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Oscar Wilde

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Richard Dellamora has suggested that the subversive potential of Wilde's society comedies resides in the way that they hint at 'possibilities of pleasure and connection unacknowledged in either aristocratic or middle-class British culture'. However other critics, such as Joseph Bristow and Alan Sinfield, have expressed doubts about the kinds of subversive meanings it is 'legitimate' to read into Wilde's dramas, particularly when they involve the disclosure of alleged 'gay' subtexts. Write an essay examining the politics of Wilde's society dramas, paying particular attention to the political significance of Wilde's depiction of secret lives and hidden pasts.

The possibility of subversive intent in Oscar Wilde's dramas may be found in the opposition to accepted Victorian values, therefore expressing radical politics. However, to impose subversive meanings or a homosexual sensibility onto the plays may be reductive to their expansive reach and apportion significance that is too reliant on political, and not artistic, intentions. Alan Sinfield warns that 'Our cultures observe the Wilde they expect and want to see,'[1] as in the centuries after Wilde the conception of the dandiacal and aesthetic elements of his work have come to denote homosexuality in a way that may not have been apparent in his own period. The representation on stage of secret lives and hidden pasts provokes the temptation for a biographical reading of the society dramas, which uses Wilde's own experiences to discover the significance he wanted to suggest to his audience. However, the augmentation of secrets and double lives in *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* through the frivolous or melodramatic exteriors of the works implies the mediation of a conservative mode to produce plays palatable to their contemporaneous audience. Sinfield notes Wilde's 'dissidence encoded in aesthetic effeminacy,'[2] which if correlated with Wilde's more overt political subtexts promotes an aesthetic doctrine of the improvement of the self. This apportions subversive meanings to the dramas that do not rely on an obvious political statement.

As the focus shifts from the woman with a past to an examination of male concerns in *Ideal* and *Earnest* the plays evolve in terms of their sexual ethics. In both plays it is possible to assert a homoerotic reading, and though there are aspects that foreground relations between men, this need not be interpreted as solely homosexual in nature. This change shows a revision in Wilde's gender politics from privately articulated exposure of sexual shame, to the public sphere of political and financial corruption in *Ideal* and of double lives in *Earnest*. This allows Wilde to broaden the significance of his society comedies into a wide-ranging political realm. Here, the aesthetic doctrine of individualism that Wilde suggested in his other works and critical writings is used to express a political principle that opposes Victorian convention. The use of wit and epigram could be viewed as trivial, thereby nullifying any subtexts through the style that makes it palatable for the audience. However, Wilde's

[1] Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde century: effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the queer moment*, (London: Cassell, 1994), p.6
[2] Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, p.89

treatment of character and inversion of morality means that there is the possibility of viewing the plays as darkly critical of an insincere society that won't acknowledge its own reliance on secrecy and public masks.

The consideration of a double life in *Ideal* is observed through Sir Robert Chiltern's particularly male secret of a political career based on corruption. His hidden past is endangered with public exposure when the intruder figure of Mrs Cheveley threatens to disclose a letter that reveals his successful political career was based on selling government secrets. Chiltern feels unable to reveal his past to his wife, suggesting that his deceit in the public sphere, 'would kill her love for me'[3] in their private life. When Lady Chiltern learns of her husband's hidden past she immediately wishes the social façade had remained, 'Oh tell me it is not true! Lie to me!'[4], expressing the preference for the social mask over truth. Lady Chiltern has idealised her husband, 'You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain,'[5] negating the possibility of accepting a past transgression. This portrays Lady Chiltern as a mirror of the conventional hypocritical values of society, exemplified when she encourages Chiltern to self-regulate by retiring from political life, thereby ostensibly enforcing this morality when there are no public consequences to Chiltern's actions. While Chiltern criticises the basis of her love for him, stating 'It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love,'[6] it is Lord Goring, the dandy figure, who urges her to accept her husband and not let him be driven out of society. He urges that the role of women is 'Pardon, not punishment'[7], which poses a conventional passive view of women at odds to his usually unconventional stance. This speech of Goring's should perhaps not be taken as a statement that accurately reflects his views, but rather a view of the wife that would appeal to the conventional moral ideals Lady Chiltern holds. Therefore, Wilde urges realism in love that can be understood by the audience, while also showing that the accepted view of women's roles, combined with the social convention of marriage as an upholder of conventional morality, actually enforces double standards. As a counterpoint to social hypocrisy marital love therefore becomes problematic, but only to conventional morality. It is shown it sustains the political career of someone who has sinned, and while it is certain that through this 'Wilde preaches a message of personal and political charity to an uncharitable age, hiding his more serious intent under a mask of wit and sentiment,'[8] this can be extended to suggest a more subversive objective. When Chiltern asserts there are men with similar secrets who would denounce him as 'shameful and dishonourable', Goring replies: 'That is the reason they are so pleased to find out other people's secrets. It distracts public attention from their own.' [9] The speech suggests the satirical view of politics that Wilde enhances through allowing Chiltern's past to be kept hidden. However, with the confession of his secret to Lord Goring, and therefore to the audience, Chiltern's male vulnerability and possibility of dispossession provokes sympathy. When this approximation of public confession is combined with Chiltern's attractive character, the audience are encouraged to concede their expectation of punishment in order for their desire of a comedic ending to be fulfilled. There is then collusion between audience and playwright in the rejection of hypocritical social punishment, and subsequently the audience are aligned with a radical morality that keeps hidden pasts secret.

[3] Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, ed. Russell Jackson, (London: A & C Black, 2003), p.57
[4] Ibid, p.83
[5] Ibid, p.84
[6] Ibid, p.85
[7] Ibid, p.138
[8] Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and subversion in the plays of Oscar Wilde*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.169
[9] Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, p.51

In *Earnest* the double life is not freighted with anxiety and strain as it is in *Ideal*. Rather, the use of Bunburying is shown to provide humour, fun, and ultimately a happy ending. The world of *Earnest* operates through lies and play, where characters are constantly creating the self. The revelatory moments of *Ideal* are no longer included, as nobody attempts to reveal their true character intentionally. Both Gwendolen and Cecily demand answers from their suitors, Algernon and Jack, but it is the expression that is deemed most important. A 'satisfactory explanation' is judged not by truth but by 'the wonderful beauty of his answer' as 'style, not sincerity is the vital thing.'[10] This reliance on form and the expression of truth as a performance displays the play's political subversion, where Victorian values and customs are expressed as roles. The repartee and dialogue, Wilde's intensity of wit and epigram, are all that matter. This brilliant and intense humour could be seen to be 'unedifyingly diverting,'[11] as it was by a contemporaneous reviewer, but its reduction of morality to triviality suggests an opposing interpretation. This is seen in the inversion of courtship rituals, where melodramatic expressions of love are diminished to an appropriate script. Cecily insists on recording Algernon's proposal in her diary, 'I delight in taking down from dictation,'[12] and has already completed the business of their courtship, 'I was forced to write your letters for you,'[13] in a parody of convention that recalls the ascendency of Mabel Chiltern in her courtship with Goring in *Ideal*. This is contrasted to Lady Bracknell's portrayal of marriage as a masque in crude economic transaction in Act 1, where she overtly intimates the importance of money and her own resolute belief in her ability to form society, 'The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.'[14] This conviction acts out the unacknowledged pretexts of Victorian social interaction, and reveals Lady Bracknell to be equally committed to shaping the self as all the other characters; not just a stock representative of the social hypocrisy of high society. The farcical comic revelation at the play's conclusion, where the invented 'Ernest' is revealed to be Jack's true name, and Algernon truly his brother, is rather the expression of turning a mask into reality. As life is articulated as a series of roles, and as social hypocrisy is the normative state, then the way to success is to perform the most compelling lies, and wear the most convincing mask. Therefore, there is no moral side to the play - the expected source of this, Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble, are embroiled in their own humorous courtship - leaving no ground for moral judgement. The audience can only judge the quality of performances. As the play enacts 'an idyll of wish-fulfillment,' where Cecily writes that she is engaged to Ernest and then is, it seems 'Nothing stands in the way of their self-creation, for reality itself is infinitely adaptable,'[15] posing that openly participating in performance allows the self to move towards its desires. This implies the aesthetic principle of self-development and expression of personality as the way to create a world where every character can achieve their aims. This removes the element of selfishness that the aesthetic way of life as art may suggest, and proposes the politics of the self as the basis for equality, where hidden lives may promote an idyllic contrast to Victorian society.

Suggestions of aestheticism are also apparent in *Ideal*, in both the descriptive settings in stage directions and in the portrayal of character. Goring is the obvious proponent of an aesthetic sensibility. He is the '*flawless dandy*' who '*plays with life'*[16]. Conversely, he is given a pragmatic nature that works as a mechanism to resolve the plot. There is an

[10] Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, ed. Joseph Bristow, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 74
[11] Unsigned Review, Daily Graphic, (15 February 1895), p.7 in Wilde: Comedies, ed. William Tydeman, (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.64
[12] Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, p.60
[13] Ibid, p.62
[14] Ibid, p.42
[15] Sos, Eltis, Revising Wilde, p.195
[16] Wilde, An Ideal Husband, p.20

incongruity between Goring's aesthetic, idle enjoyment of life and his willingness to counter blackmail with blackmail. When Goring's butler is used by Mrs Cheveley to first gain entrance to his apartment, and then to escape with another incriminating letter at the conclusion of Act III, the role of the servant is suggested as a device to complicate plot. Here, the class structure of society is implicitly denoted as a complication to life. The impediments in the plot arise from a social politeness that leaves Goring unable to snatch the letter from Mrs Cheveley in front of the servant. In *Earnest* Algernon states explicitly the effect of social order, 'if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?' The world created in *Earnest* is also inclusive to the servants, who are no longer simply plot mechanisms, but indicators of the subversion of society's stratification from the opening scene. The butler Lane observes the forms of politeness to the point of insolence, 'I didn't think it polite to listen, sir,'[17] which is in contrast to the portrayal of conventional manners in *Ideal*. *Earnest* shows the servant on an equal level to the master, participating in the fantasy world, in a way that is both dangerous in terms of class politics, and inclusive. This suggests that far from the Goring needing a society to dominate with 'social as well as intellectual superiority'[18] to express his individualism, as Arthur Ganz proposes, his sensibility is actually compromised by the prevailing moral concerns of life. This compromise of aestheticism is also posited in the speech where Goring relaying his corruption by Baron Arnheim. The description of the Baron, 'with a strange smile on his pale curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery, showed me his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels, his carved ivories'[19], invokes the listing of beautiful objects and decorative arts that both Wilde and Walter Pater incorporate in their essays on aestheticism. Chiltern's own sin is aestheticised in his terms, 'I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment'[20], which evokes the submission to the exquisite moment that forms the aesthetic approach to life. However, there is the sense that by consenting to integrate into conventional society and work in politics, Chiltern has adopted a mask that allows him to have the 'power over other men'[21] that the Baron advocated. Sos Eltis suggests he has become 'superior' to the political system of which 'he is a critic.'[22] This allows for the aesthetic principle to be seen as both a positive, and radical, approach to politics. The stage directions which are expanded for the published text capture the visual effects in Wildean way; ' *Boucher'*[23] was a painter often criticised in the 19th century for using his incredible skill and genius for beautiful, but not morally improving, subjects. His place in Chiltern's house seems to be a hint of approval for the rejection of conventional moral judgements for the glorification of the self.

There are aspects of both *Ideal* and *Earnest* that may be interpreted as homosexual in nature. The relationship between the 'strange'[24] Baron and Chiltern certainly has sexual overtones. In *Earnest* there appears to be a profusion of gay references that Laurence Senelick notes, 'The Albany Apartments, housing certain notorious gentlemen, is also Algernon Moncrieff's address. The cloakroom at Victoria Station has been suggested to be not a left-luggage hall, but a place of assignation, possibly a coded term for "the gents". "Earnest" and "Cecily" have been claimed as proto-gay slang.'[25] This is before there is a

[17] Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, p.28
[18] Arthur Ganz, The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of Oscar Wilde', in Wilde: Comedies, ed. William Tydeman, (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.131
[19] Wilde, An Ideal Husband, p.53
[20] Ibid, p.55
[21] Ibid, p.53
[22] Eltis, Revising Wilde, p.139
[23] Wilde, An Ideal Husband, p.7
[24] Ibid, p.53
[25] Laurence Senelick, 'Master Wood's Profession: Wilde and the Subculture of Homosexual Blackmail in the Victorian Theatre', in Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.176

discussion of cucumbers. Richard Dellamora also points to the Labouchère amendment[26] and Wilde's own secret life to lead to an interpretation based on Wilde's experience of homosexual blackmail. However, the implications of an aesthetic, as opposed to a gay, experience express the scope of the play's politics by not necessarily excluding the reading of homosexuality, but also expressing the subversive possibilities of aestheticism. The humour around rituals of food alludes to a Victorian discourse on sexual appetite that need not be divided by a reading that poses the authenticity of gay culture against the playacting of heterosexual culture. This subversion can apply to the politics of both genders, and it seems surplus to the internalisation of the comic world of *Earnest* to read solely as having 'gay' subversive meanings. In both plays it would be reductive to interpret only one strain of political intention when Wilde is expressing the changeability of self. This would merely lessen the drama's encompassing dissemination of the individual and society to simply another set of rules for character to work under. The hidden secrets of *Ideal* and *Earnest* work as devices to examine the politics of conventional society. Through advocating an aesthetic doctrine, Wilde opens up many possible readings for the society comedies, which allow the women to be as witty as the men, and in *Earnest* for the servants to join in too. The idea of secret lives becomes an ironic mask with which to view the scripts and farce of aristocratic interaction, and find pleasure without being compromised. The radical politics of individual fulfilment, which are constrained by the plays' contemporaneous society, suggest a subversive meaning that Wilde poses as ultimately beneficial to society.

[26] Richard Dellamora, Masculine desire: the sexual politics of Victorian aestheticism, (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p.202

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