused to allow the quasi-divorced Mrs. Millais to be presented at court, relenting only when Millais lay dying; the play signals Effie’s vindication by having the Queen finally receive her. The play is as patriarchal as the Victorian world it recreates, not only on stage but also in the approving mind of the audience. Perhaps more troubling to admit is that the erotic charge for present-day audiences observed by The New York Times surely depends in part upon the patriarchal Victorian setting: the triangle involving an abusive and powerful husband, a legally vulnerable and neglected wife, and a devoted and impetuous young lover needs the perceived power dynamics of Victorian gender relations to maintain the same erotic appeal. In twenty-first-century Britain or America, Effie Gray would not be legally bound to obey her husband, and John Ruskin would not be trapped without possibility of divorce. In chapter 1 I discussed the historical Ruskin’s concern that the surrogate outrage we experience at theatrical presentations can dull our intention to make material improvements for social justice outside the theater; that point might well serve as a critique of the compromised feminist outcome of The Countess.

Aspiring to the Condition of Music

Even people familiar with the tragic soap opera of Ruskin’s love life probably never imagined that it would become the topic of a real opera, but with 1995’s world premiere at the prestigious Santa Fe Opera, it did. Modern Painters not only tells the story of Ruskin’s marriage and its notorious dissolution, but also chronicles his doomed love for the very young Rose La Touche, whom it depicts as only thirteen (rather than eighteen) when he proposes marriage; in addition it recounts the disastrous Whistler trial, in which the young American Impressionist painter James Whistler sued the influential art critic over a bad review, exacerbating the aging writer’s increasingly severe bouts of mental illness. The Santa Fe Opera commissioned composer David Lang, best known for co-founding the “Bang on a Can Music Festival” in New York, and librettist Manuella Hoelterhoff, the Pulitzer-Prize winning culture critic for the Wall Street Journal. Francesca Zambella directed, having just won the Laurence Olivier Award for a production at the English National Opera. It received positive reviews from Vogue and the Village Voice, but has not been produced since. The opera is a musically
minimalist yet philosophically expansive look at all of Ruskin’s adulthood, less factually accurate than The Countess but more committed to communicating the beauty of Ruskin’s language, organized more thematically than chronologically. Although it is very odd to think of an opera as an adaptation of critical texts, this one largely is. Besides some quotations from the autobiography Praeterita, characters often sing lush passages directly from Ruskin’s criticism, including Modern Painters (1843–1860), The Stones of Venice (1851–53), The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1848), The Crown of Wild Olive (1866), Unto this Last (1860), Sesame and Lilies (1865), and Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century (1884). But perhaps it should not surprise us, since Wilde already tells us that “criticism . . . is the only civilized form of autobiography” (1027).

Very different issues arise in adapting autobiography to a Masterpiece Theater-like costume drama than to an opera, rarely a realistic form. As a genre it revels in artificiality, often highlighting virtuosity over content, always subordinating words to music. Of course, a realistic play is also a study in artifice and convention; William Demastes, Brian Richardson, and others point out that what defines a play as realistic or not changes over time and across cultures. Nevertheless, as a genre today, realistic drama depends upon the audience’s acceptance of these established conventions (linear time, reasonable cause and effect, plausible plot, likely dialogue, ignoring the audience), as marking it somehow true to life. In contrast, opera traditionally depends upon the audience’s expectation of grandeur and excess. Although some of the same issues of authenticity arise in watching an opera based on life-writing as in a play, the historical accuracy of an opera does not increase its appeal to the same degree. Opera promises extravagant emotion and mythic circumstances, no matter how prosaic the narrative it presents. Far from creating an illusion of greater objectivity than its autobiographical sources, Modern Painters—with its stylized sets, lengthy arias, and richly metaphorical language—seems outside discussions of subjective and objective portrayal of real events. Neither does opera offer the same sense of immediacy that a realistic play does; the medium acts as a buffer between the audience and the character, no matter how good the acting and singing, because the conventions of realism do not include song as a likely mode of conversation. Far from following the record as rigorously as The Countess, Modern Painters radically rearranges chronology, changes facts, and combines circumstances. Highlighting some of Ruskin’s most purple prose as lyrics, its creators concentrate more on transmitting the poetry of Ruskin’s language than in telling his story.
The opera takes its title from Ruskin’s magisterial five-volume analysis of J. M. W. Turner and many other artists, which he wrote over seventeen years, from 1843 to 1860, documenting his own intellectual development as well as offering a fount of social, mythological, and (as I have shown in chapter 1) opera criticism. However, the opera’s seven scenes are organized around the chapter titles of another of Ruskin’s famous books, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, published in 1849, soon after Ruskin’s marriage began. The seven lamps are Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, and Obedience. The opera provides little direct relationship between its action and the seven elements Ruskin describes as necessary for a nation’s healthy architecture, but as abstract terms they resonate thematically with the subject matter of each of the roughly chronological episodes from Ruskin’s life. The result of naming and structuring the creative work after the critical suggests that Matthew Arnold was in this respect right: criticism provides the stream of ideas for artists, quite literally. The opera also dramatizes art as criticism and criticism as art, almost as though the subject matter were Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” insinuating that the boundary between the two is meaningless. In addition the show implies that opera is structured like architecture: it is meant to last, to be worthy of sacrifice, to be a monument and a living, inhabitable cathedral of music, meant as much for future generations as for us. In organizing their opera along the *Seven Lamps*, Lang and Hoelterhoff make a very grand claim.
Nevertheless, although beguiled by the beauty of Ruskin’s writing and the significance of his ideas, the creators are faced with the fact that what is opera-worthy about Ruskin is the story of his scandalous marriage and the other personal tragedies of his life. The show reveals the tension between their fascination with his language and their attraction to his dirty laundry in that the opera’s best moments appear in the juxtaposition of Ruskin’s riveting words to a wildly dramatic version of his private troubles.

While *The Countess* reveals the calamitous wedding night retrospectively, only in Effie’s halting confession of misery to her older friend Lady Eastlake, *Modern Painters* symbolically renders the failed nuptials in the second scene, “Truth,” where it portrays Ruskin’s idealization of women as the reason for his marriage’s collapse. The scene opens with the wedding dinner, showing Effie and her parents eating with the Ruskins. The singers create a cacophony that Ruskin ends by simply ringing his glass: he rises alone to toast Effie as his future wife, as though oblivious to the commotion.24 The strings here intensify the sweetness and romance of his gesture. He sings: “I dreamt of a woman like an angel / who brought peace into my home, / In her presence all division disappeared” (11). Ruskin’s words in the libretto recall “Of Queens’ Gardens” (18.122). Of course, that essay was in fact written seventeen years later with Rose, not Effie, in mind.25

This toast is the segue to Ruskin and Effie’s wedding night. In their bedroom, the young couple tells each other what they expect from life together: she a round of costume balls and gallery openings; he a rigorous work schedule. Ironically, historically and in the opera, both get exactly what in this duet they say they want. What they don’t get is a physical relationship. As Effie pleads with him to come to bed, Ruskin reads aloud from a book, intoning lyrically to Effie of a beautiful woman:

She lies on her pillow, a hound at her feet
Her arms folded softly over her breast
Her dress is simple, of medieval style,
with flowing drapery, marble white.
Around her head a fillet of flowers. (12)

However, this blossom-crowned beauty lying on a pillow is not Effie, and she knows it. In fact, although the audience never discovers her identity, Ruskin’s pretty song describes a statue on a tomb; the woman’s white pillow is marble; she sleeps in her grave. The book he reads from is his own *Modern Painters*, which describes the funeral effigy.26 Ruskin does not even look at Effie in her nightgown as he recalls this deathly figure—probably
a good thing, since Ruskin has suffered enough bad press sexually without adding necrophilia to the list. Instead, the bridegroom reads himself to sleep, fully clothed, serenading his lovely homage to the cold sculpture of a long-dead Renaissance woman, while the living wife covers her face on their unhappy bridal bed.

In *The Countess* Ruskin describes the same sculpture, this time to Millais, emphasizing more fleshly details: “One day we will go to Lucca, and I’ll show you della Quercia’s sculpture of Ilaria di Caretto. You will not believe the perfect sweetness of her lips and closed eyes, or the way her dress folds closely beneath the curve of her breasts” (12). Both playwright and librettist see in this passage, based on an 1845 letter to Ruskin’s father, a key to Ruskin’s debilitating idealization of women. Hoelterhoff suggests that Ruskin envisions abstracted beauty, whereas Murphy views it in palpably physical terms. He considers Ruskin’s focus on the sculpture analogous to problems men still have with unrealistic expectations about women’s bodies: Murphy mentioned in interview that today men are taught to want tall, thin models rather than alabaster effigies, but the idea is the same.

This almost anatomical interpretation of Ruskin’s idealization of women certainly works both biographically and dramatically as a way to understand Ruskin’s disillusionment with his wife once he saw her naked. However, while the opera and the play try to work out Ruskin’s private woes by pinning his ideal of womanhood to a marble statue, the empowering effect of his gender mythology on Victorian women (other than Effie) goes unnoticed. When Ruskin writes about housewives’ queenship in “Of Queens’ Gardens,” he concerns himself with redefining and enlarging the domestic sphere so that women will take on greater responsibility outside the home. Seth Koven and others have shown how Victorian feminists found Ruskin’s ideas useful. Likewise, when Ruskin advances a progressive education for girls, he promotes their equal schooling with boys. Contrary to what the play and opera depict, the historical Ruskin’s ideal for the identity “woman” concerned what women should do rather than how they should look.

The final scene in *Modern Painters,* “Obedience,” stages a lecture famously described by A. E. Housman. Ruskin takes a beautiful landscape by J. M. W. Turner, depicting an English scene from before it was polluted by heavy industrialization, and paints ugly modern additions—including smoke, factories, railroads, and prisons—onto the glass that covers the painting, completely disfiguring its beauty. Housman describes this lecture as brilliant and its effect on students at Oxford as electrifying, but the opera presents it as the ravings of a mad seer failing to convince a crowd of jeering workers (contrary
to the historical Ruskin’s overwhelmingly positive reception by working-class readers). The libretto’s method of describing alternately the wretched state of the environment and the appalling condition of the workers’ lives—lifting passages from *The Crown of Wild Olive, The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, and Unto this Last*—underscores Ruskin’s link between a just society and a healthy ecology. Yet Ruskin’s song turns into an incantatory mumbling as he goes from singing repeatedly, “There is no wealth but life,” to chanting “Blackened sun, blighted grass, blinded man” (31), signifying his final insanity.

In both the first and the last scenes, Ruskin futilely addresses working men, first to prevent their demolishing a beautiful building, later to educate them about art and ecology. In each case, the workers dismiss Ruskin as insane, just as the press really had rejected Ruskin’s social activism as the preaching of “a mad governess” (17.xxviii). The opera follows suit, depicting a feminized Ruskin. The practical, burly workmen with hammers and menacing voices come across as masculine compared to the aesthetic, moralistic, idealistic, and poetic Ruskin, weak and ineffective. Likewise, in comparison to the opera’s virile Millais, who imagines himself as a medieval knight on horseback in armor rescuing Effie, who then fathers eight children during his enthusiastically consummated marriage with Ruskin’s neglected bride, the opera emasculates Ruskin. Even in comparison to the lively Effie, who verbally castrates her former husband by shrieking her revenge, Ruskin is feminized. The emasculation is made explicit in the spoken line “He is impotent,” cut from the opera before its premiere because the audience tittered.

The ultimate potency in this opera resides in Ruskin’s words. The best moment in the opera is the very last. The Santa Fe Opera House is outdoors; the audience sits in the open air at night in the high desert. The lights of Los Alamos shimmer like fireflies in the distant background behind the stage, while a women’s chorus quietly chants one of Ruskin’s most famous lines about Turner: “It is the living light which sleeps but never dies” (3.308). But now it is the light of Ruskin’s language that never dies, as we hear him cry out the famous firefly passage from the end of his autobiography *Praeterita*:

How they shone!

As I entered the town through the gleaming gate
bright, silver hued
and I felt inside me
a light more intense than the stars. . . . (32)
The stage darkens around Ruskin; light in the center brightens, and suddenly he is gone, dropped off the back of the stage, like Tosca. While the opera’s focus on sexual dysfunction obscures subtle gender subversion in Ruskin’s prose, nevertheless, these rich passages reinvest Ruskin with the power of his own vigorous imagery. The feminized man—now stripped of any meaningful gender—has become most potent as the disembodied spoken word, reverberating on the empty stage bathed in white light.

RUSKIN AND WILDE IN THE UNDERWORLD

Stoppard’s brilliant and very funny play The Invention of Love, about A. E. Housman’s youth at Oxford, includes both Ruskin and Wilde as characters. Directed by Richard Eyre, The Invention of Love opened at the National Theatre in London on September 25, 1997 and moved to the West End’s Haymarket Theatre shortly afterwards. It premiered in the United States in 2000 at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, and arrived on Broadway at the Lyceum Theater, March 29, 2001; it has had numerous productions since.32 Not a realistic play, The Invention of Love takes place in Hades with flashbacks to Oxford. Its characters are dead or are remembered in their college days by the dying Housman; two actors play the protagonist, allowing the old Housman to react to, comment on, and even to converse with his younger self.33 Stoppard’s play chronicles the old Housman’s realization that perhaps he should have had the courage to declare openly his love for the young heterosexual Moses Jackson at Oxford for whom he wrote poetry, instead of burying himself in the classicism that formed the bulk of his life’s work.

Covertly introduced in the play’s opening seconds by an allusion to one of his Oxford lectures, Ruskin drifts on and off stage, playing croquet with fellow don and aesthete Walter Pater. Both wear angel wings as they discourse decoratively on art, life, and society. Unlike the patriarchal tyrant of The Countess or the pitiable, impotent pedophile of Modern Painters, this Ruskin is hilariously pretentious, declaring, “I have announced the meaning of life in my lectures” (15).34 Referring to his utopian social project of St. George’s Guild, Stoppard’s Ruskin cares more about his undergraduate student’s prettiness than any principles of social justice. Ruskin says:

I had my students up at dawn building a flower-bordered road across a swamp. . . . There was an Irish exquisite, a great slab of a youth with white hands and long poetical hair who said he was glad to say he had never seen
a shovel, but I . . . taught that work with one's hands is the beginning of virtue. Then I went sketching to Venice and the road sank into the swamp. My protegé rose at noon to smoke cigarettes and read French novels, and Oxford reverted to a cockney watering-place for learning to row. (15)

While the historical Ruskin really did set his students to road-building and really did make the crack about Oxford as a place for learning to row (22.274), Stoppard’s Ruskin is a clever maker of empty aphorisms. He resembles a Gilbert and Sullivan parody of Oscar Wilde more than the passionate moralist critics recognize; indeed the character of Bunthorne from their operetta *Patience* also makes a cameo appearance in this play, appropriately before the “real” Wilde shows up. Very different from *The Countess* or *Modern Painters*, this depiction of Ruskin leaves out women completely; instead of fearing women or repressing desire for them, he displaces onto art an attraction for the “Irish Exquisite” we recognize as Wilde. But Ruskin’s utility in Stoppard’s play is not that far off finally from *The Countess* and *Modern Painters*. Ruskin acts the warped and faded aesthete, too wrapped up in rigid theories of beauty or impractical social experiments to pay attention to what genuinely matters, which in the dead or dying Housman’s estimation is sex after all. Moreover, *The Invention of Love* portrays Ruskin as puritanical and hypocritical. In an even more sinister note, in the National Theatre production, the actor playing Ruskin also plays the M.P. Labouchere, whose earlier legislation against acts of “gross indecency” between men resulted in Wilde’s conviction and imprisonment.

The historical Wilde, who overlapped with Housman at college, also studied with both Ruskin and Pater, remaining friends with them afterwards (Ellmann 47–52). Not only did Wilde and Ruskin go to the theater together, but also they were sufficiently intimate that Oscar and his wife, Constance, asked Ruskin to be godfather to their son Vyvyan. Ruskin declined, saying he was too old, as indeed in 1886, at the age of sixty-seven and only a few years away from complete disability, he was (Ellmann 266; Amor 61). In the play, Stoppard’s desiccated Ruskin becomes a backboard against which we bounce our own superiority. In contrast, Stoppard assigns Wilde a much more positive role, making the flamboyant wit into a model both for Housman and for the audience. At the end of the play, Wilde at last appears in person. He has been talked about—perfectly appropriate to Wildean practice—all throughout the play. He arrives to be ferried across the Styx. With instructions to pick up “a scholar and a poet,” Charon has been waiting since the very first scene for a second passenger, despite Housman’s emphatic assurances that no second passenger would show up, sure that he is both the scholar and the poet. Wilde’s appearance in Hades vindicates the ferryman and sug-
gests that Housman is more scholar than poet, more repressed than liberated, more closeted than out. In the set of binaries implicit here, Wilde’s claim to identity as poet is at one with his identity as gay.

Wilde talks glibly about art and what he has learned from Ruskin. He declares, “I banged Ruskin’s and Pater’s heads together, and from the moral severity of one and the aesthetic soul of the other I made a philosophy that can look the twentieth-century in the eye” (96). But Wilde’s foundational modernism in art and aesthetics is conflated with his bravery in loving Lord Alfred Douglas, known as Bosie. Although in college and for many years afterward until 1886 the historical Wilde had sexual relations only with women (Ellman 277), most of the characters in *The Invention of Love* and indeed the play itself equate the aesthetic long-haired Wilde’s plum-colored breaches with practices that they variously call “spooniness” (40), “beastliness” (7), or “buggery” (17). As we shall see in a moment with *Gross Indecency*, this requires us not only to read backward from our twentieth/twenty-first century vantage point in which a gay identity category already exists but also to assume that all the sex Wilde had in the years before his first homosexual experience with Robbie Ross at the age of thirty-three somehow did not count. In other words, in this play even the undergraduate Wilde symbolizes daring in same-sex love as much as new ideas in art. As Stoppard’s Wilde says to Housman of both love and poetry: “Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light” (96).

*The Invention of Love* conjures Ruskin only to dismiss him as impotent (94), as making virtue into a vice (93), as too removed from real feeling to be of any use at all. In contrast, Oscar Wilde appears as the example of what Housman could have done, had he the courage to choose illicit love and its poetry over scholarship. Ruskin, along with Pater and Jowett, represents the latter, the sublimation of sexuality into erudition and dry aesthetics. Again Ruskin—even for Stoppard—serves to establish through opposition postmodern identities as sexually and socially liberated; Stoppard’s Wilde, on the other hand, articulates his own contribution explicitly: “The blaze of my immolation threw its light into every corner of the land where uncounted young men sat each in his own darkness. I awoke the imagination of the century” (96) to the identity of the homosexual.

**Wilde’s Trials**

*Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, written and directed by Moisés Kaufman, premiered with great success off Broadway at the Greenwich House theater in 1997, transferring to the larger Minetta Lane Theater a few months
later. By 1998 it had opened in Plymouth, England and by 1999 was playing in London at the Gielgud Theatre. It has enjoyed brisk performance regionally ever since. More conventionally biographical than the dream-vision netherworld landscape of *The Invention of Love*, both *Gross Indecency* and *The Judas Kiss* concentrate on the period of Wilde’s life from his court trials to his final break with Bosie. Despite moments of humor provided by quotations of Wilde’s own or inventions of Wilde-like wit, *Gross Indecency* and *The Judas Kiss* are tragedies, enacting what in retrospect we know is Wilde’s doom as we are “ushered into a narrative” of destruction that Joseph Bristow describes as “almost as relentless as *Oedipus Rex*” (1995, 24).40

By far the more rigorous and interesting play, *Gross Indecency* dramatically presents records from Wilde’s three trials (from H. Montgomery Hyde’s compilation *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*)41 interspersed with other Victorian documents, such as letters from all the principals, Wilde’s lectures and other writing, newspaper accounts, and the later autobiographies of Bosie and Frank Harris. Abandoning the fourth wall, *Gross Indecency* nevertheless promotes a sense of documentary realism. However, as with Ruskin, Wilde’s significance as a writer and as a philosopher of art becomes almost irrelevant; what emerges from this focus on his fall, guaranteed by a slip in admitting that he avoided kissing a particular boy “because he was, unfortunately, extremely ugly” (57), is that Wilde’s real importance lies in his narrative of martyrdom for the right to homosexuality. What is so interesting about this reification of Wilde as gay before that identity existed historically is that Wilde’s actual sexuality and his sense of self were far more slippery and thus, one could argue, both more queer and more postmodern than these plays suggest. As S. I. Salamensky points out, the historical Wilde’s “sheer performativeness,” his flippant, verbose, and consciously artificial “behaviors enthusiastically stressed their own theatrical quality” (578). Wilde’s personal theatricality highlights the instability of identity, but current theatrical representations squash it. As Alan Sinfeld explains, “it is hard to regard Wilde as other than the apogee of gay experience and expression”; nevertheless, his being always already gay is a historical anachronism (2). But *The Invention of Love, Gross Indecency*, and *The Judas Kiss* reinforce the notion that Wilde’s boundary-breaking aesthetic pose and his flamboyant persona were consubstantial with his homosexuality. These plays do not recognize that to some degree flamboyance as a signifier of homosexuality began as an imitation of Oscar and can not be read backwards as a sign of Wilde’s gay identity. Even Wilde’s later defense of Uranian love’s nobility does not come with a statement of exclusivity. Wilde argued for freedom to explore beauty and sensation wherever he found it: in sexual terms, that meant with
female prostitutes in college; in ardent marriage to his wife Constance; in his introduction to same-sex experiences by his friend Robbie Ross; through his besotted love affair with Bosie; and in entertaining dalliance with the “rent boys” who proved his downfall. The identity labels based on sexuality that these plays depend upon and solidify do not quite fit either the details of Wilde’s life or his definition of life as art.

*Gross Indecency* recognizes and dismisses the idea that Wilde might more accurately be labeled by the current use of the word *queer*, with its connotations of indeterminacy and disruption, rather than *gay* or *homosexual*. The play does so primarily by incorporating an interview between the author (played by Kaufman in the original production) and scholar Marvin Taylor, based on the real-life scholar Marvin Taylor, curator at the Fales Collection at NYU, who stands in for other Wilde scholars and queer theorists, such as Joseph Bristow, Ed Cohen, Jonathan Dollimore, and Alan Sinfield. Kaufman’s Taylor comes off as ridiculous in arguing for a Foucauldian historicization of the term *homosexuality*.

Taylor: [W]hat happens in the trial is [Wilde] comes head on up against legal discourse, and perhaps I would even say legal-medical discourse. And he begins to lose to this sort of patriarchal medical discourse that makes him appear to be a homosexual, as opposed to . . . hum . . . someone who has desire for other men.

Moises: Are you saying that Wilde didn’t really think of himself as “homosexual”?

Taylor: . . . It is after the Wilde trials that people began identifying themselves as a specific type of person based on the their attraction to people of the same sex. See, it created the modern homosexual as a social subject. . . . You know Foucault talks about how it was impossible for men in the Victorian era to think of themselves as gay or homosexual because that construction didn’t exist. (76)

Michael Schiavi reports that in the off-Broadway production “the baffled Kaufman squinted, to the audiences’ hysterical laughter, at Taylor’s stumbling depiction of Wilde as ‘a disruption of all kinds of things, of class, of gender, of hum sexuality, hum’” (410). The attitude of the play toward these distinctions is best summed up by Tony Kushner in his “Afterword” to *Gross Indecency*. While declaring admiration for the “whole splendid Queer Theoretical Company” (138), including Marvin Taylor (137), Kushner comments that “Wilde was destroyed at an early age by reactionaries, conservatives, liberals,
and homophobes (and I know, I know, you can’t call them ‘homophobes’ because there are no ‘homosexuals’ and blah blah blah)” (139). So finally, even for people who know that Wilde’s usefulness as a model for homosexual identity is the product of anachronism, this anachronism makes him most precious for gay liberation. To the notion that such a limiting reduction of Wilde’s life, work, and persona ultimately diminishes the elasticity of Wilde’s performed existence, which could actually open up the possibility of even more ways of being than we now recognize, the response is “blah blah blah.”

*Gross Indecency* presents Wilde’s fall primarily through staged but historically viable documentary evidence, offering—despite its Brechtian anti-realist presentation—an even greater sense of authenticity than the realistic drama of *The Countess*. Audiences leaving a production of *Gross Indecency* feel (rightly) that they have learned something about Wilde’s life. But mostly what they learn is that Wilde suffered for being gay.

**Apotheosis**

*The Judas Kiss*, by David Hare, intensifies Wilde’s suffering to Christian martyrdom. Directed (like *The Invention of Love*) by Richard Eyre, *The Judas Kiss* opened with Liam Neeson playing Oscar Wilde in 1998 at the Playhouse in London, earning mixed reviews. It moved to Broadway’s Broadhurst Theater a month later, with the London cast. Like *The Countess*, *The Invention of Love*, and *Gross Indecency*, it too continues in production regionally. Echoing *De Profundis*, this play presents Wilde as a Christian martyr. In the first act, Wilde sacrifices himself for Bosie by staying in England at Bosie’s request to continue the fight against Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensbury, when he could have fled the country before criminal prosecution. Again in the second act, after release from prison, Bosie (carrying on with other lovers) betrays Wilde by abandoning him for money in the form of an allowance from his family. Because this straightforward realistic drama does not present the trials themselves, there is no staged shocking courtroom lie by Wilde that he did not have sex with men, and of course no climactic revelation that he had. There are no celebrated witticisms on the stand. Instead, there is the story of Wilde’s catatrophic obsession with a spoiled, aristocratic Adonis, and Bosie’s caddish disregard for Wilde’s best interest.

*The Judas Kiss* allows for even less ambiguity regarding Wilde’s gay identity than *Gross Indecency*. Wilde refers to himself outright as an invert (18), a pederast (76), and one who loves boys (87). No Marvin Taylor character presents a queer analysis of Wilde’s biography. With none of the aesthetic
posing from *The Invention of Love* or imitating in lecture the parody of himself created by Gilbert and Sullivan, Hare’s Wilde disastrously throws away his reputation, career, friends, freedom, and family for love of a manipulative, unworthy user. When Wilde’s friend Robbie urges Wilde to save himself from prison and ignominy by fleeing from London in defiance of Bosie’s wishes, Wilde responds:

I have acted out of love. I have defended this love. . . . The redeeming fact of my life. . . . It is what I have left. . . . All else has now been taken away. So now would you take even that from me. You would tell me I have been deceived and used in all this? . . . If the love between us is not as I think it, I shall have suffered to no purpose at all. (49–50)

For Hare, Wilde’s suffering for love actuates his existence. Their private affection gives Wilde purpose, but for Hare’s Bosie the point of their relationship is to proclaim their gay identity. Bosie accuses Wilde of cowardice and duplicity in having not proclaimed his homosexuality on the stand:

Lying in public! . . . You could have defended Greek love! How will history judge you? . . . You will be known for ever as the man who was ashamed to admit his own nature! . . . When a better time comes, when this kind of love is accepted and understood, then you will be condemned because you took the coward’s way. (100–101)

Although the play sides with Wilde in sacrificing himself for love and highlights Bosie’s self-centered hypocrisy in leaving Wilde, the charge of his denying his true or core self remains. Bosie’s expression of the play’s concern with Wilde’s lie only makes sense if Wilde has an intrinsic rather than socially constructed identity. By the end of the play, Wilde has sacrificed himself not just to free Bosie but as a Christ figure whose self-sacrifice frees succeeding generations to be true to their own natures. But *The Judas Kiss*’s apotheosis of Wilde eradicates any indeterminacy in his identity, crystalizing him as essentially and exclusively gay.

**Conclusion**

The Oscar Wildes of *The Invention of Love*, *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, and *The Judas Kiss* participate in the vision of Wilde as a
gay icon for contemporary audiences to admire, to feel outrage on his behalf, and to sympathize with, to model themselves after, and to feel finally relief that no matter how bad their own coming-out scenarios might be, Wilde’s will always be worse. All depend on the audience’s identifying Wilde as homosexual, which, while understandable and even valuable, is a narrower construction than either history or Wilde himself would acknowledge. For Gross Indecency, Wilde is a brilliant, hubristic victim; for The Judas Kiss, he is an eloquent, self-destructive martyr; but in both cases he is the quintessential gay man, struggling for a place to survive in a homophobic culture. Even The Invention of Love ultimately restricts his significance to a more essential expression of self than to a performed one. These Oscar Wildes operate primarily to maintain him as a glittering figurehead of gay identity for twenty-first-century audiences.

The John Ruskins of The Countess, Modern Painters, and The Invention of Love operate primarily to establish the turn-of-the-millennium spectators’ superiority to the supposedly frigid (and homophobic) Victorians, despite the fact that the historical record shows that the Victorians often do not fit these stereotypes of sexual repression. Victorian attitudes toward sexuality were not as monolithic and very often not as puritanical as the rebellious and dismissive Modernists claimed about the previous generation. Beginning at least with Stephen Marcus’s The Other Victorians and going on through Porter and Hall’s The Facts of Life to a long list of books and articles, researchers have drawn a picture of a diverse set of attitudes toward sex. Ultimately, the sympathetic opera Modern Painters uses Ruskin’s own words against him, making him pitiable. The Countess not only indicts Ruskin but also necessarily renders the stage Effie less complex than the historical Effie’s correspondence reveals. For Modern Painters, Ruskin is a tragic, brilliant madman; for The Countess he is an eloquent, manipulative tyrant; but in both cases he is a quintessential Victorian prude, too wrapped up in ideal beauty to recognize it in the flesh. Although Murphy believes his drama reveals to play-goers that they do the same thing, neither show holds a mirror to its public. Instead, the audience reacts with relief that no matter how bad their relationships are, at least they (probably) consummated their own marriages. The audiences disapprove of Ruskin’s failure to appreciate Effie, confirming their complacency about their own enlightenment regarding sex and women’s right both to a loving, respectful relationship without psychological abuse and to physical pleasure within that relationship. So in neither case do these theatrical representations awaken audiences to their own faults. Rather they function to validate audiences in their self-satisfaction and to reinforce current identity categories as natural and fixed.
The historical Ruskin and Wilde died over a century ago, within months of each other. They each left a tremendous legacy of extraordinary writing, serious ideas, and both documented and incalculable influences. Both have also sparked a growing proliferation of Ruskins and Wildes as literary characters, not only in *The Countess, Modern Painters, The Invention of Love, Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde,* and *The Judas Kiss* but also in a variety of films, novels, radio plays, and other kinds of representation. As time goes by, there will be more. What purpose do theatrical Ruskins and Wildes perform? What cultural work do they accomplish? How do they contribute to the construction of current identities? What does Ruskin- or Wilde-as-character represent? In a sense, any theatrical adaptation of autobiographical material diminishes the historical subject and will always say as much or more about the adaptor’s culture than that of the figures represented on stage. *The Countess, Modern Painters,* and *Gross Indecency* demonstrate how fragile the selves created in letters and autobiography are, how inevitably words change out of context. Even the most sensitive, nuanced attempt reduces a full life to a few hours’ span, choosing what is dramatic, powerful, symbolic, or entertaining to succeed or fail as a work of art, not as a somehow genuine translation to stage of the historical person’s lived experience. Even the so-called historical Ruskin or historical Wilde is inaccessible, available to us only as a textual artifact that we read rather than meet. Such texts stand ready to be interpreted and re-created for us by critics, scholars, autobiographers, novelists, playwrights, directors, actors, audiences, and readers. With each iteration, a new Ruskin or new Wilde appears. While we use these figures to confirm the seeming solidity of our current identity categories, the repetition and performativity of each incarnation ultimately undermines the security of these labels. Recognizing the artifice of each performance reveals to us the instability and constructedness of our own identities more surely than it reconstructs a Ruskin or Wilde long past.
“Scene from ‘Jack in the Box’ at the Drury Lane Theatre.” The Illustrated London News 64 (January 10, 1874): 28.