

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51692-1 - Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde

Kerry Powell

Excerpt

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Acting Wilde

“One’s true character is what one wishes to be, more than what one is.”
 – A line in an early autograph manuscript of *An Ideal Husband*,
 unfortunately canceled in the process of revision.

“I love acting,” says a character in Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “It is so much more real than life.”¹ The proposition is striking in its anti-Victorian contention that dramatic artifice holds sway on *both* sides of the curtain, and that the conscious actor has a greater claim on “reality” than the unwitting performers beyond the footlights.

Wilde was among the first to discern that life is a continuum of performance, and everyone an actor – not metaphorically, as in Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage,” but *really*. In his darkest hour, imprisoned at hard labor and recognizing himself as the unwilling principal of an all-too-real, grotesque puppet-play, Wilde maintained his belief in the power of the actor, even when thwarted and diminished, to shape reality through performance. “Puppets themselves have passions,” he wrote from prison. “They will bring a new plot into what they are presenting, and twist the ordered issue of vicissitude to suit some whim or appetite of their own.”² This freedom-in-bondage is “the eternal paradox of human life,” Wilde goes on to reflect, and it is a paradox that determined his work as a playwright as well. It is most fully realized in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play in which personal identity is contingent on external forces – an array of textual, ritual, and theatrical practices – and yet is capable, within limits, of disrupting this “ordered issue of vicissitude” by means of an insurgent self-enactment to fulfill the desire left unsatisfied by one’s assigned role. It is Wilde’s visionary theatricality with which this book is concerned; and far more than has been acknowledged, it lies at the core of his importance in the realms of both theatre and thought.

This intertextuality of theatre and life took shape for Wilde as something much deeper and more complex than the dandified “posing” with which his contemporaries and later generations stigmatized or, in a few

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cases, valorized him.³ Wilde's theatricality was only coincidentally, and briefly, concerned with wearing his hair long, dressing in velvet and silk, and walking about London with a lily in his hand. Rather, it was, or became over time, a philosophy with revolutionary aims and high ideals, yet conflicted and compromised, and laboriously worked out in both his life and work. What began as the high-spirited and largely unreflective "posing" of a young aesthete in the early 1880s would turn deadly serious in time as Wilde grappled with the anxieties and difficulties of forming a new, performative interpretation of life. At issue were the dynamics of personal and gendered identity, and the shifting currents of Wilde's debates with his adversaries and with himself on these points can be detected in the still incomplete record of his life and in the much-revised writing he undertook for the actual theatre. Wilde's theatricality, however, cannot be adequately accounted for by postmodern theories of performance and subjectivity, although it is surprising to see how prophetically he anticipated them in the *fin de siècle*. To appreciate and understand Wilde's performative achievement, it is necessary above all to situate him in the controversies of his historical moment regarding gender and subjectivity, while at the same time attending to the archival record of his hesitations and second guesses as a playwright for the late-Victorian stage.

This book, therefore, will attempt to recover Wilde's theatre and theatricality in the web of historical circumstance in which they were formed. His developing ideas of gendered and sexual identity, I will argue, arise out of a contentious dialogue with late-nineteenth-century feminism and its struggle to disturb the settled meanings of such concepts as "masculine" and "feminine." Wilde's best-known plays, from *Lady Windermere's Fan* to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, were written to a considerable degree in response to the radical views that drove a militant and still widely misunderstood women's movement. Feminist political action of the time was informed by a vast outpouring of polemical journalism, books, and pamphlets – documents little-known today, yet historic in their challenge to established ideas of what it meant to be a "man" or "woman," setting up a field of tension in which Wilde's own attempts at self-fashioning took root. Wilde's theatricality was both revolutionary and historically specific, making for a significance that we cannot adequately appreciate outside the context of an under-historicized, late-Victorian feminism as well as a variety of related legal and other social texts of the time.

Within this crucible of conflict over personal and gendered identity, Wilde's dramas for the London stage were written and rewritten, his revisions providing a map of the intellectual ferment that underlay their

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changing form. The present study is the first, I believe, to base its analysis on first-hand examination of all surviving, pre-production manuscripts and typescripts of these plays – numerous drafts, scattered geographically, but crucial for their revelation of the advances, retreats, and dead-ends of Wilde’s thinking about gender and subjectivity in his comedies of the early 1890s. No edition of Wilde’s plays captures the full range and nuance of these revisions, and no criticism of Wilde, as far as I know, has taken them all into account. Nevertheless, this book owes a considerable debt to the ground-breaking work of Sos Eltis, whose *Revising Wilde* was the first and, until now, only book to focus on Wilde’s rewriting of his own dramas. In addition to being based on the virtually complete archive of surviving play manuscripts, however, the “Oscar Wilde” who emerges from the present study is more contingent and conflicted, more “Victorian” and less consistently progressive in his sexual and political views, than the Wilde whom Eltis draws in her powerfully argued analysis.⁴

By 1895 Wilde’s career as a playwright was effectively finished, brought to an end by his arrest and trials on charges of gross indecency, culminating in a sentence of two years in prison. But his trials and imprisonment were dramas in their own right, as perceived by Wilde as well as his tormentors, a view that is vividly communicated in the defendant’s long letter from prison, *De Profundis*, and in the long-lost but recently discovered transcript of one of his trials. There was no known surviving transcript of any of Wilde’s three trials until this one came to light only a few years ago, and this study, as far as I know, is the first to make use of it in any serious or detailed way. The transcript reveals a courtroom proceeding that was, in effect, a mosaic of competing dramatizations of “Oscar Wilde,” performances enacted by Wilde himself and others that were staged by his adversaries in a contest to specify and define the celebrated principal of the case and the nature (if any) of masculinity itself. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the lost transcript to Wilde studies, and the impact it is sure to have on our understanding of the trial of the century and the man it was about.

Terry Eagleton has observed that Oscar Wilde lived and expressed, *avant la lettre*, the fundamental insights of contemporary cultural theory. Most notably, late-twentieth-century theories of performance can be seen as an elaborate footnote to Wilde, who produced art, including the art of life, in performative terms without the benefit of a theory of performance to guide him. What we now call performativity came to Wilde and his dramatic characters in the rush of events, as the expression of their own passions and musings rather than as a developed system of thought. Wilde’s

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vaguely rebellious and exuberant “posing” in the early 1880s matured over time into tactical, urgent reflections on social performance in a world that, as he came to know it, was controlled by a dramatic script that preceded him. The directives of that controlling script were expressed in legal processes, social rituals, and the theatre itself, and the burning question – for Wilde, as for later theorists such as Victor Turner, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler – was whether the actors could exercise improvisational freedom and make the play their own, if only within limits. Especially in his last plays and in the courtroom trials and their aftermath, Wilde consciously sought to enact an alternative masculinity that would upset the foundations of Victorian social life – yet he was never able to work out, either for himself or others, precisely what would constitute this new kind of man. In both his life and drama Wilde’s efforts to articulate a new vision of manhood stopped short of their destination; for the more he talked and wrote, the more he became enmeshed in the web of custom and power that he most wanted to break free of. Wilde’s performativity was prophetic, but also of its time, shaped and limited by the late-Victorian conditions that framed it. Among those contextual conditions were historic disputes over gendered identity, controversies hugely influential at the time, but blurred, distorted, or overlooked entirely in our retrospective vision today.

Wilde, moreover, was a Victorian himself, inhabiting the world of Matthew Arnold while envisioning and to some degree actually living a postmodernity yet to be born. He stood at the crossroads where ideas of a “genuine self,” in Matthew Arnold’s nostalgic phrase, began to be superseded by an unstable, performance-based subjectivity. Arnold’s poem “The Buried Life” (1852) laments the “disguises” behind which modern individuals present themselves to each other and even to themselves, disguises that estrange us, in Arnold’s view, from the authenticity of a “hidden” self that constitutes our core being.⁵ But the theatricality that Arnold, and Victorians generally, feared as deadening to the “soul” was embraced by Wilde precisely because it freed him from the structures of fixed truth, opening new worlds of possibility for the individual.

Nina Auerbach has speculated that the source of Victorian fears of theatricality was a historically new anxiety that the “true” self, and indeed all “truth,” was performed rather than real; Victorians were haunted, in other words, by a dread of “the theatricality of sincerity itself.”⁶ But Oscar Wilde was not. “Is insincerity such a terrible thing?” he writes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.” And Lord Henry Wotton’s paradoxical remark in the same novel – “I love acting. It is so much more real than life” – recognizes

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theatricality of the “real” world and celebrates the power of the conscious actor to perform a superior “reality” of his or her own design. Yet the ugly ending of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and of Wilde’s own life and career, suggests that these large and subversive claims for a performative interpretation of life do not tell the whole story, even for Wilde.

At the same time, it would be mistaken to construct a simplistic binary of the “performed” and the “real.” For Wilde, as for a few recent critics of Victorian performativity, no such clear-cut distinction is possible, and all so-called authenticity has its performative dimension. Lynn Voskuil has recently demonstrated that in Victorian England, theatricality and authenticity were inseparably entangled in the construction of the “symbolic typologies by which the English knew themselves as individuals, as a public, and as a nation.”⁷ Theatricality, rather than subverting “reality,” commingles with and potentially enhances it, as Lord Henry Wotton suggests in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when he imagines the theatricality of authenticity – moments when “we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play . . . Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enralls us.”⁸ James Eli Adams has argued persuasively that for the Victorians there was “the intractable element of theatricality in all masculine self-fashioning.” There was not one regimen of Victorian masculinity, but many, as Adams reminds us – including “gentleman, dandy, priest, prophet, soldier, and professional,” varied scripts of manhood that were inevitably performed for an audience.⁹ Herbert Sussman, in an earlier analysis, makes a similar point, arguing that Victorian masculinity was “varied and multiform” (even though contrasting versions of manhood held in common some underlying features such as ascetic self-regulation and homosocial bonding).¹⁰ Typically these discourses of Victorian masculinity were performed unselfconsciously, in resistance to the idea that masculinity, or any form of identity, is socially constructed or mediated. Wilde’s revolutionary contribution was not only to conceive of gender, personal identity, and life itself as “performed,” but to welcome this recognition with open arms and adopt, in both theory and practice, a calculated strategy of self-fashioning. The grand scale of his analysis and ambition was matched only by the catastrophe in which it engulfed him. In ensuing chapters this book will examine Wilde’s success and failure in achieving the liberation that he sought through dramatic self-enactment, both in his plays and in his life. Chapter 1, “Posing and dis-posing: Oscar Wilde in America and beyond,” sets the stage for this analysis by recalling Wilde’s visit to America in 1882 to give a series of lectures promoting the new Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera, *Patience*

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– a slashing satire of the new “aestheticism” of which Wilde himself was already the most notorious embodiment. In America, he appeared in lecture halls as the look-alike of Reginald Bunthorne, the effeminate, velvet- and lace-clad central character of *Patience* who had been conceived in the first place as a parody of Wilde. Posed as a caricature of himself, Wilde nevertheless aimed to undermine the Gilbert and Sullivan “Oscar Wilde” by simultaneously performing the tenets of an aestheticism in which he really believed, including opposition to the commercial and legal principles that accounted for his presence in America in the first place. The self-contradictions and limitations of such an undertaking were materialized dramatically one evening when Wilde and his entourage went to the theatre to see a performance of *Patience* in New York City. The real-life “Bunthorne” – i.e., the gorgeously accoutered Wilde himself – took a prominent seat where he attracted the fascinated gaze of the audience toward a counter-performance that he carried out in competition with the enactment of Bunthorne/Wilde on stage. Was Wilde *posing* in his theatre stall, or being *dis-posed* – confined in a role written, imposed, by someone or something else? This crucial question of agency in Wilde’s flamboyant posing arose repeatedly in his American tour, and perhaps most notably with a famous photograph, “Oscar Wilde, No. 18,” shot by the celebrity photographer Napoleon Sarony in his Manhattan studio and distributed widely by him for sale. This picture of Wilde – dressed in full Bunthorne regalia, with dreamy eyes, book in hand – would soon become the centerpiece of an important law case in intellectual property, the issue being one of “ownership” of this elaborately posed image of Wilde. Ultimately the U.S. Supreme Court determined that the photographer himself, Sarony, had so arranged and “disposed” his model, Wilde, that the photo was exclusively Sarony’s in terms of property rights. It was a potent demonstration that one’s pose or self-presentation is not a matter of pure personal agency, but rather implicated in the regulatory processes of the social world. In this sense Wilde’s audacious posing in America was “owned” and “authored,” in a legal and broadly social sense, by forces far beyond himself.

The first chapter argues further that Wilde’s ruminations on posing and self-enactment became increasingly sophisticated, if never wholly successful, after the experience of his American tour as “Bunthorne.” In his essay “London Models,” for example, Wilde characterizes artist’s models as professors of posing who vacate any identity of their own, becoming neutral surfaces upon which artists enact themselves and their desires. This analysis of the model as a pastiche of poses could have been applied, with

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at least some accuracy, to Wilde's own experience in America, and it was an analysis that complicated the issue of personal agency, his own and in general, to an extreme degree. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," a story first published in 1889, posits the allegedly antique portrait of a boy, really a forgery, as "proof" that the model was the W.H. to whom Shakespeare dedicated his love sonnets, thus providing a genealogy and a discourse for the homosexuality that Wilde sought fumblingly to express and legitimate. In the story, the search for the boy's identity becomes in fact the search for a homosexual identity, including Wilde's own, but the success of the project depends upon the complete erasure of the model himself. The boy in the painting is posed by Wilde, much as Sarony had posed Wilde himself a few years before, and each of these *dis-posings* produced, at best, ambivalent results as far as Wilde's own self-enactment was concerned.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s Wilde continued to develop his ideas on the self-fashioning of the artist through art, including the ambiguous role of the model in an effort to realize himself on his own terms. In Wilde's maturing analysis, all great art is a mode of acting, an attempt by the artist to realize himself outside the limitations of the social and material world. Thus, in "The Critic as Artist," the best playwrights actually *become* the dramatic characters they create, and in "The Decay of Lying" it is the business of the actor to *mis*-represent Nature, turning Hamlet's aesthetic of mimesis inside-out. These hopeful theoretical pronouncements are always compromised by the narrative structures in which Wilde seeks to embed them, however, whether in fiction, plays, or life itself. Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, demonstrating that self-enactment is inevitably, even fatally, contingent upon the constraints it seeks to elude. Dorian Gray merges his identity with the picture he posed for, as the result of a stunningly efficacious speech act early in the novel, and in so doing transcends for a time not only the laws of representation (making life imitate art, rather than the other way round), but the laws of morality and social convention as well. At the end of the novel, Dorian's suicide and the entry of the police signal the end of this subversive enactment. Loathing himself (his aestheticized self), Dorian lies dead from the knife-wound he inflicted on his own portrait, reclaimed by the moral and social codes that he had defied in life.

Chapter 2, "Pure Wilde: feminism and masculinity in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Salomé*, and *A Woman of No Importance*," begins by arguing that Wilde's first great stage comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), was originally conceived as a harsh attack on social-purity feminists who sought to achieve gender equality by applying the "law of purity," as they called it,

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to men and women equally. Through a series of drastic manuscript revisions, however, Wilde modified this melodramatic opposition to a newly powerful women's movement and in the process diminished his most theatrical and unconventional characters, the ones most like him. They either disappear from these plays prematurely or are severely chastened if not actually reformed by the puritanical morality they had set out to oppose. In this surprising accommodation with the feminist puritans responsible for the law that would later send him to prison, Wilde allows his most aesthetic, dandified, and effeminate characters to be silenced or co-opted by the puritanical legislators of gender and morality that, in earlier drafts, the play had mocked and demonized. Lady Windermere, in later drafts, embraces a flexible and compassionate feminism, but leaves no room for the wits and dandies who loomed so large earlier in the play. In effect, Wilde writes himself out of his own play in order to make way for a West End fourth act in which Lady Windermere and her priggish, conventional husband are reunited in perfect harmony. Although in the end Lady Windermere has enlarged her understanding of what it means to be "a good woman," the category of goodness itself remains intact as she pronounces the moralizing final lines of the play in complete ignorance of the key facts of her own history and of the drama which bears her name. In important respects, then, the "new" Lady Windermere is as much in the dark as ever, and her redefined "goodness," although generous and forgiving, can never be compatible with a Wildean stylistics of living that displaces all moral categories.

Chapter 2 also identifies a less compromising Wilde – the playwright who wrote and nearly brought the one-act tragedy *Salomé* to the London stage in 1891–92, at precisely the time when *Lady Windermere's Fan* was the hit of the season. The play was barred from the stage by the Examiner of Plays after rehearsals had already begun, and for many good reasons – good at the time, at least: its depiction, directly and indirectly, of male–male desire; its violent, sexually predatory heroine; and its blasphemous, erotically charged characterization of John the Baptist. In fact, as Richard Dellamora has argued, *Salomé* was "so sure to enrage English philistines that its conception needed to be translated into – perhaps even to be imagined in – French."¹¹ Its title character is a powerful woman who aggressively expresses and murderously gratifies her sexual desire for John the Baptist. Wilde's *Salomé* operates on the borderland of gender, combining her feminine exterior with "masculine" authority, self-assertion, and sexual passion to produce a kind of transvestism of the soul. Indeed, she is the organizing center for the gender confusion and reversals that

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structure Wilde's one-act tragedy; for example, her own "masculinity" figures in a homosexual relay between the young Syrian captain who is in love with her and the page who is suicidally in love with him. Her passion for Jokanaan is similarly complicated, for her passionate and poetic descriptions of his physical beauty are a reverse echo of the biblical Song of Solomon, where the desiring subject is male, and the beautiful desired is female. Not only is Wilde's heroine "like" a man, but in the same sense his men are like women, and in this reorganized landscape of gender and sexuality the illustrator of the play, Aubrey Beardsley, perceptively detected the presence of Wilde himself – incorporating his features into four images, drawing him as the "Woman in the Moon" looking down with a sensual gaze on an effeminate and nude male, variously interpreted to be Jokanaan, the Syrian captain, and/or the Page. These gender crossings, including Wilde's own, culminate when the severed head of John the Baptist is brought to Salomé on a silver charger, and she makes love to it in full view of the audience. This realization of desire by Wilde's aggressively masculine heroine puts a threatening edge on Wilde's play; her appropriation of the penis through the symbolic decapitation of John the Baptist is suggestive of the peril in which unmitigated female power and sexuality place men.

His next play would attempt once again, as in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, to accommodate revolutionary perceptions of gender and sexuality to the socially conservative medium of West End comedy and heterosexual romance. Although *A Woman of No Importance* began in its earliest drafts as a rhetorical and ideological confrontation with an emerging and radical feminist movement, it developed in its final version into a search for common ground, a hybridized performance of gender which, if not fully realized in the text of the play, lies just over the horizon, beyond the final curtain. The marriage of the once-puritanical Hester Worsley and the bastard son Gerald Arbuthnot will reconfigure traditional understandings of gender, a goal of "Puritan women" and Lord Illingworth alike. Their marriage will be an accommodation between the excesses of feminist social purity on one hand and of Wildean dandyism and aestheticism, as embodied in Lord Illingworth, on the other. In *A Woman of No Importance*, as earlier in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde was making conciliatory gestures toward the advocates of social purity even as he was resisting them, and in return the play was received with satisfaction in some quarters where a positive reaction to Wilde could not have been expected. As one religious journal, for example, remarked in its review, "A living sermon is being preached nightly at the Haymarket."¹²

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Despite the existence of a “pure Wilde” who could find common ground in his early plays with social-purity feminists such as Josephine Butler, another Oscar Wilde was increasingly at risk as the result of a recently enacted law on gross indecency that Butler and her legion of supporters had successfully pushed through Parliament. Chapter 3, “Performance anxiety in *An Ideal Husband*,” examines Wilde’s next play, *An Ideal Husband* (1895), as an anxious self-enactment under threat of criminal prosecution stemming from his dealings with male prostitutes and blackmailers. Wilde, like his central character Sir Robert Chiltern, was under pressure from the austere morality of militant feminism on one side while on the other being threatened with blackmail and public exposure for criminal behavior. At the heart of *An Ideal Husband* is the question of gendered identity and related, urgent issues for Wilde at the time. How does being a man or a woman determine the meaning, opportunities, and responsibilities of one’s life? Is a person irrevocably defined by circumstance – not only his or her gender, but past behavior, political and legal contexts, and a body of fixed truth – if there is such a thing – that marks each of us as one thing or another for all time? Wilde’s tortured revisions and rewrites – some of which have rarely (if ever) been dealt with in scholarship on *An Ideal Husband* – provide a map of the second thoughts and self-doubting that stood in the way of bringing this play, not to mention his life, to a happy or at least artistic conclusion. *An Ideal Husband* asks potentially revolutionary questions without ever answering them, or sometimes, unable to decide, by answering them in more ways than one – for example, the question of whether gendered identity is real or a theatrical enactment, and whether truth itself is “real” or in its own way a social performance. The disappointing result is a play laced with contradictions, one that turns away from the innovative conclusions it had been driving toward and finally sinks into an anachronistic and self-serving representation of gender in relation to the social world.

In Chapter 4, “Performativity and history: *Oscar Wilde and The Importance of Being Earnest*,” I argue that Wilde would not make the same mistakes in his next and last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), although the same issues were at stake as in its predecessor. Shaw and others who attacked *Earnest* from the beginning as a play conveying no sense of authentic being or reality, either in its characters or language, entirely missed the point, for a profound disbelief in so-called reality is the radical idea that drives the play, making it a turning point of the Victorian stage and of what we have come to call modern drama. The central character, Jack Worthing, stands for the contingency of selfhood: lacking any