

Wilde Lectures

No.4 - Wilde and Sexuality

'My friend the attorney general in the course of his eloquent peroration asked you to perform your high office, and no doubt he produced an effect upon you at the time when he said he invited you to stop this plague. Gentlemen, I call upon you to perform a higher, a kinder, and a more patriotic office; I call upon you to do something which will be of greater utility, and that is to pronounce by your verdict that they libel the morality and character of this country who say that that plague exists....I trust your verdict will establish that the moral atmosphere of England is not yet tainted with the impurities of Continental cities and that, free as we are from our island position, we are insulated from the crimes to which you have had allusion made, and you will pronounce by your verdict on this case at all events with regard to these facts that London is not cursed with the sins of Sodom, or Westminster tainted with the vices of Gomorrah.'

(The Queen v. Boulton and Others, at Westminster Hall in the Queen's Bench, May 9-15, 1871, 3: 323-25 - quoted in William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1996), p.97)

Illustrations: George du Maurier, 'Maudle on the Choice of a Profession', *Punch*, 12 Feb. 1881.

Hungarian opera singer Alice Guszalewicz as Salome, ?1910.

The Petition of the above-named prisoner humbly sheweth that he does not attempt to palliate in any way the terrible offences of which he was rightly found guilty, but to point out that such offences are forms of sexual madness and are recognised as such not merely by modern pathological science but by much modern legislation, notably in France, Austria, and Italy, where the laws affecting these misdemeanours have been repealed, on the ground that they are diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge. In the works of eminent men of science such as Lombroso and Nordau, to take merely two instances out of many, this is especially insisted on with reference to the intimate connection between madness and the literary and artistic temperament, Professor Nordau in his book on "Degenerescence" published in 1894 having devoted an entire chapter to the petitioner as a specially typical example of this fatal law.'

(Letter to the Home Secretary, 2 June 1896, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (4th Estate: London, 2000), 656)

"The love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and

Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the “Love that dare not speak its name”, and on account of it I am placed where I am now. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder has the intellect, and the younger has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.”

(H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, 2nd edit. (N.Y.: Dover, 1973), p.201)

CARSON: I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare’s sonnets were suggestive of unnatural vice?

WILDE: On the contrary, I have written an article to show that they were not. I objected to such a perversion being put upon Shakespeare.

(Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: 1948), p.129)

“Why go grubbing in muck heaps? The world is fair, and the proportion of healthy-minded men and honest women to those that are fair, fallen, or unnatural is great. Mr Oscar Wilde has again been writing stuff that were better unwritten; and while *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he contributes to *Lippincott’s*, is ingenious, interesting, full of cleverness, and plainly the work of a man of letters, it is false art – for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature – for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality – for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health and sanity. The story – which deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera* – is discreditable alike to author and editor. Mr Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals.”

(*The Scots Observer*, 5 July 1890, quoted in *Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p.438)

“Does an artist break the march of his story with tedious dissertations upon jewels and wearisome catalogues of furniture? And does he not, when dealing with an avowedly delicate topic, refrain as Marlowe refrains in ‘Edward II’, from superfluous detail and exotic sentimentality? Mr Wilde has proved that he lacks the tact and restraint to give us the artistic representation of a hero who is half Jack-the-Ripper, half Gaveston, and the reception that has been accorded his story must be peculiarly painful to him.”

(Letter to Editor of the *Scots Observer*, July 1890, quoted in Stuart Mason, *Art and Morality: A record of the discussion which followed the publication of “Dorian Gray”* (London: Frank Palmer, 1912), p.88)

"Let us sit down, Dorian," said Hallward, looking pale and pained. "Let us sit down. I will sit in the shadow, and you shall sit in the sunlight. Our lives are like that. Just answer me one question. Have you noticed in the picture something that you did not like? – something that probably at first did not strike you, but that revealed itself to you suddenly?

... "I see you did. Don't speak. Wait till you hear what I have to say. It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time. Perhaps, as Harry says, a really '*grande passion*' is the privilege of those who have nothing to do, and that is the use of the idle classes in a country. Well, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art. It was all wrong and foolish. It is all wrong and foolish still. Of course I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it; I did not understand it myself. One day I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you. It was to have been my masterpiece. It is my masterpiece. But, as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that the world would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much. Then it was that I resolved never to allow the picture to be exhibited...."

(*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol.III, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, The 1890 and 1891 texts, ed. Joseph Bristow (OUP: Oxford, 2005), chap.VII, pp.89-91)

"Mr Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering and somewhat broken voice; all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr Utterson regarded him. 'There must be something else,' said the perplexed gentleman. 'There *is* something more, if I could find a name for it. God bless me, the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic, shall we say? or can it be the old story of Dr Fell? or is it the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent? The last, I think; for O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend.'"

(Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. 1st published 1886. (OUP, 1987), p.19)

“Mr Tree is a wicked lord, staying in a country house, who has made up his mind to bugger one of the guests – a handsome young man of twenty. The handsome young man is delighted; when his mother enters, she sees his Lordship and recognises him as having copulated with her twenty years before, the result of which was – the handsome young man. She appeals to Lord Tree not to bugger his own son. He replies that it is additional reason for doing it (oh! he is a very *wicked Lord*)”
(Lytton Strachey on 1907 revival of *A Woman of No Importance*, quoted in Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.156)

“Several plays have been written lately that deal with the monstrous injustice of the social code of morality at the present time. It is indeed a burning shame that there should be one law for men and another law for women. I think that there should be no law for anybody.”

(Wilde interviewed about *A Woman of No Importance*, quoted in Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen, 1946), p.251)

Further Reading:

Possibly by Wilde and others – *Teleny: or, The Reverse of the Medal; a Physiological Romance* (Gay Men’s Press)

Ed Cohen, *A Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a genealogy of a discourse on male sexualities*

Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aesthetics*

Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*

Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*

Jeff Nunokawa, *Tame passions of Wilde : the styles of manageable desire*

Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: interpreting Oscar*

Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the queer moment*

MAUDLE ON THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION.

Maudle. "HOW CONSUMMATELY LOVELY YOUR SON IS, MRS. BROWN!"
Mrs. Brown (*a Philistine from the country*). "WHAT? HE'S A NICE, MANLY BOY, IF
YOU MEAN THAT, MR. MAUDLE. HE HAS JUST LEFT SCHOOL, YOU KNOW, AND
WISHES TO BE AN ARTIST."

Maudle. "WHY SHOULD HE BE AN ARTIST?"

Mrs. Brown. "WELL, HE MUST BE SOMETHING!"

Maudle. "WHY SHOULD HE BE ANYTHING? WHY NOT LET HIM REMAIN FOR EVER
CONTENT TO EXIST BEAUTIFULLY?" [Mrs. Brown determines that at all events
her Son shall not study Art under Maudle.

