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Wilde's comedies of Society

Wilde's three Society comedies were produced by different managers: *Lady Windermere's Fan* by George Alexander at the St James's Theatre (20 February 1892), *A Woman of No Importance* by Herbert Beerbohm Tree (19 April 1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (3 January 1895) by Lewis Waller, both at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. Had Henry James's *Guy Domville* not been a failure and left Alexander with a gap in his season, Wilde would have added Charles Wyndham and the Criterion Theatre to his list with *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the months before his career collapsed in the witness box of the Queensberry libel trial, he was sketching out a new play of modern life for Alexander, the Gerald Lancing scenario which Frank Harris later fleshed out as *Mr and Mrs Daventry*; and negotiating with American producers such as Albert Palmer about a play "with no real serious interest" – just a comedy, and with Charles Frohman for a 'modern "School for Scandal"' style of play. This flurry of activity indicates both Wilde's perceived marketability on both sides of the Atlantic and his own growing confidence in a genre he had only taken up in 1891, in fact at Alexander's invitation. 'I wonder can I do it in a week, or will it take three?' he reportedly commented to Frank Harris. 'It ought not to take long to beat the Pineros and the Joneses.'

Writing to Alexander in February 1891, Wilde offered a rather different attitude towards his progress on *Lady Windermere's Fan*: 'I am not satisfied with myself or my work. I can't get a grip of the play yet: I can't get my people real . . . I am very sorry, but artistic work can't be done unless one is in the mood; certainly my work can't. Sometimes I spend months over a thing, and don't do any good; at other times I write a thing in a fortnight' (L 282). Even allowing for a writer's defensiveness to explain his delays in delivering a commissioned piece, Wilde makes clear the artistic seriousness with which he approached his plays; an attitude to which the numerous drafts and rewritings of all his comedies also testify. In the case of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, it was a process which, famously, continued after the

opening night, with changes made at Alexander's strongly urged suggestion to reveal Mrs Erlynne's relationship to her daughter Lady Windermere by gradual degrees, instead of reserving it for the fourth act. Following the first run of each play, Wilde would then make alterations and additions to the post-production printed text. No playwright before him writing in English had paid such minute attention to the text of both his performed and published work.

What did Wilde mean by 'I can't get my people real'? In the London theatrical context of 1891, one might assume that he was responding to Ibsen. Janet Achurch had appeared as Nora Helmer in the 1889 production of *A Doll's House* which Harley Granville-Barker described as 'the most important dramatic event of the decade': Lady Windermere prepares to leave her child, like Nora, even if she changes her mind as she waits in Lord Darlington's rooms. In March 1891 came the singular, explosive English presentation of *Ghosts*; in April, Wilde returned a second time to see Elizabeth Robins as Hedda Gabler. He was well aware both of the revolutionary kind of dramatic writing Ibsen was practising, and the different kind of acting that Ibsen's roles demanded, especially those of the women.

Wilde, like Ibsen initially, worked within the dramatic conventions of his time. This was particularly evident in terms of plot. When *Lady Windermere's Fan* was produced in February 1892, some of the critics leaped eagerly to proclaim its ancestry: Victorien Sardou was the name frequently thrown at Wilde, but other suspects included Haddon Chambers's *The Idler*, recently performed at Alexander's St James's Theatre, while Sydney Grundy complained that he could not revive his own deservedly forgotten 1883 piece *The Glass of Fashion* because Wilde had already done so, 'under the title of *Lady Windermere's Fan*'. Some of the situations, motifs and devices which Wilde employed – the woman concealed in the room of a man who is not her husband, the mislaid fan, the misdirected letter – are decidedly, even deliberately, familiar: in an early draft of the play, Wilde has Lady Windermere hide behind a screen, rather than a curtain, an obvious echo of Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (a 'quote' which might today be applauded as sophisticated intertextuality, the kind of theatrical echo which Stoppard deploys so skilfully). Wilde was a master of conventions, and particularly the conventions of popular form: he did not hesitate to exploit any medium within which he chose to work.

Wilde, with one eye on the dramatic genius of Ibsen and the other on the commercial competition in London's West End, targeted his audience with adroit precision. Alexander's audiences at the St James's Theatre were well connected, well dressed, wealthy and influential; and Wilde set *Lady*

Windermere's Fan explicitly within their world. The Windermeres' town house is located in Carlton House Terrace, a few hundred yards from the theatre in King Street, and close to the Foreign Office and the London Clubs. Wilde maps out the restricted geography of English upper-middle-class society: Grosvenor Square, Curzon Street, the Park and, beyond this little parish of St James's, the rose gardens of country houses like Selby. The names of the principal characters root the action in the English landscape: Windermere, Darlington, Berwick. Beyond England lies a Europe which provides temporary refuge for erring husbands in the ambivalent spas of Wiesbaden, Homburg and Aix, or a more permanent exile in capitals such as Vienna or Rome to be reached in the luxury of the Club Train.

This world of 'Society', circumscribed by conventions, monitored by formidable dowagers such as the Duchess of Berwick, measured by the rituals of the English version of the tea ceremony, or the endless round of 'small and early' dances and luncheons, is created brilliantly by Wilde. (Like Henry James in *The Portrait of a Lady*, or T. S. Eliot in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', he suggests both the comforting security and the terrible emptiness of the routines.) This was a world Wilde was already confident about, and one he would become even more familiar with after the success of this play; and he strove to get the details right. During the rehearsal period, he bombarded Alexander with comments, writing him long letters when he was not able to have 'a formal quiet interview at the end of each day's rehearsal', as he had requested. He learned that Alexander planned to use the Act I setting – originally specified as Lord Windermere's library – for Act IV, which Wilde had intended to be Lady Windermere's boudoir, an arrangement which would have shifted the context from male to female territory. 'If through pressure of time, or for reasons of economy, you are unable to give the play its full scenic mounting, the scene that has to be repeated should be the second, not the first. Lady Windermere may be in her drawing-room in the fourth act. She should not be in her husband's library.' A compromise, the morning-room, was reached, a setting which could accommodate both Lady Windermere's area, the table with the bowl of roses and the fan and the site of afternoon tea, and, in male opposition, Lord Windermere's bureau, with books and papers and the locked bank-book. Wilde's comments revealed a sharp understanding of stage dynamics in creative tension with his social awareness. He demanded a central position for Mrs Erlynne in the last act. 'Windermere, being in his own house, can pace up and down – does, in fact, do so; Mrs Erlynne, of course, cannot do anything of the kind. She rises from the sofa, as marked in the play, and sits down, but with the possibility of Lady Windermere entering at any moment, for her to walk about, or cross, or the like, would be

melodramatic, but not dramatic or artistic.¹ Wilde's comments must have been extremely irritating to Alexander, as he claimed superior knowledge both of high Society and stage-craft, whilst implying that Alexander's movement patterns tended to the broad and obvious. Wilde's art was not an exercise in naturalism. As he wrote in a subsequent letter to Alexander, 'Details in life are of no importance, but in art details are vital.'² His reproduction of wit, the polish and balance of the phrasing, the rhythm of the exchanges, suggest for much of the play a certain mocking detachment. The habits and rituals of the tribe have been adjusted, subtly exaggerated and heightened, until they are made transparent and so exposed to ironic scrutiny.

Wilde opens the play with a deliberately light sequence, as the young Society hostess arranges roses while deflecting the charming compliments of the witty Lord Darlington, a Lord Henry Wotton with feelings. Significantly, she instructs the manservant that she is at home 'to anyone who calls', thus marking the visit as entirely innocent, though the effect of the instruction is to alert the audience to the subtext. As Darlington handles the fan which is Lord Windermere's twenty-first-birthday present to his wife, and talks about covering the street with flowers for her to walk on, the tone is one of admiring and trivial flirtation, until the offer of friendship – 'you may want a friend some day' – disturbs the innocent ritual momentarily, and reveals the unquiet reality beneath the smooth social patina. Wilde then introduces the Duchess of Berwick, a prototype for Lady Bracknell, to conduct a more formidable and broadly comic assault on the conventions of conduct and alliance. Her scorn for the new money of commerce is matched by her ruthless pursuit of the rich young Australian, Hopper, as a suitable husband for her monosyllabic daughter. She has kindly called to warn Lady Windermere about her husband's supposed affair with Mrs Erlynne, and, with the additional confidence of her own experience, passes on to her the received wisdom – 'Just take him abroad.' 'Yes, dear, these wicked women get our husbands away from us, but they always come back, slightly damaged, of course' (CW 427). What makes Lord Windermere's conduct so particularly scandalous is that he has given away large sums of money – Berwick was 'far too principled for that!'. Marriage is here seen as an economic transaction: the woman acquires security, and the wealth to maintain a conspicuous social position; in return, the man's sexual infidelities are condoned, or at least overlooked. After the Duchess's bombshell, Wilde shifts the tone to focus on the serious. Lady Windermere is given a soliloquy, its artificiality modified by her shocking action, as she cuts open her husband's bank-book and discovers the 'truth' of the Duchess's allegations. By the end of the night, she will have moved traumatically from

idealised innocence to experience, a series of shifts highlighted by the ostrich-feather fan as it passes from hand to hand in this glittering comedy of masks and manners.

The juxtaposition of the comic and the serious is one of Wilde's most successful dramatic techniques; once the absurd and the patently false have been established, the serious emotions and ideals which are explored have been given a context which prevents them from ever seeming too solemn. Inevitably, in what was his first attempt within the genre, Wilde has some awkward passages, perhaps most evident in Lady Windermere's long soliloquy at the beginning of Act III, when she has fled to Lord Darlington's rooms. In terms of achieving the right balance and tone, Alexander gave Wilde good advice. It was at his suggestion that Wilde wrote an additional speech for Lord Augustus, 'Well, really, I might be her husband already. Positively I might', ensuring that Act II closed on a comic downbeat, rather than on Mrs Erlynne's strong and serious instruction. Alexander also persuaded Wilde to reveal Mrs Erlynne's identity as Lady Windermere's mother gradually through the course of the play, rather than holding it back for a fourth-act revelation. Wilde resisted this suggestion fiercely: 'I have built my house on a certain foundation, and this foundation cannot be altered' (L 309). However, after the first night, he agreed to the alteration, claiming that all his friends, 'without exception', thought that the psychological interest would be greatly increased by the disclosure of the actual relationship (L 313). In ways like these, Wilde achieved a subtle variation on what appeared to be a traditional plot, with a hidden secret which would be explained in the last act, accompanied by repentance and reconciliation. Wilde's handling of the narrative elevates the art of concealment, if not of outright lying. Lady Windermere never discovers the identity of Mrs Erlynne. Lord Windermere never knows that his wife had been prepared to throw herself into Lord Darlington's arms. (In much the same way, Harabin in Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan* never learned what happened, or did not happen, in Cairo, during that suspiciously long sermon.) Lord Darlington and Lord Augustus Loring are both left in ignorance. Lady Windermere's final comment to Lord Augustus, in contradiction to her husband's po-faced put-down, 'Well, you're certainly marrying a very clever woman!' is: 'Ah, you're marrying a very good woman!' (CW 464). The speech picks up the play's subtitle (and original working-title). This conventional ending works effectively as an expression of Lady Windermere's coming-of-age, and her exposure to a new morality; it is also wonderfully ironic, a joke shared only between the audience and Mrs Erlynne. (Philip Prowse's 1995 production added a fresh dimension, as Lady Windermere slapped her husband's face in response to his sneering delivery of 'clever'.)



Figure 8 *Lady Windermere's Fan* at the St James's Theatre, 1892; outfits by Savage and Purdue for Mrs Eryllyne (Act IV, centre) and Lady Windermere (Acts II and III, left; Act IV, right) (*The Lady*, 10 March 1892)

Wilde's playing with the audience, who, in contrast with the somewhat mixed reception from the critics, were amused and enthusiastic, did not close with the play's final lines. He gave a curtain speech. The contents have been variously reported. According to Alexander, it concluded by praising the audience for their most intelligent appreciation: 'I congratulate you on

the *great* success of your performance, which persuades me that you think *almost* as highly of the play as I do myself' (E 346). But it was Wilde's manner which attracted attention, and, from some quarters, censure, as he walked onto the stage smoking a cigarette, in mauve gloves and with a green carnation in his button-hole. Graham Robertson had been despatched to buy green carnations from Goodyear's in the Royal Arcade, and Wilde's young friends wore them to the first night, so creating an echo with the on-stage costume of the young dandy in the play, Cecil Graham: life imitating art.

Wilde paid what was, for the English stage, unprecedented attention to dress and accessories. Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, in *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*, have illuminated the relationship between the London stage and fashion, peeling off the translucent layers of meaning which surrounded the social event of Wilde's play of modern life at a smart theatre, attendance at which itself formed part of the Social Season. They quote Florence Alexander, in charge of the women's costumes, who commented that 'in those days people went to see the St James's plays *before* ordering a new gown';³ and the key costumes for Marion Terry as Mrs Erlynne and Lily Hanbury as Lady Windermere were made by the couturières Mesdames Savage and Purdue. These ensembles were minutely reviewed and illustrated in the press, ensuring that significant details were given close attention. Wilde, as instanced by the notorious button-hole, which reached its apotheosis in Lord Goring's lapel in *An Ideal Husband*, operated through male as well as through female costume detail: one of his notes to Alexander concerned Lord Augustus's coat in Act III – 'too horsy: also he should take it off. He wants to make a night of it.'⁴ (Wilde would reserve his most brilliant *coup de théâtre*, achieved by costume alone, for Jack's entrance in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in full Victorian mourning.) Kaplan and Stowell have drawn attention to the visual contrast between Lady Windermere and Mrs Erlynne in Act III: Lady Windermere, the Puritan, standing in Lord Darlington's rooms with bare arms and low-cut gown, having thrown off her cloak and flung it on the sofa, while Mrs Erlynne, the woman with a dozen pasts, remains cloaked throughout 'in a garment of sound English manufacture'.⁵ The cloak itself conveys complex associations. The mother covers up her daughter; the sexually promiscuous protects the innocent; the action signifies Lady Windermere's decision to return to her child, a decision which will be immediately challenged by the arrival of her husband. But the cloak has already been emphasised in Act I, when Lady Windermere orders it to be taken out to the terrace, where she has walked and talked with Lord Darlington. On her return, she places it on the sofa, as he asks her to leave the house with him. It thus becomes a

reminder of the declaration of love, and an image of the false life Darlington says that she will have to contend with if she remains with her husband: 'You would have to be to him the mask of his real life, the cloak to hide his secret' (CW 438). The cloak remains, while Mrs Erlynne seats Lord Windermere on the sofa and bargains with him about the extent of her settlement, with Lady Windermere a silent witness in the background. Finally, Lady Windermere puts on the cloak, to leave ball, house, husband and child, an action potentially as shocking as Nora's in *A Doll's House*. Wilde orchestrates and emphasises Lady Windermere's feelings through the cloak, which forms part of the pattern of parallels and contrasts between daughter and mother, as well as furnishing their one moment of physical intimacy. It is one of a sequence of motifs which binds them, the most obvious being the fan with 'Margaret' (in diamonds) on it; the last is Mrs Erlynne's Act IV bonnet, decorated with real roses, a natural touch which echoes both Lady Windermere's reference to the garden at Selby, and the play's opening image. In the words given to Mrs Erlynne, 'manners before morals': this is a play where surface is triumphantly dominant, a surface which throughout hints at what lies beneath, and which repeatedly causes an audience to question what is seen and heard.

Established firmly in the ranks of the smart and fashionable by the success of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde was courted to write a second social comedy by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, half-brother of Max. Initially, he refused, with a characteristic put-down. 'As Herod in my *Salome* you would be admirable. As a peer of the realm in my latest dramatic device, pray forgive me if I do not see you.'⁶ Tree's argument, that he had been admired as the Duke of Guisebury in Jones's *The Dancing Girl*, was hardly phrased to convince Wilde; but Tree persisted, and Wilde retired to the Norfolk coast in the late summer of 1892 to write, accompanied by Lord Alfred Douglas. Norfolk place-names – Hunstanton, Brancaster – survive in the play's text; the setting, indeed, seems to be one of the great East Anglian country houses, and the almost silent figure of Lord Alfred Rufford, whose only occupations are his debts and the gold-tipped cigarettes he cannot afford, provides an echo of Lord Alfred Douglas. But the most disturbing portrait within the play is that of Lord Illingworth, a 'witty aristocrat' whom Wilde described to Tree in these terms: 'He is certainly not natural. He is a figure of art. Indeed, if you can bear the truth, he is MYSELF.'⁷ Tree, quite carried away with the role, took to playing it off-stage, which Wilde described as a wonderful case of nature imitating art: he himself did his best to make Tree less theatrical, attending rehearsals, and cutting and rewriting. Tree's retrospective comment that he had produced the play with 'the interference' of Wilde is likely to be less than the truth. The two men were

much closer in temperament than, for example, Wilde and Alexander, and theirs was a fruitful collaboration.

Where *Lady Windermere's Fan* centred on a woman who left her husband and so lost her daughter, *A Woman of No Importance* features a father, Lord Illingworth, who seduced and abandoned a young girl, and now tries to win back his son Gerald; a story taken, so Wilde claimed, from *The Family Herald*: he professed not to be interested in plot. The orphan is a recurrent motif in Wilde's plays, and this one has two of them, Gerald Arbuthnot and the beautiful American Puritan, Hester Worsley. Challenging the stereotype, Rachel 'Arbuthnot', Wilde's woman of no importance, is both a woman with a past, an innocent victim, and the centre of goodness and moral truth within the play; she is also extremely beautiful, appearing after dinner at Hunstanton Chase in her black velvet gown, whose colour was appropriate for a penitent, but whose close-fitting bodice and low neckline conveyed a disturbingly ambivalent image, and stood out strongly 'in grim, sombre majesty against the brilliant dresses of the butterfly women of the play'.⁸ Her name, Rachel, conveys her condition of grief. Her young American counterpart's first name, Hester, was deliberately chosen for its New England Puritan ring, echoing Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Worsley, too, created ambivalence in performance, her moral condemnation of English society issuing from the mouth of the extremely pretty Julia Neilson dressed in white, the fabric 'glistening and shimmering with every movement', 'a superb Juno dressed by Worth'.⁹

The social and moral values of this play are as complex as the dress codes. Wilde places his social world with great precision. The first act – a perfect act, he claimed, because nothing happens in it – is set on the lawn in front of the terrace of a great English country house, with guests sitting under a large yew tree – an image of tranquillity, stability, wealth. There is little truly rural about this evocation of 'English country life'. Footmen move in and out with shawls and cushions and letters, converting the lawn into an extension of the house. (In Philip Prowse's design for his 1990 production, he brilliantly suggested this colonising of the outdoors by a kind of upholstered lily pond which was transformed into a sofa for Act II.) As the act proceeds, the sense of unruffled calm becomes increasingly disturbed. The make-up of the house party is immediately brought under question: Lord Illingworth is a man of 'high distinction' – but Mrs Allonby is 'hardly a very suitable person', declares Lady Caroline Pontefract, though she immediately defends her as 'very well born' when Hester Worsley expresses her dislike. Wilde introduces a number of value systems in the first two acts, and invites the audience to place Lord Illingworth and Mrs Allonby at the apex, dandies who dominate by wit and assurance, who

match each other in their manipulation of words, and who define the fashionable and the modern. Yet they are also associated with a sense of decadence: Mrs Allonby leaves the lawn for the conservatory, where, she has been told by Lord Illingworth, 'there is an orchid as beautiful as the seven deadly sins'. 'Yes, let us stay here', suggests Lord Illingworth to Mrs Allonby, as an alternative to taking tea in the Yellow Drawing-room; 'The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.' Mrs Allonby replies, 'It ends with Revelations' (CW 477). The flippant joke is also prophetic. Mrs Allonby's challenge to Lord Illingworth to kiss the pretty Puritan is the action which cracks open the fragile shell of this flawed masquerade of civilisation. The barbed shafts directed at America, and Hester's youthful idealism, seem increasingly harmless, and the portrait of aristocratic and political society edges towards caricature and satire. There is only one married couple on stage, Lady Caroline Pontefract and her fourth husband, the quiescent Sir John. Mrs Allonby mocks her absent husband, ominously named Ernest; Mr Kelvil, the ludicrous Member of Parliament who expands on the subject of English home life, is only too happy to be absent from his wife and eight children. When Mrs Allonby and Lady Hunstanton visit the 'happy English home' of Mrs Arbuthnot, in Act IV – 'fresh natural flowers, books that don't shock one, pictures that one can look at without blushing' – the contrast with the luxury of Hunstanton Chase is complete. Their visit is refused: Mrs Arbuthnot pleads a convenient headache. The falseness of this happy English home is then laid bare: an unmarried mother with an assumed name; a bastard son; and an unrepentant seducer, who offers marriage as the price for his son. When his bid is rejected, Lord Illingworth is given a speech of unrivalled condescension: 'It's been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one's own rank, and treated quite seriously too, one's mistress, and one's —' Mrs Arbuthnot snatches up one of Illingworth's gloves (he has been pulling on the other during his speech, with the fastidiousness of the dandy) and strikes him across the face with it, to prevent his uttering the word 'bastard'. This private action echoes Lady Windermere's threat to strike Mrs Erylne with her fan should she appear at her ball.

The conclusion works on a number of levels. The blow has been postponed from the end of Act III, when Mrs Arbuthnot halts Gerald with the notoriously melodramatic 'Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father!' Coming from a woman, and unsignalled, hers is a far more telling action; it is the traditional insult of one man to another, an invitation to a challenge, but here wholly unanswerable: a spontaneous subversion of a male code which is absurdly theatrical. Tree was praised by the *Pall Mall Gazette* for his acting in this sequence, suggesting 'a sudden uncomfortable feeling of



Figure 9 Mrs Arbuthnot insults Lord Illingworth, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act IV
(*The Graphic*, 29 April 1893)

old age coming over the brilliant sinner – an old age that betrayed itself in mere hints of speech and gait, and that contrasted grimly with the elaborate youthfulness of dress'.¹⁰ Illingworth has been defeated by youth, by that 'fin de siècle person', the pretty Puritan. His is the defeat of age, of aristocracy, of the old England; of everything that is suggested by the manicured lawns and terraces of Hunstanton Chase. Wilde gives the conventional word-

playing last phrase to Mrs Arbuthnot, 'A man of no importance', so lightening the sentiment of the last sequence, which closes on Gerald holding the single glove, an ironic last legacy from his father.

There is a tension in this play, which arises from the language Wilde gives from time to time to Mrs Arbuthnot, and to Hester. Their expression of the new morality is conveyed in terms and rhythms which seem too heavily reminiscent of melodrama and the Bible to be aesthetically convincing; 'What welcome would you get from the girl whose lips you tried to soil, from the boy whose life you have shamed, from the mother whose dishonour comes from you?' (CW 512). The wit, and so the play's dynamic focus, seems to belong by natural right to Lord Illingworth, or to his counterpart, Mrs Allonby. Yet even without the impetus of language this last scene can be made to work with great effect on stage. It is, perhaps, the counterpart, in more serious mode, of the outrageously contrived trivial ending of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There is something Chekhovian in this study of England, which exposes the immorality and hypocrisy, and the immense self-satisfaction, of the English ruling classes, and which yet contrives to show glimpses of the charm and elegance, the allure, of a way of life which has no future. The play has an autumnal feel, with its leitmotifs of Shetland shawls and mufflers; and the single white glove of the ageing aristocratic dandy provides an appropriate final image.

Wilde injected a political and social agenda into the text and texture of *A Woman of No Importance*; the subject of class, and related matters of wealth and morality, forms a recurrent topic of conversation, a parallel to the analysis of relationships between men and women. Even Lord Illingworth, arbiter of the idle classes, professes high ambitions, and announces his intention to travel to India, presumably on some imperial purpose. In Wilde's next play, *An Ideal Husband*, he transposes the context in which morality, in the broadest sense, is scrutinised overtly to the political arena. The central issue concerns the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and the way he acquired the wealth which allowed him to succeed by 'selling a state secret'. This was by passing on privileged information about the Suez Canal to a European financier. The backdrop to the play is the imposing London house where the Chilterns entertain people who have powerful political connections; the reference points are to the Houses of Parliament, to Downing Street, attachés at Embassies, and seats in the Cabinet. (Wilde's fictional Argentine Canal scheme echoes the current Panama Canal scandal which was threatening the stability of the French Government as he drafted the play; Sir Edward Grey was Under-Secretary in the English Cabinet at the time, speaking on foreign affairs in the House of Commons since the Foreign Secretary was Lord Rosebery, who took his seat in the Lords.)



Figure 10 Four sketches by Fred Pegram of *An Ideal Husband*: clockwise, Lewis Waller as Sir Robert Chiltern with Florence West as Mrs Cheveley in her unsuitable dress, Act I; Charles Hawtrey as Lord Goring with Maude Millet as Mabel Chiltern; Julia Neilson as Lady Chiltern and Fanny Brough as Lady Markby; and Mrs Cheveley's triumphant exit in Act III, in the presence of Charles Brookfield's Ideal Butler, Phipps (*Lady's Pictorial*, 12 January, 1895)

While Wilde's handling of these references may have the lurid simplicity of melodrama and Fleet Street scandals, this does not invalidate them as reflections of reality. The way such events are discussed and reported has not materially changed in the last century, and audiences in the 1990s simply transpose the general area of reference to some more recent comparable issue. Sir Peter Hall's production of 1992 and 1996 frequently evoked the laughter of recognition.

Wilde did not complete this play with the same fluency as its predecessors; managers raised a number of objections – John Hare declined it, thinking the last act unsatisfactory – and it was not put into rehearsal at the Haymarket, this time under Lewis Waller and H. H. Morell, until the end of 1894. Julia Neilson, who had acted Hester Worsley, was apprehensive about the part of Lady Chiltern, and Wilde wrote to her husband: 'Let me assure you that it is what I believe is called the part of the "leading lady"; it is the important part, and the only sympathetic part. Indeed the other woman does not appear in the last act at all.'¹¹ Wilde's letter helped to convince Julia Neilson; but the last act's focus on the 'serious' Chilterns, modified only by the 'trivial' engagement between Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern, suffers from the absence of the 'other woman', Mrs Cheveley.

Wilde seems a little inconsistent in his construction of the 'brilliant Mrs Cheveley'. She is witty, wealthy, moves in European rather than English circles, and has an interesting past which includes an engagement to Lord Goring: for three acts, she plays the game of life with pleasure and aplomb. But her dress codes indicate an adventuress of a rather more blatant kind: she wore, in Lord Goring's words, 'far too much rouge last night, and not quite enough clothes'. Yet she and Goring were once in love; and she is also marked as the companion of Baron Arnheim, the off-stage mentor whom Sir Robert Chiltern describes as 'a man of a most subtle and refined intellect. A man of culture, charm, and distinction' (CW 537). Wilde gives Mrs Cheveley all the best scenes: her arrival at the Chilterns' languorous, decorous reception, where she springs her outrageous request on Sir Robert and ruffles his smooth complacency; her unwelcome afternoon call on Lady Chiltern, which concludes with her denunciation of Sir Robert to his wife; and her late-night visit to Lord Goring, a wonderful exercise on Wilde's part of high comedy and melodrama. Revising the play for publication, in 1899, Wilde expanded some of the stage directions, and the commentary on Mrs Cheveley as she struggles with the snake-brooch/bracelet (itself a very late arrival to the plot) suggests a villaininess such as Dumas père might have lifted from stock under pressure of a deadline: 'Her face is distorted. Her mouth awry. A mask has fallen from her. She is, for the moment, dreadful to look at' (CW 567). The role, and the third act, do not work like that in

the theatre. The melodrama is held in check and pointed up by the brilliance of the comic structure, as the fast-moving series of visits – Lord Caversham, Mrs Cheveley, Sir Robert Chiltern – and the accumulation of misunderstandings is coolly orchestrated by the Sphinx-like Ideal Butler, Phipps. Chairs fall, bells ring, letters are presented on salvers, burned, stolen: the act is visually framed by two deftly chosen stage emblems, male and female: Lord Goring's fresh button-hole and Lady Chiltern's letter on pink paper. The effect was well described by Shaw when he wrote of the play's 'subtle and pervading levity'. Wilde's imitation of the English ruling class is sufficiently well informed and accurate to anchor it to reality; yet he is also engaged in an exercise in pastiche, lightly mocking the social structures and moral postures both from within, in the manipulations of Mrs Cheveley and Lord Goring, and from without, by his overall control of the physical pattern and verbal tone.

An example of this mockery comes in Lord Goring's argument in Act IV when he solemnly informs Lady Chiltern: 'A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses.' Could anyone seriously believe that in 1895, let alone a champion of the Higher Education of Woman, as Lady Chiltern purports to be? Yet she allows herself to be persuaded that the decent thing is for her husband to stay in office; and, if any doubt lingers for the audience, Wilde points up the absurdity by having Lady Chiltern repeat this specious argument word for word, to be answered by Sir Robert's breathless 'Gertrude! Gertrude!'. Sir Robert's willingness to conceal his own discreditable past is then placed in ironic perspective by his moral indignation over Lord Goring's supposed indiscretion with Mrs Cheveley. The cumulative impact of the resolution of Act IV is to reveal the gap between high moral posturing and the reality of political control. Normal service can resume again, with luncheon, and a visit to Downing Street to secure the future. The English system is triumphantly back in place. The play concludes, the spirit of comedy prevails and the audience applauds: Wilde has returned this segment of English society to the people who act it out in real life, slightly but significantly damaged.

From one perspective, these three plays might seem to be concerned with a ridiculously circumscribed and skewed cross-section of English life. Wilde worked within the theatre conventions of his time, and with the world he knew, even if he did not belong to it. He saw it as a fantastic masquerade, highlighting aspects of English public life which themselves inhabited the dimension of theatre: the smart dance, the country house party, the Chilterns' reception. At all of these there is a strong element of performance,

and of audience, accentuated by the presence of almost silent ‘extras’, and a background of servants. In *An Ideal Husband*, the idea of ‘real’ life as theatre is especially powerful, with Chiltern’s off-stage ‘performance’ in the House of Commons glowingly reviewed in *The Times* the following day. This imitation of Englishness is at once parodic and unnervingly accurate, a subtle form of insult. Wilde uncovers the relentless evasiveness of English speech, the attempts to make resounding definitions and statements of ideals within a world that is clearly no longer static and solid, attempts Wilde described as ‘the vice of sincerity’. Morality, private and public, is brought into question in these plays, and found wanting quite as radically as in the ‘stronger’ dramas of Ibsen.

It is interesting to note what Wilde leaves out. Art and literature, for example, are scarcely mentioned, except as jokes, or as possessions, in the case of Chiltern’s Corots. The middle classes, and the working classes, on the other hand, receive a surprising amount of coverage. In *A Woman of No Importance* the earnest Kelvil’s defence of the House of Commons for having always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor is dismissed by Lord Illingworth as its special vice, a philosophical point of view which coincided with Wilde’s; but the truer responses of the ruling class come from Lady Hunstanton’s benignly inane assurance: ‘Dear Dr Daubeney, our rector here, provides with the assistance of his curates, really admirable recreations for the poor during the winter. And much good may be done by means of a magic lantern, or a missionary, or some popular amusement of that kind’; while the authentic voice of Empirespeak rings out in Lady Caroline Pontefract’s retort: ‘I am not at all in favour of amusements for the poor, Jane. Blankets and coals are sufficient. There is too much love of pleasure amongst the upper classes as it is’ (CW 471). No one, apart from the servants, works, or wishes to work, in these plays: Gerald longs to escape the horrors of a bank in a provincial town. It is a world claiming to live exclusively on inherited wealth, though in reality needing to top up family money by marrying heirs to Australian canned-goods fortunes like Hopper’s, or selling a state secret to a European financier. Perhaps the most ironic line in these three plays is Lady Chiltern’s solemn valedictory statement: ‘For both of us a new life is beginning.’

The interpretation of these plays as essentially ironic exposures of English society, a society still ostensibly ruling a large part of the world, forms part of the meanings which they convey: it is an interpretation which is only intermittently made explicit. Wilde pursued pleasure, and he enjoyed the pleasures which were available at the tables of the English leisured classes: ‘I filled my life to the very brim with pleasure, as one might fill a cup to the very brim with wine’ (CW 1022). But he also saw through them, with the

detached, or semi-detached, perspective of his Celtic mind and imagination. Like Maria Edgeworth, he moved between Ireland and England, and his position as part-time outsider sharpened his analysis. Moreover, he created a particular form of comedy in which to display his mocking imitation of England, a form which satisfied his audience, and which seemed, by its adroit resolutions, to suggest that all was well with Society. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by pushing neatness and coincidence to its outer limits, he came closer to revealing his method. In his short but intense burst of play-writing, he first made his people 'real', and then took his audiences through the looking-glass into a world which seemed to reflect modern life, but which was a surreal improvisation upon it. It seems appropriate that his professional career as a fashionable writer drew to a close with two plays in West End London theatres running simultaneously, *An Ideal Husband* with its echoes of contemporary politics, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, an ostensible farce. You could look from one to the other, and back again, and wonder which represented English society more acutely. Wilde's claim to have made the drama, 'the most objective form known to art', 'as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet', has validity; it was a claim which Society found it hard to accept, or to forgive.

NOTES

- 1 Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: John Murray, 1985), pp. 109–12.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 3 Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapter 1, 'The Glass of Fashion'. For other discussions of the Society comedies, see: the Introductions by Ian Small and Russell Jackson in their editions of the plays; Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde*; Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*; the following essays in *Modern Drama* 37:1 (Spring 1994): Alan Sinfield, "'Effeminacy" and "Femininity": Sexual Politics in Wilde's Comedies'; Joseph Bristow, 'Dowdies and Dandies: Oscar Wilde's Refashioning of Society Comedy'; Richard Allen Cave, 'Wilde Designs: Some Thoughts about Recent British Productions of his Plays'; and Joel Kaplan, 'Staging Wilde's Society Plays: A Conversation with Philip Prowse'; and the following essays in *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*, ed. C. George Sandulescu: Richard Allen Cave, 'Power Structuring: The Presentation of Outsider Figures in Wilde's Plays'; Robert Gordon, 'Wilde's "Plays of Modern Life" on the Contemporary British Stage'; Joel Kaplan, 'Wilde in the Gorbals: Society Drama and the Citizens Theatre'; and Peter Raby, 'Wilde and European Theatre'.
- 4 Hart-Davis (ed.), *More Letters*, p. 114.
- 5 Kaplan and Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion*, p. 17.

- 6 Hesketh Pearson, *Beerbohm Tree: His Life and Laughter* (Methuen: London, 1956), p. 65.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 8 Kaplan and Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion*, p. 21 (*Sketch*, 26 Apr. 1893).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 25 (*Echo*, 20 Apr. 1893).
- 10 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 Apr. 1893.
- 11 Hart-Davis (ed.), *More Letters*, p. 127.