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Rewriting the past

Remember, dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père.
 Oscar Wilde, to Will Rothenstein

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.
 Wilde, in *The Critic as Artist*

Much of the theatrical landscape of Oscar Wilde's time, including some of its most imposing monuments, remains unmapped. Measured by the number of performances in their first run, the fifty most popular plays in major London theatres in the 1890s (excluding comic opera and pantomime) include only a handful which would be familiar even to most specialists in Victorian literature – *Charley's Aunt*, the longest-running play of the decade with 1,469 performances; Henry Arthur Jones's *The Liars*, 328 performances; Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, 223; Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 197; and a revival of *Julius Caesar*, 161. Among Wilde's plays *Lady Windermere's Fan* enjoyed by far the longest run, but ranked only thirty-third with respect to dramas of the 1890s in general; *A Woman of No Importance* was seventy-second; *An Ideal Husband*, ninety-third.¹ Of the ten most popular plays of the decade, only *The Liars* has been published in standard book form; at least six were printed as acting chapbooks by the Samuel French company, and two never were published in any form – a farce by Seymour Hicks called *A Night Out* and Wilson Barrett's religious melodrama *The Sign of the Cross*.²

Perhaps the most successful dramatist of the 1890s was not Shaw or Ibsen in translation or even Wilde, Jones, or Pinero, but Sydney Grundy, nine of whose plays enjoyed runs of 100 performances or more – a generally recognized standard in the 1890s for a hit show. A number of these never appeared in print. R. C. Carton, pseudonym of the little-known dramatist Richard Claude Critchett, wrote six plays which ran a hundred nights or more in the 1890s, only two of which have been published even in acting editions. The melodramas of G. R. Sims, which typically enjoyed long engagements at the Adelphi, are almost entirely unpublished. The

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name of W. Lestocq, co-author of long-running and influential farces like *Jane* and *The Foundling*, is to be found today only in bibliographies of drama. Women dramatists who wrote hit plays – Mrs. H. Musgrave, Mrs. Hugh Bell, Mrs. C. L. Riley, Mrs. R. Pacheco – are, if possible, even more obscure. On the other hand the longevity of a play does not invariably provide an accurate measure of its popularity. The last performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan* played before a large audience, and actor-manager George Alexander apologized in a curtain speech for having to close the play prematurely “to tour several provincial towns” with his company.³ The first engagement of *A Woman of No Importance* might have been considerably longer were it not for the fact that H. Beerbohm Tree closed it to honor a commitment to produce Jones's *The Tempter* at the Haymarket.⁴ But generally the number of performances can be referred to now, as it was then, to provide some indication of the commercial success of a play.

The theatrical scene in which so many barely remembered authors played a vital part would have appeared extremely seductive to Wilde. The introduction of Ibsen on the London stage in 1889, along with the frequent appearances of Sarah Bernhardt beginning a decade earlier, lent the stage an intellectual and aesthetic excitement that was missing when Matthew Arnold, in “The French Play in London,” bemoaned the torpid state of English drama.⁵ Henry James, it is true, continued to insist that the art of writing drama was “a lost one,” replaced by mere scenic effects such as the leaping flames and blue vapors of Henry Irving's production of *Faust* at the Lyceum.⁶ Even James, however, could work up mild enthusiasm for Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea's successful effort to bring *Hedda Gabler* to the London stage, finding that “Acted, it leads [one's intellectual sympathy] over the straightest of roads with all the exhilaration of a superior pace” (even if there was little else, for James, to “get from it”).⁷ The conditions were right for someone like Wilde, who self-consciously styled himself an artist, to undertake the writing of plays which made more than superficial claims upon his audience.

Wilde aspired to be the “English Ibsen”; but even such recognition would not, in itself, have been enough. Bitterly disappointed with his royalties from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published as a book in 1891, Wilde turned for at least partly financial reasons to the stage.⁸ With him the need for cash was always urgent, and the theatre had become the likeliest place where an ambitious writer could make money. The *Era*, a theatrical trade newspaper containing a wealth of unindexed and unexplored information about the late Victorian theatre, observed in 1892 that successful playwrights no longer struggled with poverty as Dion Boucicault had done early in his career, or died in want like the popular farceur H. J. Byron only a few years earlier. Far from it – for by 1892, the *Era* noted, the standard arrangement provided the dramatist with “ten per cent on the gross” for each performance. “An ordinary West-end theatre holds £200

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when quite full," the newspaper pointed out, so the author's fee for a single performance in a sold-out house would be £20. A long-running play, therefore, could bring the author a very considerable sum. G. R. Sims, the *Era* said, was paid £30,000 in fees for *The Lights o' London* alone.⁹ "I am often asked," wrote the actress Madge Kendal in her memoirs published in 1890, "whether playwrights make large fortunes. There is no doubt about it, they do."¹⁰

Today the English theatre of the 1890s has been reduced to the plays of Wilde and Shaw, the influence of Ibsen, and – to a far lesser extent – certain works by Pinero and Jones. But for its patrons the *fin-de-siècle* drama bore scant resemblance to the highly selective recollection of it in the twentieth century. J. T. Grein, manager of the Independent Theatre and producer of plays by Ibsen and Shaw as well as several women playwrights, recorded his impressions of the English theatrical scene in a long-lost lecture of 1892, just as the so-called New Drama was coming to life. Grein rated Sydney Grundy as "the most talented of all our dramatists," just ahead of Haddon Chambers, Jerome K. Jerome, Louis N. Parker, and the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.¹¹ The year 1892 – which saw the London premiere not only of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, but *Widowers' Houses*, *Ghosts*, and *Hedda Gabler* – seemed to the *Era* "the worst theatrical year that most playgoers can remember."¹² *A Woman of No Importance*, seen now as the least of Wilde's comedies, was in 1895 "generally regarded as the most successful of Mr. Oscar Wilde's plays."¹³ Wilde himself discounted the worth of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and estimated *An Ideal Husband*, infrequently performed in this century, as the best-written of his plays.¹⁴ It may be that people in the 1890s took a view of their theatre so different from ours because they saw more of it. Most plays of the period, even prominent ones, disappeared utterly with the final performance. Canon formation, therefore, has been haphazard, influenced not only by critical but legal and financial concerns that worked against the publication of plays and removed most of them from consideration. "We have to talk in the air," complains a character in Henry James's dialogue "After the Play," regretting the failure of Victorian playwrights to publish their work; "I can refer to my Congreve, but I can't to my Pinero."¹⁵

Many of the most popular dramas which precede Wilde's own work lapsed into oblivion as soon as the footlights were extinguished, having never been published, or printed in cheap acting editions of which only a scattered remnant survives. It is this vanished but essential context of Wilde's theatrical career that needs to be recaptured, and to that end some "desperate raids on oblivion," to use a phrase of Max Beerbohm's, cannot be dispensed with. But this oblivion holds a fascination of its own, for some interesting work is buried there. From these largely forgotten plays Wilde's own writing derives, yet at its best surpasses. Sydney Grundy once wrote that Wilde ought to be "washed in Lethe and forgotten," his

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bones sprinkled with “chloride of lime.”¹⁶ But it is Grundy and Wilde’s other rivals who have suffered that fate – unjustly, perhaps, in some cases.

Wilde’s plays began as a collaborative enterprise which their author, even if he did not understand it fully himself, was anxious to conceal. “My works are dominated by myself,” he declared, telling a reporter that no dramatist of the nineteenth century had influenced him even “in the smallest degree.”¹⁷ But the fact is that without the spur of influence he could scarcely write a play at all. Nevertheless Wilde forms a surprising contrast to the “strong poets” who, according to Harold Bloom, emerge triumphant from “wrestling with the greatest of the dead.”¹⁸ In his best plays Wilde contends not with the titanic dead, but with the living, and these often nameless enough – a W. Lestocq or Pierre Leclerq, although in the right mood he could challenge Henrik Ibsen with success. Plays such as *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* grow out of once-popular theatrical types, yet in imitating resist them. The struggle can be prolonged and the outcome suspended in doubt until the final act, but when he succeeds Wilde overcomes the force of his predecessors and reverses in his own play the important tendencies of statement and character in theirs. What begins in cliché thus finishes in upset of expectation, in paradox, and Wilde’s dramas take on a bold individuation. An observer almost feels, strangely enough, that the earlier plays by others are somehow feeble imitations of Wilde’s later successes.

The relation of Wilde to so-called sources, despite his wounded denials of influence, has fascinated critics from his first theatrical reviewers to Harold Bloom, who introduces *The Anxiety of Influence* and the more recent *Oscar Wilde*, an anthology of criticism, with all-too-brief remarks upon Wilde as a writer whose “anxiety of influence” was too unformed for the “strong poet” who could prevail in the struggle with the literary past and achieve distinctive work of his own. From this perspective Wilde is like Dorian Gray, mesmerized by the influence of another and older, struggling for an autonomy beyond his reach and thus, for him, fatal.¹⁹ To a large extent Bloom’s suggestion of tension between Wilde and his predecessors, although less complimentary to Wilde, has much in common with what some other notable and recent critics have observed. The work of Isobel Murray, for example, exposes a central truth about Wilde – that the influence exerted upon him came from a wide variety of “sources,” their very number protecting Wilde from “undue influence” by any single author or work.²⁰ The question of influence in Wilde’s writing is further complicated by the fact that among the works most telling upon him at any particular stage of his career are those that he had already written himself.²¹ For Wilde, moreover, his plays, like all literature in a Paterian world, were fundamentally self-expressive:

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Those great figures of Greek or English drama that seem to us to possess an actual existence of their own, apart from the poets who shaped and fashioned them, are, in their ultimate analysis, simply the poets themselves, not as they thought they were, but as they thought they were not; and by such thinking came in strange manner, though but for a moment, really so to be. For out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not.²²

But it would be a mistake to apply this account of the artist's radical subjectivity too literally to Wilde's own career as playwright. What has been termed his most original work, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is perhaps the one most conditioned by literary precedent — but a precedent transfigured in its rewriting.

Although Wilde at his finest “misreads” many of the most popular dramas of the 1890s, this action is not generated — as it is in Bloom's “anxiety of influence” — by a love for the precursor which is complicated by the latecomer's need to clear his own poetic space.²³ It is not Browning's regard for Shelley, or Keats's for Milton, that attracts Wilde to Sydney Grundy, R. C. Carton, the anonymous farceurs of the *fin-de-siècle*, or even Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. Of his contemporaries in drama (Shaw and Ibsen excepted), Wilde usually speaks, when he speaks at all, with unmitigated disdain. To write for the popular stage was to risk the loss of artistic prestige, even at a time when theatres attracted increasingly fashionable audiences and held out to dramatists the prospect of wealth. Robert Buchanan, like Wilde a poet turned playwright, asked that his dramas appear under a pseudonym after Robert Browning sneered at him as “the man who writes plays with Sims at the Adelphi.”²⁴ Buchanan reckoned “us poets” as a class distinctly apart from the melodramatists and farce writers of the day, and it was a difference that he meant, in his own interest, to respect. Wilde's method of keeping himself in the company of what Buchanan called “us poets” was to deny that his plays owed anything at all to other Victorian drama, being, as he said, “dominated by myself.” At the end of his career he would describe himself as one who poeticized the drama, making it “as personal a mode of expression as the Lyric or the Sonnet” and enlarging its “artistic horizon.”²⁵ Against this background it is easy to see why Wilde overestimated the merit of a “poetic” drama like *Salomé* and was so comparatively modest, even deprecatory, about *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Indeed he regarded *Earnest's* lack of “serious interest” as the very quality to ensure its box-office appeal.²⁶ Even the authorship of a popular society comedy like *Lady Windermere's Fan* seems to have made Wilde uneasy. “In Paris,” recalled his friend Will Rothenstein, “he had been rather apologetic about his first play; as though to write a comedy were rather beneath a poet.”²⁷

In spite of himself Wilde was energized by popular writing — he liked it when he scorned it, and found his own voice, when he found it at all, in answering the melodramatic clamors and boisterous humor of his rival

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playwrights. What we sometimes assume to be Wilde's voice *par excellence* is really that of another, lost to memory, speaking through him. Wilde's real attitude toward the popular theatre of his day was thus something more complicated than disdain. Its vigorous currents overpower him, or threaten to, even in his best work – *especially* in his best, one is tempted to say. Thus in a forgotten, unpublished play called *The Foundling*, popular in the summer of 1894 when Wilde was setting to work on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a 25-year-old orphan is regarded askance by the formidably conventional mother of the young woman he wants to marry. To satisfy her demand for "blood," Dick Pennell considers christening as a way out of his difficulty, like Algernon Moncrieff in a parallel situation in *Earnest*.²⁸ In both plays the young heroes desire to know, as they say, "who I am"; and each brings down the house with laughter when, with the cry of "Mother!", he embraces a maidenly woman of advanced age, thinking her his long-lost parent. The author of *Earnest* denied all influence, but the truth is that at times he was mesmerized by the humblest precursors in the most undistinguished literary modes of the age.

His denial of influence failed to keep Wilde from falling into embarrassing echoes of other playwrights, but it also resulted in a revenge upon the source. One frequently finds that the popular playwrights whom Wilde repeats are ultimately ambushed in some larger matter of substance or style. In *Earnest* Wilde often took the words directly from the mouths of other people's characters, but merged them into a stylistic texture – epigrammatic, literary, aristocratic – which was utterly divorced from the pedestrian language that usually characterized farce. In this respect going to see *Earnest*, as one reviewer observed, was like "drinking wine out of the wrong sort of glass."²⁹ In statement, however, as well as expression Wilde's play subverts the comedies which from another point of view it imitates. In popular Victorian farces the heroes typically begin with deceit and disguise, abrogating responsibility, but end by dutifully enjoining truth, constancy, work, and earnestness – the great verities of the world beyond the footlights. Wilde's play, however, refuses to deny the revolutionary fun from which its humor springs. For its characters there is no turning back from the life of masquerade and lie, no retreat to the stern embrace of authority. The last line of the play – Jack's defiant remark that "I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" – is a parody of the contrite moral speeches offered up in the last act by the heroes of such plays as *The New Boy* (1894), *Charley's Aunt* (1892), and *The Foundling*. Jack's being "Earnest" is a victory won by defying "earnestness" and the army of Victorian virtues which held in check the disruptive tendencies of other late-century farces.

In *Salomé*, regarded by some critics as the author's most original play, Wilde falls captive to prior dramas in a way which he would escape in *Earnest*. He detached Salomé from her biblical incarnation as a marginal,

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passive woman and gave her an eruptive nature, swerving between violence and listless yearning – made her, in short, a Sarah Bernhardt character in the mold of *Fédora*, *Floria*, and *Théodora* in the plays of Victorien Sardou. The clipped, hieratic style of Wilde's French, furthermore, was a perfect vehicle for the monotonous, one-note chanting which by the 1890s had become the trademark of Bernhardt's delivery. In this instance Wilde even abandoned English altogether to write in his predecessor's language. The very costume Bernhardt was to wear as *Salomé* had been borrowed from the wardrobe of Sardou's most recent showcase for *la grande Sarah*, an adaptation from Shakespeare called *Cléopâtre* (1890).

As usual, however, Wilde's play was generated from a variety of "sources," and the painter Will Rothenstein, who recognized one of them as Flaubert's *Hérodias*, understood that in *Salomé*, at least, Wilde had not experienced what Harold Bloom might characterize as a sufficiently intense "anxiety of influence":

When he gave me a copy on its first publication in its violet paper cover, he knew at once that it put me in mind of Flaubert. He admitted he had not been able to resist the theft. "Remember," he said with amusing unction, "Dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père." But I didn't think he had killed Flaubert; nor did he, I believe.³⁰

Rothenstein acutely perceived that Wilde's achievement depended somehow upon an aggression against the past in which prior writers had to be "killed." Being unable to "resist" Flaubert – or any other who preceded him – thus signified failure. It is in this sense that Wilde's plays may be seen as struggles against literary and theatrical precedent, contests in which Wilde himself is sometimes overwhelmed.

Thus in *A Woman of No Importance* the cynical humor of Lord Illingworth and the feminist iconoclasm of Hester Worsley and, at times, Mrs. Arbuthnot introduce modern and original notes into a play in other respects dominated by the melodramatic forerunners which inspired it. But these individuating aspects of *A Woman of No Importance* engage in conflict with the dramatic formulas which organize it. In the end Wilde surrenders to tradition when he silences Lord Illingworth's wit and allows Mrs. Arbuthnot the old-fashioned satisfaction of striking her seducer in the face.

Lady Windermere's Fan, Wilde's first success in the theatre, derives from the strangely numerous plays, both French and English, in which disreputable mothers have abandoned their husbands and children. Like most before him, Wilde depicts the absconded mother insinuating herself, with belated maternal instincts, into the presence of the child she left long ago. In such plays as Sardou's *Odette* (1881), Pierre Leclercq's *Illusion* (1890), and the notorious *East Lynne* (played in many versions from the 1860s through the end of the century), the mother repents, cries bitterly over the deserted child, and finally pays dearly for her crime – typically with death or exile.

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At first, indeed for much of the play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is captive to its tradition, but finally Wilde's Mrs. Erlynne, although stirred by motherly feeling for her daughter, bluntly refuses to "weep on her neck and tell her who I am, and all that kind of thing."³¹ The orgy of sentiment which repulses Mrs. Erlynne was actually the outcome which history had written for Wilde's play; in refusing it, she enables the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan* to make it his own in a sense in which *Odette*, for instance, does not really belong to Sardou.

Nevertheless the indecisive early acts of *Lady Windermere's Fan* transcribe the theatrical past as much as rewrite it. Something similar can be observed in *An Ideal Husband*, which combats but imitates a type of late nineteenth-century drama in which men are held to an impossible standard associated today almost entirely with Victorian demands made upon women. This fuss about "ideal" men and "perfect" husbands was not unrelated to the movement for equal rights for women, for it was an unlikely attempt to put an end to what Wilde once described as the insistence upon "separate sorts of virtues and separate ideals of duty" in the sexes.³² Plays such as Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, staged in England in 1889 (an adaptation appeared earlier), assaulted the double standard of conduct by domesticating the ruthless male rather than altering the standard of purity by which women were judged. The "ideal husband," feminized in this way, elected to forgo the liberty given men to violate official morality in sex, business, and politics. In a half-dozen plays being staged in London when Wilde's was introduced in early 1895, this sanitized man is a central figure, and in most of them, as in *Pillars of Society*, a revisionary masculinity is in some sense endorsed. For a nearly fatal interlude in the middle of *An Ideal Husband*, reminiscent of hesitations which nearly spoiled *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde's play assigns speeches and situations to Sir Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring which are not genuinely their own, but belong to a host of other dramas. As in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, however, the last act separates it from plays which in other respects it overlaps. Sir Robert Chiltern discards – rather too suddenly, indeed – the mantle of "ideal husband," refuses to confess his crime, and evades punishment. The irreverent and paradoxical humor of Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley, moreover, has been the stylistic correlative of this overthrow of precedent, providing a foundation upon which the hard-won but flawed conclusion of Wilde's divided play can be laid.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) had anticipated Wilde's plays in organizing itself as a countermeasure against certain literary clichés in much the same way that Lord Henry Wotton's aphorisms, with their whiplash of surprise, attack familiar wisdom. Wilde's novel takes its story and its imagery, even the names of its characters, from a popular subgenre of fiction, rife in the 1880s, which included tales such as *The Picture's Secret*, *The Portrait and the Ghost*, *The Veiled Picture* and *His Other Self*. These stories

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of occult pictures and magical mirrors are almost invariably simple allegories of good and evil, often ending with a painter or model destroying a canvas whose evil influence must be purged before virtue can prevail. But the *doppelgänger* motif so basic to this mode of fiction is given unique expression in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when the hero destroys himself as the consequence of his very predictable attack on the “evil” portrait. Wilde’s didactic predecessors are answered with a supernatural picture which becomes many things at once – diabolic yet good, loathsome but beautiful – and as a result *Dorian Gray* avoids making the portrait simply another unimaginative caricature of evil and attains a psychological truth not found in other works of the kind.³³ But Dorian’s frantic drive for repentance does some damage to *Dorian Gray*, as the author himself seems to have sensed – for the book’s only “artistic error,” Wilde said, was its overdeveloped tendency to state a moral.³⁴ Even at his best Wilde does not prevail in every phase of these contests with the source, but he survives influence to pronounce the last word. He achieves his own voice – and this is what one misses not only in much of his earlier work, but in a considerable amount of his dramatic writing in the 1890s. The verse Wilde published in 1881, for example, belongs in a real sense to other and better poets of the nineteenth century – including Swinburne, Keats, and Rossetti. Wilde’s college at Oxford spurned a gift copy with the explanation that these authors were already well represented in the library.

Like his poems, Wilde’s early and virtually ignored plays, dating from the early 1880s, are too much the passive receptors of influence. With its story of a noblewoman, her treacherous husband and forbidden love, *The Duchess of Padua* contains little not attempted earlier and with more success by John Webster and Robert Browning. The passion which Wilde’s duchess feels for Guido Ferranti and her murderous gratification of it suggest a fusion of *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, another play with a duchess of Padua in it. Wilde’s, written in 1882–3 but not staged until 1891 in New York, is one of the last gasps of nineteenth-century blank-verse drama, but its atmosphere is Jacobean and its imagery Webster’s. The duchess is a “devil,” and human nature gives rise to an extreme type of mordant speculation:

The world’s a graveyard, and we each, like coffins,
Within us bear a skeleton.³⁵

This is the mode of Webster, united with something of Browning. The aesthetic, ego-mad Duke of Padua in Wilde’s play, like the Duke of Ferrara in “My Last Duchess,” resents his wife’s generous good nature, her popularity with the people, her regard for others than himself: “I will not have you loved” (p. 50). His wife must be, says the duke, “mine own,” and if not content as his possession must suffer the fate of the “last duchess” of Browning’s poem. In fact Wilde’s duke cites his own last

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duchess as a warning to the new one. "Madam," he says, when his wife asks by what right he restricts her behavior, "my second Duchess/Asked the same question once: her monument/Lies in the chapel of Bartholomew,/Wrought in red marble; very beautiful" (pp. 53–4). Wilde's aesthetic but brutal duke recognizes that a sculpted duchess might satisfy his taste and ego more than a living one, just as Browning's duke, for the same reasons, prefers the painted duchess to the actual women whose death he caused. The double suicide at the end of the play evokes memories of *Romeo and Juliet*, while the heroine who murders her patriarchal oppressor suggests Wilde may be working in the shadow of Shelley's *The Cenci*, a play he much admired. What is missing in this play is the author's own voice – the "personal" mode of expression which, in Wilde's view, was his distinctive gift as a playwright. A voice of his own would later salvage *Lady Windermere's Fan* from the melodramatic tradition behind it, as Robert Sherard discerned. Rising above the threadbare plot, as Sherard says, "his dialogue was wonderful because it was he himself talking all the time."³⁶

For *Vera; or, the Nihilists*, Wilde's first play, no source is certain. It is tempting to imagine that *Fédora*, written by Victorien Sardou for Sarah Bernhardt, inspired Wilde with its story of a Russian "nihilist" heroine who vents murderous impulses before dying herself in the last act. But *Vera*, published in 1880 and staged unsuccessfully in 1883 in New York, evidently preceded Sardou's play, first acted in December 1882 in Paris while Wilde was concluding his American tour. Perhaps the Russian settings, the anarchist themes, and the bloody-minded heroines of both plays stem from popular literature which capitalized upon the same materials.³⁷ A letter by Wilde, unpublished until recently, shows he was well aware of one such work – a French novel by M. L. Gagneur, translated into English as *The Nihilist Princess*. Wilde's *Vera* had been withdrawn from its scheduled production in London in 1881, deemed politically too sensitive in the period following the assassination of Czar Alexander II. In America Wilde asked Clara Morris to take the role of the nihilist heroine Vera Saboureff, but she knew of *The Nihilist Princess* and its heroine, who calls herself "Vera Perowsky," and told Wilde she was "afraid of it." The author of *Vera* sent word that "the novel *The Nihilist Princess* is a sham, and empty of all dramatic matter."³⁸ In reality, however, the book is breathlessly melodramatic, like *Vera* itself, and, in a manner suggestive of *Vera*, finds its basis in the idea of a conspiratorial heroine who dies a martyr to the cause. In Nikolai Chernyshevski's novel *What Is To Be Done?*, widely available in French when *Vera* was written, the heroine, called Vera, is converted to nihilism under circumstances similar to those in Wilde's play.³⁹ *Vera*, with its revolutionary heroine, discloses some interest in social reform and an enlarged conception of women's capabilities, yet its overriding and final impression is that of a woman who extravagantly sacrifices herself for her