



An essay showing how Wilde's and James's literary works engage with their contemporary consumer culture

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Introduction

In his essay *The Soul of Man* (1895), Wilde asserts that 'Art should never try to be popular', separating himself from the transformation of artistic works into commodities for public consumption.¹ Conversely, Paul L. Fortunato describes how Wilde's first West End play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893), 'was calculated to be fabulously popular with a mass audience', implicating Wilde's stance against art's widespread appeal.² James's narrator in *The Aspern Papers* (1888) muses that 'there is no more money to be made by literature', distancing writing from commodification by highlighting it as commercially inviable.³ However, Miranda El-Rayess represents how 'critics have challenged the traditional view that James's attitude towards the burgeoning commodity culture of his time was one of disapproval and detachment', reflecting how Wilde's works both criticise and engage with consumer culture.⁴ By focusing on *Lady Windermere's fan* and the *Aspern papers* as symbols entangled with economic exchange, Wilde and James interrogate the relationship between consumer culture and individual desire. Both writers distance themselves from consumerism by exploring the subjective appreciation of the art object and critiquing the morality of those connected with desirable commodities. However, they also participate in consumer culture by engaging with commercial literary forms and demonstrating the influence of the venerated commodity.

Consumer culture developed as one of many Victorian innovations in the literary market. Jonathan Freedman explains how fin de siècle consumer culture involved 'the acquisition of goods whose possession would confirm the high cultural status of their consumers', emphasising the interrelationship between culture and the commodity.⁵ Wilde's play exemplifies the fan's 'acquisition' as it changes hands throughout the performance, along with visually advertising it on stage and in magazines that included 'fine illustrations also of the enormous, ostrich-feather fan'.⁶ Peter Raby notes that 'Alexander's audiences at the St James's Theatre were [...] wealthy and influential; and Wilde set *Lady Windermere's Fan* explicitly within their world', with the play resembling a consumer good by appealing to

¹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', in *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-37 (p. 17).

² Paul L. Fortunato, *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 88.

³ Henry James, 'The Aspern Papers', in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Michael Gorra (London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 50-145 (p. 108). All references this text.

⁴ Miranda El-Rayess, 'Consumer culture', in *Henry James in Context*, ed. by David McWhirter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 126-137 (p. 126).

⁵ Jonathan Freedman, 'Introduction' to *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. xi-xxx (p. xiii).

⁶ Fortunato, *Modernist Aesthetics*, p. 95.

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the wealthiest classes.⁷ James also adopted popular literary forms, utilising the periodical when first publishing *The Aspern Papers*. Dean Baldwin states that 'short fiction, as an economically or aesthetically successful genre, did not emerge until the 1880s', underscoring its status as an emergent form for consuming literature in short bursts.⁸ Commercial genres reflect the narrator's pursuit of the Aspern papers as 'of such immense interest to the public', seeking to transfer them into the public sphere of mass consumption.⁹ James's primary criticism of commodity culture concerns the publication of private possessions, whereas Wilde grants the fan with heightened signification as a symbol of private affairs. Ultimately, Wilde engages with contemporary consumer culture to a greater extent by maintaining the fan's status as a public commodity after removing its personal implications, while James condemns the acquisition of private documents for public consumption.

The Fluctuating Economy of Desire

Wilde and James situate themselves within their consumer culture by inserting the art object into an economy where its value changes based on fluctuating desire. As June Hee Chung notes, capitalism created 'instability and uncertainty due to [its] cyclical boom-and-bust pattern', reflecting how Lady Windermere's fan and the Aspern papers alternate in value depending on the consumer's desire for them.¹⁰ Initially, Lord Darlington praises the 'wonderful fan' as a public accessory that he can 'look at' along with the audience.¹¹ However, Wilde introduces an economic background which bestows additional value upon the fan when it becomes entangled with private affairs. When Lady Windermere discovers how Lord Windermere has paid 'Mrs Erlynne—£600—Mrs Erlynne—£700—Mrs Erlynne—£400', her husband remarks 'has the fan been sent home yet?'¹² By removing adjectival embellishment of the fan and repeating 'Mrs Erlynne' in conjunction with monetary values, Wilde implicates the fan's value as a 'husband's birthday present' based on Lord Windermere's investment in another woman.¹³ The presence of the fan '*lying on the table*', alongside comments on Lord Windermere's economic investment, support Regenia Gagnier's perception that 'the fan [...] is associated throughout the play with the transfer of money'.¹⁴ Lady Windermere foregrounds this relationship when describing Lord Windermere's transition 'from the love that is given to the love that is bought', yet Wilde incorporates irony with the fan also connoting 'bought' love.¹⁵ Syntactic parallelism emphasises the antonymic 'given' and 'bought', contrasting the freely bestowed object and the monetised commodity. By associating the fan with investment in Mrs Erlynne, Wilde underscores its transformation from a valuable, displayed item to its relation with private

⁷ Peter Raby, 'Wilde's comedies of Society', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 143-160 (pp. 144-145).

⁸ Dean Baldwin, 'The Tardy Evolution of the British Short Story', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 30:1 (1993), 23-33 (p. 29).

⁹ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 103.

¹⁰ June Hee Chung, 'Money and class', in *Henry James in Context*, ed. by McWhirter, pp. 224-233 (p. 231).

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, ed. by Ian Small (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), I. 14. All references this text.

¹² Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I. 352-354.

¹³ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I. 16-17.

¹⁴ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I. 13; Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p. 119.

¹⁵ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I. 375-376.

affairs, marked by how its value fluctuates with Lady Windermere's perception of her husband's desire.

While Lady Windermere's fan reflects contemporary purchasing and gift-giving, James's narrator seeks articles that are not for sale. James exhibits the narrator's preoccupation with possession through his investment in papers that neither the narrator nor the reader encounter. Despite their intangibility, the narrator 'was prepared to spend money' and pays 'a thousand francs a month' to inhabit the same space as the Aspern papers.¹⁶ While the narrator notes that 'there was many an old palace in an out-of-the-way corner that I might on such terms have enjoyed by the year', he describes the transaction as a 'little bargain'.¹⁷ Through the focalised narrative, James underscores the narrator's ironic understatement of the cost as a 'bargain', distracting the reader from his excessive investment by presenting it as a trifle compared to the literary commodity's value. The economic register continues when the narrator perceives that 'I would give myself the compensation of extracting the papers from her for nothing', representing them as a counterbalance for the money invested in the rooms.¹⁸ However, 'extracting' carries a sinister tone as *The Oxford English Dictionary* provides the definition 'to draw forth (a confession, money, etc.) against a person's will', emphasising how the narrator seeks to force the private papers into the public sphere.¹⁹ The conflict between public and private relations climaxes when, like 'the love that is bought', the Aspern papers lose value when associated with another person. When Miss Tita seeks marriage in exchange for the papers, the narrator repeats 'that was the price – that was the price!'²⁰ Compared to 'bargain', 'price' conveys sacrifice in gaining the commodity, with its repetition underscoring the narrator's difficulty to comprehend the cost. Value revolves around the amount the narrator will pay to acquire the papers, initially viewing 'a thousand francs a month' as a trivial cost for the literary commodity. When Miss Tita becomes part of the 'bargain', the papers are no longer worth the price. Since the economic worth of art changes based on individual perceptions, Wilde and James highlight the subjective nature of value within their consumer culture.

Consumerist Aesthetics

As 'the pursuit of, or devotion to, what is beautiful or attractive to the senses', Aestheticism resembles consumerism with its 'devotion' to particular objects.²¹ By synthesising consumer culture and Aestheticism, Wilde and James explore the fluctuation of value through the consumer's perception of the commodity. *Lady Windermere's Fan* initially distances itself from consumer culture as Lady Windermere advocates that life 'is not a speculation. It is a sacrament. Its ideal is Love'.²² Wilde applies economic terms to Lady Windermere's speech to emphasise the contrast between consumerism and aesthetic attraction, as 'speculation' can refer to 'the action or practice of buying and selling goods'.²³ By juxtaposing 'speculation'

¹⁶ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 67.

¹⁷ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 67.

¹⁸ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 67.

¹⁹ 'extract, v.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www-oed-com.nottingham.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/67080?rskey=HTKizY&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 18 May 2022] (sense 3b).

²⁰ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 140.

²¹ 'aestheticism, n.', *OED* [online], <<https://www-oed-com.nottingham.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/3241?redirectedFrom=aestheticism#eid>> [accessed 18 May 2022] (n/a).

²² Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I. 86-87.

²³ 'speculation, n.', *OED* [online], <<https://www-oed-com.nottingham.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/186113?redirectedFrom=speculation#eid>> [accessed 18 May 2022] (8a).

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with 'sacrament' and 'Love', Wilde conveys a life of feeling over the 'buying and selling' of goods for profit. This distinction emphasises Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small's reflection that the Aesthetes made 'a strong distinction between the ownership of an object and its value as a source of aesthetic pleasure or experience', with 'experience' emerging after the fan passes between multiple hands.²⁴ Lord Windermere 'can't bear the sight' of the fan after it becomes 'soiled' by its association with sexual indiscretion, exemplified by his inability to look upon it as the fan repulses his senses.²⁵ In contrast, Mrs Erlynne describes the fan as 'extremely pretty', recalling Aestheticism's emphasis on 'what is beautiful or attractive'.²⁶ Wilde highlights the fan's aesthetic qualities by juxtaposing the descriptions given by Mrs Erlynne and Lord Windermere, contrasting feelings of beauty with repulsion based on different experiences.

However, in *The Aspern Papers*, aesthetic appreciation struggles to separate itself from veneration as James's narrator bestows significant importance upon Aspern's writings. The narrator's first impression of the papers emerges in conversation with Mrs Prest when she mocks how he seeks 'the answer to the riddle of the universe' in Aspern's letters.²⁷ The narrator responds 'by replying that if I had to choose between that precious solution and a bundle of Jeffrey Aspern's letters I knew indeed which would appear to me the greater boon', initially concealing the significance of the 'bundle' of papers.²⁸ However, the narrator later associates the letters with 'sacred relics', underscoring their real value to him.²⁹ James's use of a religious register heightens the narrator's fetishisation of the commodity, with 'sacred' bestowing a divine fascination with the papers as 'relics' requiring conservation. However, conflict emerges as Juliana views the papers with a similar devotion, having 'lived on them' according to Miss Tita.³⁰ James conveys differences in the value attributed to the papers, with the narrator advocating their public importance as preservable 'relics' and Juliana deriving sustenance from their personal meaning. These contrasting responses exemplify 'James's fascination with the problems of privacy and publicity', as Thomas J. Otten underscores the conflict caused by valuing the private possession as a 'relic'.³¹ Remaining unattached to the papers, Mrs Prest's view that the Bordereaus 'live on nothing, for they have nothing to live on' highlights Juliana and the narrator's overvaluing of the letters, with James representing their power over both characters.³² While Wilde criticises consumer culture by underscoring the fan's aesthetic value, James critiques the reverence of the papers by those who do not own them, emphasising their value for Juliana to heighten the narrator's inappropriate attempts to publicise cherished memories. However, both approaches culminate in debates concerning the morality of those entangled with the art object.

²⁴ Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 139.

²⁵ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, IV. 205-206.

²⁶ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, IV. 208.

²⁷ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 51.

²⁸ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 51.

²⁹ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 77.

³⁰ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 137.

³¹ Thomas J. Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 88.

³² James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 55.

The Morality of Commodification

Wilde and James mark commodities with an ethical undertone by attributing different degrees of justification to those who possess and pursue them. While Wilde reconciles the conflict between desire for the consumer item and immorality by the end of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, James maintains his narrator's lack of moral scruples to condemn the commercialisation of personal property. However, Gary Scharnhorst outlines James's desire for Nathaniel Hawthorne's private papers, having 'visited Julian Hawthorne [...] with the hope of enlisting his help on the memoir of his father'.³³ Despite yearning for Hawthorne's documents, James was 'disturbed by the invasions of Hawthorne's privacy' and parallels this violation by portraying his narrator as a 'publishing scoundrel' seeking to publicise private letters.³⁴ Labelling the narrator as a 'scoundrel' marks him as 'a low petty villain' resembling a common thief, dampening the modern sense of 'one destitute of all moral scruple'.³⁵ However, by devaluing his narrator as a criminal, James refuses to attribute a higher moral justification to his publishing mission. The narrator also lowers others when the price of the 'tattered papers' requires his marriage to 'a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman'.³⁶ James's narrator links the value of the papers to Miss Tita, appearing 'tattered' like the 'old woman' connected to them. The narrator's tone changes upon desiring the literary commodity again, with this reversal also applying to Miss Tita, whose 'look of forgiveness, of absolution made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger; she was not a ridiculous old woman'.³⁷ The 'angelic' Miss Tita achieves a deific status akin to the 'sacred' papers, contradicting the narrator's previous criticism of her 'ridiculous' proposal as his desire for the literary commodity increases. Ultimately, she reverts 'to a plain, dingy, elderly person', losing all value after reducing Aspern's relics to ashes.³⁸ Through interlinking the papers with Miss Tita, James marks her transformation into a commodity through the narrator's eyes to enforce the all-consuming effect of desire for the art object.

By illustrating how the fan's purpose changes throughout the play, Wilde differs from James by separating the art object from its association with clandestine affairs. After its initial introduction as a consumer item, the fan transitions into a weapon against Mrs Erlynne as Lady Windermere vows to 'strike her across the face with it'.³⁹ Resembling a 'scoundrel' herself, Lady Windermere lowers the art object by connecting it with unjustifiable, 'petty' conflict. The fan reaches the height of its association with immoral action when Cecil Graham discovers it in Lord Darlington's rooms, with Wilde conveying an aggressive tone when Lord Windermere forcibly 'seizes *the fan*'.⁴⁰ Wilde draws upon legal language as Lord Windermere takes possession of the fan 'in pursuance of a judicial order', marking an attempt to bring justice to Lord Darlington by seizing the implicated goods as evidence of his improper conduct.⁴¹ As the fan only holds connotations of violence when connected to

³³ Gary Scharnhorst, 'James, "The Aspern Papers," and the Ethics of Literary Biography', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 36:2 (1990), 211-217 (p. 213).

³⁴ Scharnhorst, 'Ethics of Literary Biography', p. 212; James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 127.

³⁵ 'scoundrel, *n.*', *OED* [online], <<https://www-oed-com.nottingham.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/173189?rskey=FYBkhn&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 18 May 2022] (a).

³⁶ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 141.

³⁷ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 144.

³⁸ James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 145.

³⁹ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I. 481-482.

⁴⁰ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, III. 393.

⁴¹ 'seize, *v.*', *OED* [online], <<https://www-oed-com.nottingham.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/174979?rskey=iqGfR&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 18 May 2022] (5b).

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sexual transgression, Wilde resembles James in tying the commodity to immoral behaviour. However, Wilde severs the art object from its unsavoury implications by restoring its value through Mrs Erlynne. Her 'act of self-sacrifice', which involves a final exchange between herself and Lady Windermere, returns the fan to its starting role as a consumer item on public display.⁴² 'Self-sacrifice' emerges with Mrs Erlynne's self-deprecating language, using short sentences to represent factual statements without embellishment concerning how she 'made such a silly mistake. Most stupid of me'.⁴³ Mrs Erlynne lowers her self-value to reinstate Lady Windermere's, placing the fan's return at the centre of her restoration. Wilde deliberately creates parallels with the play's first act as the fan again lies displayed on a surface in the home before being 'given' as a gift to Mrs Erlynne. The fan returns to the public eye after becoming separated from private affairs, restoring it as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Conversely, James details the sacrifice of the papers as the only way to protect personal property against the consumerist narrator's obsession with acquisition.

Conclusion

As commercial authors, Wilde and James sought to profit from writing for popular audiences, yet balanced this wish with the desire to appeal to a limited readership who appreciated the artistry of their work. *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Aspern Papers* address consumer culture's emphasis on possession and purchase, exploring how the desire for commodities implicates moral integrity. Wilde clears the fan's moral associations with its return to Lord Windermere's home while emphasising its beauty through Mrs Erlynne's desire for the 'pretty' fan, which she subsequently claims. As an object also depicted in the magazines that accompanied the play, Wilde's final symbolism of the fan marks it as an art object representing the high taste favoured by consumer culture. Alternatively, returning to El-Rayess's view that criticism has challenged James's 'disapproval' of consumer culture, James instead represents the narrator's attempts to possess privately owned papers with displeasure. James's final criticism emerges once the narrator achieves an undesirable form of consumption when flames swallow the Aspern papers, marking destruction as the only means of preventing the documents from falling into the publishing scoundrel's hands.

⁴² Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, IV. 26.

⁴³ Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, IV. 107-108.

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