OSCAR WILDE IN CONTEXT

Oscar Wilde was a courageous individualist whose path-breaking life and work were shaped in the crucible of his time and place, deeply marked by the controversies of his era. This collection of concise and illuminating articles reveals the complex relationship between Wilde’s work and ideas and contemporary contexts including Victorian feminism, aestheticism and socialism. Chapters investigate how Wilde’s writing was both a resistance to and quotation of Victorian master narratives and genre codes. From performance history to film and operatic adaptations, the ongoing influence and reception of Wilde’s story and work is explored, proposing not one but many Oscar Wildes. To approach the meaning of Wilde as an artist and historical figure, the book emphasizes not only his ability to imagine new worlds, but also his bond to the turbulent cultural and historical landscape around him – the context within which his life and art took shape.

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To Merlin Holland
in warm appreciation
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Dublin finally accepted Wilde as one of its own with the unveiling of a statue (1997) in the corner of Merrion Square facing his ancestral house. (Reproduced courtesy of Jerusha McCormack.)

A page from Wilde’s ‘Commonplace Book’ from his student days at Oxford. (Reproduced courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.)

Wilde in full aesthetic regalia, photographed by Napoleon Sarony in his New York studio in January 1882. (© National Portrait Gallery, London.)

The developing Circle Line was part of an underground railway network transforming the way people travelled around London in Wilde’s time. (Reproduced courtesy of the London Transport Museum.)

Convicts from Wandsworth Prison being transferred by train from the local station at York Road. This was how Wilde was moved to Reading Gaol in November 1895, although in De Profundis he recalled the station as Clapham Junction. (Merlin Holland photographic collection.)

‘La Place du Carrousel’, by Guiseppe de Nittis (1882), with the ruins of the Tuileries in the background. (© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource.)

In ‘The Bard of Beauty’, an early caricature published in Time (April 1880), Wilde brings gifts of poems to Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt. (Reproduced courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.)

William Morris’s aesthetic dining room at Kelmscott House with its Persian carpets, brass peacocks and ornate candlesticks.
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(Reproduced courtesy of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, William Morris Gallery.)

9 ‘J’ai Baisé ta Bouche Iokanaan, J’ai Baisé ta Bouche’ was drawn by Aubrey Beardsley in response to Salome and published in the Studio (1 April 1893) before Wilde commissioned him to illustrate the English edition of the play. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

10 For the frontispiece for Salome, Beardsley drew Wilde as ‘The Woman in the Moon’ with a flower in his hair, perhaps a reference to the green carnation and its encoding of decadence and homosexuality. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

11 ‘Enter Hérodias’, one of the drawings with which Aubrey Beardsley illustrated Salome, depicts a comically bloated Wilde introducing his play. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

12 Aubrey Beardsley, in ‘Oscar Wilde at Work’, playfully suggests the dependence of Wilde’s writings on the works of other authors, both past and present. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

13 Beardsley’s salacious first version of ‘The Toilettte of Salome’ included a bookshelf containing Zola’s La Terre and Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal, both of which had been censored. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

14 Beardsley’s sanitized second version of ‘The Toilettte of Salome’ replaced its predecessor in the book publication of Salome and displayed revised titles on the bookshelf of censored works including Nana, The Golden Ass and Manon Lescaut. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

15 Beardsley’s ‘The Stomach Dance’ may satirically evoke the ‘level cyclone of electrified flowers’ in Jules Laforgue’s parody of Flaubert’s Hérodias’ as much as it illustrates Wilde’s Salome. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

16 In this previously unpublished letter from 1888, John Ruskin writes to Constance Wilde declining the Wildes’ offer to become godfather to their son Vyvyan. (Reproduced courtesy of William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.)
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17 George Du Maurier, illustrating Henry James’s *Washington Square* (1880), sketched the mercenary aesthete Morris Townsend as a Wilde lookalike. (Reproduced courtesy of the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries, Oxford, Ohio.)

18 A dangerous book selection: Aubrey Beardsley’s design for the prospectus of the *Yellow Book*, 1894. (Reproduced courtesy of Stephen Calloway, from his collection.)

19 ‘Congratulate me, I’ve found my mother!’ – a contemporary photo from *The Foundling* (1894), staged in London shortly before *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written, with a number of similar characters and narrative situations. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.)

20 Claire Higgins as Lady Britomart in the National Theatre production of Shaw’s *Major Barbara* (2008), a play with many resonances of Lady Bracknell and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (© Catherine Ashmore.)

21 How the official record reported Wilde’s last trial for gross indecency, in the *Central Criminal Court Sessions Papers, Eighth Session, 1894–95*, Case No. 425; the details were considered unpublishable. (Merlin Holland photographic collection.)

22 Sir Edward Clarke, the Queen’s Counsel, who represented Wilde in his courtroom trials. (Merlin Holland photographic collection.)

23 Edward Carson, who led the defence of the Marquess of Queensberry against Wilde’s accusation of criminal libel. (Merlin Holland photographic collection.)

24 Mr Justice Henn Collins, the judge before whom Wilde’s libel action was tried. (Merlin Holland photographic collection.)

25 The front page of the *Illustrated Police News*, 4 May 1895: Wilde’s progress from successful lecturer to potential convict. (Merlin Holland photographic collection.)

26 Thomas Huxley was caricatured in *Vanity Fair*, 28 January 1871, as part of its ‘Men of the Day’ series. (Reproduced with permission from John van Wyhe, ed., *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*, http://darwin-online.org.uk/.)

27 A Bovril advertisement in the *Illustrated London News*, 2 February 1901, captures the prominence of sporting and military manhood at the time. (Courtesy of the Columbia University Library.)
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28 In ‘Aesthetics vs Athletics’ (Punch, 1881), a rather Ruskinian Wilde is swarmed by a group of athletes in what seems to be Christ Church meadow. (Reproduced courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.)

29 In The New Woman (1894), Sydney Grundy satirized the women’s movement for having invented ‘a sex of their own . . . a new gender’ and included among the cast of characters a scathing caricature of Wilde. (Reproduced courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner, from his collection at the University of Delaware Library.)

30 ‘George Egerton’ (Mary Chavelita Dunne), the author of Keynotes, a volume of New Woman stories that helped reinforce the association in the public mind between Wilde and literary feminists. (Reproduced courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner, from his collection at the University of Delaware Library.)

31 Poets Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper concealed their gender, writing collaboratively under the name ‘Michael Field’; their work was favourably reviewed by Wilde in the Woman’s World in February 1888. (Reproduced courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner, from his collection at the University of Delaware Library.)

32 Edward F. Smyth Pigott, the subject of this cartoon in Vanity Fair, was the Lord Chamberlain’s Chief Examiner of Plays and undertook most of the work of censoring the drama, including Wilde’s Salome, during his term of office from 1874 to 1895. (Reproduced courtesy of Look and Learn/Peter Jackson.)

33 Rose Leclercq as Lady Bracknell in the original production of The Importance of Being Earnest; sketch by Fowler in the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 30 March 1895. (Reproduced courtesy of the British Library.)

34 William Hutt as Lady Bracknell and Nicholas Pennell as John Worthing in a 1975 production of The Importance of Being Earnest; photo by Robert C. Ragsdale. (Reproduced courtesy of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives.)

35 Martin Shaw played Lord Goring as a sympathetic portrait of Wilde in Peter Hall’s production of An Ideal Husband (1992) at the Royal Haymarket, London. (© Robbie Jack/Corbis.)

36 Gustave Moreau’s L’Apparition (1876) was one of many influences, visual as well as literary and religious, that
influenced Wilde in his dramatization of the Salome myth.  
(Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.)  

A 2011 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with Tony Taylor and Geoffrey Rush (as Lady Bracknell); the stage design by Tony Tripp featured period costumes and a setting that incorporated Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings.  
(Photo reproduced courtesy of Jeff Busby/Melbourne Theatre Company.)  

Wilde (Stephen Fry) finds his beauty ideal embodied in Bosie (Jude Law) in the 1997 film *Wilde*. (Reproduced courtesy of Samuelson Productions.)  

Ellen Terry, shown here in her role as Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing* (Lyceum Theatre, 1882), exemplified what Victorians understood to be ‘natural acting’. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.)
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It is possible that Oscar Wilde would have recoiled from the title of this book, because in one of many moods he saw himself as towering above rather than standing within ‘context’ – as one of the poets who triumphantly express themselves rather than literary, social or historical contingency. Reimagining the world and themselves, these artists successfully resist contextual conditions and precedent; they realize Gilbert’s pronouncement in ‘The Critic as Artist’ that ‘the one great duty we owe to history is to rewrite it’.1 ‘Remember,’ Wilde remarked to his friend Will Rothenstein, ‘dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père.’2 Indeed, referring to his own writings, Wilde advanced the claim that ‘my works are dominated by myself’, adding that no dramatic author, and by implication no author of any kind, had ever influenced him even ‘in the smallest degree’.3 By this account the work of art is the artist, and therefore, as Gilbert puts it in ‘The Critic as Artist’, ‘those great figures of Greek or English drama that seem to us to possess an actual existence of their own [are] simply the poets themselves . . . for out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not’.4

This formulation of the poet’s mind as a sealed chamber – sealed once ‘son père’ has been dispatched – is very much indebted, in both thought and expression, to the radical subjectivity articulated some years earlier in Studies in the History of the Renaissance by Walter Pater, who was already an established figure as a fellow of Brasenose when Wilde entered Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1874. The Picture of Dorian Gray is itself saturated by the presence of Pater, who in turn wrote an admiring review of the novel; but this interchange with Pater is only one instance of Wilde’s participation in the criss-cross traffic patterns of late Victorian literature and culture. Although uniquely his own in important ways, Wilde’s work, and indeed his remarkable life, was carried on in perpetual dialogue with the social conditions of his time and the creative work of his contemporaries, especially in Britain and France – notably Ruskin (another Oxford
Nevertheless, the myth of Wilde the autonomous actor and author has outlived him by far, and in recent times we find Wilde being credited, for example, with the invention of homosexuality in the tortured course of his courtroom trials and with the invention of an entirely new genre of literature in what is perhaps his finest achievement as an artist, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Such claims are dubious at best, as this book richly demonstrates, but in the final result Wilde remains not simply undiminished, but a more complex and interesting figure than ever and more vitally connected with his age. The varied and concise chapters that follow reveal an Oscar Wilde with deep roots both in the classical past and in his Irish heritage, and intersecting with a host of contemporary social and aesthetic developments – in the law, politics, science, religion, and gender and sexuality; in poetry, fiction, the theatre, the visual arts and aesthetics. This Oscar Wilde was never a mere quotation of past or present; rather, he stood in creative tension with both, and with wherever life took him – from Ireland where he grew up, to the criminal court and an anonymous cell in Reading Gaol near the end, a journey illustrated by, for example, his statue in Merrion Square, by Sarony’s ‘aesthetic’ New York photograph, and by the anonymous uniforms of the prisoners on the platform of Wandsworth station.

Our book begins with an introductory appreciation by Mark Ravenhill, the contemporary playwright whose work displays many important points of connection and sympathy with Wilde. Part I, ‘Placing Wilde’, follows on with a group of essays that examine the author in relation to the cities most integral to his career: Dublin, New York, London and Paris. Part II, ‘Aesthetic and Critical Contexts’, places Wilde in the context of those who influenced him the most, beginning with his parents and including a number of contemporaries from Ruskin and Gautier to Swinburne and Flaubert. Faulted by some critics for wholesale plagiarism of other writers, Wilde has also been blamed for not following these precursors closely enough, misreading and distorting them – Pater, for example – even as he incorporated their ideas and stylistics into his own work. The truth appears to be somewhat more complicated – that he regularly absorbed the influence of others, but in a form that made the resistance and rewriting of influence his defining artistic imperative. As several essays explore, Wilde’s contemporaries – for example, Beardsley, Whistler, James, Shaw – actively
challenged Wilde’s own definition of himself and his achievements; and these definitions, we are reminded, unfolded themselves not just in the more or less polite columns of literary magazines, but in the full glare of Victorian public life: the theatre, the salon, the daily newspaper and the courtroom of the Old Bailey.

Part III, ‘Cultural and Historical Contexts: Ideas, Iterations, Innovations’, brings together a group of essays that concern Wilde’s engagement with the ideological forces, aesthetic movements and styles of living that defined his experience and moment in time. Our authors discuss an array of such encounters – for example, with socialism, religion, Darwinism, censorship, the classical tradition, dandyism, aestheticism and decadence, journalism, poetry, fairy tales and the oral tradition, Victorian poetry, popular drama, fiction, feminism and the Victorian criminal justice system. Everywhere in these diverse essays one discerns Wilde’s transforming individualism at work, registering the impact of influences but always producing something greater than the sum of its contextual parts. Part IV, ‘Reception and Afterlives’, incorporates chapters on the performance history of Wilde’s major plays as well as their reincarnation in other modes, such as film. An essay on Wilde and ‘performativity’ demonstrates his uncanny anticipation of current critical theory as well as his connection with Victorian currents of thought, and a chapter on editions and texts draws attention to the highly incomplete presentation of much of Wilde’s work to date, pending completion of the exemplary Oxford Complete Works.

If not with the title itself, Wilde might have been pleased with the way this book makes visible the multiplication of his personality into a dazzling array of selves, each communicating a particular self-realization that also made it possible for his epoch – so Wilde believed – to realize itself through him. ‘I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age’, he asserts in the long letter from prison, and for this he found no precedent except a faint one in Byron.5 Our book, while not underwriting the grandiosity of Wilde’s claim, argues with emphasis for many ‘Oscar Wildes’ that combine in revelations of his multiplex self and the turbulent period in which he lived. This large scope as an artist and man helps to explain why Wilde has emerged in our own age as one of the Victorians who matter most; and certainly that bold self-assessment in De Profundis – ‘I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age’ – is a fitting epigraph for the chapters that follow.
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Preface

Notes

3 Quoted from an interview of Wilde in the St. James’s Gazette, 18 January 1895, pp. 4–5.
4 Wilde, ‘Critic as Artist’, p. 389.
Chronology

1835
Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

1839–47
Honoré de Balzac, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*.

1843
First volume of John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1843–60).

1851
First volume of Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* (1851–3).

1853
16 October Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde born at 21 Westland Row, Dublin, the second son of oculist and ear-surgeon Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee, Lady Wilde, who wrote under the name ‘Speranza’.

1855
Family moves to 1 Merrion Square, Dublin.

1857

1859

1864
Attends Portora Royal School, Enniskillen.

1864–71
Matthew Arnold’s lecture ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’.

1866

1868–70
Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*.

1870
William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*.

1871–4
D. G. Rossetti’s *Poems*.

1871–4
Undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin, where he wins many prizes, including the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek.
# Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Charles Darwin, <em>The Descent of Man</em>.</td>
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<td>1874</td>
<td>October Enters Magdalen College, Oxford, with a scholarship.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gustave Flaubert, <em>La Tentation de Saint-Antoine</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>June Travels in Italy with J. P. Mahaffy, Professor of Ancient History at Trinity College Dublin.</td>
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<td>1876</td>
<td>July Awarded a First Class in Honour Moderations, the first half of his classics degree.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>19 April Death of Sir William Wilde.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gustave Moreau’s paintings, <em>The Apparition and Salome Dancing before Herod</em>.</td>
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<td>1877</td>
<td>March–April Travels in Italy and Greece with Mahaffy, returning via Rome.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flaubert, <em>Trois Contes</em>.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Grosvenor Gallery opens.</td>
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<td>1878</td>
<td>June Wins Newdigate Prize at Oxford with poem ‘Ravenna’.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>July Completes his degree with a First in Greats.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>November Whistler sues Ruskin for libel over his description of ‘Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket’; awarded one farthing in damages.</td>
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<td>1879</td>
<td>Autumn Takes rooms at 13 Salisbury Street, London, with Frank Miles.</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>August Moves with Miles to Keats House, Tite Street, Chelsea.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>September Wilde’s first play, <em>Vera; or the Nihilists</em>, is printed privately.</td>
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<td>1881</td>
<td>23 April Gilbert and Sullivan’s <em>Patience</em> opens in London. The two aesthetes Bunthorne and Grosvenor are associated with Wilde.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>June Poems published.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>17 December <em>Vera</em>, scheduled for performance at the Adelphi Theatre, is withdrawn.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>24 December Wilde sails to the USA for a lecture tour arranged to coincide with the New York production of <em>Patience</em>.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emile Zola, <em>Nana</em>.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>March Assassination of Tsar Alexander II.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Carries out an extensive tour of the USA and Canada, lecturing first on 'The English Renaissance' and later on 'The House Beautiful' and 'The Decorative Arts'.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>29 May: Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd are married in London.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>January: The Wildes move into 16 Tite Street, Chelsea. 5 June: First son, Cyril, is born. Wilde begins to be extremely active in journalism, writing both signed and unsigned articles, as well as critical essays and stories.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>Meets Robert Ross. 3 November: Younger son, Vyvyan, is born.</td>
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<td>1887</td>
<td>Accepts the editorship of <em>Woman's World</em>.</td>
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<td>1888</td>
<td>May: <em>The Happy Prince and Other Tales</em> is published, illustrated by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>July: <em>The Portrait of Mr W. H.</em> is published in <em>Blackwood's Magazine</em>. Resigns as editor of <em>Woman's World</em>.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Chronology

1890  
June The Picture of Dorian Gray is published in Lippincott’s Magazine.

Henry James, The Tragic Muse.
William Morris, News from Nowhere.
Morris founds Kelmscott Press.

1891  
Meets Lord Alfred Douglas.
February ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ is published in the Fortnightly Review.
April The extended version of The Picture of Dorian Gray is published, the title-page and binding designed by Charles Ricketts.
May Intentions is published in book form.
July Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories is published in book form.
November A House of Pomegranates is published, designed and decorated by Ricketts and Charles Shannon.
November–December Wilde visits Paris, where he works on Salomé.

1892  
20 February Lady Windermere’s Fan opens at the St James’s Theatre, produced by George Alexander.
June Salomé is in rehearsal, with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, when it is banned by the Lord Chamberlain.
August–September Wilde works on A Woman of No Importance in Norfolk.

1893  
February Publication of Salomé in French.
19 April A Woman of No Importance opens at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, produced by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree.
October 1893 – March 1894 Wilde writes An Ideal Husband in rented rooms in St James’s.
November Lady Windermere’s Fan is published; Shannon designs the binding for this and subsequent comedies.