Wilde Lectures
No.5 – The Plays

'What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities.'
('The Critic as Artist', *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* vol.4, *Criticism*, ed. Josephine Guy (OUP, 2007), 189.

'Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely the method by which we can multiply our personalities.

'Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray's opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead.'
(*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in *Complete Works,* vol.3, ed. Joseph Bristow (OUP, 2005), 287-8)

By revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammelling burden of moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become, as it were, the warrant for the contemplative life. It has shown us that we are never less free than when we try to act. It has hemmed us round with the nets of the hunter, and written upon the wall the prophecy of our doom. We may not watch it, for it is within us. We may not see it, save in a mirror that mirrors the soul. It is Nemesis without her mask. It is the last of the Fates, and the most terrible. It is the only one of the Gods whose real name we know.

And yet, while in the sphere of practical and external life it has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice, in the subjective sphere, where the soul is at work, it comes to us, this terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands, gifts of strange temperaments and subtle susceptibilities, gifts of wild ardours and chill moods of indifference, complex multiform gifts of thoughts that are at variance with each other, and passions that war against themselves. And so, it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy.
('The Critic as Artist', *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* Vol.IV: *Criticism,* ed. Josephine Guy (OUP, 2007), p.177)

'People, in that case, are less conscious of the horrible pressure that is being put on them, and so go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like petted animals, without ever realising that they are probably thinking other people's thoughts, living by other people's standards, wearing practically what one may call other people's second-hand clothes, and never being themselves for a single moment. '
('The Soul of Man under Socialism', *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* vol.4, *Criticism*, 244)

'…[A]nybody can act. Most people in England do nothing else. To be conventional is to be a comedian.'
(Letter to Editor of *Daily Telegraph*, 19 Feb 1892 –*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland (Fourth Estate: London, 2000), 519)

'Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole of their relationship. ... Life tends, in this fiction, toward ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements.' (Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), 4)

'Men don't understand what mothers are. I am no different from other women except in the wrong done me and the wrong I did, and my very heavy punishments and great disgrace. And yet, to bear you I had to look on death. […] . . . And you thought I spent too much of my time in going to Church, and in Church duties. But where else could I turn? God's house is the only house where sinners are made welcome, and you were always in my heart, Gerald, too much in my heart. For, though day after day, at morn or evensong, I have knelt in God's house, I have never repented of my sin. How could I repent of my sin when you, my love, were its fruit! Even now that you are bitter to me I cannot repent. I do not. You are more to me than innocence. I would rather be your mother—oh! much rather!—than have been always pure . . . Oh, don't you see? don't you understand? It is my dishonour that has made you so dear to me. It is my disgrace that has bound you so closely to me. It is the price I paid for you—the price of soul and body—that makes me love you as I do. Oh, don't ask me to do this horrible thing. Child of my shame, be still the child of my shame!' (Mrs Arbuthnot, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act IV)

'The story, which is presumably adapted from the *Family Herald*, is so full of high-class virtue and vice that the gallery is kept in a state of subdued enthusiasm, while the stalls are puzzling over the paradoxes. But it requires a pit to appreciate the depth of the dramatic talent, and a pit, unfortunately, is wanting at the Haymarket Theatre. If some accomplished dramatist - Mr G. R. Sims, for instance - would only straighten out Mr Wilde's English into robust intelligibility, an audience on the Surrey side might enjoy the familiar flavour of this genteel melodrama.' (*Lika Joko*, 13 (12 Jan. 1895), 244-5)

'What is your feeling towards your audiences - towards the public?'

'Which public? There are as many publics as there are personalities.'

'Are you nervous on the night that you are producing a new play?'

'Oh, no, I am exquisitely indifferent. My nervousness ends at the last dress rehearsal; I know then what effect my new play, as presented upon the stage, has produced upon me. My interest in the play ends there, and I feel curiously envious of the public - they have such wonderful fresh emotions in store for them.'

I laughed, but Mr Wilde rebuked me with a look of surprise.

'It is the public, not the play, that I desire to make a success,' he said.

… ‘We shall never have a real drama in England until it is recognised that a play is as personal and individual a form of self-expression as a poem or a picture.’
(‘A Talk with Mr Oscar Wilde’, by Gilbert Burgess, *The Sketch*, 8 (9 Jan 1895), 495)

‘Lady Chiltern is depressingly good all the time - good enough to drive an ordinary husband to drink from a sheer monopoly of the cardinal virtues….I shall always think kindly of a great public man in the future if I hear that he has been suddenly found to have been all along a masterpiece of moral error. I shall put his drawbacks down to the fact that he must have got an abnormally good wife.’
(*Pick-Me-Up*, XIII (19 Jan 1895), 246-7)

‘The great thing is not to be found out; indeed, the whole play is designed to fill us with joy over the escape of a sinner from the penalty of his sin through a trick with a diamond bracelet.’
(A. B. Walkeley, *The Speaker*, 11 (12 Jan 1895), 44)

‘a petticoat Torvald Helmer’ [description of Lady Chlltern] (*The Sketch,* 9 Jan 1895, 496)

‘In a certain sense Mr Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything; with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre. Such a feat scandalizes the Englishman, who can no more play wit and philosophy than he can with a football or a cricket bat. He works at both, and has the consolation, if he cannot make people laugh, of being the best cricketer and footballer in the world. Now it is the mark of the artist that he will not work. Just as people with social ambitions will practise the meanest economies in order to live expensively; so the artist will starve his way through incredible toil and discouragement sooner than go and earn a week’s honest wages. Mr Wilde, an arch-artist, is so colossally lazy that he trifles even with the work by which an artist escapes work. He distils the very quintessence, and gets as product plays which are so unapproachably playful that they are the delight of every playgoer with twopenn’orth of brains. The English critic, always protesting that the drama should not be didactic, and yet always complaining if the dramatist does not find sermons in stones and good in everything, will be conscious of a subtle and pervading levity in An Ideal Husband. [….] He is shocked, too, at the danger to the foundations of society when seriousness is publicly laughed at. And to complete the oddity of the situation, Mr Wilde, touching what he himself reverences, is absolutely the most sentimental dramatist of the day.

It is useless to describe a play which has no thesis: which is, in the purest integrity, a play and nothing less. The six worst epigrams are mere alms handed with a kind smile to the average suburban playgoer; the three best remain secrets between Mr Wilde and a few choice spirits. The modern note is struck in Sir Robert Chiltern’s assertion of the individuality and courage of his wrongdoing as against the mechanical stupidity of his stupidly good wife, and in his bitter criticism of a love that is only the

reward of merit. It is from the philosophy on which this scene is based that the most pregnant epigrams in the play have been condensed. Indeed, this is the only philosophy that ever has produced epigrams.'
(George Bernard Shaw, 'Two New Plays', *Saturday Review* (12 Jan 1895), 44-5)

"Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion. Sometimes the poor are praised for being thrifty. But to recommend thrift to the poor is both grotesque and insulting…. Man should not be ready to show that he can live like a badly fed animal. He should decline to live like that, and should either steal or go on the rates, which is considered by many to be a form of stealing. As for begging, it is safer to beg than to take, but it is finer to take than to beg. No: a poor man who is ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him. He is at any rate a healthy protest… I can quite understand a man accepting laws that protect private property, and admit of its accumulation, as long as he himself is able under those conditions to realise some form of beautiful and intellectual life. But it is almost incredible to me now a man whose life is marred and made hideous by such laws can possibly acquiesce in their continuance.
('The Soul of Man under Socialism', *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* vol.4, *Criticism*, 235)

Ladies and gentlemen, I have enjoyed this evening *immensely*. The actors have given us a *charming* rendering of a *delightful* play, and your appreciation has been *most* intelligent. I congratulate you on the *great* success of your performance, which persuades me that you think *almost* as highly of the play as I do myself.
(George Alexander's account of curtain speech to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Penguin: London, 1987), 346.)

<u>Further Reading</u>

Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*
Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*
Sos Eltis, *Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage, 1800-1930*
Regina Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*
Kate Hext and Alex Murray, *Oxford Handbook to Oscar Wilde*
Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion, from Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*
Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*
Kerry Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian sexuality, theatre and Oscar Wilde*
Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde*
Peter Raby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*
Frederick S. Roden (ed), *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*
Neil Sammels, *Wilde style: the plays and prose of Oscar Wilde*
George Sandalescu (ed), *Re-discovering Wilde*.
William Tydeman (ed), *Wilde: Comedies*
Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*
Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde*