The Plays: The Public & Private Worlds of Oscar Wilde

The Public World of the Society Comedies

WE ARGUED in chapter two that it is possible to find in some of Wilde’s works two distinct kinds of allusions: the private and biographical on the one hand, and the intellectual and the literary on the other. Wilde’s four society comedies—*Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)—complicate this simple dualism by offering many examples of a third kind of reference, that of the social and cultural contexts against which and for which they were written, a subject more often called their topicality. (As we have seen, an analogous, but not really similar kind of reference is to be found in *De Profundis*, in the sense that Wilde’s account of his and Douglas’s private relationship is set against a background of complex social mores, such as the aristocratic practice of self-imposed exile in British colonies to avoid scandal or embarrassment at home.)

As far as the society comedies are concerned, academic critics have usually understood what we have described as the private and biographical in terms of a series of coded (or as we labelled them earlier, subtextual) references to homosexuality and the various subcultures in which it thrived in the 1890s. For example, a subject typically alluded to in Wilde’s comedies is that of a man taking a mistress or lover, or leading a double life in general, together with the consequent threat of exposure and scandal in the press. This theme has been seen to possess a particular resonance with the contemporary criminalization of homosexuality as much as its overt relevance to heterosexual adultery, which is of course its primary meaning in the plays. At a more local level some critics have claimed to find a whole range of subtextual meanings in single lexical items. These often amount to what we might call a double language and have been perceived in phrases such as Bunburying (which we also mentioned in chapter one), in Wilde’s own name and its homophone (wild), and in that of Ernest. Attention has also been drawn to the topic of male beauty (as it is discussed, for
example, by the female characters in Act II of *A Woman of No Importance*), and
to the dramatic investment in male-male, as opposed to male-female, relation-
ships. So some critics have found the dynamic between, say, Algernon and Jack,
or between Gerald Arbuthnot and Lord Illingworth to be much more compell-
ing than the relationships which any of those men have with female charac-
ters in the plays.

By contrast, the intellectual and literary references in the society comedies
tend to have been understood in terms of Wilde’s dramatic sources or literary
analogues. Thus numerous critics have commented on Wilde’s adaptations of the
structure of the contemporary French *pièce bien faite* (or the “well-made play”),
or of particular devices taken from contemporary British theatre, or of patterns
of dialogue derived from British and Irish Restoration comedy. In keeping with
this general view there have also been a number of critics who argue that we
can see in Wilde’s plays some thematic and structural debts to specific contem-
porary works, such as the suggestion that the plot of *The Importance of Being Ear-
nest* was based on W. S. Gilbert’s *Engaged*. Critics who are predisposed to see
such “borrowings” as indicative of a lack of originality or inventiveness on Wil-
de’s part—at least in terms of plotting and theme—could find corroboration for
their view in another body of research that has drawn attention to what might
be described neutrally as Wilde’s reuse of his own material, the moving of lines

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**Performance and “reading texts”** One reason why we are able to study Wilde’s society
comedies so easily is because he decided to publish them; the vast majority of late-nine-
teenth-century dramatic works were never made available to the general reading public,
and can only be studied today by those readers patient enough to work though the moun-
tains of material in the Lord Chamberlain’s Collection in the British Library, which contains
the licensing copies of all plays performed on the public stage. (Whether these copies were
an entirely accurate record of what was actually performed on stage is not always easy to
determine.) The idea of a “reading text” of a play—a version quite distinct from the texts that
would be typed or printed (usually privately) for use by actors—was relatively novel in the
1890s, particularly for the work of contemporary dramatists. Moreover the market for such
books was uncertain, making them a risky investment for any publisher. Even very success-
ful dramatists, such as Henry Arthur Jones, rarely made any money out of the published ver-
sions of their plays. It is unsurprising therefore that Wilde’s society comedies were published
only in limited editions: the first two, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Impor-
tance*, were brought out in editions of just 500 copies by a small, specialist 1890s publisher
called the Bodley Head which had a reputation for coterie publishing. The last two, *An Ideal
Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both of which appeared after Wilde’s re-
lease from prison, were published in editions of 1,000 copies each by an even smaller en-
terprise—the one-man firm of Leonard Smithers who was chiefly known as a publisher of
pornography and who soon afterwards went bankrupt.
or blocks of dialogue between the plays (from *An Ideal Husband* to *Earnest*, for example) or from nondramatic works, such as the fiction, into the plays (most obviously seen in the reuse of aphorisms and witty repartee from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*).

This interest in the manner in which the plays were composed has become a focus of attention only relatively recently, and dates from the first variorum editions of them produced some twenty-five years ago. Since then their construction has been systematically scrutinized by text editors, such as Joseph Donohue, and by a small number of critics, principally perhaps Sos Eltis. In terms of critical judgments or literary evaluation, Wilde’s writing practices, as we see them exhibited in the plays’ stemmata, have tended to produce divergent opinions. As we suggested, for some they are further evidence of a lack of originality, or even a kind of plagiarism or cheating. Other critics, though, have seen Wilde’s reuse of material more positively: for them it becomes a form of self-quotation and irony, a version of Wilde the proto-postmodernist, the writer who plays with his readers and typically with how they expect to find qualities such as originality in dramatic works. Then there is a further group who have viewed Wilde’s writing practices pragmatically, as the economical use of resources by a hard-pressed professional dramatist eager to make the most of his material, often

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**continued** Because early typescripts and licensing copies have survived for the society comedies, it is possible to see how Wilde changed his plays when presenting them as reading rather than performance texts. In *An Ideal Husband* he added more and more detailed stage directions, as well as lengthy descriptions of each of the “persons of the play”; these could include ironic commentaries on the characters. For example, near the beginning of Act I Sir Robert Chiltern is described as having “a nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect…. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive in the House of Commons. But Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head” (Ross, ed., *An Ideal Husband*, 11). Here Wilde, like his contemporary George Bernard Shaw, is writing more like a novelist than a playwright, appealing to the reader’s visual imagination. In his reading texts Wilde also tended to lengthen his plays by adding minor (and sometimes nonspeaking) characters and extending speeches; in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, for example, some speeches are more than doubled in length and are also generally more impassioned and self-consciously rhetorical. Again it is as if Wilde is trying to present his dramatic world as fully as possible, but on the page rather than on the stage. Paradoxically, though, Wilde did not follow this pattern in every case: so his published edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* actually omitted various stage directions (although these were mainly to do with “blocking” or the positioning of characters on the stage space).
prepared to repeat a winning formula. This last kind of explanation has found particular favour with cultural historians who have studied the changing conditions for writers in the late nineteenth century, and who have isolated what they see as the effects of a nascent but increasingly important consumerism on the commercial theatre and the culture industry in general.

It is worth stressing, though, that none of these features of Wilde’s writing—neither his use of dramatic traditions nor his borrowings from his own, earlier works—seems to have troubled successive theatre audiences, who seem content to see them merely as a Wildean trademark, a brand they are happy to come back to. For individuals interested solely in modern theatre and the pleasure of attending particular performances, information about what Wilde “did” with the sources from which he borrowed (whether he subverts, satirizes, improves, or merely slavishly copies from them) is largely irrelevant, certainly to an enjoyment of the plays. And this in turn may explain why the concern with originality and intertextuality figures more strongly in accounts of literary rather than dramatic history. Intertextuality is an issue mainly for those critics who study the versions of his plays that Wilde published and who treat them—as the process of publication explicitly invites them to do—as polished artifacts which have a life and value beyond the particularities of specific performances.

The Topicality of the Society Comedies

These are, as we have said, the usual ways of dealing with the plays either in terms of their place within the Wilde canon or in terms of literary and dramatic history. What of our third category, that of the plays’ social and cultural contexts, or what we have called their topicality? This particular quality is again most easily glimpsed, albeit in a piecemeal way, in modern scholarly editions, some of which seem to vie with each other to produce what are virtually encyclopaedic accounts of late-nineteenth-century British social mores. We are invited, either explicitly or implicitly, to see Wilde’s plays as elaborate late-nineteenth-century comedies of manners, and Wilde himself as a writer caught up in, and playing with, the minutiae of late-nineteenth-century etiquette.

Here the justification, rarely made fully or openly, is of the following sort. Nineteenth-century Britain was subject to immense and rapid social changes. Certainties about status and hierarchy were disappearing as the result of a number of large and irresistible historical and economic forces, principally the rapid growth in the population, the equally rapid growth in its wealth, and a movement in the ownership of that wealth away from established interests, such as the aristocracy, to the new industrial and financial entrepreneurs who emerged at the end of the eighteenth and during the first half of the nineteenth centuries, and then to the burgeoning middle and lower-middle classes. This process led to anxieties about status, which led in turn to the development of various
forms of rigid social practice intended to permit traditional centres of power to differentiate themselves from social newcomers (the parvenu or outsider is a repeated motif in Wilde’s works). The codification of what was seen as acceptable behaviour was known formally as social etiquette. Wilde’s society comedies take as their principal themes the actions of a leisured aristocratic or upper class, and were aimed at an audience who either aspired to the lifestyle of that class or (and this is more likely) were fascinated by, perhaps resentful of, the “goings-on” of their “betters,” happy to see representations of them as flawed or immoral individuals. These plays, together with the production qualities brought to them by their various West End managers, would presuppose in the audience a detailed knowledge of that social system, of the class values it exhibited, and of the etiquette, social customs, and manners that defined it.

Those dramatic critics and historians who have seen fit to excavate this level of historical reference invariably feel obliged to give details of the nature and social significance of practices and habits that have now virtually disappeared from British life. These include phenomena such as calling cards, different sorts of meals and their basis in class distinctions (for example, the contrasts between a “high” or “meat” tea and dinner, or the connoisseurship of some French and German wines as a mark of social distinction), dress codes (such as dressing for dinner or the wearing of “mourning” dress), courtship rituals (for example, the chaperoning of young women), the social geography of London, and semi-public events in the London Season. The assumption underlying this kind of research is that theatre is fundamentally a social institution and cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of the society (and particularly the audiences) for which it was written and performed. A related insight is that the politics of late-nineteenth-century British theatre were deeply topical yet simultaneously circumscribed by its fundamentally conservative commercial interests. So a knowledge of London society of the 1890s has also to take account of the whole structure of contemporary theatrical institutions, from the bricks and mortar of the actual theatre buildings, to the individual characters of their managers and their companies, as well as to larger issues such as the economics of the theatre and to details (and occasionally reconstructions) of particular notable performances.

This body of scholarly material—an attention to the biographical, literary, and social reference of Wilde’s plays—has been produced at the expense of enormous effort and is often very valuable to the academic community, interested as it has recently been in issues such as canonicity, originality, and the politics both of texts and of the literary institutions that produced them. It is also a useful resource for theatre historians who have of late become increasingly preoccupied with the study of performance practice and the difficulties involved in reconstructing the details of particular performances, especially when they took
place before the advent of the technology for modern visual recording. At the same time, however, and as we have already hinted, that knowledge, taken in its entirety, has tended to produce a range of judgments about Wilde’s society comedies that do not sit easily with each other. More importantly for our overall argument, they do not seem to have any particular relevance to the experiences of modern audiences or readers of the plays, or the theatrical equivalent of the Amazon.com reader we mentioned in chapter one.

For example, by looking closely at submerged biographical references some critics have turned the plays into subversive, almost revolutionary works that fundamentally challenged the political and social status quo. Some have examined what they perceive to be Wilde’s sense of exclusion, either because of his nationality or his sexual orientation. For an Irish writer such as Terence Brown, this sense of exclusion is a consequence of Wilde being an Irishman working in the colonizer’s country; for others that sense derives from his status as a gay outsider. Such observations as these lend a political dimension to the plays’ satire on English aristocratic manners; they become the revenge of the marginalized subject on his oppressor. By contrast, other critics, attentive to aspects of the plays’ social context, have found virtually the opposite politics at work in them. For example, Sheila Stowell and Joel Kaplan’s discussion of the use of fashion houses and *haute couture* in the first productions of the plays has shown how the society comedies could be staged in such a manner that they flattered their audiences, making the works (and by implication the author of them) complicit in the very bourgeois and high capitalist values which other commentators have claimed they subvert. Although there is an obvious tension between these two views, they are not necessarily incompatible. It is possible to claim that the texts of the plays are subversive, but that a particular kind of staging could have made that politics invisible. In order to substantiate such an argument we would need to investigate the nature and extent of Wilde’s agency in the production process. Unfortunately, however, investigations of this sort have produced only further conundrums.

Discussions of Wilde’s relations with the theatre industry of the 1890s have produced a line of argument which holds that his initial intentions were indeed radical but were compromised by the cultural and financial power of the actor-managers with whom he worked. Thus critics like Sos Eltis have interpreted Wilde’s revisions to his plays as a movement towards conformity, a concession that was forced upon him and is made visible textually as the critic traces a work’s stemma. Here it is worth remembering that the fine details of Wilde’s plays were often worked out during the rehearsal process and in consultation with the actor-managers—George Alexander and Herbert Beerbohm Tree—with whom he worked; there are late drafts of his plays in which revisions are marked up by hands other than those of Wilde. Moreover there is plenty of
evidence to suggest that figures such as Alexander were on occasions capable of being overbearing and manipulative. In a revealing study Joel Kaplan has shown that following a dispute with Wilde over the ending of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Alexander enlisted the help of Clement Scott, one of the most eminent theatre critics of the time, to articulate in a first-night review what was in effect his (Alexander’s) own dissatisfaction with the play’s structure. This course of action immediately persuaded Wilde to agree to revise the ending in the way Alexander had proposed during rehearsal. As a result the revelation of Mrs. Erlynne’s identity as the mother of Lady Windermere was moved from Act IV to the end of Act II, a change which (in the eyes of some modern critics) makes her a more conventional figure whose actions (in Acts III and IV) can be understood via the familiar melodramatic trope of the wronged victim, rather than that of the scheming female adventuress.

On the other hand, however, studies of Wilde’s financial situation in the early 1890s suggest that he had as much investment, both financial and cultural, in his plays as those managers who were staging them, and that it would not have been in his interest to see their dramatic success undermined in any way. So rather than seeing the plays’ first productions in terms of a betrayal of Wilde’s political intentions, in this argument they can be understood as the culmination of a long process of textual and dramatic refinement designed to ensure their success. Viewed from this perspective, Wilde’s movement towards conformity was a process with which he was actively complicit, and so his relationships with his actor-managers can be seen more in terms of cocreativity than coercion. This line of argument, too, has plenty of evidence to support it; for example, details that highlight the fraught nature of Wilde’s relationship with Alexander can be countered with other evidence pointing to their closeness and to the latter’s generosity. On several occasions Wilde approached Alexander to ask him to lend him money, and almost certainly offered him the first refusal of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in anticipation that their friendship would result in Alexander giving him the best terms. Wilde’s relationship with Tree, who was certainly involved in some of the revisions made in final rehearsals to *A Woman of No Importance*, was also long-standing and seems to have gone well beyond the level of the mere professional courtesy expected of a manager dealing with a writer. More significant, though, is the fact that when, often many years later, Wilde came to publish his plays, in every case he kept faith with the large-scale structural changes allegedly “imposed” upon him (although he did make numerous small verbal and stylistic revisions). Moreover, in the case of the publication of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* these decisions were made at a time when one might have thought that Wilde would have been most politicized, when (following his imprisonment and exile) he had most reason to be resentful of the British establishment.
The Concept of Context

At this point we might want to ask what is at issue in the tensions between these different ways of understanding the relationships between the plays and their “contexts”—whether we understand this last term to refer to staging, composition, biography, nationality, gender politics, or whatever. Is it simply a local disagreement among Wilde scholars about how to read the society comedies? As a way of answering this question we can begin by noting that contradictions seem to be arising because what is being defined as a context is being used to support what is to all intents and purposes a preexisting reading of the plays or a preexisting concept of Wilde’s intentions in writing them. Once we grasp the implications of this situation, the tensions between various critical positions become easier to understand. If a critic has a preconceived view that Wilde’s nationality is the dominant aspect of his character, then information which appears to support Wilde’s complicity with British commercial interests will be relegated in importance or ignored altogether. In such a view, for example, Alexander will be more likely to be seen as a bully than a co-creator, even though biographies of him do not really confirm such a view. Conversely, if one is predisposed to see Wilde as a willing exile from Ireland, eager to acquire for himself the trappings of British aristocratic success (that is, literally as well as metaphorically “sleeping with the enemy”), then his interest in making money, even at the price of artistic and political compromise, is easier to understand, and the commercial nature of the West End theatre will seem more like an opportunity than a constraint. From these observations we can see that context never speaks neutrally to the critic. Actually, contexts are quite mute—they don’t “speak” at all. If one wished to be argumentative one might suggest that the critic is constructing the context he or she needs to find. For this reason any appeal to context alone—social, economic, political, biographical, and so forth—cannot reconcile interpretative differences.

Put this way, arguments about the manner in which Wilde’s plays are to be interpreted seem to have a ring of familiarity to them. They are reminiscent of a controversy that took place over half a century ago and that informed a debate conducted in the first numbers of the Oxford academic literary periodical, Essays in Criticism, founded under the guidance of F.W. Bateson in order explicitly to counter the unapologetically evaluative Cambridge literary periodical, Scrutiny, then edited by F.R. Leavis. Essays in Criticism carried a series of exchanges between Leavis and Bateson over the role of what was then called the “social context” of literary works. Bateson’s proposition was that an “essential requirement” of judgments about a work’s literary value—about whether, in his words, we are “able to use it, to live ourselves into it”—was “an understanding” of its “original social context,” for it was only in relation to that context
that “the values implied [in the work] become explicit, and its relative goodness or badness declares itself” (Bateson, 19).

To modern eyes, Bateson’s idea of a social context was a fairly restricted one: it meant mainly an economic and then perhaps a political context, when politics was defined in terms of class. It ignored, that is, modern contextual interests to be found in issues of gender, book history, the rise of consumerism, theatre history, and so forth. That narrowness, though, was a consideration that was largely irrelevant to Leavis. He took issue with the whole proposition that context could ever form part of an initial literary response: for Leavis, context, however defined, was always a construction, one perceived in, or—more likely—one placed upon, the past by the historian. More importantly, for the modern reader it was a prior judgment about a work’s literariness which determined the limits and relevance of the historical information that the reader brought to bear on it. It was not, as Bateson implied, the other way around. By recasting this argument in terms more relevant to understanding Wilde’s works, we can see that what is being contested is the nature of the relationship between a knowledge of the historical circumstances (however those circumstances are defined) surrounding a work and the prior attribution of literary identity and literary value to it.

It should be clear from the examples which we have cited that information of the kind being brought to our attention by literary or theatre historians about the context or contexts of Wilde’s works is reminiscent of the logical flaw that Leavis detected in Bateson’s argument. Too often a description of the conditions under which a work by Wilde was produced is used as a reason to justify why it has been read, why it should continue to be read, why literary value accrues to it, and how one should understand that literary value. Although it can certainly be interesting to locate Wilde’s plays within a social history of taste, or within a history of changes in class values, such an ambition will never provide compelling grounds for reading or performing them today.

This distinction is an important one, for it goes to the heart of why much academic research on Wilde strikes the common reader or the average theatre-goer as irrelevant. This irrelevance becomes more obvious if we examine the contrast between what we can for convenience call (borrowing a phrase which was first used by Jan Kott apropos of Shakespeare) “Wilde our contemporary” and the historicized (and almost archaic) Wilde of much scholarly research. It is striking how few modern revivals of the plays—certainly in Britain—ever attempt to reconstruct the late-nineteenth-century social world so painstakingly uncovered by academics. For most modern directors that world is too remote for audiences today to understand. For example, Philip Prowse, who directed and designed several successful productions of Wilde’s society comedies in the 1980s and early 1990s, has commented on the difficulties some modern actors have in understanding the precise social niceties in the plays, where class dis-
tinctions are to do with much more than just money. Prowse, like other directors, found it necessary to find equivalents of Wilde’s themes in modern class and gender politics, so in his 1991 staging of _A Woman of No Importance_ at London’s Barbican Theatre he cast a black actress in the role of the American heiress, Hester; and in his 1986 production of _An Ideal Husband_ he took various liberties with the text, cutting some of Lady Chiltern’s more melodramatic lines and allowing Mrs. Cheveley a rather modern “fuck” when she finds herself unable to remove an incriminating piece of jewellery.

Likewise, Bill Alexander’s production of _Lady Windermere’s Fan_ at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the mid-1990s virtually rewrote the character of Dumby. In Wilde’s text Dumby is a slightly raffish but witty “masher,” or man-about-town, a foil to another witty, slightly decadent minor character, Cecil Graham. Thematically Dumby’s function is twofold. It is first to point to the verbal deceptions and inconsequentialities that oil much of the day-to-day intercourse of London “polite society.” As he knows that society to be economical with the truth, so he tailors his social chitchat to please what he anticipates will be the opinions of his interlocutors. But he has a second important thematic function: his flirtation with the “woman with a past,” Mrs. Erlynne, arouses jealousy in Lady Plymdale, with whom, we can infer, he has an unexplained but presumably illicitly intimate and obviously heterosexual relationship. In Bill Alexander’s production, this hint of sexually illicit behaviour and the threats it poses were maintained, but by some changes that had no textual warrant. Dumby, made up with lipstick and eyeshadow, was now seen to be a camp figure, ominously leering at the young men at Lady Windermere’s ball, something which of course could never have happened on the London stage in the 1890s.

Bill Alexander was using a historically decontextualized adaptation of the role of a minor character in the play in order to remain faithful to the spirit of the original, and thus to ensure the continued appeal of “Wilde our contemporary.” To give a sense of the sexual danger that Dumby posed Alexander presumably felt it necessary to ratchet up Dumby’s transgression so that it was more appropriate to behaviour that modern audiences might find outrageous. We might note generally here that the tendency of modern productions to “uncover” homosexual rather than heterosexual tensions in the plays might have its origins in an attempt to recapture the sense of shock which revelations about adultery and children born out of wedlock would have provoked in late-nineteenth-century theatregoers. Similarly, the production of _An Ideal Husband_ at Chichester at around the same time, with Paul Eddington as Lord Goring, exploited the modern resonances of some of the play’s political comments, particularly the widespread feelings of disenchantment with all British political parties and
political processes felt by many Britons during the last years of Margaret Thatcher’s administration and virtually all of John Major’s.

If these observations are correct, then we seem to have arrived at something of an impasse. If Wilde’s society comedies are as adaptable or as open as many modern productions suggest, and if context, too, is an unstable concept, its boundaries shifting to accommodate particular critics’ preoccupations, do modern readers or students of Wilde’s plays really need to bother themselves with that mountain of scholarly material that academics produce? After all, it will not, as we have said, fix the meanings of the plays; on the contrary, it seems to have produced more dissent than agreement—academics are probably as divided in their views about Wilde’s dramatic achievements today as they have ever been. Of course to expect scholars to agree with one another is probably wishful thinking; but equally utopian is the expectation that scholarship alone can determine an interpretation of a literary work. This caveat, however, does not make scholarship redundant or irrelevant. On the contrary, if we investigate the tensions which exist between various forms of scholarly knowledge—in Wilde’s case between the biographical, literary, and social references of the plays—we can see how it is that readers are able to arrive at such different interpretations of the same plays and why, too, some interpretations can be considered more correct or plausible than others, when “correctness” and “plausibility” are defined in terms of freedom from contradiction and incoherence. We will begin this investigation by examining how different kinds of scholarship bear upon possible readings of a single scene, the famous opening of The Importance of Being Earnest, and then broaden the argument to include some significant dramatic moments in Wilde’s other society comedies.

Music, Manners, Food, & Class

The opening lines of The Importance of Being Earnest give a textbook illustration of the ways in which the three kinds of reference we have described can operate. The first published (1899) version of the play begins in Algernon Moncrieff’s flat in Half Moon Street, which runs between Curzon Street and Piccadilly in London. The Licensing Copy of the play, that version of it which was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office for official approval, places it simply in Piccadilly. Joseph Donohue’s reconstruction of the text of the first performance notes that the fashionable areas of Piccadilly and Mayfair—then as now—denoted wealth and leisure, and that Half Moon Street was an entirely appropriate address for a wealthy young man about town in the 1890s. A separate group of critics have observed that other addresses in the play, particularly those to be found in the earlier four-act version, are more pointed in their social reference, a detail which we examine below.
Thereafter the stage directions indicate that Lane, Algernon’s manservant, is found arranging afternoon tea. Algernon, who is heard playing music off, enters:

**Algernon**
Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

**Lane**
I didn’t think it polite to listen, sir.

**Algernon**
I’m sorry for that, for your sake. I don’t play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

**Lane**
Yes, sir.

**Algernon**
And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

**Lane**
Yes, sir. Hands them on a salver

**Algernon (Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa)**
Oh!—by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreham and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

**Lane**
Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

**Algernon**
Why is it that at a bachelor’s establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

**Lane**
I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

**Algernon**
Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

**Lane**
I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

**Algernon (Languidly)**
I don’t know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.
No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

Thank you, sir.

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

(Doss, ed., The Importance of Being Earnest, 1–4)

Dramatically these short exchanges serve to introduce a number of the main themes of the piece, but they are also extraordinarily rich in the variety and forms of their reference and allusion. The easiest and most available way of understanding the opening speeches is in terms of the familiar literary trope of the wise servant and the gullible master. This was to become the staple of writers such as P. G. Wodehouse (in the characters of Bertie Wooster and his manservant Jeeves) some years after Wilde’s death, but it has a pedigree that goes back to Plautus, via the works of writers as well known as Ben Jonson and Cervantes. Unlike the servants in Wilde’s first two society comedies (who are simply mechanisms for stage business and for furthering the action of the plot), Lane, and earlier Phipps (in An Ideal Husband), are scrupulously polite and observant of their positions, but they verbally negate that sense of class inferiority by asserting an equality of wit and intelligence. It is clear, then, that our appreciation of this archetypal power relation, and the comedy to be derived from it, can transcend the specifics of any particular social and historical setting. Interestingly many modern comedies continue to employ this same basic dramatique structure.

The first local reference is to a familiar nineteenth-century debate about musical performance, more particularly about the relationship between technical virtuosity and artistic expressivity, issues which can, for example, be found in late-nineteenth-century reactions to the performances of the great Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein. (Wilde attended one of Rubinstein’s concerts in Dublin in 1877, and Rubinstein made a farewell tour of England in 1886–1887.) Musical expressivity in turn had become a topic of general cultural discussion because of the popularity of the piano as an instrument for amateur drawing-room recitals in middle- as well as upper-class homes. In An Ideal Husband Mabel
Chiltern complains to Lady Chiltern of being proposed to when trapped in the “music-room” with “an elaborate trio going on”: “I didn’t dare to make the smallest repartee,” she explains. “If I had, it would have stopped the music at once. Musical people are so absurdly unreasonable. They always want one to be perfectly dumb at the very moment when one is longing to be absolutely deaf” (Ross, ed., An Ideal Husband, 106).

In The Importance of Being Earnest the primary function of the exchange about Algernon’s piano playing is, as we have noted, to establish the tone of the relationship between master and servant. Lane’s refusal to flatter Algernon’s ego through an excess of deference, to offer up to him the uncritical approbation that an employer clearly expects from an employee, introduces an anxiety that will continue to motivate the play’s interrogation of class relations—that a character’s moral or intellectual authority cannot be mapped on to his social and economic status. Lane is a servant with attitude, with a mind of his own, one who needs no lessons (either on wine, or on aesthetics, or on marriage, as it will turn out) from the aristocracy or the upper-middle classes. But why make piano playing the occasion for this exhibition of independent judgment? Presumably because it was an area of expertise in which so many West End theatregoers could claim some degree of competence. (Here it is hard to think of a modern equivalent, certainly in the realm of music, where technology provides much of our primary experience of performance, and where musical taste tends to be defined in terms other than that of class.) The play, then, is exposing the class-

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**The Signifying Power of Food** Meals and foodstuffs are rarely used neutrally in literary works. From Eve’s tasting of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in Eden, food has been used as a means of troping other concerns than simple alimentation. Often it is used as a means to denote appetite, and particularly sexual appetites. Indeed Wilde uses precisely this tradition to describe Douglas’s excesses—both culinary and carnal—in De Profundis. Equally often, however, food and meals are a means of representing class and power relationships. So in Dickens’s early fiction meals, usually feasts and presided over by a patriarchal figure, are used to denote familial, and therefore (for Dickens) social, harmony. In later novels meal-times are also used to signal social pretension. Novelists contemporary with Dickens, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, use food or its absence to intimate class antagonisms. The wealthy and powerful gorge themselves while the poor starve; but the willingness of the poor to share their last crust is indicative of a community spirit absent among the selfish rich. The class values revealed in what particular foods are consumed, and in the manner of their consumption, are also exploited by writers more contemporary with Wilde, such as George Gissing who uses a preference for tinned food to denote lower-class values. Wilde, too, frequently uses cheap or mass-produced foods to indicate an unsubtle palate and therefore an unsophisticated taste.
based assumptions about the intelligence of the “lower orders” while simultaneously satirizing the audience’s own pretensions to cultural sophistication. (The added implication of Lane’s silence is that his master is playing so badly that he cannot possibly make a polite comment about it.)

Then there are references to food, specifically to cucumber sandwiches and champagne. The most important function of these comestibles as signifiers is that they denote luxury; and the principal anxiety which Wilde’s jokes draw upon is that both (like musical expertise) were markers of class taste that were rapidly losing their exclusivity. So some commentators have remarked upon the popularity of champagne as a wine served at dinner parties in the 1890s, and have noted the regret felt by contemporary wine connoisseurs that cheap champagne was taking the place of what Wilde calls here “first-rate brands,” those produced by the most famous houses of Epernay, such as Perrier-Jouet (which he frequently drank in the company of Douglas and which he mentions in De Profundis). Throughout his oeuvre Wilde typically associates the appreciation of fine wines with upper-class (and particularly a refined male) taste; so the hero of “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” is immediately put at his ease by “the genial little German,” Herr Winckelkopf, when offered “the most delicious Marco-brünner” which he sips in a “pale yellow hock glass marked with the Imperial monogram” (Ross, ed., Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime, 46).

As Donohue has noted, the class-based nature of champagne drinking was also an issue in Wilde’s cross-examination by Carson in his action for crimi-

**continued** In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, for example, the Duchess of Berwick disparagingly refers to the nouveau-riche Mr. Hopper, a suitor for her daughter, by commenting that his “father made a great fortune by selling some kind of food in circular tins—most palatable, I believe—I fancy it is the thing servants always refuse to eat” (Ross, ed., *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, 31). Likewise in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” the relative sophistication of Herr Winckelkopf in matters of wine is immediately undercut by its absence in matters of food—he offers Lord Arthur a “meat tea” (at a time when, for the British aristocracy, an evening meal was always a more elaborate repast, taken later, and was called “dinner”). In both cases the superiority of English tastes over those of foreigners is being stressed.

There is ample evidence that Wilde himself saw lavish entertainment as an opportunity to exhibit his own fine tastes, and dining at expensive restaurants was a feature of his life in the 1890s, a habit he attributes to characters most closely identified with himself. So in “The Critic as Artist” Gilbert talks of discussing “some Chambertin and a few ortolans” (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 154). In letters written to the *Morning Chronicle* after his release from prison, Wilde complained of how the prison diet was inedible and degrading for inmates (even though Home Office doctors had found no evidence of his being malnourished).
nal libel against the Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde was questioned by Carson about his habit of entertaining young men, and particularly Alfred Taylor (who ran a male brothel), and who in turn introduced Wilde to two other young men, Charles Parker and a friend, whom Carson later identified as “a gentleman’s valet” and “a groom.” All three had dined with Wilde in some luxury at the Savoy Hotel on the Thames Embankment in Victoria. Asked whether their meals included “plenty of champagne,” Wilde replied: “they had whatever they wanted,” adding “What gentleman would stint his guests?” To this comment Carson retorted: “What gentleman would stint his valet?” Unwilling to let the matter drop, Carson then asked whether Wilde had served “small bottles of iced champagne” to the young men, and asked further: “Was it a favourite drink—iced champagne?” Wilde replied: “Is it a favourite drink—iced champagne?”—“Yes.”—“Yes, strongly against my doctor’s orders.”—“Never mind the doctor’s orders.”—“I don’t. It has all the more flavour if you discard the doctor’s orders” (Holland, 168–70).³ The implication of Carson’s questions—which Wilde had attempted to diffuse with a witty retort—was that there could be no social occasion where a servant and a gentleman would drink champagne together; and that therefore the relationship between Wilde and his guests had to be an “improper” one, of a sexual nature, with champagne being offered as some form of payment for sexual favours.

What about the significance of Lane’s omission of a pint of the wine from his cellar-book, a detail also implicit in Carson’s questioning, which includes a specific reference to “small bottles” of the wine? Until the 1960s pints of champagne were quantities regularly bottled by many champagne houses specifically for the British market. A pint (the British or imperial measure of liquid of 56.5 cl., not the American one of 47.5 cl.) is larger than the standard French half-bottle of wine but smaller than a full bottle (75 cl.); consequently it was the ideal size for a young man to consume on his own before he went out to dinner or to seek other entertainments, such as (in Algernon’s later words to Jack) “trotting” “round to the Empire at ten.” In other words, the implication is that the pint of champagne was drunk by Lane on his own in his butler’s pantry. And it is precisely because such consumption is private—Lane may be drinking with his master’s approval, but he is not drinking in his master’s company—that Algernon offers no objection to it (he asks about the details of Lane’s cellar-book “merely for information”). A familiarity with the etiquette surrounding the consumption of champagne, like that to do with piano recitals, allows us to see that Wilde is blurring class distinctions, although in a manner which, in keeping with the comic tone of the play, is entirely safe. Lane may have knowledge and experience which equals or exceeds that of his master (Lane, too, knows a “superior” wine when he tastes one), but he does not share that knowledge with Algernon, nor does he place it on public display: it does not form the basis of any kind of intimacy. Lane’s relation to Algernon is thus quite different from that which
Carson imputed to Taylor’s and Parker’s friendship with Wilde, where the public consumption of wine together did indeed signal a transgressive or socially unacceptable friendship.

The drinking of champagne is the social reference which has detained most critics, but why, we might ask, the specificity of cucumber as a sandwich filling? Here scholarly commentary is slight (to the point of nonexistence), yet textually and dramatically speaking the term “cucumber” is as strongly foregrounded as champagne is—more so perhaps, as it is picked up later in the scene when the cucumber sandwiches run out. Gardening manuals from the late nineteenth century testify to the premium placed on the cucumber as a salad vegetable, that it was “everywhere valued” and as a result “much spirit [was] shown in its production.” This is because rather than being imported into Britain for most of the year (as today), in the 1890s virtually all cucumbers were homegrown, often at considerable expense and with considerable difficulty in heated greenhouses. As a consequence, ensuring “an abundant and continuous supply” for “all seasons” was a complex and expensive undertaking (Sutton and Sons, 50–51); hence the connection in Algernon’s mind between cucumbers and what he calls “the science of Life.”

Moreover, by the late decades of the century cucumbers (like champagne) were becoming increasingly prized by the middle classes; and again like champagne, the middle classes could generally only afford inferior specimens, or what were then called “summer” cucumbers, the more hardy ridge varieties, which were grown for a limited season, without heat, and which had a less subtle taste. The best cucumbers (known then as “frame cucumbers”) required a constant minimum nighttime temperature of 60°F (15°C) and could therefore only be grown professionally or “in the gardens of the wealthy” (Sutton and Sons, 51). And this is why Wilde’s text draws attention to the extravagance of purchasing cucumbers and, later, to their rarity. (Lane reports that he has been unable to buy more cucumbers in the market despite going there twice with “ready money.”)

Understood in this way, the plan to serve his Aunt Augusta with what we may presume are the finest kind of cucumber sandwiches (she asks pointedly for one of those “nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me”) functions primarily to signal Algernon’s recognition of her social superiority. And Algernon’s (and Jack’s) preemptive consumption of those sandwiches in turn introduces what will become a central comic theme in the play: the struggle between aristocratic men and dowager duchesses for power and status in the marriage market.

Today such is the influence of Wilde’s play that the eating of cucumber sandwiches for afternoon tea as a marker of social refinement has become something of a cliché; and modern theatregoers seeking to understand the pointedness of Wilde’s joke are quite likely to read into the references to cucumbers (and particularly the attempted purchase of them for “ready money”) some kind of
cheap sexual innuendo, one suggested by a knowledge of Wilde’s biography. So here it may seem significant that cucumbers turn out to be circulated only between men: they are provided by Lane and consumed by Algernon and Jack (Algernon only ever plans to offer the youthfully attractive Gwendolen plain “bread and butter”). Thus we might be tempted to generalize and conclude that the “real” issue of the play is a contest between men and women over the possession of the male body. Certainly Wilde does use food as a means of trooping sexual appetites, both in The Importance of Being Earnest and in An Ideal Husband. For example, in Act I of An Ideal Husband the sexual propriety of the female characters is signalled by their attitudes towards “supper”; so although the risqué Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon admit to each other that they are “dying” for something to eat, when the latter woman is questioned by a man, the Vicomte de Nanjac, she stiffly claims “I never take supper” (Ross, ed., An Ideal Husband, 34–35). But for the late-nineteenth-century audience the principal comic potential of cucumbers, as a specific sort of food, almost certainly resided in their implicit class value, the social nuances of which are easily lost on modern audiences, for whom cucumber eating (like wine drinking) has become thoroughly democratized.

Grasping the signifying power of particular foods in the 1890s can thus serve to remind us that the most overt jokes in Wilde’s plays were also those which were often the most safe, exploiting as they did generic and largely conventional reversals in the power relations between the classes and the sexes. Although Lane’s drinking of champagne and attempted purchase of cucumbers may seem to gesture towards the more dangerous (and private) ground of male-male desire—particularly those elements of it suggested by details of Wilde’s biography—they do not have to be explained in this way, and it is unlikely that they were so interpreted by the majority of the play’s original audiences.

The Domains of Public & Private Knowledge

We can see here how studying the social or topical references in The Importance of Being Earnest—what we might more usefully call the public knowledge which the play draws upon—gives a rather different sense of its politics than one brought about by a concentration on its private or biographical allusions. Public knowledge, that is, tends to anchor the play more firmly in a heterosexual world; this in turn helps us to understand why it was so successful with contemporary audiences. Of course one of the difficulties of reading The Importance of Being Earnest today is that it is nearly always the private references which come most readily to mind: modern readers and theatregoers tend to know more about Wilde’s biography than they do about, say, the precise social values attached to particular late-nineteenth-century foods and drinks, and they are in this sense alerted in advance to look for a homosocial or homoerotic context. If we recognize the truth of this situation, the appropriate critical question
becomes whether such a biographically informed reading actually makes more sense than any other, and whether (as we put it earlier) it can contribute to a coherent interpretation of the work. Another way of posing this question is to ask how the private or biographical allusions that have been found by recent critics can be integrated with the public knowledge which the play more obviously and more conventionally draws upon.

The relationship between certain details of Wilde’s life and elements of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was mooted by Lord Alfred Douglas well over half a century ago. In his *Autobiography* Douglas observed that much of the dialogue between Jack and Algernon was based upon what he remembered of his banter with Wilde when the play was being written on the English south coast, so much so that he suggested that it was to all intents and purposes a collaborative venture. It is impossible to corroborate Douglas’s claim now (and that claim anyway may have been no more than an attempt to capitalize upon Wilde’s fame), but there are a number of details that suggest how aspects of Wilde’s personal life might indeed have “leaked” into the work. A little later on in the first act of *The Importance of Being Earnest* we are told that Algernon has taken possession of a cigarette case inadvertently left behind by Jack on an earlier visit. The case bears an inscription from Cecily, whom Jack identifies as his aunt. However the inscription is made to him as “Jack” when, as Algernon points out, his calling card identifies him quite differently, as a certain “Mr Ernest Worthing” living in an apartment in “The Albany” off Piccadilly (Ross, ed., *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 14–15). That address, as several critics have noted, was associated with some of the more prominent members of London’s homosexual circles. This association is in turn reinforced by the knowledge that in Queensberry’s trial Wilde admitted that he had given cigarette cases as presents to young male friends, in particular to Alfred Taylor and Sidney Mavor. The relationship between deception and a double life on the one hand, and gifts of cigarette cases on the other, has thus been interpreted as yet another coded signal to the audience (or to select members of it) that Wilde was in part writing about himself, and that the illicitness of “Bunburying” was because it involved secret male-male relationships, rather than secret heterosexual adulterous ones. How justified are we in reading the cigarette case episode in this way? And is it anything more than an isolated reference?

As Alan Sinfield has pointed out, when he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde could not possibly have known that he was later to face detailed cross-examination in three trials and that cigarette cases would “prove embarrassing” (Sinfield, 35). Moreover the use of personal possessions as plot devices that can reveal secrets in characters’ lives was common both in Wilde’s other society comedies and in the well-made play generally. (Good examples are to be seen in the use of a fan and the brooch/bracelet in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and
An Ideal Husband respectively, or of a pen in Henry Arthur Jones’s The Case of Rebellious Susan.) Like those references to cucumbers and champagne, then, the most readily available (or public) meaning of cigarette cases was a wholly uncontroversial one. We should also notice how swiftly The Importance of Being Earnest moves us on from the exclusively male environment with which it opens, and which has prompted the search for those homosexual and homosocial allusions, to the altogether more conventional ground of heterosexual courtship rituals (the entrances of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen, and the subsequent establishing of those themes, occur less than three hundred lines into the play). As the dramatic action unfolds the comic tensions arise not from the juxtaposition of what might be taken as an authentic male–male world with a trivial male–female one, but from the mirroring of upper-class male–female desire in the passions of individuals from the lower orders. Like Lane, Miss Prism and the Revd. Canon Chasuble—Laetitia and Frederick—also turn out to have been leading a kind of double life, propriety having dictated that their courtship rituals were conducted “metaphorically” through the coded language of bees and horticulture. The secret—or otherness—which the plotting of the play works most consistently and coherently to expose is thus not about sexual identity or sexual preferences, but about class differences. The ending, then, echoes the themes of class and power established in the opening scene. And here again we are on familiar comedic territory, reminded by the socially inclusive ending that (as in Shakespearean comedies) the young and the old, the rich and the poor, men and women, are all subject to the selfsame human desires, and to the vanities and hypocries which accompany them.

Bunburying  Like cucumber sandwiches, Wilde’s term “Bunburying” as a euphemism for living a double life has passed beyond his play into the English language generally. Unsurprisingly many critics have been intrigued by the possible origin of the word. Some have pointed to the punning association of “bun” and “bum,” one which does not work so well in modern U.S. usage. Another has claimed that “Bunburying” was British slang for a male brothel; yet another that it was a term for a homosexual pickup. These explanations rest on the assumption that “bun” is slang for buttock (although attempts to find such usage in late-nineteenth-century dictionaries of slang have proved unsuccessful). Other critics have noted that Wilde had a friend from Trinity College, Dublin called Henry S. Bunbury. Yet others still have observed that Bunbury was the name of a character in an unpublished play, the name of a village in Cheshire, and an entry in the army lists of 1894. A more recent commentator has noted that the name could have been found in the obituary columns of the two main daily papers of the time, the Times and the Morning Post. Bunburying, then, could have had a range of meanings for nineteenth-century readers and audiences, from the overtly sexual to the innocently geographical.
If we are disposed to see the opening exchanges in the play as alluding to a homosocial world, one where “family life” (as Algernon and Lane agree) is “not a very interesting subject,” then, as we have noted, the critical question we need to consider is how such private or coded references interact with the more obvious public jokes about class and age. We should remember that in Wilde’s and Queensberry’s trials, the social distinction between Wilde and the young male companions he entertained at the Savoy was consistently invoked as evidence that the friendships were “unnatural,” and that the intimacy which Wilde claimed to exist between them could only have been purchased. The unequal class basis of those relationships was further emphasized in the attention Carson gave to the attempt by two of the young men concerned to blackmail Wilde (the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, under which Wilde was tried for gross indecency, had come to be popularly known as the “blackmailer’s charter”). The effect of Carson’s questioning, then, was to present Wilde’s sexuality in exploitative terms, as one dependent on (rather than, as Wilde wished to present it, as transcending) his class and financial power over his young male “friends.” If we wish to pursue those hints in the opening few hundred lines of The Importance of Being Earnest and understand the whole of the play biographically—as about male-male desire—then we need to acknowledge that it in no way broaches any of the issues exposed by Carson’s cross-examination, and which were manifestly part of Wilde’s and Douglas’s own sexual life from their first meeting onwards. As we observed in chapter two, in De Profundis Wilde repeatedly drew attention to the need to extricate Douglas from threatened scandals and potential blackmailing by “renters” or male prostitutes.

At first sight the easy banter and camaraderie in the opening exchanges between Lane and Algernon look more like an escape from these realities; that is, they seem to gesture towards an idealized homosocial world, one where male servants willingly collude with their male masters in order to resist the prejudices of a coercive heterosexual society, and where loyalty comes about through mutual self-interest. The difficulty here is that there is little comic or dramatic potential in such idealized relationships, and thus, theatrically (as well as socially), the world of male-male desire, so conceived, can only ever exist offstage as an unexamined other against which we view the power struggles of a flawed heterosexual world. One reason why Lane disappears so quickly from the action of the play (he only figures in the opening exchanges) may be because there is no space for his character to be developed except, perhaps, in terms of the theme of betrayal; but such a theme would have turned The Importance of Being Earnest into a very different play—a much more personal one, perhaps, but certainly not a comedy.

It is also worth remembering that where “real life” is allowed to intrude into the action, in the scene deleted by George Alexander that has come to be known
as the “Gribsby episode,” it is in terms of the nonpayment of debts, a gentlemanly and thus entirely class-bound misdemeanour that can be understood in thoroughly conventional terms. The penniless but well-born and well-mannered gentleman is, after all, a staple theme of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction; moreover, a detachment from the vulgar world of ready money is a definition of aristocratic and dandaical privilege to which we have already been introduced very early in the play.

None of this is to deny, however, that such an incident does once again have many resonances with some details of Wilde’s own life for, as he later testified, he was technically bankrupt when he wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Moreover, this situation had come about in part because (as he later bitterly complained in *De Profundis*) he had spent so much of his income on funding his and Douglas’s secret life, specifically on the latter’s extravagant hotel and restaurant bills. If we pursue this biographical allusion, the most obvious way to read Gribsby’s claim that he has “arrested in the course of his duties nearly all the younger sons of the aristocracy” is in terms of a personal jibe against Douglas’s “reckless extravagance” (to borrow Jack’s phrase). Rather than Wilde rehearsing anxieties about the possible consequences of his own lack of restraint—as

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**The Three Versions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*** Modern readers of *The Importance of Being Earnest* can choose three different versions of it. First, there is the three-act “reading version” that Wilde published in 1899 with Leonard Smithers and that is reproduced in most modern editions. Then there are some modern editions—notably the Collins *Complete Works*—that print an earlier, four-act version of the play that has undergone some reconstruction from surviving manuscript and typescript drafts. To be precise, these consist of a series of exercise books containing what look to be the earliest drafts of the play set out in a four-act version; some slightly later typescripts of Acts I, III, and IV with Wilde’s notes and alterations and that are variously dated September and November 1894; and a full typescript of a four-act version of the play that is dated 31 October 1894 (a transcription of which was first published in 1956). Third and finally, Joseph Donohue (with the help of Ruth Berggren) has attempted to reconstruct the text of the first performance of the play—that is, the three-act play that George Alexander staged at the St. James Theatre in 1895 and that differed in several respects from the three-act play that Wilde published in 1899 (the licensing copy of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the Lord Chamberlain’s Collection in the British Library is also in three acts).

Each of these three texts of *The Importance of Being Earnest* has a different kind of authority and thus possesses a different claim on our attention: none, however, can be said to be entirely the product of Wilde’s own hand. When he worked on the 1899 edition, Wilde was living in hotel rooms in a self-imposed exile and did not have any of his papers—including earlier drafts of *The Importance of Being Earnest*—to hand (most had been sold or stolen from his Tite Street home).
some critics have assumed—the scene looks much more like the articulation of a simmering resentment against his lover’s financial carelessness, a frustration that despite the wealth and privilege into which Douglas had been born (he was, significantly, the youngest of four sons), it was always Wilde who was responsible for picking up the tab, for funding the appetites of a “young man who eats so much, and so often.”

Such personally motivated anger makes little sense in terms of the comic logic of the play, for bitterness and resentment towards aristocratic profligacy tends to place Wilde on the side of the law and of the play’s raisoneurs, those puritans (like the Revd. Chasuble), or the newly censorious Jack, who would call to heel “the disgraceful luxury of the age.” In other words, if details of Wilde’s and Douglas’s life had indeed “leaked” into The Importance of Being Earnest, then it may have happened more by accident than design, for the implications of the biographical allusions in the Gribsby episode seem to run counter to those we have identified in the opening scene and which point to champagne drinking as coding idealized and mutually satisfying male-male relationships, where the amount and cost of alcohol consumed does not belong to Wilde’s actual world, but is a matter for “information only.” If we do wish to read Algernon and Jack as “versions” of Douglas and Wilde (as Douglas suggested) then we need to acknowledge that the exploration of male-male desire which the play gives us is hardly a consistent one, nor does it have much to do with the social or polit-

continued  He thus based his text on a typescript sent to him by Smithers which had formerly belonged to George Alexander and which incorporated Alexander’s own suggestions and changes to the play, including of course Alexander’s decision to cut it from four to three acts. Although Wilde revised this typescript—he added words and phrases, struck out some stage directions, and marked passages for omission—there is little evidence of any attempt to revert to his original intentions. Moreover, it is difficult to know whether such a decision was pragmatic (that Wilde was no longer able to reconstruct the longer version from memory), or creative (that he now saw that Alexander’s version was superior as a piece of theatre). The four-act version of the play may seem the most authentic, in that it was in this form that he originally submitted the work to Alexander. On the other hand, though, we do not have Wilde’s final four-act play: the most complete typescript, that dated 31 October 1894, unfortunately does not carry the latest revisions. So all modern “four-act” versions are editorial reconstructions which combine early and late drafts, and thus incorporate judgments other than those of Wilde. Donohue’s performance text is probably the furthest from Wilde, for we know that Wilde had little involvement in the rehearsal process when many changes to the text would have been made (he was in Algiers with Douglas at the time). But it is the best social text we have—the best record of what contemporary audiences actually witnessed and heard.
ical realities of homosexual life at that time. Those allusions make most sense as expressions of the tensions underlying Wilde’s and Douglas’s own particular situation, as Wilde’s simultaneous obsession with and resentment of Douglas’s youthful beauty; yet it is also that very particularity and privacy which guarantee their invisibility to (and irrelevance for) the vast majority of theatre audiences.

Are the Society Comedies Homoerotic or Homophobic?

The logic of our argument so far is that it is not that one cannot find plausible allusions to gay lifestyles in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but those which scholars have detected are not consistent, nor developed in the course of the play; nor do they seem capable of sustained development, even in the service of the most radical rereadings. So if a director were to stage the opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by emphasizing a sexual intimacy between Algernon and Jack (one moreover witnessed by Lane), it is difficult to see how this revelation could be meaningfully sustained for the entire play, nor the relevance it would have to the sorts of secrets exposed in the work’s denouement, whether of the three- or four-act versions of the play. The same can be said of some of Wilde’s other society comedies. As we will show, both *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance* also seem to have distinct homoerotic elements to them. Moreover, and unlike the comic world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, they use the devices of melodrama to hint at a complex power relation underlying male-male desire. At the same time, though, in neither work can a homosexual thematic provide a coherent reading of the entire play, nor (and this is more surprising) does the recognition of it make either play any less conventional in its politics. Once more we will find that the apparently biographical elements of the work (what we have called its “private knowledge”) and its social or topical references (its “public knowledge”) seem to be pushing us in contradictory directions; but being alert to those tensions does allow us to see both the strengths and weaknesses of the plays’ structures.

Shortly after the opening of Act II of *An Ideal Husband* Sir Robert Chiltern relates to his friend Lord Goring the power exerted over him by Baron Arnheim and the reasons he was seduced into betraying state secrets for money:

**Sir Robert Chiltern** (Threw himself into a chair by the writing-table.)

One night after dinner at Lord Radley’s the Baron began talking about success in modern life as something that one could reduce to an absolutely definite science. With that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvellous of all gospels, the gospel of gold. I think he saw the effect he had produced on me, for some days afterwards he wrote and asked me to come and see him. He was living then in Park Lane, in the house Lord Woolcomb has now. I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale, curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery, showed me his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels, his carved ivories, made me wonder at the strange loveliness of the luxury in which he lived; and then told me that luxury
was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and that power, power over
other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, the one supreme
pleasure worth knowing, the one joy one never tired of, and that in our century only
the rich possessed it.

Lord Goring (With great deliberation.)
A thoroughly shallow creed.

(Ross, ed., An Ideal Husband, 80–81)

In his introduction to his revised edition of An Ideal Husband, Russell Jackson
points out how this passage can be construed as containing layers of reference
that gesture towards a world well beyond the drawing rooms and ballrooms in
which nearly all of the action of the society comedies is contained. It is, for Jack-
son, redolent of a “secret life more profound than Chiltern’s wife ever suspects
or discovers, a seduction with deeper implications than an offer of the means
to worldly success” (Jackson, ed., An Ideal Husband, xxix). That “secret life” is an
exclusively male one and is characterized by extreme wealth, by power, and by
exquisitely sophisticated tastes. In this sense it is reminiscent of the male–male
world so consistently evoked in The Picture of Dorian Gray and in some of the
dialogues in Intentions (although, typically for Wilde, it is simultaneously sati-
rized by the use of ridiculous and completely improbable aristocratic names—
so Arnheim was “living in the house of Lord Woolcomb”).

Moreover the language of Chiltern’s speech, with its emphasis on objects
such as the “wonderful picture gallery,” “his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels,
his carved ivories,” is evocative of the aesthete’s tastes and reminds us of Wil-
de’s own fascination with A Rebours and French Decadence. But like Waine-
wright’s artistic connoisseurship in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” or that of Lord
Henry Wotton in The Picture of Dorian Gray, it carries with it overtones of dan-
ger, of what Wilde in De Profundis called the fruit of the trees in the “other half
of the garden.” Thus Chiltern’s vocabulary also reminds us of some of Wil-
de’s correspondence to his male friends in which he describes the pleasures of
this life of refinement—in collocations such as “strange loveliness,” “wonder-
fully fascinating,” “most terrible,” and particularly in “pale curved lips,” a phrase
which Wilde frequently used to describe the physical beauty of Alfred Douglas.

Jackson goes on to point out that it is possible to see the revisions that Wilde
made to the play for its book publication in 1899—“the removal of circumstan-
tial details of Mrs. Cheveley’s involvement with Arnheim”—as being “intended
to make the Baron a more mysterious, less clearly heterosexual figure” (Jack-
son, ed., An Ideal Husband, xxix). It is only a short step from here, then, to infer
that the power that Arnheim has, that “power over other men,” is one associat-
ed with homoeroticism.
However the later exchange with Goring, the dandy figure in the play, serves as a critique of such a lifestyle. Goring peremptorily dismisses it as a “thoroughly shallow creed.” Thereafter Chiltern explains his relationship with Arnheim as a purely financial one, and so his actions, while morally reprehensible, are made safe, at least in sexual terms. This changed atmosphere is emphasized by Goring’s joke about Chiltern’s attempt at atonement:

Sir Robert Chiltern
I don’t say that I suffered any remorse. I didn’t. Not remorse in the ordinary, rather silly sense of the word. But I have paid conscience money many times. I had a wild hope that I might disarm destiny. The sum Baron Arnheim gave me I have distributed twice over in public charities since then.

Lord Goring (Looking up.)
In public charities? Dear me! what a lot of harm you must have done, Robert!

(Ross, ed., An Ideal Husband, 84–85)

This sense that the play is moving quickly back to the familiar and unthreatening ground of a comedy of manners is reflected in the stage directions for Goring. While Chiltern makes his confession, Goring speaks “with great deliberation” and keeps “his eyes steadily fixed on the carpet.” But when he makes his joke about charity he is “looking up,” and is soon confident enough to be “leaning back with his hands in his pockets,” and eventually, like all of Wilde’s dandies, “arranging his necktie” and “settling his buttonhole.” Once more, Russell Jackson makes clear the stereotyped character which Wilde is invoking: “Wilde makes Goring the play’s raisonneur, the familiar stage figure of the experienced man of the world who provides the wisdom of the world and helps to resolve the difficulties of the principal couple. Such parts occur in many plays of the time, and especially fine examples were written for Charles Wyndham by Henry Arthur Jones” (Jackson, ed., An Ideal Husband, xxxi). The raisonneur knows well the realities of the life to which Chiltern has alluded; consequently he acts to dismiss the threat of that life, and as the scene progresses he is able to revert back to the languid, nonchalant dandy, whose social raison d’être is of course to take nothing seriously.

We should remember that in the 1899 edition of the play the stage directions are Wilde’s and are thus free from interventions from players, theatre manager, or the demands of the office of the Lord Chamberlain. They were made for a reading text, two years after his release from prison, and four years after the play’s first production. If Wilde is on the one hand hinting that Arnheim is a more dangerous and sexually ambivalent figure, he is simultaneously limiting what we can do with those hints. This raising but immediate closing down of dangerous topics might look like a loss of nerve but, exiled in France and far removed from British prudishness as he was in 1899, it is hard to see why such a course of action would have appealed to Wilde. It is much more plausible that
Wilde’s directions were included for their overall dramatic effect to reassure us that his play is after all a comedy of manners.

As Jackson also suggests, it is possible, even tempting, to understand Chiltern’s secrets in sexual terms and thus to connect the play’s theme of public exposure to the anxieties that were then animating Wilde’s own life. However, the deliberate curtailing of this line of interpretation, which we have just described, in the reactions Wilde gives to Goring (who is finally to marry Chiltern’s sister, Mabel) suggests that if he was aware of such a subtext, Wilde did not want it to dominate the action. Indeed the play concludes with the conventional melodramatic language of heterosexual love and self-sacrifice, a language far removed from the world of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where such values exist only in Sibyl Vane’s life of theatrical make-believe. As with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a distinction needs to be drawn between discovering dramatic elements that we can understand as occasional or isolated references to a homosexual subculture and seeing in them the dramatic motor of the play. For if we do try to understand Chiltern’s past as that of the compromised homosexual then the dynamic behind the relationships of the other characters becomes dramatically and structurally incomprehensible. In particular it becomes difficult to understand Chiltern’s relationship with Lady Chiltern and the ways in which the tensions between the two are used to explore the nature of love—more specifically, the difference between a love based on realism (that is, on a knowledge of and ability to forgive the loved one’s imperfections and mistakes), and a love centred on idealism, on placing the loved object on a pedestal (a theme that had also been explored in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*).

Act II of the play closes with Chiltern’s eloquent plea to his wife that the truest test of love is that it endures despite “weaknesses … follies … [and] imperfections.” As Chiltern puts it—in quasi-Christian terms that in turn anticipate the language of the later parts of *De Profundis*: “It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon” (Ross, ed., *An Ideal Husband*, 132). Of course it is very tempting to read these lines biographically and to substitute Wilde and his wife Constance for Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern. As Neil McKenna has argued:

There are many parallels between [their] situations…. Like Oscar, Sir Robert had committed a terrible sin and hides a terrible secret from his wife and the world. That Oscar’s sins are plural and sexual, as opposed to Sir Robert’s single, financial sin, makes little difference. Sir Robert speaks of his single sin as if it were, in fact, plural and sexual. He describes his sin as “my secret and my shame,” evoking the Uranian meaning of shame as love and sex between men. (McKenna, 244)
If we are disposed to see Chiltern’s past as involving a homosexual scandal, we must also give full attention (as McKenna fails to do) to the way in which the play develops and so treats such a misdemeanour. And this requires us to read Chiltern’s speech in Act II in its entirety and to recognize that his aim is not only to ask for his wife’s understanding of and forgiveness for a compromising relationship with another man, but also to regain her love for the future. As he confesses to Goring in Act III: “I love her more than anything else in the world…. Love is the great thing in the world. There is nothing but love, and I love her” (Ross, ed., *An Ideal Husband*, 161). We might now find these lines overly melodramatic or even overly sentimental, but structurally they stand as Chiltern’s attempt to find a form of closure for his earlier wrongdoing—to present it as an isolated aberration, now firmly in his past, one never to be repeated. In other words, even if we see Chiltern’s friendship with Arnheim as possessing a sexual element, then we also have to acknowledge what a very Victorian—indeed conservatively Victorian—conclusion the end of Act II represents dramatically.

In this reading homosexuality would have to be seen as an aberration of youth, a younger man led astray by an older (exactly what Edward Carson accused Wilde of doing to Douglas); the mature, and fundamentally heterosexual man bitterly repents of his earlier “weakness” or “folly,” a sentiment which is reiterated several times in the remainder of the play. Of course one might wish to attribute that view of homosexuality to Chiltern’s hypocrisy—to see his speech as mere cant, an attempt to cover his back, as it were, and to preserve his marriage in order to maintain his grasp on political power. The difficulty with this interpretation, though, is that Chiltern’s view of his past is explicitly endorsed by Goring. As Goring later explains to Mrs. Cheveley, “It was an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable, I admit, shameful, I admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore … *not his true character*” (Ross, ed., *An Ideal Husband*, 177; Wilde’s ellipsis, our emphasis); and then, later still, to Lady Chiltern: “Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself?” (Ross, ed., *An Ideal Husband*, 228; our emphasis). It is interesting to note that it was in precisely these terms that the older Alfred Douglas accounted for the homosexual promiscuity of his own youth. It was not unusual, he claimed, for boys in public schools, or young men in universities, to be “led astray” in such a way. Of course we do not have to see the play in biographical terms, but if we do feel tempted to pursue the personal allusions, then we should acknowledge that they appear to make the play more, not less, conservative, for they present homosexuality in a conventional and ultimately unthreatening way. Such an account of course bears no relation to the realities of Wilde’s own sexual life.

The themes of financial and moral corruption in *A Woman of No Importance* can also lend themselves to that kind of homoerotic reading that has been found
in parts of *An Ideal Husband*. On its surface *A Woman of No Importance* concerns the rivalry between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Arbuthnot for the attention and the care of their illegitimate son, Gerald Arbuthnot. Here, as we hinted earlier, the relationship between Illingworth and Gerald is, on the surface, not easy to understand. It is one where the older man seems to treat the younger as a kind of possession: despite his illegitimacy he will gain his inheritance, but only under certain conditions, ultimately that of spending (like the Persephone of Greek mythology) half of his life with Illingworth. The comparison with Persephone is not as far-fetched as it first sounds, because Illingworth’s offer has sinister overtones to it, and his relationship with Gerald has often been seen as one which makes most sense when understood in sexual rather than parental terms (even though we are told explicitly that Illingworth and Gerald are father and son). This interpretation was expressed most provocatively by the iconoclastic modernist Lytton Strachey, who in a letter informed Duncan Grant of his reactions to Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1907 revival of the play:

“It was rather amusing,” he told Duncan Grant (2 June 1907), “as it was a complete mass of epigrams, with occasional whiffs of grotesque melodrama and drivelling sentiment. The queerest mixture! Mr Tree [who played Lord Illingworth] is a wicked Lord, staying in a country house, who has made up his mind to bugger one of the other guests—a handsome young man of twenty. The handsome young man is delighted; when his mother enters, sees his Lordship and recognizes him as having copulated with her twenty years before, the result of which was—the handsome young man. She appeals to Lord Tree not to bugger his own son. He replies that that’s an additional reason for doing it (oh! he’s a very wicked Lord!). She then appeals to the handsome young man, who says, ‘Dear me! What an abominable thing to do—to go and copulate without marrying! Oh no, I shall certainly pay no attention to anyone capable of doing *that*, and—’ when suddenly enter (from the garden) a young American millionairess, shrieking for help, and in considerable disorder. The wicked Lord Tree, not content with buggering his own son, has attempted to rape the millionairess, with whom (very properly) the young handsome man is in love. Enter his Lordship. Handsome Y. M.: ‘You devil! You have insulted the purest creature on God’s earth! I shall kill you!’ But of course he doesn’t, but contents himself with marrying the millionairess, while his mother takes up a pair of gloves and slashes the Lord across the face. It seems an odd plot, doesn’t it? But it required all my penetration to find out that this was the plot, as you may imagine…. The audience was of course charmed.”

As Alan Sinfield helpfully reminds us, had the plot of *A Woman of No Importance* “been read generally in this way, it could not have been performed on the West End stage in 1907 or initially in 1893” (Sinfield, 34). The fact that Strachey might have been alone, or in a tiny minority, in his deliberately provocative understanding of the play does not, however, necessarily invalidate it. As we have argued, the relative visibility of biographical allusions (which will obviously change with the passage of time and the differing degrees of knowledge held by the plays’ audiences) is important, though it remains a literary-
historical issue. By contrast the principal literary-critical question is how those allusions affect our interpretation and evaluation of the play. As we put matters earlier, how do the private and public domains fit together, and how do they allow us to glimpse the play’s politics? In order to examine this topic, it will be useful to revisit briefly those details of Wilde’s personal life which most forcefully underwrite a biographical reading like Strachey’s.

In January and February 1893, while the play was in preparation and about to be put into rehearsal, Wilde was staying at Babbacombe Cliff, near Torquay in Devon, in the house of Lady Mount-Temple, a distant relative of Constance, his wife. The trip began as a family holiday, but in due course Constance left with the children (a circumstance which might have some bearing on the series of jokes in the play made at the expense of Mr. Kettle, whose wife and children are also apart from him during the action of the first two acts). In the absence of his family, Wilde set up what he called a mock “academy,” writing in a letter of “Babbacombe School,” with himself as headmaster, with Lord Alfred Douglas, who represented the “Boys,” and with Campbell Dodgson, Douglas’s private classics tutor at Oxford, acting as “second master.” The mock rules Wilde invented included “tea for headmaster and second master, brandy and soda (not to exceed seven) for boys” (Complete Letters, 555–56). Here life—at least Wilde’s life—seems to have been perilously close to art. Further details about that life came to light a couple of years later during Queensberry’s trial. The relationship between Wilde and Walter Grainger, Douglas’s Oxford servant, who was employed by Wilde as a member of the household staff at Babbacombe Cliff (and then again as an under-butler when he rented a cottage for himself and Douglas in the summer of 1893 in Goring), became the subject of a heated exchange, in which Carson attempted to demonstrate that Wilde’s interest in Grainger was chiefly sexual.

If Wilde’s admission in De Profundis that he found completing A Woman of No Importance difficult is to be believed, it was because of the demands made upon his time by Alfred Douglas and Douglas’s constant need to be entertained. So if we wish to construe Wilde’s writing as autobiographical, then it is tempting to see how once again he might have used A Woman of No Importance to articulate some of the tensions between his public (and familial) and private (and gay) selves which he was experiencing at this time. In such an interpretation the overt and explicitly heterosexual concerns of the play (aristocrats and their mistresses, Victorian sexual double standards, the concern with legitimacy and inheritance, and what male writers in the 1890s labelled the Woman Question) are read so that they code homosexual desire, where the older man must compete with both older and younger women for the affection and loyalty of young men, a theme also to be found in the extant scenario of The Cardinal of Avignon,
a project about which Wilde was thinking at around the same time as he was writing *A Woman of No Importance*, and which we discuss in more detail below.

In contrast to the rather forced interpretation of one speech in *An Ideal Husband*, a biographical reading of *A Woman of No Importance* can be developed with some consistency and plausibility and may appear to resolve what otherwise might seem structural or thematic weaknesses in the play, particularly (as Strachey noticed) the imbalance of its main dramatic tension, ostensibly a conflict between a selfless maternal and a selfish paternal love. These imbalances are quite far reaching; so, for example, in the course of the play we and the characters learn with Illingworth that he is Gerald’s father but we never really find out the reasons why he wishes so strongly to “own” his son by having his exclusive company for six months of the year. Moreover, we never see Gerald in a situation that explains any of the qualities that make him such a good prospect for Illingworth both as secretary and as a companion—which particular qualities, that is, that would make him “of considerable use” (Ross, ed., *A Woman of No Importance*, 17), apart from his boyishness and looks.

Another imbalance is the length of the scenes given to the play’s dowagers, such as Lady Hunstanton, Lady Stutfield, and Mrs. Allonby, who contribute nothing to the play’s action, but who in Act II discuss quite openly the attractions of the male body. This scene is there, of course, principally for comic effect, but collectively the openness of the dowagers contrasts with the milk-and-water, and sexually unthreatening, younger woman—Hester. She is a rich but tedious American heiress, much more of a one-dimensional character than the witty Mabel Chiltern. Why she comes to Britain, why she is so attractive to Gerald (and why he is so attractive to her) are, once again, questions which the play studiedly ignores. Moreover the young heterosexual lovers, Gerald and Hester, are the most stereotyped and for that reason dramatically the least interesting characters in the whole play. Then there is the slightly ambivalent presentation of Mrs. Arbuthnot. As the seduced and deserted single mother she ought to invite at least some of our sympathy, even if we take account of the fact that Victorian attitudes to premarital sex and illegitimacy were quite different from modern ones. In contrast, as the play progresses she is given long, over-melodramatic, and self-pitying speeches, and sometimes seems to be on the side of the priggish, coldhearted puritanism that Wilde consistently mocks in all his work, and here specifically in the character of Hester.

A reading of the play that stresses its gay subtexts may seem to make sense of these imbalances in that it gives reasons for the shortcomings in the representation of heterosexual love—in Sir John and Lady Pontefract, in Mrs. Arbuthnot and Illingworth, in Kelvil and his offstage wife, as well as in Hester and Gerald. At the same time, however, it makes the discussion of love in the play much more cynical and certainly less comic and romantic. What is professed to
be love invariably turns out to be simple desire or possessiveness, and therefore the play’s ostensible theme of love as selflessness, articulated by Mrs. Arbuthnot, becomes marginal. If we pursue Strachey’s homoerotic reading, this “darkening” of the play’s themes manifests itself again in the way we now have to understand the role of Gerald, that obscure object of Illingworth’s desire, who is at the same time his own son. A biographical reading adds to gay desire the altogether more difficult (and far less comic) topic of incest. So some imbalances are resolved, but at the cost of producing new ones. The problem—as Strachey hints—now becomes that of reconciling incestuous desires (if that is what they are) with Illingworth’s witty nonchalance: like Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he is an attractive villain and is given the best comic lines in the play. Even in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is hard to see the dandy as such a straightforwardly sinister figure as incestuous desire threatens to make Illingworth here: his ability to make outrageous comments about hypocrisy and double standards derives from, and is reinforced by, his relative remoteness from the world of real emotions and from real desires which can disturb or damage. The dandy’s ability to embarrass others is a direct function of his imperturbability.

We ought to remind ourselves that the plays, taken as a sequence, develop the role of the dandy with considerable sophistication. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Darlington is either an amoral but purely verbal cynic or a compromised would-be adulterer: he is never both. The play keeps these different aspects of Darlington quite separate; moreover Wilde showed little interest in developing the dandy’s role as an adulterer. It was a difficult subject to broach in the drama of the late nineteenth century, and it only figures as a topic of gossip in the other plays. In *A Woman of No Importance* the dandy is given a more prominent role than in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, for unlike Darlington, Illingworth is very much at the centre of the power structures and social world that the play alludes to. However, as we noted, a cynical detachment remains central to his characterization and is the source of most of the comedy: the audience can appreciate Illingworth’s wit while simultaneously deprecating his immorality. Such a delicate dramatic balance would be overturned by the theme of incest. Illingworth would soon reveal himself as a monster, and the society of which he is the centre would by extension become monstrous too. Pursuing the homoerotic subtexts in *A Woman of No Importance* may give it a particular kind of darkness, one in tune with modern sensibilities, but it exacts a huge price in doing so because it makes it incomprehensible as a comedy of manners. It also has the unfortunate consequence of presenting male–male desire as something so unnatural that incest is no longer a taboo; and in this way (as with *An Ideal Husband*) it can be seen as reinforcing contemporary conservative prejudices about the pathology of homosexuality.
The logic of our discussion of the society comedies is that it is difficult to develop the occasional hints about homoerotic or homosocial lives in a way which makes sense of the plays’ overall themes or of what we know of Wilde’s attitudes to his own sexuality. Moreover—and surprisingly—it is perfectly possible to pursue the biographical allusions in An Ideal Husband and A Woman of No Importance to produce a homophobic interpretation of those plays, one in which homosexuality is depicted either as a one-off lapse excusable in a basically heterosexual young man or as monstrous behaviour in his more mature homosexual counterpart. These views are hardly compatible with anything we know of Wilde’s intentions or of the plays’ first reception. We should not, however, take all this to imply that Wilde had no interest in exploring in his dramas the complexities of male–male relations. In fact that theme does figure much more centrally in some of his lesser-known works, in particular in Salome, A Florentine Tragedy, La Sainte Courtisane, and the scenario of The Cardinal of Avignon. Significantly, the settings of this group of plays—they are all placed in distant Renaissance or biblical times—are far removed from the social topicality of the society comedies, from that domain of “public” knowledge which, we have argued, seems to conflict with the occasional glimpses into the “private” world which was the arena for Wilde’s own sexual life. It is as if this very remoteness from late-nineteenth-century social mores gave Wilde the freedom to explore the concerns closest to his own life. In other words, it is paradoxically those plays that seem to be the least about the world in which Wilde lived which may repay best a biographically motivated reading.

The Private World of the Unfinished & Unperformed Plays

Complaining, as usual, about the demands that Douglas made on his time, Wilde wrote in De Profundis of an exceptionally productive period in his life that followed his lover’s departure to Egypt. He described how he had “collected again the torn and ravelled web of my imagination, got my life back into my own hands, and not merely finished the three remaining acts of An Ideal Husband but conceived and had almost completed two other plays of a completely different type, the Florentine Tragedy and La Sainte Courtisane” (Complete Works, II: 40). Readers and scholars of Wilde have been so habituated to thinking of Salome as the exception in his dramatic oeuvre—“his most experimental play isolated as an apparent aberration among the complete works,” as one theatre historian has put it—that they have been apt to forget that it was two other pieces which in De Profundis Wilde himself singled out for their “difference.”

Categorizing Wilde’s dramatic output is not a straightforward task. That body of writing could be divided into the early and the late works: a period of nearly a decade separates Wilde’s first theatrical experiments—Vera; Or, the Nihilists, written in 1880, and The Duchess of Padua, written in 1883—from the run of successful West End comedies that began with Lady Windermere’s Fan (complet-
ed and first performed in 1892) and ended with *The Importance of Being Earnest* (in 1895). Or one might choose the finished and the unfinished. For most of the plays that were completed and either performed or published in Wilde’s lifetime—that is, *Vera*, the four society comedies, *Salome*, and *The Duchess of Padua* (published in an edition of twenty copies, at Wilde’s expense and probably in 1891); for those there is another group of dramatic works that exist only as scenario or as unfinished draft. This latter group includes *La Sainte Courtisane*, written sometime after 1893 but (as Karl Beckson notes) incomplete in mid-1895; *A Florentine Tragedy*, an incomplete one-act drama again written in the years after 1893; *The Cardinal of Avignon* (a lengthy scenario of which was sketched out by Wilde in 1894, although the first idea for the play came to him as early as 1882); *A Wife’s Tragedy* (probably written in the late 1880s, and surviving only in a manuscript fragment which was published by Rodney Shewan in 1982); and *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry*, a scenario which Wilde wrote in the summer of 1894 and which he eventually sold to Frank Harris, who completed the play in 1900. Finally, one might be tempted to divide the plays by genre or theme, separating *Vera* and the society comedies with their contemporary settings from those more melodramatic or tragic works concerned with historical or biblical subjects.

The very least we can agree upon is that Wilde’s interest in the theatre was more wide-ranging than an exclusive concern with the society comedies might lead us to believe. On the other hand, it does seem significant that the works Wilde found most difficult to complete were, overwhelmingly, those with little or no topical reference. There is, of course, a straightforwardly pragmatic explanation for this state of affairs. Wilde worked hardest on those genres that offered the best prospect of commercial success; and it was the fashionable contemporaneity of the society comedies, rather than the stylized and perhaps archaic Renaissance tragedies, which brought the much-needed commissions and cash advances. Yet the failure of his attempt to have *Salome* staged, and the contrasting success of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, did not blunt Wilde’s interest in those plays “of a completely different type”: *La Sainte Courtisane, A Florentine Tragedy*, and *The Cardinal of Avignon*. They all postdate *Salome*, and provide evidence of Wilde’s continuing (even compulsive) interest in dramatizing those fierce emotions and desires that had no place in the politely ordered, normative, and strictly gendered world of the drawing rooms of London society. It seems from his scattered references to these projected works that they possessed a powerful hold over his imagination, even while he was preoccupied with the more popular and conventional society comedies. That Wilde was unable to sell the scenarios for any of these works probably explains why they were never finished. However, what must have been failures or disappointments for him do present the modern reader with a number of opportunities. The very fact that *La Sainte Courtisane, A Florentine Tragedy*, and *The Cardinal of Avignon* were never placed
before the public when Wilde was alive means that other hands, whether they belonged to actors, managers, or publishers, did not—so far as we know—intervene in or interfere with Wilde’s creative process by forcing or persuading him to modify his first ideas.\(^8\) As a consequence, it may be that it is in these incomplete and fragmentary works that we see Wilde at his most raw and personal, using drama or theatre (however inexpertly) to explore emotions that were closest to his own life.

Before continuing with our argument it may be helpful to offer a brief word of explanation about how we will develop our discussion in the remainder of this chapter. The plots and situations of the society comedies are so well known and have—as we noted earlier—been the subject of so much critical explanation that we have assumed that the reader will be able to place those particular or local episodes we have discussed in relation to the plays as a whole. However, the same is not true of the unfinished plays; these works are not widely available and the fundamental precondition of a critical debate about them—the establishing of reliable and authoritative texts—has yet to be put in place. And it is because they are relatively unexamined in comparison with the rest of Wilde’s oeuvre that we think it worthwhile to provide the reader with accounts of their themes and—when necessary—their plot structures. (They are reprinted, with full bibliographical information, in the Appendix.) In this way and for these reasons we offer much more of a close reading or explication of these works than with any of the better-known pieces in Wilde’s oeuvre.

The fact that the potential of *La Sainte Courtisane*, *A Florentine Tragedy*, and *The Cardinal of Avignon* has been so little explored by modern critics can be explained, as we said, by the fact that the texts themselves are only infrequently reprinted. Moreover, those that have been published are not always consistent with each other, as editors make different decisions about how to piece together the various surviving manuscript fragments. Merlin Holland reproduced *A Florentine Tragedy* (along with *La Sainte Courtisane*) in his revised *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (1994), although Terence Brown, who wrote the introduction to the section on the plays in Holland’s edition, does not mention either of them. The only other easily available printing of *A Florentine Tragedy* is to be found in Richard Allen Cave’s Penguin edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (2000), the introduction to which, unlike Brown’s, does discuss some of the work’s themes as well as its theatrical novelty and dramatic power. Readers might also go to Robert Ross’s 1909 edition, although they would notice that Ross’s text is significantly different from that of Holland or Cave, for it includes a first scene of some 200 lines composed by the writer Thomas Sturge Moore after Wilde’s death. To complicate matters further, manuscript fragments of what appears to be the missing opening which Moore’s lines had been composed to replace came to light after Ross’s edition had gone to press, and were reprint-
ed in part in Stuart Mason’s *A Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*. None of the Mason fragments appears in the few modern editions of the work. By contrast the scenario of *The Cardinal of Avignon* is virtually unknown to all except a handful of experts: it has been printed only in bibliographical works directed towards the specialist reader. The few surviving lines of dialogue of the play (probably an opening for Act II) contained in a notebook (currently held in the Taylor Collection at Princeton) have never been reprinted.

**The Cardinal of Avignon**

The 1894 scenario of *The Cardinal of Avignon* is quite detailed, giving both an outline of the play’s plot as well as some indication of the principal dramatic exchanges. It centres on a Cardinal who is about to be elected Pope. In the opening scene he is soliciting votes by promising to fulfil the “personal aims and desires” of various “Nobles and Princes” whose “vices and pleasures” he knows well. He also has the guardianship of what the scenario describes as “a beautiful young girl.” In a later scene she reveals to him that she is in love with “a handsome young man” who has “been made much of by the prelate” (and who, we soon learn, is in fact the Cardinal’s illegitimate son). Full of “rage and sorrow” the Cardinal, who is also secretly in love with the girl, makes her promise not to relate their conversation to her lover. Later, on finding out that the two lovers have indeed met, the Cardinal, determined not to “lose the only thing he loves,” lies to the girl’s lover by telling him that she is in fact his sister and he must therefore “pluck this impossible love from his heart and also kill it in the heart of the girl.” The young man carries out this demand. In the final act, the Cardinal is struggling with his conscience, anxious that the “sin in his soul”—his illicit love for his ward and his lie to his son—will prevent him from being elected Pope. But he is elected, and in his elation reveals to the young man that the lie was merely a “test” and that he can now marry his ward and “ride away from Rome.” But the girl has already killed herself in despair. The scenario ends with a violent argument, conducted over the corpse of the girl, between the Cardinal (now Pope) and his son; in the course of that confrontation the son threatens to kill his father. In order to save his life, the Pope first appeals to the sanctity of his office; then, on revealing his identity as a father, draws attention to the “hideousness of the crime of patricide.” Finally, he reveals his love for his ward—“I too loved her”—at which point the young man throws himself on the corpse and stabs himself. In the final tableau, reminiscent of a Jacobean revenge tragedy, the Pope is seen blessing the dead bodies, an action witnessed by the “soldiers, Nobles, etc.” who have burst into the palace.

This potent mix of parental power, sexual rivalry between an older and a younger man, and the hint of incest (as both quasi-parental and fraternal feelings are translated into sexual ones) we have of course seen before, though with a much less explicit treatment. Wilde was composing the scenario for *The Car-
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dinal of Avignon less than a year after he had completed A Woman of No Importance, in which similar themes have been detected. In both plays a young woman (an entirely blameless, and thus a dramatically uninteresting victim) is a device by which Wilde can dramatize a conflict between two men, one in which good looks and youthfulness are set against age, knowledge, and power. It is clear from the scenario that the scenes that interested Wilde most—and that are afforded the most extensive treatment by way of his marking out potential lines of dialogue—are the exchanges between the Cardinal and his son. By contrast, the conventional love scenes between the son and the ward are given only a perfunctory mention. As Wilde curtly puts it: “The girl now re-enters, and the Cardinal explains that her lover finds he has made a serious mistake and does not love her sufficiently to wed her. The portion of the play winds up with a powerful scene between the two lovers, the young man rigidly carrying out the promise exacted from him by the Cardinal.” Wilde gives no indication of the kinds of exchanges that might be exhibited in this “powerful scene.” We might also notice the lack of women characters in the scenario: the Cardinal/Pope (as one would expect) operates within an entirely male world of nobles, princes, and soldiers. The dowager-duchesses and the wronged middle-aged women who populate the society comedies and whose influence is exercised only in a domestic environment are significantly absent; and so too, therefore, are the male-female power struggles which help to ground the society comedies in the conventional sexual ethics and traditions of the well-made play. As a result Wilde’s interest in the complexities of male-male relationships is very much at the forefront of The Cardinal of Avignon. In that work, as in the periodical version of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde’s personal concerns seem right on the surface. Richard Ellmann, who sees the scenario as an “emulation” of Shelley’s The Cenci, is certainly right when he comments that Wilde is “not interested in the subject of incest” and that “the tragedy is one of thwarted love [where] family relationships of lovers and rivals do not seem to matter” (Ellmann, 386). Oddly, though, Ellmann does not tease out the nature of that nonfamilial love.

A Florentine Tragedy

As we noted earlier, in order to understand some of the problems involved in interpreting A Florentine Tragedy, modern readers need some information about its textual status. They can choose between two different texts: that printed by both Holland and Cave, or that given by Ross in his 1909 edition. In fact, the only (though substantial) difference between the Ross and the Holland and Cave texts concerns the latter editors’ omission of those opening 200 lines which had been commissioned from Sturge Moore. Ross himself, according to an introduction he wrote for the American edition of that work, had based his text on a typescript of the play (now presumed lost) which had been given to him by the actor Edward Smith Willard (Willard in turn claimed that the type-
script had been sent to him by Wilde). Significantly, that typescript, according
to Ross, began at the same place as some loose manuscript fragments of the play
which he had in his own possession, having retrieved them from Wilde’s Tite
Street home in 1895 following Wilde’s bankruptcy proceedings. Ross’s frag-
ments in turn were almost certainly the same incomplete manuscript draft that
is now held in the collection of the Clark Library in the University of Califor-
nia; the first page of that draft—numbered as it is in Wilde’s hand—begins (as
we must presume the Willard typescript did) with the stage direction “Enter the
Husband” followed by Simone’s first speech. Simone enters a stage already peo-
pled with two other characters—Guido and Bianca—whose presence has not
been explained to the audience. This detail, in combination with the absence of
description of the scene or of the dramatis personae, led Ross to conclude that
Wilde had failed, for whatever reason, to write an opening scene for the play.
Later in De Profundis Wilde acknowledged that the play was indeed incomplete
at the time of his conviction, though he did not explain precisely what work
remained to be done.

However, as we hinted earlier, other surviving manuscript fragments, which
were not in Ross’s possession when he put together the 1909 edition of A Flo-
rentine Tragedy, show that Wilde had indeed worked on a beginning for his play,
although whether these lines had been composed before or after the typescript
made for Willard is not clear. That these fragments are on unnumbered pag-
eses may seem to suggest that they came from a very early draft, as Wilde tended
to number manuscript pages only when he was making a fair copy for a typist.
On the other hand, we know from Wilde’s other works that he habitually had
drafts typed up, and that these would subsequently be heavily corrected, and
new manuscript pages interleaved with them. The typescript he sent to Willard,
then, did not necessarily represent finished work, and the unnumbered pages
where he is apparently drafting out a possible opening do not necessarily rep-
resent discarded ideas.

These details about the composition of A Florentine Tragedy may seem unnec-
essarily complex, an example of exactly the sort of arcane scholarship or dry-as-
dust facts that we have deprecated as being of interest only to scholars. However,
as we will show, they turn out to be important for an interpretation of the play,
and particularly for how we understand its main themes.

A Florentine Tragedy is written in blank verse; it represents an achievement in
striking contrast to some of the dully artificial language of Poems (1881), the
pseudo–Elizabethan diction of A Duchess of Padua, and the occasionally over-
wrought Decadent verse of The Sphinx. In many ways A Florentine Tragedy can
lay claim to be Wilde’s most accomplished and mature verse in the sense that
it is completely of a piece with the play’s themes and action. Its plot is simpler
than that indicated in the scenario of The Cardinal of Avignon, though it has many
thematic similarities, in that it is concerned with power, sexual attraction, and male-male rivalry. The entire action takes place in a single scene, one which (as we have noted) seems to possess no proper opening, or none that Wilde completed. The scene provided by Sturge Moore was thus an attempt to frame and to explain the abrupt beginning and spare action of Wilde’s typescript. (The play, using Moore’s opening, was first performed privately in the King’s Hall in London by the Literary Theatre Society in 1906.) However, these additional lines produce a different effect than the one we would expect from a simple scene-setting addition: they act as a controlling or preemptive paratext for it. In Moore’s opening, we learn that Guido Bardi, the son of the Duke of Florence, has attempted to buy the favours of Bianca, the wife of a Florentine trader, Simone Dario, for 40,000 crowns, a sum Bianca returns to Guido. All of this information is related in a conversation between Bianca and her “tire-woman” Maria (a character invented by Moore), who has been acting—as female servants typically do in Renaissance dramas—as a kind of go-between for her mistress and that mistress’s putative lover. Indeed, in this version most of our information about Guido, prior to his entrance, comes to us via Maria, who is explicitly weighing him as a potential suitor (and, for her, a potential employer). Thus she emphasizes his “blue” aristocratic blood and his conventional manly virtues: that he is rich and “handsome,” with his “doublet,” “chains” and “hose,” and his “revered legs.”

Guido’s entrance in Moore’s opening then initiates a familiar Renaissance theatrical courtship ritual, in which he celebrates Bianca’s grace and beauty and

Wilde & Renaissance Drama  For those readers, almost certainly the majority, who associate Wilde’s dramatic energies with his four society comedies, it may come as something of a surprise to learn that he had such a sustained interest in historical and particularly Renaissance drama. One of his favourite works was Shelley’s The Cenci—in a letter to the editor of the Daily Telegraph, dated 19 February 1892, he described it as one of only “two great plays” to have been produced “in this century, in England” (Complete Letters, 519). In the mid-1880s he reviewed several Shakespearean productions for the Dramatic Review, including those of Hamlet, As You Like It, Henry IV, and Twelfth Night, and he also wrote more generally on contemporary methods of staging Shakespeare, engaging with what was then a lively debate about archaeological accuracy in costume and scenery. There is also evidence of a more widespread public interest in seventeenth-century drama. In 1887 Henry Havelock Ellis (who would later find fame as a sexologist) established the Mermaid Series of Old Dramatists, published by Vizetelly. It was designed to make available to a wider audience texts of Renaissance and Jacobean dramas. Early editors included John Addington Symonds, Edmund Gosse, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Arthur Symons, Ernest Rhys, and Roden Noel. Wilde’s sustained commitment to the subgenre, then, was far from being unusual.
then asks what he could purchase from Simone for 100,000 crowns, finally telling Bianca that it is her whom he wishes to buy. At the close of the scene Bianca directs Guido to “bargain” for her with Simone. It is important to stress that all of these exchanges are an invention by Moore (even though they pick up certain details in Wilde’s text, such as the amounts of money mentioned when Simone is trying to sell Guido a “robe of state”). Their cumulative effect is to establish Bianca, and the exchange value of female beauty, as the pivot of the play’s action; and they also suggest an overt connection between money, sex, and power in a way which is once again familiar from the sexual politics of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Moore seems to be transforming Wilde’s play into a conventional period piece.

Wilde’s own incomplete draft openings to the play (printed in the Appendix) could not be more different. They give no hint that Guido has attempted to “buy” Bianca, nor, more importantly, that either or both parties understand their relationship principally in economic terms. Bianca, in particular, is presented (as her name suggests) as virtue personified. So what we call Fragment B (published by Mason) centres on a conventional lover’s language of longing and anxiety; Bianca stands alone near an open window lamenting the problems of an involvement in an illicit love affair—the “loveless days | Wearly passed and patiently endured”—and calling on the “Holy Mother” to witness her patience and her pain. In what we call Fragment C (first published in full by Small in 1993), her piety is given yet greater weight, as we meet her “kneeling before an image of the Madonna … simply but beautifully dressed.” Moreover, when Guido enters by the window, it is her own unworthiness which preoccupies Bianca—that, as a “common burgher’s unloved wife,” it would be enough for her (using a Dante-like phrase) just to have “looked on” her “terrible Lord,” on his “fair” face, with his “throat like milk,” “mouth a scarlet flower,” and eyes where “wild woodland wells” and “dark violets see | Their purple shadows drown.” Here, in Wilde’s opening, we should notice that it is the beauty of Guido (rather than of Bianca) that is dwelt upon. In neither of Wilde’s manuscript fragments is Guido given any lines celebrating Bianca’s appearance. Moreover, Bianca’s dreamily sensuous appreciation of the male body, so reminiscent of the Decadent language in works such as The Picture of Dorian Gray, is completely at odds with Maria’s description of Guido (as imagined by Moore), which emphasizes his possessions and his public standing. In Wilde’s draft opening, it is the male (rather than the female) body that is established as a “priceless” object of desire—a detail to which we shall return.

As we noted, the text of Willard’s typescript (and those of Holland and Cave) opens suddenly with Simone returning to his own house to discover his wife Bianca in the company of Guido. Simone begins with a series of apparently innocent questions about the identity and purpose of the visit of his wife’s guest
which make immediate sense in terms of the themes of manners and courtesy, as one would expect from a play whose setting is Renaissance Italy. However, the specificity of that setting is largely irrelevant to the play’s plot. It is important only insofar as it permits Wilde to rehearse his themes of desire and jealousy. For Simone, Guido’s presence must be explained by the fact that he is “some friend” or “kinsman”; no other man could properly be entertained by Bianca with “such courtly grace” in a house “lacking a host”—that is, without an adult male, and presumably the husband—present. Simone then makes explicit the sexual impropriety of such an encounter when, in imagery ironically anticipating how he will describe the duel he is later to fight with Guido, he describes his house as “a scabbard without steel to keep it straight.” When Guido’s identity is explained—he is the “son | Of that great Lord of Florence”—Simone then chooses to understand his presence, his acceptance of “hospitalities,” in terms of trade, and in a series of long exchanges attempts, via flattery, to sell Guido some rich and luxurious clothing. That flattery, however, centres explicitly on paying tribute to Guido’s sexual attractiveness and sexual prowess—that “highborn dames” of the court “throng like flies” around him; and that in his presence “husbands … wear horns, and wear them bravely, | A fashion most fantastical.” When Guido refuses to barter with him (by offering a sum so extravagant that Simone will be “richer far | Than all other merchants”), Simone then tries to engage his attention with other subjects, speaking first of politics (the tensions between the Pope and King of France) and then of music, requesting Guido to “draw melodies from [his] lute | To charm my moody and o’er-troubled soul.” The implication, of course, is that Guido could only have brought his lute to entertain Bianca; Simone’s challenge, however, is to demand that Guido pay court to him, a man, and not to his wife. Finally he invites Guido to drink with him at a table already set, once more explicitly inviting Guido to transfer his romantic attention from Bianca to him (Simone).

These exchanges, which dominate the action of the play, are briefly and periodically interrupted by asides between Bianca and Guido, in which the former confesses her revulsion at her husband’s vulgarity—that he speaks like “a common chapman” and has a “soul [that] stands ever in the market-place.” Matters come to a climax when Guido makes a move to leave, despite Simone’s pressuring him to “stay awhile.” Simone duly fetches Guido’s cloak and sword; but before his guest can depart he reminds him that he has “drunk of my wine, and broken bread, and made | Yourself a sweet familiar.” He then confronts Guido in language whose metaphors lay bare the source of the tension between the two men:

Why, what a sword is this!
Ferrara’s temper, pliant as a snake,
And deadlier, I doubt not. With such steel
One need fear nothing in the moil of life.
I never touched so delicate a blade.

Simone then challenges Guido to test “Whether the Prince’s or the merchant’s steel | Is better tempered”; and in a long monologue observes that although his own sword “is somewhat rusted now,” he too is an accomplished swordsman and has killed a thief “on the road to Padua.” A duel ensues in which Guido wounds Simone. Undaunted Simone fights on, and disarms Guido, noting that “My gentle lord, you see that I was right. | My sword is better tempered, finer steel.” Simone finally kills Guido and “looks at Bianca.” At this point the reader or the audience expect Simone to kill Bianca as well—such a conclusion would clearly fit the Renaissance setting and context. But instead “she comes towards him as one dazed with wonder and with outstretched arms.” Thereafter the play concludes quickly and enigmatically with a reconciliation of husband and wife over the corpse and blood of the wife’s dead lover, one that makes overt the relationship between male physical power and attraction:

Bianca:
Did you not tell me you were so strong?
Simone:
Did you not tell me you were so beautiful?

How are we to make sense of the play and in particular its surprising and sudden denouement? Karl Beckson helpfully suggests that it was modelled upon the example of Alfred de Musset’s *proverbes dramatiques*, “brief dialogues with a dramatic reversal at the end to illustrate a moral point” (Beckson, 103). But what is that moral exactly? Does it amount to anything more than a crude display of sexual power and prowess, a suggestion that the potency of the “sword” is mightier than any amount of “red gold”? Some critics, following up the hints in Moore’s opening scene, have attempted to elaborate that connection linking desire, money, and value in terms more relevant to Wilde’s own society. Thus Regenia Gagnier, probably the best-known of those critics, has glossed those themes by finding analogues to them in the discourses of late-nineteenth-century classical economics, particularly in the ways in which the market was held by some contemporary theorists to underwrite all forms of human behaviour. In other words, primed, it would seem, by the example of the society comedies, Gagnier looks for some form of social or topical reference—that domain of “public” knowledge that we mentioned earlier—to explain Wilde’s interest in a Renaissance setting:

And where is the “priceless love” Bianca longed for? It is inspired by the merchant’s strength, finally revealed when activated by competition. In classic terms, as Guido’s language of seduction makes clear, Bianca is the Beautiful: the small, the smooth, the soft, curvaceous, and bright; while Simone is the Sublime: the rugged, the rigid, the dark, the timeless. By the end of the play, one is to be embraced, the other to be saluted.
Inevitably, they are the pair that audiences are hard-wired, according to Hume, to find most productive of pleasure. In economic terms, it’s the oldest trope in market society: Beauty loves not so much the man with money (the idle aristocrat) as the man who makes money, in historical chronology, the merchant, the capitalist, the entrepreneur, the financier, the arbitrageur. Love is not only on the market, it is driven by market forces. (Gagnier, 80)

There are some obvious problems with this reading (though it is useful in helping point out the strengths and weaknesses of the play). First it blurs the distinction between Wilde’s text and the lines added by Moore. The foregrounding of love as an economic exchange, and the consequent understanding of the play’s “moral” as centering on a choice (made by Bianca) between two different kinds of moneymaking, is directed by Moore’s interpretative paratext. Read without his 200-line introduction, Bianca, as we have argued, is a much less prominent and attractive figure; certainly she has much less dramatic agency. Her name, which translates as “the white woman” or “the white female,” and her status are reflected in the fact that she is given only a handful of lines in the play (about one-twelfth of the total). Moreover, this impression is reinforced by Wilde’s fragmentary openings which have survived. There, as we noted, Bianca is conventionally pious and submissive: she is in no sense (as Moore portrays her) an agent in her own selling, and neither is she—as Gagnier suggests—a modern consumer or a prototypical “new woman,” choosing the man who is (economically speaking) the more productive.

Second, and more important, the principal or dominating “language of seduction,” to borrow Gagnier’s phrase, belongs not to Guido but to Simone. In Wilde’s text, it is he (not Bianca) who most explicitly “courts” Guido, who flatters him with increasingly voluptuous and sexually explicit language. He claims, for example, to have “a curious fancy” to see Guido “in this wonder of the loom | amidst the noble ladies of the court, | A flower among flowers”; later he again refers to Guido as “the flower in a garden full of weeds.” Moreover, at the very beginning of the play Simone had also used botanical imagery (that selfsame language of horticulture innocently given to Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble in The Importance of Being Earnest) to describe himself, explaining that a house without a host was “A flowerless garden widowed of the sun.” (Here we might usefully also recall that Wilde habitually, but less innocently, referred to Douglas in flower-imagery as his “jonquil,” or his “narcissus,” or his “fleur-de-lys.”) Simone’s decadent language—of “pearls | As thick as moths in summer streets at night | And whiter than the moons that madmen see”—is, ironically, very far from that of the “common chapman” which Bianca and Guido insist on calling Simone. The following lines, for example, where Simone, in Keatsian fashion, exalts the lasting beauty of art over the transience of nature—of the attraction of roses made of “Lucca damask” over real blossoms—would not be amiss in Wilde’s own lyrics:
I think the hillsides that best love the rose
At Bellosguardo or at Fiesole
Throw no such blossoms on the lap of spring
Or if they do their blossoms droop and die.
Such is the fate of all the dainty things
That dance in wind and water. Nature herself
Makes war on her one loveliness and slays
Her children like Medea.

Such images explicitly echo the language of desire in which (in a fragment we have already referred to) Bianca herself had described her lover. In other words, the play’s language of love—that familiar Wildean lexicon of “curious” fancies, of “silver and roses,” of “blossoms,” of “pomegranates,” of “pearls,” and of “rubies”—is used principally by Simone to engage Guido’s attention: it seems, that is, to refer to male, rather than female, beauty.

Throughout this attempted verbal seduction of Guido—he beseeches him at one point to “ravish my ears with some sweet melody”—Simone repeatedly insists on his wife’s plainness: she is “uncomely,” and her virtues are those of the traditional wife. She should “kneel down upon the floor”; upon such a surface she is “better so,” and she should be merely “made to keep the house and spin.” In a startlingly misogynistic line Simone implicitly compares her to “the meanest trencher-plate | From which I feed mine appetite.” Such sentiments are hard to account for simply in economic terms: attributing to Simone a mercantile sensibility, as Bianca does—he is a man whose “soul stands ever in the market-place”—may explain why he sees his relationship with his wife as one of ownership, but not why he professes to Guido that that particular possession has such little worth. (If we follow Gagnier’s economic analogies, we should remember that in market economics rarity carries the highest price; yet Simone insists on his wife’s ordinariness, that she has “virtues as most women have, | But beauty is a gem she may not wear.”) Nowhere in Wilde’s text is Bianca, as Gagnier proposes, “soft, curvaceous, and bright”; she is, like Sybil Vane and a host of Wildean women before her, much more of a cipher.

But there is, of course, another way to make sense of the dynamic of the play’s dialogue: that the affair between Bianca and Guido is a framing device that allows Wilde to stage a much more compelling contest, one in which Bianca and Simone are competing with each other for Guido’s attention, and where women’s “foolish chatterings,” as Simone calls them, are displaced by a male language of desire which, in places, is Shakespearean in its eloquence:

There are times when the great universe,
Like cloth in some unskilled dyer’s vat,
Shrivels to a handsbreadth, and perchance
That time is now! Well! Let that time be now.
Let this room be as that mighty stage
Whereon kings die, and our ignoble lives
Become the stakes God plays for.

We might recall that, as we commented in chapter two, Wilde had used similar phrases to describe the tragedy of his own life in *De Profundis*: “[For] me the world is shrivelled to a handsbreadth, and everywhere I turn my name is written on the rocks in lead.” By far the greatest proportion of the lines, and all of the long speeches, are given to Simone and directed to Guido. Simone dominates the action; the other two characters, by contrast, are barely realized. It is thus hard to resist concluding that Wilde’s failure to complete the opening scene of *A Florentine Tragedy*—the scene preceding Simone’s entrance—was due (like the underwritten elements of the scenario to the *Cardinal of Avignon*) to a lack of interest in dramatizing heterosexual desire. We might also note that, for some critics, the weakest elements in the society comedies are those exchanges—for example between Lord Darlington and Lady Windermere in Act II of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*—in which men profess their love for women and vice versa.

This representation of male–male rivalry as a process in which men exhibit themselves to each other (rather than to a woman) can be found elsewhere in Wilde’s *oeuvre*: it is hinted at in the competition between Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward for Dorian Gray’s attention (in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), in the competition between Darlington and Lord Windermere (in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*), and in the threatened physical encounter between Lord Illingworth and Gerald Arbuthnot (in *A Woman of No Importance*). Wilde’s text of *A Florentine Tragedy* clearly shows more interest in the power relationship between Guido and Simone than in any sexual relationship between Guido and Bianca, or between Simone and Bianca. And that male–male relationship has some obvious similarities to the personal situation of its author in the mid-1890s. Simone is given little social distinction; he is a kind of outsider who has to make his way in the market-place, which reminds us of how Wilde felt himself constrained to write for money—“How poor a bargain is this life of man, | And in how mean a market are we sold!” Simone exclaims. More importantly Guido, the younger and more attractive man, is the son of a prince; he, like Wilde’s lover Douglas (the son of an aristocrat) assumes he has the money to buy any sexual object he desires. Here we should recall that the year when Wilde was writing the play, 1893, was also the time when his relations with Douglas were at their most fraught, and when Douglas had been dispatched to Egypt to avoid engulfing them both in scandal following Douglas’s and Wilde’s relationship with a sixteen-year-old youth. The lesson that Guido learns in the play, that sexual power depends more on possessing a “better tempered steel” than on youth and money, seems very personal—wishful thinking, perhaps. If we are tempted to read Wilde’s fictions and plays as disguised dramatizations of the sexual and psychological tensions he was experiencing in his own life, then *A*
Florentine Tragedy is a far richer seam to mine than the society comedies, in the sense that it positively invites such a reading. The themes of money and power, the excitement of male-male rather than male-female relationships, and a focus on class, require little scholarly excavation once we understand what comprises Wilde’s text: those themes are, to revert to Henry James’s phrase, all on the surface of the piece.

La Sainte Courtisane

La Sainte Courtisane survives in a much more fragmentary form than A Florentine Tragedy; moreover the version of it published by Ross in his 1908 Collected Edition (and subsequently reprinted in the Collins Complete Works) was considerably “tidied up” by its first editor. Wilde’s manuscript has no names of characters or stage directions; there are just heavily corrected blocks of speech. To make dramatic sense of this material, Ross had both to rearrange and edit the speeches, and then to attribute them to characters. In so doing he imposes a dramatic structure on Wilde’s text, inventing *dramatis personae* such as “first man” and “second man,” and making decisions about which lines belong to which character. As with his editing of A Florentine Tragedy, these interventions have had some interesting implications for how the play has been understood.

Few critics have drawn attention to the title of La Sainte Courtisane, which draws upon French religious language used to describe Mary—“la Sainte Vierge,” “the Blessed Virgin.” Wilde’s title translates as “the blessed harlot” or “prostitute,” which should immediately alert us to its similarity to Salome. Like that play it centres on the desire of a lascivious and beautiful heroine for a celibate holy man who “will not look on the face of woman.” Also like Salome, it combines biblical and erotic language as, for example, in the heroine Myrrha’s enticing promise to Honorius: “I will smear your body with myrrh and pour spikenard on your hair. I will clothe you in hyacinth and put honey in your mouth.”

The fragment, as rearranged by Ross, begins with two unnamed men discussing the beauty of Myrrha, who has in turn come to consult them about the “beautiful young hermit,” Honorius. By far the longest speech is given to Myrrha as she tries to coax Honorius from his hermit’s cave. She tempts him by recounting the number and beauty of her young male lovers: there is “the minion of Caesar” who is “pale as a narcissus” with a “body … like honey”; there is the “son of the Praefect” who “slew himself in my honour”; there is the “Tetrarch of Cilicia” who “scourged himself for my pleasure”; and there are the “young men wrestling” who have “bodies … bright with oil and … brows [which] are wreathed with willow sprays and with myrtle.” The strange courtship of a man (Honorius) with images of male beauty and of male masochistic violence is worlds away from the genteel language of wooing that we find in the society comedies. As with A Florentine Tragedy and The Cardinal of Avignon,
the scenario of *La Sainte Courtisane* appears to have provided Wilde with an opportunity to rehearse the themes of male eroticism, sinfulness, and a Decadent theatre of cruelty. That these passages seem, in Wilde’s text, to have been composed as autonomous units—as freestanding pieces of prose—lends further weight to such conjecture. It is as if Wilde wrote the speeches first and then tried to find a dramatic structure to contain them, one in which they could be made to make sense.

The draft ends with a double role reversal: the chaste Honorius wishes to “taste of the seven sins” while the courtesan Myrrhina longs for “a cavern in the desert” so that her “soul may become worthy to see God.” Myrrhina invokes in her final speech a sense of “Sin” and “Shame” that is explicitly to do with sexual transgression. The homoerotic language of *La Sainte Courtisane* places that sin and shame much closer to Wilde’s own life than the more elusive hints in the society comedies. Indeed, the speed with which desire is transformed into its opposite (both here and in *A Florentine Tragedy*) is reminiscent of the way Wilde interrogates sin in *De Profundis*: there the moral life and tasting the fruit of the trees on the “other side of the garden” are two equal and equally necessary modes of experience. This relativization of desire was simply not a theme that could be explored in those plays which, like the society comedies, are set in such a contemporary and precisely realized social world, where transgression—especially sexual transgression—has real consequences. Such themes are sustainable only within the stylized world and highly stylized language of Decadence. They have no place in comedy and exist only fleetingly in *An Ideal Husband*—as we noted, to be dismissed immediately by Goring.

**Conclusion**

We began this chapter by noting that academics have tended to find three layers of reference or allusion in Wilde’s plays: the literary, the biographical, and the social or topical. We have also tried to show that the different kinds of knowledge that these references call upon—particularly the distinction between what we termed “private” biographical knowledge as opposed to “public” topical information—do not always interact with each other in coherent or consistent ways, a circumstance which in turn can make it difficult for the general reader to make sense of the vast body of scholarly material produced on these works. One way around this dilemma is to acknowledge that not all lines of scholarly enquiry are equally useful in enhancing our enjoyment of Wilde’s dramas. We have argued quite forcefully that, despite their apparent closeness to Wilde’s own life, pursuing the occasional and isolated personal allusion in the society comedies is a fairly fruitless task, producing surprisingly conservative (even homophobic) interpretations of the plays. By contrast, those lesser-known, unfinished plays—the *Cardinal of Avignon*, *A Florentine Tragedy*, and *La Sainte Courtisane*—provide rich pickings for critics disposed to see some of Wilde’s writings as
autobiographical; the conflicts dramatized in this group of works make most sense in terms of Wilde playing out the anxieties that were produced by his own relationship with Douglas. It is therefore something of an irony that they have been all but ignored by Wilde’s biographers, and particularly by Neil McKenna, who is so insistent in his biographical treatment of Wilde’s writings. In our final chapter we will examine another group of works which are habitually ignored by scholars (though not, interestingly, by general readers): Wilde’s short fiction.

Notes

1. This is not the only way of understanding Wilde’s place within a theatrical tradition. Rather than seeing Wilde as a dramatist constrained by the conventions of his time, there have been a number of attempts to locate Wilde’s comedic style within particular modern—that is, twentieth-century—dramatic traditions. Here Wilde is typically seen as the starting point of a modern comedy of manners, which is developed through the works of Noel Coward and, more recently, Joe Orton. In this tradition of modern farce, Wilde becomes a truly original and originating voice, not an echo of Arthur Wing Pinero or of W. S. Gilbert. Far from manipulating fundamentally conservative late-nineteenth-century dramatic devices, he becomes a dramatist developing patterns and forms that later generations exploit.

2. See, for example, the argument that underwrites Sos Eltis’s account of Wilde’s revisions to the society comedies in her Revising Wilde (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

3. The same exchange is to be found in The Trials of Oscar Wilde, H. Montgomery Hyde, ed. (London: Hodge, 1948), but in a version that—as we noted in chapter two—makes Wilde’s comments seem considerably wittier.

4. Suttons was and is a large British horticultural firm.


6. William Tydeman and Steven Price, Wilde: Salome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1; Tydeman and Price go on to counter this assumption by pointing out how some of the themes and theatrical devices of Salome are anticipated in two earlier works, Vera and The Duchess of Padua.

7. There may also be fragments of another play, a blank verse tragedy called Beatrice and Astone Manfredi; see Beckson, 23–24.

8. There were of course other hands involved in both the writing and the translation of Salomé. More still were involved in its publication, in both Britain and France.

Works Cited & Consulted


____. A Woman of No Importance, Robert Ross, ed. London: Methuen, 1908.

____. The Importance of Being Earnest, Robert Ross, ed. London: Methuen, 1908.


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