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# The Importance of Being Oscar: A Performance Studies Inquiry of Wilde's Literary Women

Sydney Nicole Lanier

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING OSCAR: A PERFORMANCE STUDIES  
INQUIRY OF WILDE'S LITERARY WOMEN

by

SYDNEY NICOLE LANIER

Under the Direction of LeeAnne Richardson

ABSTRACT

The plays of Oscar Wilde hold more than just sharp wit and likable characters; they also contain examinations of aspects of the playwright's own personality and explorations of possible life choices. Through the use of Performance Studies theory, this thesis seeks to shed light on how Wilde saw himself versus how he presented himself at different points in his life. The texts analyzed within are Wilde's 1891 dramatic religious retelling, *Salomé*, and his 1894 domestic comedy, *The Importance of Being Ernest*. Within each are clues to the interior desires of their author: *Salomé* offers an investigation of a strong female personality in a repressive male society, while *The Importance of Being Earnest* expands on the feminine taking control over destiny.

INDEX WORDS: Oscar Wilde, Performance studies, Judith Butler, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, *Salomé*, Erving Goffman, Gender roles, Homosexuality, Theatre

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SYDNEY NICOLE LANIER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“This central contradiction, that one is conscious of one's pretensions but continues to hold on to them, echoes through the lines of Wilde's plays.” - Kenneth Krauss*

This thesis will serve to interpret several characters and events from Oscar Wilde's plays that, with the aid of the tenets of the sociological field of performance studies as it pertains to the presentation of identity, will help to shed light on Wilde's personal life. I believe this work will prove very helpful in understanding aspects of the writer's outward personas, particularly with regard to the concepts of expressive equipment, sincere and cynical performances, and the performative nature of gender and sexuality. This task will require extensive biographical research as well as close readings of his texts. The prominent texts I will use from performance studies include, at the forefront, Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and Judith Butler's many works on gender identity.

## The Basic Tenets of Performance Studies

Erving Goffman was a sociological pioneer of his time; his *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* was a breakthrough in the field. In the ten years following this publication, a new genre blossomed out of Goffman's work, led by Richard Schechner with the contributions of others. In their work, both Schechner and Goffman stress the importance of the many roles that one takes on over the course of his life or even a small piece of a single day. Robert Ezra Park explains that it is generally accepted within the field that “everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role . . . it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves” (qtd. in Goffman 19). It is important to point out that, just because one is seen as performing in a role, it does not mean that one is being in any way dishonest. Performers should not be seen as necessarily “deluding their audiences for purposes of what is called 'self-interest' or private gain” (18). Anyone acting within the confines of a social distinction – any position in any social setting – functions as a performer of a role: teachers, students, politicians, garbage collectors, and, yes, even playwrights.

Goffman compares the idea of the performance of life to the various parts of the theatre. In his work, the theatre logically breaks down into four main components: performer, audience, text, and performance. For the sake of clarity, I will relate these terms in just one isolated example. Here, there is one solitary *performer* who wears one mask, whether a literal covering of the face or a mask of symbolic identity. This person puts on a *performance* for the sake of an *audience*, which is comprised of everyone that

witnesses the performance in any way. The performer acts according to a script, or *text*. This text may be explicit, as it is in rehearsed theatrical productions, or it may be something as implicit as a social script, something that is ingrained in the societal mind of the performer.

All performances, regardless of the size or intensity of their audiences, rely on one thing above all else: “when an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman 17). Audience members must “suspend disbelief” of what is in front of them, or, more appropriately, take part in the “cycle of disbelief-to-belief” (18-20). In this cycle, audience members are transported by the quality of the performance into believing what they could not before believe. The role that is being performed offers an easier interpretation of the perceived evidence than what the audience knows to be true; it is, thus, subconsciously accepted that the role is more honest than what is real. Occasionally, the performer takes part in this cycle as well and, if he does not return to the reality of the situation, may take on serious mental damage or dissociative syndromes, though this is very rare.

An important part of the Goffmanian concept of the performance is the “front”. The front, as defined by Goffman, is

part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance . . . [and] the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance. (22)

Thus, anything we knowingly or unknowingly articulate in a particular situation becomes part of the front. This helps to uphold our act; if our expressions or actions do not match the audience's perception of the performance, then the performance fails. Our actions must be evidence to support our performance rather than tools to undermine it.

The “expressive equipment” Goffman mentions “may include insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex; age. . . size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures and the like” (24). For example, if one chooses to dress nicely for a wedding, this is part of the front utilized by the wedding guest. If one chooses to wear dirty and ragged clothing to work at a construction site, this is part of the front utilized by the construction worker. When it is noted that either person would look and feel quite out of place if the equipment were reversed, it becomes obvious that this equipment is an important part of the society with which one comes into contact everyday. These fronts are not mutually exclusive and should not be seen as necessarily belonging to separate individuals; the construction worker could easily exchange fronts to become a guest at a wedding. Thus, one need not view contradictions in character display as deceit but merely as the expression of another front – another facet of the same entity. The fronts complement one another, together forming the entire individual.

Richard Schechner, in his *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, argues that no front, regardless of how original it seems, is entirely unique or new. All action should be viewed this way and is thus what he refers to as “restored behavior.” This behavior, as Schechner describes, “is 'me behaving . . . as I am told to do' . . . Even if I feel myself wholly to be myself, acting independently, only a little investigating reveals that the units

of behavior that comprise 'me' were not invented by 'me'" (28). It is important to note that, while this seems to echo "history repeats itself," Schechner readily admits that "every performance is specific and different from every other" (29). It is the component parts of the performance that are resurrected from performances past. The performance itself is unique, as the constituent pieces are combined and used in a new fashion each time.

Schechner points out that "life also involves years of training, of learning appropriate bits of behavior, of finding out how to adjust and perform one's life in relation to social and personal circumstances" (22). As a child, one must be taught to talk through careful and wearying processes if one is to ever effectively communicate with those around them. Further in life, one is often found dependent upon training for one's position in life: a doctor must not only spend years in medical school and commit himself to a period of time interning under a practiced physician, but also be coached on how to interact with upset patients and grieving families before he, himself, can become a licensed practitioner. If a doctor must learn many facets to perform an assumed identity, why should any role, such as the playboy playwright, be treated any differently?

Judith Butler, one of the foremost scholars in the arena of gender performance studies, makes the assertion that, while sex is biologically prescribed, gender is merely performance. In other words, our gender and, by extension, our sexuality, is determined by the characteristics we display. By this definition, gender is dynamic and may depend more on our environment and those who accompany us than anything intrinsic. A man may elect to accept front characteristics based on his biological sex, or he may eschew them for those

of more female-assigned roles. In some cases, he may choose to combine these forms, creating a more gender-neutral or gender-queer identity. These choices are all performance-based and rely on the presentation of fronts for exhibition.

In many ways, the persona one builds through many fronts is truer to one's own sense of self than many may believe. Robert Ezra Park, quoted in Goffman's text, comments on the concept of the persona as a personal escape: "this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be." (19). Goffman concludes the discussion of Park with the statement, "in the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality" (19).

While Goffman believes that there are sincere and insincere performances, he further posits that no front is ingenuine since it originates within the individual. The relative sincerity or cynicism of a performance is measured by the degree to which a performer is "sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality" (Goffman 17). Is the performer acting in the same manner as he would were he his only audience? If he accepts his performance as truth, then it is sincere; this interpretation disregards fact in favor of perception.

In many cases, a front is performed or a mask is worn for the expressed enjoyment of the audience. This enjoyment is what Anne Ubersfeld refers to as the presumed "pleasure of the spectator." Many public figures assume that their audience deserves the delight of an amusing front or else needs an intermediary dissolution in order to interpret anything about the situation. One of the most important "pleasures" of the audience is

that of “bricolage.” According to Ubersfeld, because a performance “is made up of bits and pieces, it builds for another use – that of each spectator – a new ensemble with the piece of the preceding one: a tableau” (131). In other words, an audience member combines what he knows about the performer, the performance, and the text, and feels accomplishment when he understands how the puzzle pieces fit together. The opposite can also occur; the audience member can decide the pieces do not fit satisfactorily and brush away the entire performance.

The word “bricolage,” itself, literally means “to interweave.” The term's use is interesting in this context because it insinuates that the images created and perceived would interweave and create a series of patterns and masks. It would thus change as the audience's positions of viewing change. It would be appropriate that a person's masks would not only be different with differing audience members but also within the same audience member as time, view position, or personal opinion changed. The same audience member who was dissatisfied with the performance may have felt it worthy viewing from another time or place.

## Wilde's Relevance

The concepts that underlie performance studies – the mask, sincere and cynical performances, the pleasure of the spectator – are extremely important when studying Oscar Wilde. Many scholars have commented on the stark separations between the different aspects of Wilde's life: he is, on one hand, a typical Irish family man with children and a wife he supports through his writing; on the other, he is a metropolitan playboy, chasing young men throughout Europe. It is generally assumed that Wilde was merely playacting as the family man, that his true self was not allowed to emerge until he was outed as a “sodomite [sic]” by the Marquess of Queensberry in 1895.

However, performance studies suggests that neither the family man nor the playboy can be divorced from his “self.” Though Wilde publicly asserted that biography should not be found in art, it is clear that many aspects of his life are parallel to events in his plays, and his works were even used in his trial to prove him guilty of gross indecency. Wilde was not a different person in Ireland than in England; he was not a different person when penning his canon than when cavorting with friends. All of these aspects – and even more than we, years later, are privileged to know – come together to form one Oscar Wilde, and none should be condemned or praised above others in studying his character.

It has been oft-noted that Oscar Wilde's work is highly self-referential. However, I would take that statement further: Oscar Wilde's work references not only his previous publications, but events and experiments from his personal life. Through careful biographical analysis and the injection of theory from the field of performance studies, I



will illustrate how Wilde can be seen peppering his work with his real life fears and doubts and how he is most closely aligned with the female characters of his plays. *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be viewed as an exploration of guilt and the possibility of future paths while *Salomé* allows a literary treatment of subversion through gender expression and an unexpectedly potent feminine characterization.

Oscar Wilde is a much studied character. There have been many works published on Wilde within performance studies, but all deal exclusively with him as a persona rather than a writer. While his role as writer is a distinct mask (or, perhaps, many masks interacting), these works consider him without reference to his artistic endeavors. Many works have also been published in the literary realm that focus on his works. I see a gap here – he was not one person on the street and another when penning his canon. Therefore, my work is to both branch out into new territory for literary studies, bringing in relatively unused theory, and to bridge together the existing criticism from the two camps. In light of the research in performance studies, it is important to understand every individual as one coherent entity who may display many, and often, opposing, fronts. When fellow Irishman W.B. Yeats was asked his opinion on Wilde's playing the “poseur” and being ingenuous to his nature, Yeats defended the playwright: “He was merely living artistically, and it was the duty of everybody to have a conception of themselves, and he intended to conceive of himself” (Ellmann *Yeats* 77).

## CHAPTER 2

## SALOME, 1891

*“You have a dreamer's look; you must not dream. It is only sick people who dream.” - Herodias*  
*“[Wilde's] eyes are blue, or a light gray, and instead of being 'dreamy', as some of his admirers*  
*have imagined them to be, they are bright and quick – not at all like those of one given*  
*to perpetual musing on the ineffably beautiful and true.” - The Tribune, 1883*

In 1893, Oscar Wilde wrote that he was so disappointed in England's censor that he would be forced to flee to Paris, “that vivid centre of art, where religious dramas are often performed” (qtd in Powell 34). However, Paris is also “the place to which one flees for sexual liberation” (Waldrep 34). The controversy over France began two years earlier, when Wilde penned his most controversial and, I argue, most telling play of his canon, *Salomé*, in French. Not only was he provoking the British censors by portraying religious figures on stage, he also created a world where the roles and actions of the genders could be questioned. Though many doubted that any of *Salomé* was original to Wilde – the plot was certainly a retelling –, it is not difficult to see how his interpretation of the title character reached far beyond the previous tales of the princess from Judæa.

Kerry Powell writes of Wilde's characterization of *Salomé*:

The heroine not only shatters Victorian conceptions of womanhood, she actually pursues 'sex for sex's sake, without purpose or production' [. . .] in her unrelenting insistence upon controlling her own sexuality, *Salomé*

attacks the very foundation of patriarchal culture with murderous female energy. (34)

Through this “murderous female energy,” Salomé is able to subtly use her more feminine qualities to illicit weaker ones in Herod. Wilde knew that “it is in French that one must find the representation of such extreme 'perversity' and decadence,” and likely thought that the language could be used to mask any explorations of personality as well as prohibited doctrinal discourse (Waldrep 34).

## **The Shift of the Feminine to Power**

From the very first lines of the play, Salomé is constantly compared to nature. However, she is not found to be alike those more grotesque aspects of nature, but simplistic designs of the world, and those related closely with purity. She is compared to white doves and butterflies (her feet and hands), a white rose (her complexion), and a narcissus and a silver flower (her countenance). Many of these same terms Salomé uses to describe the moon, typically a female symbol. These depictions have nothing in common with the ostentatious nature of the Aesthete – unlike the objects Herod will later offer her – and, in fact, seem simple enough to be the antithesis of such showmanship.

Salomé hears the cries of prophecy coming from Jokanaan (John the Baptist) from deep within his prison cistern and demands that she be allowed to see him. The soldiers, who seem enamored with, if not amorous of, Salomé, urge her not to request such things, and to instead return to her rightful place at the royal banquet with the Tetrarch and her mother, his wife. This prodding serves to remind her of her role; she is a woman, a subject, and not to be demanding such things of men. Salomé is, however, unrelenting. She does not stop until she is allowed to see Jokanaan, for whom she immediately conjures lust. As Powell wrote, she pursues “sex for sex's sake,” much like the Aesthete would desire “art for art's sake.”

As soon as Salomé disregards purity as an ideal, the imagery of the moon also shifts. Though it was just moments ago seen as a chaste silver flower like Salomé, it returns to the persona of the dead woman searching for dead things, according to the page of Herodias,

and a “little princess, whose eyes are eyes of amber, [. . .] smiling like a little princess,” as told by the young Syrian (344). Salomé, the literal little princess, begins on the path that will have her requiring nothing but death, echoing the perceived desires of the female moon.

The constantly changing moon illustrates the impermeable nature of humanity, especially when the relationship between the moon and Salomé. It changes as she changes. Felski writes of this occurrence:

This insistence on the artificiality of the real can thus be read as a critical response to the presentation of bourgeois values and beliefs as rooted in an organic and unchanging reality. The authority of nature is exposed as nothing but art, reality as simulation – an insight that contains an emancipatory moment in its recognition that identity is constructed and hence changeable. (1097)

This interpretation would indicate that the moon, which exists both literally and figuratively in the minds of the characters, is a representation of the emotions of the humans, namely Salomé. However, this reading differs from that of McKenna, who writes, “the moon as arbiter of erotic destiny was to feature in Oscar's play *Salomé*, where a cruel, cold moon presides over and controls the erotic desires and destinies of poor mortals” (114). McKenna's explanation relies on the assumption that Wilde was aware of the Russian concept that homosexual men were “men of the lunar light” (114). While Wilde perhaps may have known of this foreign phrasing, it is not the men in *Salomé* who would

mimic the moon's adjustments. Salomé does pursue Jokanaan, a man, the real intrigue of the play lies in the strength of her femininity.

Both the characterization of the moon and the actions of Salomé are odd when compared to the role of the woman in Victorian society. Women were the givers of life, not those who would take it away. They were to remain, or, at least, appear to remain, chaste. They should not turn red, as Wilde's moon does, with sexual or murderous desire. When Salomé is no longer seen as silver and white by the men in the scene, she abandons her strict expected female role. She does not return fully to this role until forced by the final action of the play, her death as decreed by a man once again reclaiming his masculine power.

Salomé asserts herself as a superior in front of Jokanaan. She commands him to allow her to touch his body, claiming that it is “white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed,” and other images of beauty found in nature (346). Again, the imagery is of simplicity in the natural world, and not of the ostentatious qualities desired by the Aesthetes. When Jokanaan fails to deliver his body to Salomé because it belongs to the Lord God, she determines that his “body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper” and, instead, it is his hair that she so desires (346-7). For her to touch his hair would be to blaspheme the “temple of the Lord God,” therefore Salomé then claims that his “hair is horrible. It is covered with mire and dust. It is like a crown of thorns” (347). Salomé desires what she sees as beautiful and, when Jokanaan repels her because he considers each item sacred, she denies it the power it claimed over her. Only she will determine what is worthy, attractive, and holy.

Salomé's next request is not subdued by Jokanaan's speech of God and her baseness. She continues to pursue his kiss as he tells her of Jesus and his desire that she seek Him for forgiveness of sin. Salomé seems to not hear Jokanaan's pleas, and only relents once he has returned to his prison and Herod and Herodias enter the scene. Salomé's transformation from the white princess to a wielder of masculine power is complete.

Salomé is careful in her assertion of her newfound power, however. Herod, entering the scene, notes that the moon, the symbol for Salomé's condition throughout the play, is "like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers" (349). Herodias is the only character who seemingly fails to note characteristics of the moon, as she also fails to note the state of her daughter, Salomé. She declares, "No, the moon is like the moon, that is all" (350). However, it can also be read as Herodias, more perceptive than she desires to appear, detecting the change in her daughter and fearing the shift in power. It is possible that she understands Salomé's amplification of her might; if Salomé gains power over the men, who are in charge, she will have met and overcome the position held by Herodias, herself. Herodias is badgered and ordered around by Herod, to which she can only continuously reply, "You must not look at her! You are always looking at her!" (349). She is afraid of Herod's gaze on her daughter and that Salomé may eventually supplant her in the hierarchy.

Herod desires Salomé to drink wine with him, rejoin the banquet, and, fulfilling Herodias' potential fears, sit for a spell in the queen's throne. On all accounts, Salomé denies him; Herod is taken aback by her refusals, yet Herodias fails to see anything amiss. Herod then requires Salomé to dance for him. Salomé allows her mother to argue for her

against dancing until Herod is so incensed that he is nearly desperate for her dance. He begs, “I beseech you. If you dance for me you may ask me what you will, and I will give it to you, even unto the half of my kingdom”; Salomé requires that he swears “by my life, by my crown, by my gods” (359). The simple fact that he begs Salomé illustrates the shift of power – he is having to ask her for something that, as king, should be delivered to him without issue.

Herod expects that the dance will reduce Salomé back into her pure, feminine state. He envisions her feet returning to the white doves and white flowers they were before she desired Jokanaan. However, Herod does not realize until after he has spoken that “she is going to dance on blood. There is blood spilt on the ground. She must not dance on blood. It were an evil omen” (360). This signals that Salomé will not return to her undefiled weak position as the feminine; the moon reflects her unchanging status, as Herodias finally realizes that the moon is as blood red as Salomé's feet. Salomé's will is resolute.

Salomé, who, as stepdaughter of the king, should hold power over a prisoner of the kingdom, fails to obtain the object of her desire. However, she manages to gain control over the one person who should have absolute rule, Herod, and does so with relative ease. Jokanaan finds the strength to deny Salomé through his connection to God; he feels that he cannot condone her advances because God would not allow it. If Wilde was writing Salomé to resemble his own experiences, Herod would likely represent his perceived masculine role in society. It is literally easy for him to live his life in his role as husband and father. While it is not obvious that Salomé would usurp Herod's power, it is the movement of power that would both please a theatrical audience as well as fulfill a



reasonable revenge scenario, as Herod killed her father, his brother, and forced her mother into marriage.

However, power over the kingdom and Herod is not Salomé's ultimate desire. It is, instead, a means to an end. The power she truly wishes to obtain is that which would allow her to be with Jokanaan. She fails to understand how an unseen force can prevent her desires from being fulfilled. God moves within Jokanaan and tells him that Salomé's touch would only serve to defile His Temple.

Wilde, himself, had experience with forbidden lust: his sexual desire for men was far greater than that of women, but the omnipresent Society sternly rejects these notions. Therefore, Wilde must subvert the system like Salomé. Neil McKenna writes on Wilde's subversion:

He had convinced himself that he could, should and must marry. He had always intended to marry, to do what his mother and what society expected of him, but there were also other obvious – and less obvious – advantages to marriage. Not least, marriage would put an end to the unceasing speculation and sniping about his sexual orientation. (51)

It should not be construed that Wilde's marriage was a complete sham. While the apparent reasons, love and honor, were not the driving forces behind the wedding, they were not completely absent, either. McKenna goes on to write, “she was the one woman who had awoken a strong sexual sense in him. [. . .] Constance was a woman entirely hypnotised, entirely subjugated by her love for Oscar. She entered the marriage grateful for love and blinded by love” (52).

Salomé appears to take genuine pleasure in controlling Herod, making her desire for power over him real, if not as strong as that for Jokanaan. This was also the case with Wilde's marriage to Constance; he may have had curious reasons for wanting to join the institution of marriage, but his wish to marry Constance was nothing but admirable.

“There can be no doubt that when Oscar proposed to Constance he was deeply in love. 'He certainly had been very much in love with her,' Bosie [Wilde's longtime lover] was to write years later. Indeed, Oscar had 'often' told Bosie how 'the marriage was purely a love match'.” (McKenna 44).

## The Feminine Conquers the Masculine

If *Salomé* is, as Rodney Shewan writes, “the most intensely self-expressive of Wilde's plays,” exactly where is the expression of Wilde's self located within the text and which front is Shewan reading into it (qtd. in Powell 45)? Richard Ellmann suggests that Wilde wrote himself into the play as Herod, the supposedly strong male figure and the one who orders the suppression through death of Salomé (“Overtures” 76). However, this does not mesh with either the fronts Wilde performed in public arenas or in his private writings. Wilde never portrayed himself as a powerful masculine figure; his great joy was in living the life of the dandy. While he relished in exhibiting his power, it was in an intellectual and rhetorical fashion rather than in a violent or oppressive one.

Wilde's performances align more closely with those of the title character, Salomé. Powell writes that “Salomé herself is one of those exceptional personalities whose intensity, Wilde believed, was 'created out of sin.' In realizing her individualism she moves irresistibly to crime and revolt, for 'most personalities have been obliged to be rebels,' Wilde had written in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'” (45). Wilde chose to explore this personality, dredging her from the background of the religious tales and the previous dramatizations of the story and making her the focus of his play. It is no coincidence that this minor character now commands the stage in Wilde's production; instead, Wilde was investigating the feminine power to which he found himself relating too closely for the comfort of the Victorian society around him. Powell comments that Wilde's creation performs as follows:

Wilde moves Salomé to the foreground and makes her passionate recoil from thwarted desire the center of interest, causing both Hérode and Hérodiad to recede in importance by comparison with their precursors. In *Salomé* the blood lust is the dancer's, not her mother's; the murder of the prophet is her own idea; and her eruptive nature veer between listless yearning and implacable fury. (46)

How could the dandy not be attracted to such a character who subverts the “natural” order of masculine over feminine, one who uses her femininity to revel in a morbid decadence? Salomé needs not hold the head of Jokanaan to know he has been murdered, but she will not halt in her demands until her desire has been completely fulfilled.

Further, Salomé does not stop until she has reduced Herod, the strongest example of proud masculine power in the play, to womanish action. She completely reverses the masculine-feminine dichotomy, which has earlier seemed so clearly delineated, and minimized his royal declarations to fruitless begging. Salomé presents herself in a position of power – Herod has let himself owe her – and refuses to back down until she has wholly subverted his force. Herod has given her his word that, “whatsoever [Salomé's wishes] may be, they shall give it to you. My treasures belong to thee” (362). As soon as he discovers that she desires the head of the prophet, Herod begins his descent into femininity.

Though it is often considered the “closest to his Aestheticist beliefs,” *Salomé* also subverts the very same beliefs more than any of Wilde's other works (Krauss xx). Herod is so displeased with Salomé's demands for Jokanaan's head that he offers her womanly

things – it is, however, soon realized that these lovely, feminine things are what Herod, himself, treasures most. As Kenneth Krauss explains, “Aestheticist imagery culled from Nature never displayed natural simplicity. Instead, the images were grotesque or highly intricate specimens: exotic, delicate flowers; rare, bizarre birds; and fabulous cut gemstones” (xiv). These are the very objects Herod offers Salomé as he pleads against her desire for a very natural and base payment. He volunteers to give her “an emerald, a great round emerald [. . .] it is the largest emerald in the world” (362-363). When this fails, he offers up “my white peacocks, my beautiful white peacocks [. . .] I will give you fifty of my peacocks. They will follow you withersoever you go, and in the midst of them you will be like the moon in the midst of a great white cloud” (363). Next, Herod begins a litany of all the exquisite jewels he has collected and hidden, including pearls, amethysts, topazes, and opals, among many others.

After his third attempt at showering Salomé with lavish gifts, Herod concedes and allows Jokanaan to be killed. Salomé is only then pleased. This moment is the exact place where Salomé is fully in control and wielding the power which should be reserved for the men. She has accomplished her goal in punishing the one who has spurned her as well as having asserted herself in a masculine fashion. In fact, Herod is so crushed by his reduction in status that he becomes hysterical. His ring of death is given to the executioner as he “sinks back in his seat,” as Wilde's stage directions indicate (365). He is seemingly unaware of his surroundings, asking, “who has taken my ring? There was a ring on my right hand. Who has drunk my wine? There was wine in my cup. It was full of wine. Some one has drunk it? . . . Wherefore did I give my oath? Kings ought never to pledge

their word” (365). Herod understands that by giving his word to Salomé to produce whatever she desired, he has relegated himself to a position of weakness, the very quality that ostensibly gives him power over women.

It is quite telling that Wilde allows Herod to be destroyed – both through emotion and through strength of conviction – after being denied thrice by Salomé. In contrast, Salomé is fortified by the same act; she begins her ascension after Jokanaan denies her advances three times. This duality illustrates that Salomé, despite, or, perhaps, because of, being a woman, is a stronger personality than that that Herod presents.

Despite Ellmann's assertion that *Salomé* is Wilde's Aesthetic masterpiece, I find Salomé's actions to be incongruous with the ideals of the Aesthetes. Wilde, himself, would have been greatly pleased with the offerings of the king, and went into keen detail on each oblation; in fact, these are the longest speeches made by any character in the play. It seems as though Herod is offering Salomé the very life of an Aesthete, the life the Tetrarch so appreciates living himself, and she chooses not to accept it. Instead, Salomé holds true to her superior intellectual stance and creates a situation where Herod must be submissive to her wants. The will of femininity, which Wilde was so careful to produce in his presentation of self, wins over the declarations of masculinity.



Figure 1. Oscar Wilde as Salomé with the head of Jokanaan

## CHAPTER 3

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST, 1894

*“If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being  
always immensely over-educated.” -Algernon, Act II*

*“Nothing but my genius.” - Wilde, upon being asked if he had  
'anything to declare' by an American customs inspector.*

It has been oft-noted that Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* “is at one level a self-parody” (Nassaar 78). If this is true, what exactly was Wilde parodying about himself? Many have suggested that the parody is of “the major events and themes of his earlier work” (78). However, I believe that *Importance* delves deeper into Wilde's own experiences as he searched for a method to properly express himself and explain the society that was shifting drastically before his eyes. The female characters from Wilde's 1894 play say much about the changing role of the Victorian woman but also reveal much about Wilde's own questions of identity and subscribed societal roles.

Wilde published his first collection of poetry in 1881; this date indicates that his literary canon is written during the decline of the Victorian era. At this time, the positions and roles of women were drastically changing. Depending on whom you asked, the degree to which this was positive or negative could swing like a pendulum. Women gained independence, both in the home and within the larger society. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde showcases various feminine positions through the four female roles.



## **The Characters' Roles in Victorian Society**

In the Victorian era, women were allowed to take jobs outside of the home. However, most women did not want to take the kinds of positions afforded to them, and the ones that did, did so out of necessity. According to John Burnett, “Victorian women provided a vast reservoir of labour, necessary for an expanding though immature economy whose fluctuations demanded additional workers at one time, fewer at another” (“Victorian Working Women”). This newly available avenue, regardless of the specific conditions, gave women a first spark of empowerment. The fight for autonomy would continue to grow from here.

Lady Bracknell is Wilde's strong representation of the stereotypical Victorian woman. She is very set in her traditional ways. Lady Bracknell has control, but keeps it out of the public eye; she runs her entire household from behind the scenes, allowing for the appearance of everything being in her husband's control. When she discovers that her daughter Gwendolen “thinks” she is engaged to Jack Worthing, she replies:

Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself. (358)

This statement perfectly illustrates the stereotype of the rigid Victorian woman; marriages were often made out of convenience rather than love, and often the young women involved

had little or no say in the matter. The implication made is that, because Lady Bracknell's marriage was arranged in such a fashion, so shall her daughter's, out of social necessity. Philip Cohen, in his *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, writes that "Lady Bracknell, who represents the older generation . . . fearlessly imposes [the generation's] expectations on experience. And Wilde wants to convince the reader that these expectations, based on convention and tradition, are every bit as fantastic as the childish dreams of the young" (224). So, while Lady Bracknell is entirely convinced that her ways are best, they are actually morally on par with those of the younger generation.

Miss Prism is the caretaker of Jack Worthing's estate and governess to his "niece," Cecily Cardew. While she is not of high social standing like Lady Bracknell, she bears many similarities. As governess, she is in control of Cecily's education; she also looks over the house and property while Jack is "bunburying" in the city. Both because of her social condition and her condition as a woman, she does not receive high praise for her actions. Rather, it is Jack that has claim to raising Cecily, and no mention is made as to who is responsible for the state of his estate. She also has old-fashioned ideas, most of which are based on the expectations of polite society, of how her charge should act.

Cecily Cardew appears to be Wilde's interpretation of the modern woman. Because she is afforded certain freedoms, she is able to make some, though minor, decisions for herself. However, because she is thoroughly inexperienced at making decisions, she is often found to be indecisive and confused. Cecily wishes not to receive the education Miss Prism offers her; she also is anticipating marrying (an imaginary person) out of love. In fact, when "Ernest" takes too long in proposing marriage to her in his correspondence, she

suggests the matter herself. This is incredibly forward and an action a stereotypical Victorian would never consider. Her views are incredibly idealistic and naïve, though it would be hard to blame her for this, considering she was raised in relative seclusion. Perhaps to compensate for her upbringing, Cecily lives for whatever is to make her happy.

Gwendolen Fairfax, Lady Bracknell's daughter, is an indication of the shift in the women of the time. While she is still very much concerned with society, appearances, and following rules, she also wishes for more personal power. She serves as a transitional character – she holds on to remnants of the Victorian culture while moving ahead in other aspects. When Jack (as Ernest) proposes marriage to her, she readily accepts. She does not seem to worry that, as an infant, he was found in a handbag in “the cloak-room of Victoria Station” (361).

Gwendolen's dual purpose can be most aptly identified in her reactions and relationships with others. When she is with her mother, she tends to be quiet and submissive. When she meets Cecily, however, she takes on many of the more modern traits. The two young women “proceed from mutual suspicion to mutual affection, thence to mutual detestation, and finally to mutual affection again, all the time firmly maintaining that they are consistent” (Parker 181). Despite the reversal of their views, they always exude confidence in their current viewpoint.

Besides just being representations for the women of the time, Wilde's female characters also seem to personify the ambivalence he had to the family unit and being pinned down into one specific identity. Parker points out that Wilde's “heroes adopt identities to suit the occasion; the heroines imagine identities to suit the person with whom

they choose to associate” (183). When relating these ideals to reality, many would consider this escapism; however, to Wilde, it was far more relevant to his personal life than others. He led the dual life of family man and not-so-secretive schoolboy lover, and was skillfully able to interchange these faces as the situation demanded.

## Wilde as Earnest's Women

While Oscar Wilde had homosexual tendencies even as a young Oxford student, he must have felt pressure to grow up and become the typical family man of the time. In 1883, his mother urged both he and his brother Willie to marry for the expressed purpose of improving their financial situation. This, from the same woman about whom Ellmann writes: “Oscar Wilde once commented that his mother and he had decided to found a society for the suppression of virtue, and it says something for their kinship of minds that the idea might have originated with either of them” (*Dubliners* 14). But, according to Ellmann's biography of Wilde:

The stirrings of varied impulses, the kisses of Walt Whitman and [Robert] Sherard, made him delay. There was no doubt, however, that marriage would silence the gossip. If he felt ennobled by victimization, he liked better not being victimized, a point not always recognized by students of his character. (233)

Ellmann also writes in *Four Dubliners* that “just as he was dallying with Freemasonry at the same time as with Catholicism, which was opposed to it, so Wilde appears to have kept heterosexual practices while clearly tending in another direction” (34).

In all of this confusion of sexual dalliance, it is hard to pin down a specific sexuality or group of characteristics that also hold true for him. Perhaps, this is not the approach one should take. According to Judith Butler, “gender and sexual reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed; . . . as

performance, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (278-279). Therefore, a concrete interpretation of Wilde is not necessary – he is as he acts at specific instances. In his “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,” Wilde declares, “the wise contradict themselves” (qtd in Ellmann *Dubliners* 37).

Regardless of his tendencies, Wilde married Constance Lloyd in May of 1884 (Ellmann *Wilde* 249). It is hard to say if the bride had much prior knowledge as to what all she was getting into, though it seems clear from several letters that she was at least partially aware of his sexual past. She writes, “I trust in you for the present: I am content to let the past be buried, it does not belong to me: for the future trust and faith will come, and when I have you for my husband, I will hold you fast with chains of love” (qtd in Ellmann *Wilde* 246). It appears as though she was sure marriage would change the man, though what comes of the marriage shows the fault in her logic.

Wilde, it seemed, fell quickly back into old habits. Though he remained married and even produced children with his wife, he also pursued extramarital affairs with males – particularly school age boys. He conducted typical family life at home, yet spent much time chasing young men around the cafés of Paris. In many cases, this more public philanderer side of Wilde was referred to as a “dandy,” a very emasculating term for a man. Lawrence Danson explains: “for the dandy, 'The condition of perfection is idleness': he is not an artist but art itself, since 'All Art is quite useless.' The useless is the decorative, and the decorative is the effeminate – here an attribute of gender, not sexuality” (83). In this

sense, Wilde can be easily identified in his female characters from *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The dichotomy of the Victorian and modern women in the play illustrates a dichotomy found in Wilde's life. His attachment to the tradition of marriage and leading the life that is "appropriate" is mirrored by the actions of Lady Bracknell. Bracknell, herself, reveals problems with the conventions of the time, yet continues to live by these rules. She comments in Act 3 that, "we live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" (394). Though she "regrets to say" this, she has no problem with conducting business in this manner; she decides that Cecily is a suitable match for Algernon after discovering her monetary worth. In the sphere of the husband and father at home, even when he seems to completely disagree with the status quo, Wilde upholds it nonetheless. He performs his duties to his family. His Gwendolen comments directly on this phenomenon: "The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive" (381).

This is exactly the fate that followed Wilde when he left home. While *The Importance of Being Earnest's* Algernon remarks that "all women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his," this seems to be a very tongue-in-cheek commentary coming from Wilde. In many ways, he did become like his mother, Lady Jane "Speranza" Wilde. At the young age of thirteen, he wrote home to his mother concerning a hamper of clothing she had sent; "the flannel shirts you sent in the hamper are both [brother] Willie's, mine are one quite scarlet and the other lilac" (qtd in Ellmann *Wilde* 4). Ellmann writes

that “his thirteen-year-old tastes in clothing were a dandy's, discriminating between his own scarlet and lilac shirts and the unmentionable colors of Willie's” (4). At this stage, we see much of his future identity being shaped, but it is also important to note that Lady Wilde facilitated this behavior, encouraging outrageousness and singularity.

Many of his ideals can be traced back to Lady Wilde. In youth:

he is on excellent terms with his darling mother, and keen to be on better ones, perhaps because his elder brother Willie is distinctly a rival for her attention. (Oscar will unseat him later) . . . Lady Wilde communicated to her son both her nationalism and her determination to embody it in verse”  
(*Wilde* 4, 7).

A great deal of Lady Bracknell's snide comments about societal woes hold roots in the discussions and writings of Wilde's own mother. For example, the women seem to share a disliking for those who are considered “respectable.” Lady Wilde's comments on the matter include such statements as “you must never employ that description in this house . . . we are above respectability” (9). Wilde's Bracknell questions Reverend Chasuble on whether Miss Prism is “a female of repellent aspect”; when he replies that Prism is “the very picture of respectability,” she insists “it is obviously the same person” (398). In fact, if we view Lady Bracknell as a model for his mother, Wilde did indeed “become like [his] mother.” Bracknell stands as the figure of authority, the way that things ought to be in society. Wilde followed his mother's wishes in marrying and becoming a family man; he acted as he was told.



Despite negating Algernon's prophesy, his actions outside of the family unit are not solved. Here, Cecily becomes perhaps the most important character of the entire play, as she holds the key to modernity. Wilde indeed became quite effeminate when outside of the “home,” in this case both the literal house and Ireland. It is important to note that there is no evidence of any sexual dalliance with males while Wilde was residing in Ireland; however, as a schoolboy in Oxford, he began to exhibit these tendencies. Even when, as described by Ellmann, he noticed a young choir boy on a visit to Dublin, he failed to comment on the matter until back in England (*Dubliners* 36). He insisted on gaining attention when not in the family light; he declared: “I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other, I'll be famous, and if not famous, notorious” (qtd in Ellmann *Wilde* 46). He managed both goals; his literary prowess earned him fame, his sexual prowess earned him notoriety.

Just as Cecily is indecisive and flighty due to her inexperience with freedom, so too was Wilde. He knew what he wanted out of life, and worked to obtain it. However, he also knew that the public would not be accepting of what it was he wanted. Therefore, the fear of exposure and condemnation made him nervous in his dandyism. Many who knew of his exploits were expressive in their disapproval; former friend Alice Meynell recalls his as “an immoral character and possibly a dangerous influence” (qtd in Stetz 520). Margaret Stetz argues that “here we run up against Victorian homophobia, which was by no means confined to muscular men . . . but also shared by women – even sophisticated, intellectual, 'modern' women” (520). The stakes were high in homosexual practices at the time.

## The Fear of Exposure, and Other Options

The entire scenario of *The Importance of Being Earnest* can possibly be related to Wilde exploring his own condition. Through his characters, he can investigate various available paths – each of the characters involve him in a specific mindset. If he chooses to follow the ideals set forth by Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism, he can become quite like his mother and society's expectation for the family man. If he chooses to follow Gwendolen's lead, he can attempt to balance his familial responsibilities and his desire for the company of young men; this is the position he generally assumed and one that allowed him to switch between roles as was required of him. However, the play also offers the possibility of Cecily's influence. This would enable him to go headlong into the world of homosexual practices and live his life to the fullest. The problem with this path is that society already held a strong position against and had serious consequences for this lifestyle. By interpreting the actions of these characters – importantly, of his own design –, decisions of a very personal nature could be made.

In a bit of irony, Wilde also explores the concept of being “outed” by a telling cigarette case; this is how Algernon comes to know that Ernest is, in fact, named Jack. Without this point of action, the rest of the play could never unfold. However, Cohen points out that “Wilde customarily gave cigarette cases to the male prostitutes with whom he consorted. Perhaps he feared that his own double life might be exposed through such a gift” (219). Therefore, the play did more than analyze character traits for Wilde, it also offered an exploration of guilt. This is particularly intriguing when one considers the

timeline for this part of Wilde's life. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was penned in 1894 and first performed in 1895. Later in 1895, Wilde is publicly outed as a “sodomite [sic]” by the father of one of his consorts, the Marquess of Queensberry (“Chronology”). This accusation led to several cross-examinations of his homosexual behavior, one of which led to a trial and sentencing to two years of hard labor for “committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons” (Ellmann *Wilde* 476).

By placing *The Importance of Being Earnest* firmly within the public sphere, the play appears to be Wilde's effort to test the waters of his own delicate situation. While there are no overtly homosexual comments within the text, it is not hard to see it used as a testing ground for his life. Cecily, the representative for the modern woman, obtains happiness at the end of the play; she and Algernon are permitted to marry. However, being modern, in Wilde's interpretation, required living for the things that would make one happy. If even Cecily can live “happily ever after,” perhaps this was Wilde's prophesy for the changing social climate with regards to homosexuality. It is possible that he saw hope in the future for those who loved whomsoever they choose to be fully accepted by society – even by those who followed the rules as closely as Lady Bracknell. This is the ideal world for Wilde; one in which he would not be imprisoned for following happiness.

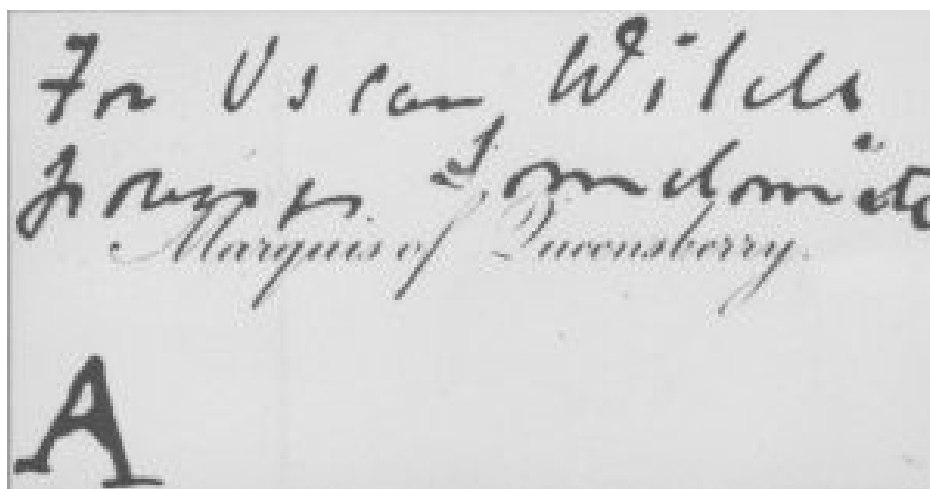


Figure 2. Calling card of the Marquis of Queensberry,

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS

*"I think his fate is rather like Humpty Dumpty's, quite as tragic and quite as impossible to put right." - Constance Lloyd Wilde*

Oscar Wilde performed many roles throughout his life, but some of the most interesting ones were the roles he crafted for himself through his plays. He alternated positions as a loving husband and father and a metropolitan playboy, and he created characters who could move between worlds with relative ease. Writing plays allowed Wilde to examine differing pieces of his self in a controlled environment – one that he need not hide from the rest of society. He could manipulate the fates of his characters to create a positive outcome for himself.

Through the penning of *Salomé*, Wilde was permitted to explore the concept of feminine power in a masculine society. He was naturally drawn to the life and style of the dandy, but his desires ran deeper than mere physical expression. It is likely that he thought of himself as a strong but feminine personality trapped in a repressive male society, which provided the magnetism he felt to *Salomé*'s story. Regardless, the dandy was a subversion of the masculine society and, while not universally accepted, was seen as an innocuous facet of the elite. Despite her death in the final moments of the play, the tale of *Salomé* is one of triumph over ultimate male order.

Three years later, Wilde was still enjoying the company of Bosie and drawing further away emotionally from the typical family life he built with Constance. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a delightful play of assumed and mistaken identity, something with which Wilde was well familiar. Here, Wilde created a world where the women had the power over the men, who were completely unaware of this retrousse arrangement. These women were permitted to construct their own fates, each desiring happiness along a different path. All of the women, including those who buck society's assertions the most, receive what they most want. Why should it not work out just as well for Wilde?

Through his use of the theatre, Wilde could expose himself to the society which shunned his desires. Oscar Wilde learned to subvert the system in which he lived, gaining power over those who determined what was morally proper. Unfortunately, like the fate of Salomé in the final moments of her play, the society executed a last-ditch effort to regain its superiority by indicting and imprisoning Wilde. This legal action broke Wilde's spirit and, despite his efforts to craft a happy ending for himself in his works, the Aesthetic life of Oscar Wilde was over.



Figure 3. Wilde with Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie) in 1893

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