

Queer Representations of Gender, Sexuality, Marriage and Family in  
Oscar Wilde's Comedies

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English Philology  
Master's Thesis  
May 2010

Tampereen yliopisto  
Kieli- ja käännöstieteiden laitos  
Englantilainen filologia

Anni Aalto: Queer Representations of Gender, Sexuality, Marriage and Family in Oscar Wilde's Comedies

Pro gradu -tutkielma, 80 sivua.  
Toukokuu 2010.

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Tarkastelen tutkielmassani sukupuoli- ja seksuaali-identiteetin sekä avioliiton ja perheen kuvauksia Oscar Wilden näytelmissä *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* ja *A Woman of No Importance*.

Näytelmät on kirjoitettu myöhäisviktorian ajan Englannissa, jonne ne myös sijoittuvat. Tuon ajan englantilainen yhteiskunta oli vielä hyvin patriarkaalinen. Naisten asema oli heikko, sillä mies toimi perheen päänä, ja hallitsi naista myös taloudellisesti. Kuitenkin 1900-luvun lopussa perinteisiä arvoja alettiin kyseenalaistaa. Feministit vaativat naisille mahdollisuutta käydä töissä ja kouluttautua, jotta avioliitto ei olisi naisille taloudellinen välttämättömyys. Vaatimukset naisten itsenäisyydestä herättivät pelkoja siitä, mitä tapahtuisi perheelle, jota pidettiin yhteiskunnan kulmakivenä. Sosiaalisten instituutioiden, kuten perheen ja avioliiton, katsottiin ylläpitävän viktorianiselle ajalle tärkeitä arvoja, ja niiden kautta säädeltiin muun muassa seksuaalista käyttäytymistä.

Argumenttini on, että näytelmissään Wilde kirjoittaa osin yhteiskuntansa perinteisten normien vastaisesti. Wilden kuvaukset vastustavat käsitystä luontaisista sukupuolirooleista, joiden mukaan nainen on miestä heikompi. Samoin näytelmien kuvaus seksuaali-identiteetistä on ajan käsityksen vastainen. 1900-luvun lopulla kehitetyissä seksologien teorioissa homoseksuaalisuutta pidetään synnynnäisenä ongelmana. Wilden kuvaukset seksuaalisuudesta sitä vastoin torjuvat synnynnäisyyden ajatuksen ja esittävät seksuaalisuuden kulttuurisena konstruktiona, jolla ei ole synnynnäistä ja muuttumatonta alkuperää.

Koska sukupuoliroolit, seksuaalisuus ja niiden ilmentymät perheessä ja avioliitossa olivat erittäin arkoja aiheita Wilden aikakaudella, hän ei kuitenkaan voinut kritisoida niitä suoraan. Tämän vuoksi Wilden kritiikki tapahtuikin usein huumorin, sanaleikkien ja monitulkintaisuuden varjolla.

Avainsanat: avioliitto, feminiinisyys, homoseksuaalisuus, maskuliinisuus, patriarkaalisuus, perhe, seksuaalisuus, seksuaali-identiteetti, sukupuoli, sukupuoliroolit, sukupuoli-identiteetti, viktorianinen aika

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of my thesis is to examine Wilde's representations of gender and sexuality including the institutions of marriage and family in four of Wilde's comedies. My argument is that in many places, these representations criticise the dominant norms of the late-Victorians.

Aspects of Wilde's subversive style have been examined by previous scholars, but in addition to continuing along the same lines, I also want to pay attention to the parts that do not question the normative. While my concentration will be on the representations of gender, sexuality, family and marriage in the plays that do transgress late-Victorian norms, there is also present a certain level of conformity. In addition to identifying and analysing subversive elements, I will also look at where Wilde does conform, examine how the different levels interact and why these conformist aspects were necessary in the first place.

Since I want to compare Wilde's representations to the 1890s norms I will be exploring the historical and cultural contexts of the plays throughout my thesis. I will start with a general overview of the fin de siècle period and examine the late-Victorian understandings of gender, sexuality, marriage and family each in their own chapter. For gender, I will discuss the notion of separate spheres and the sexual double standard, as well as the New Woman and the dandy. In chapter 4 I will detail how the late nineteenth century view of sexuality differs from ours and in chapter 5 I will examine the importance of marriage and family as institutions and why they were thought to be so important.

I have chosen four comedies as my material because I will be arguing that humour plays a part in Wilde's ability to criticise the society. Furthermore, Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has garnered the most critical attention of his works and I want to concentrate on something that has not been quite so thoroughly examined. To be sure, *The Importance of Being Earnest*<sup>1</sup> (1895) has also received a great deal of attention, but examining it together

<sup>1</sup> I am using the three-act version of the play.

with the comedies that have achieved less recognition – *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895) – I aim at finding new perspectives to it too.

My theoretical framework will be queer theory because it is interested in the non-normative, particularly in areas of sexuality and gender. Queer theory will also be helpful in exploring discursive use of power to create understandings, and in deconstructing normative conceptions and examining whose ends they serve.

The plays are all Society comedies and as such most of the characters are upper or upper middle class. The plots are not particularly complex, the appeal lays more in Wilde's exquisite witticisms that abound in all the plays. *The Importance of Being Earnest*<sup>2</sup> revolves around two dandies who spend their time avoiding unpleasant social obligations but meet two beautiful women and through several amusing complications end up engaged to be married by the end of the play. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*<sup>3</sup> the titular character believes her husband to be committing adultery with a disreputable woman, Mrs Erlynne. Her suspicions are eventually proved to be false, and while Lady Windermere never finds out, it is revealed to the audience that Mrs Erlynne is actually the mother that abandoned her as a child. *A Woman of No Importance*<sup>4</sup> also deals with a fallen woman. It details the coincidental reunion of Mrs Arbuthnot, her illegitimate son Gerald, and the seducer Lord Illingworth. The play ends on rather a more serious note than the others, with Lord Illingworth's offers of compensation being rejected, and mother, son and his fiancée planning to escape the country to avoid being shunned by the society. Finally, *An Ideal Husband*<sup>5</sup> has the husband of a seemingly perfect couple, the Chilterns, blackmailed by the ruthless Mrs Cheveley for having sold a government secret early in his career. Lady Chiltern is appalled as she considers her husband the very

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2 All further references to *The Importance of Being Earnest* will be given as *IBE*.

3 All further references to *Lady Windermere's Fan* will be given as *LWF*.

4 All further references to *A Woman of No Importance* will be given as *WNI*.

5 All further references to *An Ideal Husband* will be given as *IH*.

picture of respectability but their marriage is eventually saved and Mrs Cheveley leaves not having succeeded in her blackmail attempt.

As evidenced by the plot outlines, legitimacy, eligibility for marriage and society's expectations for married life are all prominent issues in the plays. Moreover, in the typical manner of comedies, the plays employ marriage as a plot device that neatly wraps up the story. All of the plays end in one or more betrothals. Gender roles and sexuality are also issues very much connected with marriage and family and in my analysis I will examine these connections as well as the specific characteristics of each.

The plays were written during a fairly short period taking place in the last decade of the nineteenth century. As I want to anchor my analysis in a historical perspective, I will next examine the *fin de siècle* and how the cultural and societal mood relates to Wilde and my analysis.

### **1.1 Fin de Siècle**

The term *fin de siècle* refers to the end of the century and is used in connection to the 1890s. The *fin de siècle* has been described in terms of “sexual anarchy” with new ideas rising and confronting old ones (Kaye 2007, 53). There were several sex scandals, one of which was the Cleveland street case that exposed a male brothel with ties reaching to the upper levels of British society (ibid. 60). Male aesthetes and The New Woman were prominent figures of the time who questioned the definitions of femininity and masculinity (Showalter 1992, 3). The already declining birthrates (Kaye 2007, 53) compounded with the calls for women's emancipation caused fears that the family, which was considered an indicator of the strength of the nation, was heading towards a breakdown (Showalter 1992, 3).

Controversy over matters of gender and sexuality was prominent at the time. Notably, in the period “the arts are used viscerally to debate contemporary concerns . . . [and] art itself

becomes matter of controversy” (Marshall 2007, 5). When it came to controversial art, the Aesthetic and Decadent movements were at the centre of the debate. As Dennis Denisoff puts it, “[b]y the century's end, people were using the terms 'decadent' and 'aestheticist' to condemn almost any artwork that displayed innovations in aesthetic philosophy, subject or style” (2007, 31). Aestheticism is often defined by the phrase “art for arts sake” (ibid. 34). In this view, art “has no responsibility except to beauty” (ibid.) and as such is separate from any moral considerations.

Decadence rejected western culture's view that a clear distinction could be drawn between growth which was seen as positive, and decay which was seen as negative (ibid. 32-33). Rather, the movement refused “to allow society to pretend that it can know one objective reality” (ibid. 33), and challenged what it deemed false normativisations like “the fundamental importance of the middle-class family mode” (ibid. 32) and the relationship of beauty and morality. Since traditional sources of comfort were rejected, the consequence was to live in the moment constantly seeking “the new, the rare, the strange and the refined” (Showalter 1992, 170). In essence, the Decadents believed in “the superiority of art over nature, both biological nature and supposedly natural standards of sexual behavior” (Nelson 2000, ix). In popular consciousness, however, the two movements were oversimplistically associated with “aesthetic idealism, sexual perversity and degeneracy” (Denisoff 2007, 42).

## **1.2 Wilde's Aesthetic**

Though Wilde has been widely associated both with Aestheticism and Decadence, it can be argued that he did not strictly conform to the doctrine of art for art's sake (Beckson & Fong 1997, 57). Beckson and Fong argue that while the idea of art as moral guidance was dismissed by Wilde, he still held the belief that art is shaped by one's morals (ibid. 57). Examining Wilde's critical essays, Lawrence Danson asserts that “Wilde's critic as artist

inhabits a realm where words construct the world, and society is a text to be rewritten” (1997, 81). If Wilde did not quite adhere to the aesthetic ideal of art that's only function is beauty, he seemed more faithful to the Decadents' rejection of objective reality:

Wilde saw that the 'self' was not inevitably indubitable, rational and progressive, but was socially constructed. It was constructed through language, which was why he waged a life-long subversion of conventional speech patterns. It was constructed through social institutions, which was why the school, marriage and the family, medicine, the law and the prison – what Althusser called the ideological and repressive state apparatuses – so exercised his critical faculties. (Gagnier 1997, 20)

Jonathan Dollimore makes a similar argument about what he terms Wilde's transgressive aesthetic. Wilde writes in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” that “the only thing one really knows about human nature is that it changes” (1950, 265). That is to say, he challenges the notion of unchangeable nature, which is why he maintains that anyone attempting to mystify the social as natural is in fact posing (Dollimore 1991, 10). In the same essay, Wilde also attacks public opinion on Art:

A fresh mode of Beauty is absolutely distasteful to them, and whenever it appears they get so angry and bewildered that they always use two stupid expressions—one is that the work of art is grossly *unintelligible*; the other, that the work is grossly *immoral*. (1950, 250)

These labels are a way of policing cultural difference or transgression, anything that seems unconventional to the norm (Dollimore 1991, 8). Dollimore argues that Wilde's aesthetic is characterised by transgression and anti-essentialism, to the point of seeing him engaged in “proto-decentring” (ibid. 25). Certainly Wilde's denial of an unchangeable essential nature is consistent with postmodernism, which will be examined in more detail in the next chapter. Additionally, chapter 6 will explore how transgression, Wilde's literary works and his aesthetic beliefs factored into the trials and Wilde's eventual downfall.



## **2. Theory**

My theoretical basis for this thesis comes from queer theory. It is a fairly recent theoretical offshoot, one greatly influenced by postmodernist theory, particularly deconstruction, as well as feminist theory. That is why I will briefly summarise the two before going into the intricacies of queer theory.

### **2.1 Feminist Theory**

I will only be presenting here the parts of feminist theory that are relevant to my thesis and the development of queer theory. Feminist criticism is not in itself a unified field of thought, but one that has internal conflicts and differences of opinion and I am in no way aiming at giving a comprehensive overview of the entirety of feminist theory.

Feminist literary criticism is a product of the women's movement of the 1960s (Barry 2002, 121). Representations of women in literature were seen to affect people's view on what was acceptable and what not: for instance, in most nineteenth century literature, women aspire to marry, not to support themselves by working (ibid. 122). Therefore, early feminist criticism sought to expose the underlying patriarchal mindset that created and perpetuated gender inequality (ibid.). Inherent in this thinking was a distinction between "female", which was biologically determined and "feminine", which was a social construction (ibid. 130).

From this early form feminist criticism later evolved to include psychoanalysis which further emphasised the important distinction between sex and gender (Barry 2002, 130). The logical conclusion from defining gender as acquired rather than natural is its malleability: if gender is not inherent but a cultural construct, it must be changeable (ibid. 131). Feminist criticism tends to concentrate on female gender roles, but in addition to those, I want to use the same basic principles of the sex/gender distinction to also examine male gender roles. If femininity is a social construction, it follows that masculinity must equally be one.

## 2.2 Postmodernism and Deconstruction

Postmodernism can be understood in terms of a rejection of the values of modernist thought. According to Wilchins, modernism holds an unquestioned faith in progress, subscribing to the narrative that as a society we keep progressing, guided by knowledge and science (2004, 33-34). In this view, if we are to achieve a better understanding of ourselves, including our gender or sexuality, it must be done through more and better knowledge on the subject (ibid. 34). The influence of this kind of thinking can be seen in the late nineteenth century medicalisation of homosexuality, which I will be examining in 4.2.

Postmodernism takes a different approach: it rejects the modernist notion that progress can be simply achieved through more knowledge. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick criticises the assumptions that a transhistorical essence of homosexuality exists and is knowable, and that historically our understandings of same-sex relations have become more accurate and moved towards a truer understanding of that essence (1991, 44). What Sedgwick suggests instead is that different understandings, including ours, are so dependent on historical and cultural contexts, that not only is there no essence to be known, but these constructions themselves constitute sexuality rather than operating as a transparent window into its supposed essence (1991, 44). This is precisely the point Foucault makes in *History of Sexuality*:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover . It is the name that can be given to a historical construct. (1978, 105)

Rather than accepting that there are such things as essential truths, postmodernism regards knowledge as inseparable from language and language as far from neutral (Wilchins 2004, 34-35). Paraphrasing Derrida, Wilchins argues that:

[L]anguage has some built-in problems. For one thing, it tends to name whatever is common and shared among members of a speech community. Which is another way of saying that language favours *Same*, and what is unique, unrepeatable, and private tends to go unnamed. (ibid. 35)

She goes on to explain, following Saussure, that words can take their meaning through a process of exclusion (ibid. 36). Saussure highlighted the relational meaning of words: the meaning of a word cannot be defined in isolation because the meaning depends on its relationship to other words (Barry 2002, 42). In the case of paired opposites like *man* and *woman*, the meanings are formed by excluding each other: we form the meaning of *woman* by separating it from everything deemed non-*woman* and vice versa for *man*, thus forming a binary opposition (Wilchins 2004, 36). What this results in are idealised concepts of masculinity and femininity that ignore anything queer (that is to say, non-normative). In addition, because neither side of the binary has a “true” meaning but both are dependent on the other, their meanings are always unstable, which means that their boundaries are constantly having to be reclaimed (ibid.). Not all words and meanings form binaries like man/woman, but there is definitely a tendency to view gender as well as sexuality in terms of binary opposites.

To recapitulate, queer theory rejects the essentialist view of gender and sexuality. Rather, it views them as discursively constructed and understood in culturally and historically specific ways (Sullivan 2003, 1). What is meant by discourse is a kind of social discussion that is used for meaning-making purposes: “Discourse is a set of rules for producing knowledge that determines what kinds of intelligible statements can be circulated within a given economy of thought” (Wilchins 2004, 59-60). Foucault argues that while there is a tendency to think about sexuality historically in terms of repression and censorship, in fact there has been an incitement to talk about sex within certain regulated discourses (1978, 23-24). One example is the medicalised discourse that appeared in the late nineteenth century, in

which specialised vocabulary like “invert”, professional procedures and methods of documentation were used to create a highly authoritative discourse (Wilchins 2004, 60-61). According to Foucault, rather than examining sexuality, discourse is involved in “the very production of sexuality” (1978, 105). Wilchins asserts that rather than giving a voice to the marginalised, these kinds of discourses speak for them and about them: “they are objects of discourse, not participants *in it*” (2004, 61).

People have an inclination to assume that language accurately reflects reality. Due to the flawed properties of language we have just examined, it follows that people tend to view sexuality and gender in terms of simplistic binaries such as man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual (Wilchins 2004, 40). Most binaries appear to be extensions of the pairing “good/bad”, in which one side is the defining one and the other is derived from whatever is left over (*ibid.*). The defining one of the two (in this case man, or heterosexual) is considered natural, unmarked and self-evident (Jagose 1997, 16-17). As I will be explaining later in more detail, the concept of the homosexual as a type of person only came into existence in the late nineteenth century. However, even before that sexual behaviour was divided in a binary-like fashion. The natural, unquestioned form was reproductive heterosexuality and the other side consisted of sodomy which represented a range of sexual acts that did not aim at reproduction (Sullivan 2003, 3).

Deconstruction is a way of revealing these hierarchies as false and countering the privileged status afforded to one side of the binary (Barry 2002, 143). Deconstruction demonstrates that since each term is constructed and understood in relation to one another, the distinction between them is not absolute (*ibid.*). In fact, the privilege can be shifted from one side to the other (*ibid.*).

Sullivan notes that it is important to distinguish deconstruction from destruction (2003, 50). The objective of deconstruction is not to abolish the fallacious binary oppositions or

reverse the terms permanently (ibid. 50-51). “Promoting” the derivative terms to the position of the defining one would be just as false; both are equally constructed and neither is representative of truth (ibid. 51). The objective is to expose the inherent instability of the binary opposition in order to analyse the cultural and historical aspects of how these constructions developed and what influence they have had (ibid.).

### 2.3 Queer Theory

Queer theory can be defined in a number of ways. Thus far I have been describing it in terms of the influence of earlier thinking. Like postmodernism, queer theory is critical of universal truths and uses deconstruction to counter them. Feminist theory's attention to gender has also been influential, though queer theory aims to improve on the feminist tendency to focus on white middle-class heterosexual women (Barry 2002, 140). Sexuality is often identified as the focus point of queer theory, not incorrectly, as it does have roots in Gay and Lesbian studies (Sullivan 2003, vi). However, issues of sexuality and gender are in fact inseparable in the way we nowadays classify sexuality:

[T]he gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation.” (Sedgwick 1991, 8)

That is to say, sexuality as we understand it is intertwined with gender, because categories like homosexual and heterosexual depend on dimensions of gender for their definitions.

Sullivan makes a similar point on the inclusivity of queer theory in emphasising its interdisciplinary character that is not just concerned with sexuality but widening its critique to “normalising ways of knowing and being that may not always initially be evident as sex-specific” (2003, vi). Sullivan uses queer theory to examine things like community and popular culture and along with Riki Wilchins, race. This kind of inclusive attitude towards criticism seems to promote the idea of the term *queer* not just as a new label for the gay, the

transgendered, the bisexuals and so on, but as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Sullivan 2003, 43). However, as Sullivan points out, the problem with such an umbrella term is that it tends to create a homogenised image and as such erases important differences, in a similar effect to what feminist theory was criticised for doing (ibid. 44).

In my thesis I will be utilising queer theory as a deconstructive strategy with the aim to “denaturalise heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality . . . and the relations between them” (Sullivan 2003, 81). I have already outlined what deconstruction is, but what is its purpose in the context of queer theory? There seems to be no clear consensus among queer theorists as to what deconstruction actually achieves.

Jonathan Dollimore points out that inverting the binary is a necessary step but doing so does not magically neutralise its effect in history or in the here and now (1991, 65). Sedgwick concurs that the thinking that “once a paradigm is blurred . . . meaning and sex become the objects of free play” (1991, 10) is premature to say the least. In her view deconstruction, though necessary, is not sufficient to disable these binaries, rather deconstruction reveals them as particularly powerful sites of manipulation (Sedgwick 1991, 10). It seems that the point of deconstructing binaries, of exposing the presumed naturalness of the preferred side is to enable us to

acknowledge the constructedness of meaning and identity and thus begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and of living . . . and enables us to ask . . . who it is that benefits from the cultural logic that (re)produces these kinds of divisions. (Sullivan 2003, 51)

This breaking of old thought patterns cannot guarantee change, but certainly without it, breaking out of the dominant way of thinking would not be possible at all.

Looking at the historical perspective to binaries and deconstruction, Wilde himself is an example of the possible consequences. As Dollimore argues, in his writing and his actions

Wilde was seen to be subverting the values of his time (1991, 67). His disruption of the dominant ideology caused a counterreaction that eventually landed him in gaol. From our twenty-first century point of view, deconstruction can be a less serious affair and it is easy to forget the very different reality Wilde was faced with, which is why Dollimore emphasises the necessity of not discussing theory independently of history (1991, 25-26).

### **3. Gender**

In this section I will first examine the perceptions and assumptions concerning gender in the late-Victorian period. I am specifically interested in what kinds of gender roles were acceptable or even available during that time. Having done this I can compare the representations in the plays with the norms of the time. Of particular interest are the New Woman and the dandy as two figures that are prominent in Wilde plays.

#### **3.1 Historical Context**

To understand the late-Victorian way of thinking about gender, we must first consider some of the underlying assumptions of the time. According to Jennifer Terry there were three key assumptions: that only two sexes exist, that the two are fundamentally different and mutually exclusive, and that men are superior to women (1999, 33). The difference between men and women was seen as a biologically determined fact that ordained which separate sphere the person would occupy (Nelson 2000, ix). Women's defining role was that of reproduction. Intelligence and the ability to bear children were considered mutually exclusive for women (Terry 1999, 33). Because propagating the line was essential, women were ruled out from the male domain of reason and the public sphere which required its use (ibid.).

Since women were considered inferior to men, it is fitting that self-sacrifice for the sake of husband or child was the ultimate virtue of the ideal woman (Dyhouse 1978, 174). While men were encouraged to actively work and rely on themselves, women were confined to the dependent role and expected to stay in the sanctuary of the home (ibid. 175). It was only in spirituality that a woman could be considered superior to a man (Showalter 1992, 21).

Defining the roles of the different genders is not quite this simple, though. As Elaine Showalter points out, in the 1880s and 1890s the ideology governing gender was in turmoil and the traditional way of thinking was being challenged (ibid. 2, 7). The woman unable to



marry, whom Showalter dubs the Odd woman, began to unsettle the established system (ibid. 19). Unable to fulfill her role as a wife or a mother, in order to support herself the Odd woman was forced to seek employment thus invading the sphere of men (ibid.). Feminists of the day argued that the excess of unmarried women proved that limiting women to a domestic role was an unsuccessful social policy (ibid. 20). In terms of sexuality, the Odd woman was still repressed: even though the medical discourse was beginning to recognise female sexual desire, having been taught that spirituality and passionlessness were womanly virtues, Victorian women and feminist thinkers alike found the notion of celibacy as dangerous a difficult view to accept (ibid. 21-22).

The New Woman was the next step forward from the Odd woman. The term was coined in 1894 though even previously to that issues regarding women's rights and position had been discussed in the press (Ledger 2007, 154). Within months of being coined, the term had become sufficiently well-known for a stereotypical image to form:

She was educated at Girton College, Cambridge, rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress, and smoked in public: in short, she rejected the traditional role for women and demanded emancipation. (Nelson 2000 ix)

The opponents of the cause characterised the New Woman in rather less flattering terms, promoting a stereotype that she was “simultaneously over-sexed and mannish, over-educated and asinine” (Ledger 2007, 153-154). As mentioned, fertility and intellect were linked and noncoinciding characteristics in women. Since the New Woman was intent on developing her brain, her ability to reproduce would be compromised, which meant she was a danger to the social order that required procreation to propagate itself (Showalter 1992, 40). It was not just the right to education that the New Women wanted, they challenged the ideology that determined separate spheres for men and women and demanded that women be allowed all the same opportunities as men (Nelson 2000 ix). Economic self-sufficiency was the main

objective and attaining that goal required that women have the right to “education, the ability to pursue their own interests, and the right to occupations” (ibid. x). Without these opportunities most women would have to marry out of economic necessity (ibid.).

The New Woman was discussed in the press but fictional writing was of great importance as well. Margaret Oliphant's 1896 article titled “The Anti-Marriage League” laments the attack on marriage by the likes of Thomas Hardy, who had just published *Jude the Obscure* which includes characters who share some views with the New Women. While the New Women were associated with an antipathy towards marriage, most New Woman writers were not categorically opposed to it, rather, they wished marriage to be freely chosen, not imposed by necessity (Nelson x-xi).

The topic of sexuality in regards to the New Woman was a controversial one for which there was no clear consensus. The issue was the double standard which expected sexual purity of women but allowed sexual freedom to men (Nelson 2000 xi). Sally Ledger details the two different responses to this problem: those emphasising social purity saw that both sexes should be chaste, while the sexual liberationists argued that sexual equality should be brought about by allowing women the same sexual freedoms as men (2007, 153).

### **3.2 New Women**

I would not fully label any of the characters in the plays as New Women, but there are certainly ones that embody some of the characteristics attributed to New Women. For instance, Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*. She encourages women in her society to find “a serious purpose in life” (IH 1), namely education. She takes part in the Woman’s Liberal Association where they discuss things like “Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours’ Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise” (IH 31) and is “a great champion of the Higher Education of Women” (IH 38).

While she promotes the feminist values associated with New Women, in her own life Lady Chiltern is no embodiment of the New Woman ideal. She is relatively independent, but it is through her marriage that she can afford to be so. Her own political aspirations are at least partly enabled by her husband's status as the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. For instance, Lady Chiltern notes that her husband's name "was received with loud applause" (*IH* 31) at the Woman's Liberal Association, which indicates that in their eyes Sir Robert holds a certain prestige which she undoubtedly benefits from as well.

More importantly, there is a very important moment for her character at the end of the play that makes it difficult to label her a New Woman. All through the play she is established as being "a woman of the very highest principles" (*IH* 17) who holds her husband to those very same standards. That is to say, she considers them equals. Suddenly, at the very end of the play her views are quite changed:

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon the lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learned this and much else from Lord Goring. (*IH* 75)

She is actually repeating Lord Goring's lines word for word, as if to emphasise that it is not her own thoughts she is expressing but ones imposed on her by the male society. Though she says she has "just learned this" (*IH* 75), I doubt she could have been unaware that such thinking was quite common. However, the change comes in her willingness to apply such thinking to her own life. In her act of self-sacrifice Lady Chiltern compromises her own views and allows herself to be pushed into the traditional position for women.

The change in Lady Chiltern is so pronounced and abrupt that it seems quite unbelievable. As Peter Raby points out, once Lady Chiltern relents, order is restored to society (1997b, 157). However, rather than delivering a sense of closure, the contrast between Lady Chiltern's mechanical speech and her previous actions underline the flaws in the

ideology that demands such sacrifices of her. As Joseph Bristow points out, the ending of *An Ideal Husband* is an example of Wilde's tactic of subverting the Victorian systems of value from within (1994, n.p.). On the surface the situation is resolved and order restored, but the question is raised: at what price?

Another character with elements of the New Woman in her is Mrs Cheveley, also in *An Ideal Husband*. She has a position at the Viennese Embassy and is intelligent and on the whole very self-sufficient. She professes to prefer "books . . . in yellow covers" (*IH* 39), a reference to *The Yellow Book*, a journal produced by artists and writers of the Decadent and Aestheticism movements which were associated with the New Woman (Denisoff 2007, 31). Mrs Cheveley does not care about the London season because "it is too matrimonial" (*IH* 7); instead she is in town for business. Unlike Lady Chiltern, she is actually unmarried and quite uninterested in marriage other than as a business arrangement. She attempts to barter marriage with Lord Goring in exchange for the letter she is using to blackmail Sir Robert. Her attitude underlines the economic significance of marriage, particularly for women.

While Mrs Cheveley's self-sufficiency and fearlessness could be regarded as positive characteristics, she is, nonetheless, the villain of the piece and as such not very likeable. She is a formidable opponent to Lord Goring and Sir Robert but it seems that the trade-off for her intelligence and independence is being morally reproachable. Much like Lady Chiltern must adopt a patriarchal way of thinking in the end, Mrs Cheveley must be the villain so she can be dismissed as morally reprehensible and her female intelligence fails to register as a threat to the male-dominated status quo.

The New Woman was often negatively associated with masculinity precisely because she sought to intrude in the male sphere of life. Opponents of the New Woman blamed education for the masculinisation of women which was claimed to cause infertility (Ledger 2007, 156). There is a passing mention in *An Ideal Husband* to the Chilterns being childless,

which may or may not be a reference to the critical ideas on the New Woman. Certainly there is no specific mention to suggest that Lady Chiltern would be barren. If we examine the way the two characters I have identified as having characteristics of the New Woman are represented in the play in terms of masculinity and femininity, I would argue that contrary to the expectation they are feminine.

Lady Chiltern is described as “a woman of grave Greek beauty” (*IH* 1) and Mrs Cheveley is said to look “rather like an orchid” and “a work of art” with “extremely graceful” (*IH* 3) movements. Even though the two of them intrude into the traditional male sphere of the public, business, education and intelligence, they are still very much feminine in appearance and manners. That these characters appropriate traditionally male characteristics yet still remain feminine rejects the separate spheres view that suggests there is an intrinsic link between, say, masculinity and intelligence, or any of the other traits.

### **3.3. The Angel-wife**

Lady Windermere is another female character who struggles with what society expects from her as a woman. She comes to believe that her husband is cheating on her with a rather disreputable woman and goes back and forth in her decision whether to leave him or to stay. It is established at the beginning of the play that she subscribes to the notion of the self-sacrificing angel-wife. According to her “life is a sacrament” and life's “purification is sacrifice” (*LWF* 3). When Lord Darlington puts to her a hypothetical situation in which the husband is keeping the company of a woman “of more than doubtful character” (*LWF* 4) and asks her whether the wife should have the right to console herself, she responds with: “[b]ecause the husband is vile – should the wife be vile also?” (*LWF* 4). This could be taken as an endorsement of the sexual double standard, but actually I think she believes both sexes should remain chaste, she just does not have the means to make her husband comply to such

expectations. In any case, she definitely does not subscribe to the feminist sexual liberationist view that women should be afforded the same sexual license as men.

Once Lady Windermere finds out that the hypothetical case actually concerns her own marriage, that her husband has been giving large sums of money to Mrs Erlynne, and he insists on inviting her to Lady Windermere's birthday ball, her opinion is altered. Lord Darlington appeals to her self-proclaimed high principles and argues that "[i]t is wrong for a wife to remain with a man who so dishonours her." (*LWF* 23). After her initial refusal, Lady Windermere decides to break the bondage of her marriage and go to Lord Darlington who has declared his love and promised to marry her. Even though in leaving what she believes to be a cheating husband Lady Windermere breaks out of the role of the all-enduring wife, she is hardly an independent operator. In fact, she is merely switching from dependence on one man to dependence on another.

Lady Windermere does realise that her options are extremely limited: "which is the worst, I wonder, to be at the mercy of a man who loves one, or the wife of a man who in one's own house dishonours one?" (*LWF* 29). As a woman, she has no real prospects outside marriage and is beginning to comprehend the limitations of the society she lives in. Unable to choose one of two bad options, returning to her husband to "serve as a blind" (*LWF* 30) for his relationship with another woman or leaving the country dependent on yet another man, Lady Windermere fruitlessly argues with herself on how to proceed:

I am cold – cold as a loveless thing . . . We make gods of men, and they leave us. Others make brutes of them and they fawn and are faithful. How hideous life is! . . . Oh! It was mad of me to come here, horribly mad . . . Will he love me always, this man to whom I am giving my life? What do I bring him? . . . I must go back—no; I can't go back . . . I will go with him – I have no choice. . . . No, no! I will go back, let Arthur do with me what he pleases. (*LWF* 29)

Lady Windermere's anguished soliloquy stands in sharp contrast with the more trivial and amusing parts of the play. It clearly captures her despair and impotence at being caught in

circumstances she is helpless to change. It is only when Mrs Erlynne pleads with her not to abandon her child that Lady Windermere makes up her mind and agrees to go back to her family. Lady Windermere's attempts of escaping the angel-wife role have been in vain, she is returned to her place by Mrs Erlynne who entreats her to stay even "if he had a thousand loves . . . if he was harsh to [her] . . . if he ill-treated [her] . . . if he abandoned [her]" (*LWF* 33). In essence, she is to be completely at her husband's mercy.

In the end Lady Windermere is returned to her husband. It turns out that Lord Windermere has not, in fact, been having an affair and has actually been acting strangely in order to protect her. Seemingly another perfectly happy ending where complications are resolved and order restored. However, while the Windermeres may have a perfectly happy married life, it nonetheless remains that Lord Windermere holds all the power in the relationship. It is possible that they will live happily, but that occurrence would be entirely dependent on his good will and treatment of her. The happy ending is seriously undermined by the fact that had not events lined up as they did, Lady Windermere would have ended up just another forgotten fallen woman. As Raby points out, Lady Windermere has been exposed to a new morality and no longer holds such unrealistic ideals as she used to (1997b, 147). However, her schooling in the ways of the world is of no practical use to her, since she is still as constricted by the rules of society as she ever was.

*A Woman of No Importance* also contains a clash of differing values. The American puritan Hester represents the simple and the pure while the English leisure class society seems mainly based on appearances and affectation. Witty jibes at America are traded back and forth between the English, but Hester's response to Mrs Allonby's thoughts on an ideal man are rather more scathing. She declares the English society to be "shallow, selfish, foolish" (*WNI* 49), that they are "unjust to women in England. And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man, you will always be unjust" (*WNI* 50). She is clearly against

the angel-wife ideal that is based on the double standard. The hypocrisy of the English society is pitted against the extreme puritanical view on sin and purity and the former comes across as the more ridiculous of the two. Lady Hunstanton's reply to Hester's diatribe is that "there was a great deal of truth, I dare say, in what you said and you looked very pretty while you said it, which is much more important" (*WNI* 51). This is not to say that Hester's morals are touted as superior, either. Their discrepancy with reality is revealed in the end when Hester encounters an actual fallen woman whom she quite admires. The validity of both extremes is undermined: the Society's values because Hester explicitly points out its flaws and the puritan values because Hester herself renounces them.

### 3.4 The Fallen Woman

The fallen woman and particularly society's attitude towards and treatment of her are issues raised in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*. Mrs Erlynne left her husband in favour of a lover who in turn abandoned her. Years later as she is attempting a return to society, she is viewed as a wicked woman who is "absolutely inadmissible to society" (*LWF* 7), even though nothing specific of her past is known. Mrs Arbuthnot had a child by Lord Illingworth but he refused to marry her and legitimise their son, forcing her to live a life of "suffering and . . . shame" (*WNI* 63). When we encounter her in the play, her son is grown, she has changed her name, and voluntarily stays relatively "out of the world" (*WNI* 53). By hiding out and concealing her past she has managed to gain a reputation of respectability and is considered "the sweetest of women" (*WNI* 27).

Both plays use a similar method to show the error in the treatment of fallen women. First, it is emphasised that the amount of punishment and suffering the women have had to go through is disproportionate to their infraction. "Mrs. Erlynne was once honored, loved, respected . . . well born . . . had a position" (*LWF* 11), but she lost all that. Mrs Arbuthnot's



crime “spoiled [her] youth . . . ruined [her] life . . . tainted every moment of [her] days” (*WNI* 63). For not adhering to the governing structures that maintain the rules of appropriate behaviour for women, they are shut out of society. They are labelled as deviant and cast out.

Notably, the crime these women have committed is never directly spoken of. As Hester talks about Lord Henry, she brings up “those whose ruin is due to him” (*WNI* 50). “They are outcasts. They are nameless. If you met them in the street you would turn your head away” (*ibid.*). Much like “the love that dare not speak its name” that was an euphemism for male same-sex love, the concept of a nameless or outcast woman was spoken of through euphemisms that are instantly recognisable and also convey a sense that the crime committed is so hideous it can only be mentioned indirectly.

Foucault argues that rather than being a symptom of the repression, this kind of discourse is actually a channel of control and power (1978, 10-11). For the purposes of the Society, the imperative is to establish themselves as the advantaged by making a separation from others. There is nothing inherently wrong with the others, rather their status as the stained margin is itself created by discourse. After all, privilege loses its meaning if no one is excluded from it. This is why a patriarchal society benefits from marginalising women. However, precisely because the two are defined in terms of each other, it is clear that the distinction between them is not natural but artificial. Because there is no inherent basis for it, the distinction is susceptible to questioning and must constantly be reinforced.

An example of this kind of discursive reinforcing of power takes places in *Lady Windereme's Fan*. Sedgwick discusses how the ruin of a woman can function as an opportunity for homosocial bonding between men that enables the readjustment of power relations (1985, 76). In *LWF* all the main male characters are convened at Lord Darlington's residence, where one of the main points of discussion is Mrs Erlynne. It has previously been established that she is thought to have a disreputable past but none of the characters actually

have any factual information of her alleged crimes. As observed by Lord Windermere: “You don't really know anything about her, and you're always talking scandal against her” (*LWF*

36). Lord Augustus is quite taken with Mrs Erlynne and attempts to rather half-heartedly defend her:

Lord Augustus: I prefer women with a past. They're always so demmed amusing to talk to.

Cecil Graham: Well, you'll have lots of topics of conversation with *her*, Tuppy.

Lord Augustus: You're getting annoying, dear boy; you're getting demmed annoying. (*LWF* 35)

Despite his claim that he prefers women with a past, Lord Augustus is clearly bothered by the gossip.

Another exchange regarding Mrs Erlynne indicates that this is not the first time they are discussing Mrs Erlynne's past:

Cecil Graham: But I though, Tuppy, you were never going to see her again. Yes, you told me so yesterday evening at the club. You said you'd heard – (*Whispering to him.*)

Lord Augustus: Oh, she's explained that.

Cecil Graham: And the Wiesbaden affair?

Lord Augustus: She's explained that, too.

Dumby: And her income, Tuppy? Has she explained that?

Lord Augustus (*in a very serious voice*): She's going to explain that to-morrow. (*LWF* 35)

Finally, the end of the act reveals Mrs Erlynne hiding in Lord Darlington's rooms, a compromising place for a lone unmarried woman, particularly late at night, which leads to the unspoken conclusion that she must be Lord Darlington's mistress. Lord Windermere, Lord Darlington and Lord Augustus react respectively with contempt, anger or by turning away, but more interestingly the two men who have no personal stake in Mrs Erlynne's behaviour are said to “smile at each other” (*LWF* 40) in a flagrant show of mutual delight at Mrs Erlynne's disgrace.

Though Lord Augustus protests that the other men's disparaging comments on Mrs Erlynne, the interesting thing is not whether they “want to make her out a wicked woman” (*LWF* 35) or not, it is the unquestioned supposition that they have the right and the power to make her out as anything at all. Whether their opinion is that Mrs Erlynne is a wicked woman or that she is not, all of them operate under the given assumption that they have the power to determine her worth one way or another, in effect exercising a very patriarchal kind of power on her.

Another situation, a recurring one in both *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, is that the women deemed deviant by the society are made to interact with highly moral women, who think both men and women should be chaste and any transgressions should be punished. I have already mentioned that Mrs Erlynne changes the views of Lady Windermere who originally thinks that “women who have committed what the world calls a fault . . . should never be forgiven” (*LWF* 4). By the end of the play Lady Windermere is quite convinced that Mrs Erlynne is “a very good woman” (*LWF* 52), even though she is aware of Mrs Erlynne's questionable past.

Mrs Arbuthnot has a similar affect on Hester Worsley. Discussing the treatment fallen women receive, she proclaims: “I don't complain of their punishment. Let all women who have sinned be punished” (*WNI* 50). Not satisfied with both women and men being equally punished, Hester thinks that “it is right that the sins of the parents should be visited on the children” because “it is God's law” (*WNI* 86). Unaware of Mrs Arbuthnot's past, Hester holds her in very high regard. In comparison to the other women whose superficial and hypocritical views Hester has denounced, she feels that Mrs Arbuthnot has “a sense of what is good and pure in life” (*WNI* 85). Eventually Hester finds out that Mrs Arbuthnot is a fallen woman and Hester's beloved Gerald is an illegitimate child. Faced with reconciling her moral convictions with her respect and admiration for the Arbuthnots, she openly admits that her convictions

were wrong. When Gerald insists that Mrs Arbuthnot should marry his father, Hester comes to her defense: “That would be real dishonour, the first you have ever known” (*WNI* 107).

Hester adopts Mrs Arbuthnot as a kind of mother-figure and suggest all three of them leave for “better, wiser, and less unjust lands” (*WNI* 107).

Though both Hester and Lady Windermere come to the conclusion that it is unfair to judge a woman based on one mistake, it should be taken into consideration that the way Mrs Erlynne and Mrs Arbuthnot are able to regain their respect is through self-sacrifice and martyrdom. As Hester declares, in Mrs Arbuthnot “all womanhood is martyred” (*WNI* 107). Similarly Mrs Erlynne attains Lady Windermere's good opinion only by sacrificing herself and accepting public disgrace in her stead. That is to say, the only way for Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Erlynne to regain respectability is to conform to the same rules that caused them to be cast out in the first place.

In Wilde's comedies it is not just the women who are subjected to the moral code that produces fallen women. Sir Robert Chiltern's crime in *An Ideal Husband* is actually analogous to the offenses of the fallen women I have already examined. His crime does not pertain to sexuality; instead he sold a cabinet secret to a Baron Arnheim. However, there are striking similarities. The way Sir Robert describes it, Baron Arnheim seduced him, the difference is, with him the incentive was power rather than love:

With that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvellous of all gospels, the gospel of gold. I think he saw the effect he produced on me, for some days afterwards he wrote and asked me to come and see him. . . . I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale, curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery . . . made me wonder at the strange loveliness of the luxury in which he lived.  
(*IH* 26)

The way Sir Robert recounts it, the tale has a definite sensual overtone with notable emphasis on Baron Arnheim's voice and appearance. We never get to hear how Mrs Erlynne or Mrs

Arbuthnot were seduced but it is easy to imagine it happening in a similar scenario. Like Sir Robert, both women must have been aware of the possible consequences so the incentive has to have been powerfully seductive.

The similarities do not end there: like the two women, Sir Robert was young and inexperienced at the time and like them, one past mistake could cost him his entire position. If Sir Robert refuses her demands, Mrs Cheveley threatens to ruin him by revealing the truth: “Yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it” (*IH* 16). Like the women, Sir Robert, too, is being held up to an impossible standard particularly by his wife who practically worships him as the ideal husband, and by the public who celebrate his “unblemished career” and “well-known integrity of character” (*IH* 64).

In drawing the parallel between the fallen women and Sir Robert, the play challenges the late-Victorian thinking of genders as different in kind. Instead they are very similar and capable of making the same mistakes. The point of the parallel in my opinion is that subjecting anyone, male or female to such unrealistic ideals and then punishing them disproportionately when they inevitably fail to live up to the societal expectations is a clearly unfair system. As Mrs Cheveley puts it: “with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins” (*IH* 15).

### **3.5 The Dandy and the “Manly Man”**

Though I have largely concentrated on women so far, society's restrictions applied to men as well. Because it was a patriarchal society, men did have more freedom compared to women but their role was no more natural than that of women. In fact, masculinity and femininity are two sides of the same binary and if one is in flux the other one must face redefinition as well.

Much like the New Woman, the dandy also questioned culturally assigned gender roles. Perhaps this is why the figure of the dandy is such a prominent one in Wilde's comedies. The dandy is closely associated with Aesthetic and Decadent sentiments, so much so that he is sometimes referred to as the "dandy-aesthete" (Calloway 1997, 34). The connection was in the appreciation of beauty and art over any naturalised notion of acceptable behaviour. The dandy cultivated a lifestyle that was characterised by conspicuous idleness (Sinfield 1994a, 38) and their greatest aim was the "perfection of the pose of exquisiteness" (Calloway 1997, 34). As Calloway puts it, the dandies made art of themselves (1997, 36), and because they appropriated the traditionally female domain of fashion and appearances, they were considered effeminate.

The majority of Wilde's main male characters are dandies. Algernon, for instance, proclaims: "It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind" (*IBE* 25). Of course it is not that they do not have a definitive object, it is just that doing nothing (or at least appearing so) is the object in itself. Similarly Lord Goring "rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season" (*IH* 2). That is to say, he, too, works very hard at maintaining his lifestyle of idleness.

The only main character who is not a dandy is Sir Robert Chiltern. He is politically ambitious and aside from one lapse of judgement, earnest and hard-working. Masculinity is clearly of great importance in Sir Robert's self-definition: on finding out about Sir Robert's past crime, Lord Goring is surprised that "you, of all men in the world, could have been so weak, Robert, as to yield to such a temptation" (*IH* 27). Instead of accepting Lord Goring's assessment of his weakness, Sir Robert redefines the boundary between strength and weakness:

Weak? Do you really think, Arthur, that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stake be power or pleasure, I care not – there is no weakness in that. (*IH* 27)

Sir Robert cannot accept being associated with weakness because that is a woman's feature, instead he reframes the issue, bestowing himself with manly courage.

As Sinfield points out, *An Ideal Husband* is really the only play in which “the manly man” appears on stage alongside the dandies (1994a, 40-41). In fact, there is an interesting juxtaposition of Sir Robert, the manly gentleman and Lord Goring, the effeminate dandy. The expectation is for calculated idleness from Lord Goring and earnest efficiency from Sir Robert. However, that is not the pattern that emerges as the events unfold. While Sir Robert is more or less incapacitated by Mrs Erlynne's threat, Lord Goring actually takes charge of the situation managing to neutralise Erlynne's threat of blackmail and saving the Chilterns from public disgrace. As Sinfield argues, the play in effect reverses the expectations from the effeminate dandy and the masculine man (Sinfield 1994a, 40). This kind of deconstruction is essential in showing that the hierarchy that glorifies masculinity is not inherent, that the masculinity/femininity divide is not natural and that there can be alternative ways of thinking than the dominant patriarchal mode.

The connection between effeminate men and same-sex passion is commonplace nowadays as it is part of our stereotypical construction of the homosexual, but historically the association between the two is quite different. Prior to Wilde's trials, effeminacy and same-sex passion were not yet linked in the way they are today. Later on, I will discuss Wilde's own part in the creation of the homosexual, but for now, let us consider what male effeminacy did signify in the late-Victorian period. Sinfield notes that to some extent same-sex passion was perceived as effeminate, but the crucial distinction is that effeminacy did not automatically

signal same-sex passion (1994b, 45). The two could overlap but did not do so exclusively and effeminacy could be used to signify a number of things (ibid.).

Sinfield argues that dandy effeminacy was a signifier of class rather than sexuality (1994a, 38). Since the middle-class had claimed manly attributes, the wealthy were left with the option of distinguishing themselves by embracing effeminacy and idleness (ibid.). Sedgwick, too, writes about the feminisation of the aristocracy, in which “the abstract image of the entire class, came to be seen as ethereal, decorative, and otiose in relation to the vigorous and productive values of the middle class” (1985, 93). Rather than being a marker of same-sex passion, male effeminacy was connected with being emotional, spending time with women and cross-sexual attraction (Sinfield 1994b, 27). According to Gwendolen, “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” (*IBE* 44). Accordingly, most of Wilde’s dandies express interest in women: Lord Darlington professes his love for Lady Windermere to convince her to run away with him, Lord Illingworth has produced a bastard son and chases several women during *A Woman of No Importance* and Lord Augustus is quite taken with Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

Since an aristocrat was expected to display effeminacy, his mannerisms would not have been evidence of same-sex passion. Sinfield argues that “The Wildean dandy – so far from looking like a homosexual – was distinctively exonerated from such suspicions” (1994a, 39). Moreover, due to the position afforded by gender and class, the dandy was also in a position where he could indulge himself without reproach far more freely than others (ibid.). That is to say, though effeminacy did not indicate same-sex passion, the dandy was in a unique position to be able to take part in such activities in relative safety (ibid.). The wealth and power of aristocratic men afforded a great deal of privacy and if necessary even protection from the law (Foldy 1997, 83).



### 3.6 The Female Dandy

Dandies are not limited to just men in Wilde's plays. There are also female characters who display similar enough characteristics to the male dandies that they might be considered female versions of the same. Of course fashion and appearances are traditionally women's concerns, but the dandies – male or female – take this to a level of decadence. Mabel Chiltern is described as wearing “the most ravishing frock” (*IH* 33) as well as having “all the fragrance and freedom of a flower” (*IH* 2) with “ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair” (*IH* 2). She certainly lives up to the dandiacal ambition of making art of oneself, to the point of being likened to “a Tanagra statuette” (*IH* 2).

In all of Wilde's plays a distinct indicator of the dandy is his ability converse almost exclusively using witty banter that tends to challenge or trivialise conventional moralities. The female dandies are recognisable by this marker as well and are quite capable of holding their own when it comes to verbal sparring with their male counterparts:

Mrs Allonby: What a thoroughly bad man you must be!  
 Lord Illingworth: What do you call a bad man?  
 Mrs Allonby: The sort of man who admires innocence.  
 Lord Illingworth: And a bad woman?  
 Mrs Allonby: Oh! The sort of woman a man never gets tired of.  
 (*WNI* 31)

Aside from demonstrating Mrs Allonby's skill in repartee, typically for Wilde's witticisms the exchange also plays with cultural norms. Here, for instance Mrs Allonby seems to be commenting on the sexual double standard in that innocence in women is only something that “bad men” admire because a “bad woman” (that is to say, not a sexual innocent) is what men actually want.

Mabel Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband* has similar exchanges with Lord Goring and it is he who has to ask her to “be serious” (*IH* 67). Mrs Allonby also satirises the role of the good woman in her lengthy examination of how an Ideal Man should behave towards his wife:

If we ask him a question about anything, he should give us an answer all about ourselves. He should invariably praise us for whatever qualities he knows we haven't got. But he should be pitiless, quite pitiless, in reproaching us for the virtues we never dreamed of possessing. He should never believe that we know the use of useful things, That would be unforgivable. (*WNI* 45)

In essence “the Ideal Man should talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children” (*WNI* 44). Mrs Allonby’s idea seems to be that since society views women as inferior to men, she might as well take full advantage and demand to be treated like a spoiled child: given everything she wants and have her vanities constantly catered to.

Though still confined by the limiting structures of society, these women hold power beyond what was allowed to the conventional angel-wife (Sinfield 1994a, 42-47). Sinfield argues that feminine dandified women had an important role in policing the boundaries of Society (1994a, 42). In Wilde's Society beauty, talent and charm like the female dandies have are appreciated far beyond morality (*ibid.* 43). Since position was determined based on who wished to receive you at their house, being amusing company could get you access, and once inside Society allow you to reach a position in which you could be part of the policing mechanism (*ibid* 42-43). In addition marriage is a powerful tool for controlling social rejection and acceptance. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* we can see the Duchess of Berwick single-handedly vetting a husband for her daughter within the context of calling, tea and balls which were a distinctly female dominion (*ibid.* 43). Sinfield's argument is that much like the dandy undermines the dominance of the masculine man, the female dandy is promoted as a more empowered alternative to the earnest angel-wife (*ibid.* 45).

## 4.0 Sexuality

In this chapter I will consider the discourses surrounding sexuality in the late-Victorian era and how they developed. I will then analyse the concept of bunburying and how it links with sexual identities, as well as the relation of class and homosociality to each other in the formation of identities. The emphasis of this chapter is on male sexuality, but in subchapter 4.5 I will extend the analysis to cover female sexuality as well. First, however, a brief examination of Oscar Wilde's own sexuality and the varied ways it is and was perceived.

### 4.1 Wilde's Sexuality

Homosexual, bisexual and pederast are just few of the possible labels that have been affixed to Wilde. The facts are that Wilde had a wife with whom he had children and he is also very likely to have had male lovers, many of whom were considerably younger. The different labels just reflect different viewpoints into what is considered the defining characteristic of Wilde's sexuality. Wilde is homosexual to us because of our stereotypical idea of a homosexual man strongly influenced by him. However, for the most of his life the concept of a homosexual did not exist the way it does today. It would be arrogant to assume that our subjective view is somehow better or more correct than that of Wilde's time. As explained in the theory chapter, there is no defining essence of sexuality that could even be known.

The problem that arises from assuming Wilde was homosexual is the propensity to draw the conclusion that it will show in his work. This is particularly prominent in readings of *Earnest* and the assumption that there must be "a gay scenario lurking somewhere in the depths of *The Importance of Being Earnest*" has been criticised by Alan Sinfield among others (1994b, vi). He goes on to say that thinking of Jack and Algernon as a gay couple does not really work, as both exhibit interest in women and want to marry (ibid.). I agree with Sinfield on the point that it would be ridiculous to assume that Wilde's works must contain

gay themes because he himself could arguably be described as homosexual. I also agree with him that the play does not support a reading of Jack and Algernon as a same-sex couple.

However, I think it is too simplistic to assume that since Jack and Algernon display cross-sex interest they must be heterosexual, or the presence of heterosexual desire somehow erases the possibility of a queer reading. For me, the interest in a queer reading is showing that Wilde's characters resist clear categorisation and cannot be exhaustively described with terms like hetero- or homosexual<sup>6</sup>.

Because I do not think it relevant to my analysis, I am not interested in taking part in the arguments over Wilde's sexuality. However, I do think that the fact there are so many views on the subject shows that there is no essential "core", it is a matter of social constructions and interpretations. Depending on the interpreter's cultural and historical background, Wilde's sexuality could be defined in any number of ways. The discussion over Wilde's sexuality exemplifies the very idea of non-essential identity I am trying to get across.

#### **4.2 Sexual Discourses**

The term "homosexual" was first used in 1869, though it did not immediately come into common use (Sullivan 2003, 2). The word "heterosexual" came into existence only 11 years later (Barry 2002, 144), which is not surprising if we consider how the dominant of the pair is defined through the marginalisation of the other. Even though heterosexuality was constructed as the "natural" of the two, it could only be defined in terms of its counterpart. The word "homosexual" was used in medical and legal contexts to describe sexual deviants who needed to be either treated or punished. Because of this, the word itself could be considered part of anti-gay discourse (ibid.). However, Wilchins notes that the homosexual rights movement that has established new rights for gay people also bases its identity on the

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<sup>6</sup> Disregarding for the moment the fact that the terms are anachronistic.

same historical roots (2004, 56). So although it might even be empowering to identify oneself as homosexual, the real question is that should not homosexuals, as everyone else, have the right to be defined by something other than their sexuality (ibid.). The point is not to force anyone out of their identity but to have them be aware of the fact that identities are not “natural” but created categories (ibid. 57).

The key issue here is that the modern concept of the homosexual as a kind of person or a way of life did not yet exist in Wilde’s time, although it was in the process of being formed and indeed was affected by him (Sinfield 1994a, 35). Queer theory also emphasises that there is a difference between homosexual behaviour and homosexual identity. Homosexual acts are ever-present in history. In ancient Greece a man could copulate with “virgins, prostitutes, married women, boys, or sheep” without having any of those sex acts designate him as a specific type of person (Wilchins 2004, 54). Same-sex behaviour that we might nowadays label homosexual has been historically and culturally conceptualised in varying ways, a point made by a number of queer theorists and well exemplified in this passage by David Halperin:

Does the “pederast”, the classical Greek adult, married male who periodically enjoys sexually penetrating a male adolescent, share *the same sexuality* with the Native American (Indian) adult male who from childhood has taken on many aspects of a woman and is regularly penetrated by the adult male to whom he has been married in a public and socially sanctioned ceremony? . . . Do any of these . . . persons share *the same sexuality* with the modern homosexual? (cited in Sullivan 2003, 2, original emphasis)

The idea that homosexual behaviour could be the defining aspect of one’s identity was born only in the late nineteenth century (Jagose 1997, 15). For the Greeks the direction of one's desire was not an issue. Sex only became a problem if indulging in it became excessive to the extent that it caused negligence to the man's other duties (Wilchins 2004, 54-55). In Britain, by the eighteenth century homosexual acts were understood in terms of sodomy (Wilchins 2004, 55). While today the term sodomy is mainly used in reference to anal sex, in

eighteenth century Britain it was used as a catchall term for acts such as anal, oral or safe sex: all considered “unnatural” because they did not have reproduction as their aim (Sullivan 2003, 3). The important point here is that sodomy identified certain kinds of acts not certain kinds of people.

Homosexuality as an identity would be constructed during the nineteenth century. There was a shift from sodomy as behaviour that, while considered shameful, did not label you as a specific type of person, to the homosexual, for whom “nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality” (Foucault 1978, 43). As Foucault puts it in *The History of Sexuality*: “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (1978, 43). I will be examining Wilde’s part in this change in chapter 6.

The Criminal Law Amendment of 1885 criminalised any homosexual act between males regardless of whether they were committed in public or private. Buggery (the legal term for sodomy), had been illegal since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the new amendment targeted men specifically and changed the law so that even private sexual behaviour was regulated (Beckson 1992, 191). The legal discourse did not assume the existence of a homosexual as a type of person. It dealt with homosexual acts as a part of greater issue of sexual degeneracy (Foldy 1997, 87). In fact, most of the Criminal Law Amendment pertained to the protection of women and girls from prostitution. A last minute amendment criminalised for men “any act of gross indecency with another male person”. The purpose of the addition was not to hunt down homosexual men (because that construction was yet to come together), rather it, too, was directed at abolishing prostitution (Beckson 1992, 191).

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a medicalised discourse regarding what was to be called homosexuality. Previously, legal and religious discourse had been the two major discourses that regulated the understanding of same-sex sexual behaviour (Terry 1999, 40). In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that historically, religion had a

significant effect on discourse on sex and sexuality (1978, 18-19). Sex came to be understood in terms of sin that needed to be confessed (ibid. 19). The scope of the confession was not limited to just acts but also included thoughts and desires which needed to be examined and vocalised, transforming them into discourse (ibid. 19-20). Instead of viewing sexual knowledge as a means for pleasure on a par with another basic need like hunger, sex became disconnected from pleasure and was used by the Church to control people's behaviour (Wilchins 2004, 50).

The act of confession later lost its exclusively religious nature and spread into other areas, to be used by “children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists, delinquents and experts” (Foucault 1978, 63). Sex and sexuality eventually became a national concern influenced by a new-formed awareness of population shifts (Wilchins 2004, 51-52).

The regulation of sexuality became a matter of public good:

Improper desire was no longer just a threat to decency or even a source of mortal sin. It was something that threatened society as a whole, that wasted an important national resource, and that, left unchecked, might spread. (Wilchins 2004, 52)

As Sullivan notes, in the nineteenth century the efforts to identify, classify and define sexual “perversions” were increased markedly (2003, 172). This was necessary for the purpose of regulating sexuality because the production of normality requires that the margin be identified. As Wilchins points out, the medical discourse does not study transgression, but creates it by way of specialised vocabulary, procedures and methods that endow them with authority (2004, 60-61).

The first of several attempts at explaining homosexuality came in 1864 with Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’ theory of a third sex which considered homosexuality innate and benign (Terry 1999, 43). According to him, homosexuals were a specific type of person who had characteristics of both sexes (ibid.). Sexual attraction to women was considered an essentially

male trait and vice versa (ibid. 44). Therefore Ulrichs posited that male homosexuals had an inverted psyche: it was female instead of male (ibid.). Another early view of homosexuality was also based on sexual inversion. The difference was that this group of writers, which included the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing believed homosexuality was caused by an inborn defect that caused the inversion as well as overall degeneracy (ibid. 43).

The notable thing about inverts is that though the term is used in reference to what we conceptualise as the homosexual, its construction is actually more to do with gender than sexuality (Sullivan 2003, 99). The defining characteristics of an invert were traits adopted from the opposite sex: same-sex attraction was only one of the identifying markers (ibid.). According to Krafft-Ebing's definition, there were four degrees of severity, encompassing a variety of inversions we would nowadays label as bisexuality, homosexuality, transsexualism and intersexuality (ibid. 100). The point is that the invert does not correspond completely with the modern homosexual identity (ibid.). Also worth noting is that transgressing gender norms was just as – if not more – perverse than transgressing the norms of sexual behaviour. Regardless of the fact that homosexuality was bundled in with other perversions, the change medicalisation of homosexuality brought to the different discourses was that it posited an innate constitution and began to construct homosexuals as a type of person.

The medicalised discourse was based on modernist thinking in that it assumed the existence of a “truth” or essential basis for sexuality which could be revealed through scientific knowledge. Interestingly, for many of the theorists and sexologists, the aim of the scientific theorising was to have an emancipatory effect: if homosexuality was congenital, it ought not to be socially or legally punishable (Terry 1999, 44). Many sexual theorists, including Ulrichs, were interested in repealing anti-homosexual legislation (Kaye 2007, 62; Sullivan 2003, 6). Even if the legal restrictions to homosexuality were in many places eventually lifted or lessened, the medicalised discourse constructed the homosexual as an



individual in need of medical treatment albeit through no fault of his own. However, as Foucault points out, discourses are not unidirectional in its power relations: the same vocabulary can be appropriated for a “reverse” discourse (1978, 101), which is what eventually happened when terms like homosexual were reclaimed for the uses of the gay liberation movement.

In light of this historical context, I should make it clear that I am not out to prove that Wilde’s comedies had characters with fully developed homosexual identities. I am trying to show that the plays contain an anti-essentialist view that undermines the assumption of naturalised, essential identities like the homosexual. The same resistance that opposed essentialist categorisation in terms of gender is present when examining the sexual identities in the plays. The majority of my analysis concentrates on *The Importance of Being Earnest* simply because these issues are more prominent in it, but I will also give examples from the other plays.

### **4.3 Bunbury**

Much has been made out of Bunbury in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Bunbury is an imaginary person Algernon has invented in order to shirk his responsibilities and go to the country whenever he pleases. Similarly Jack has made up a brother called Ernest whose purpose is to provide the same kind of freedom for him. This invention allows both men to live an unspecified double life which Algernon calls Bunburying.

Quite a few critics have argued that the term is used in the play as a euphemism for anal sex. Christopher Craft argues for the idea, with which most critics agree, that Bunbury simply expresses the desire to bury in the bun (Craft 1990, 28), and Joel Fineman asserts that Bunbury was “British slang for a male brothel” (1980, 89). However, Alan Sinfield makes some interesting observations regarding these claims. He points out that Fineman’s claim

about male brothels lacks historical ground (1994a, 35), and I must agree it is very hard to prove or disprove as he fails to give a source for his claim. The Cleveland Street scandal of 1889, which exposed a male brothel in the West End of London proves that such establishments did exist, but neither the OED or Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* verify Fineman's claim about Bunbury being a slang term for one. Sinfield also calls attention to the fact that the word *bun* acquires the meaning of "buttock" only in the mid to late twentieth century (1994a, 35). In Sinfield's view then, Bunburying is simply heterosexual (*ibid.*). On the other hand, Lalonde argues that specifics of the terms are not all that important as the essential idea of Fineman's reading is the image and shape of a bun and the mental association made from that (2005, 660). Ultimately, neither side of the argument can completely invalidate the other's reasoning. I will be later examining the implications of heterosexual Bunburying, but for the moment I would like to make my own argument for its same-sex implications.

*Earnest* was written to be performed, and often in colloquial speech assimilation occurs and alters alveolar consonants (Morris-Wilson 1992, 156-157). In the case of the word Bunbury, this means that the phoneme /n/ changes to /m/, which of course means that *bun* will sound like *bum*. According to the OED, *bum* was used with the meaning of "buttocks" as early as 1387. If we follow the reasoning that the mental impression is the key issue, the image of burying in the bum is quite evocative. However, as the phonemic change is noticeable only in speech, and can be circumvented with slow and careful pronunciation, it also has the added benefit of being subtle enough to allow Wilde plausible deniability. In addition, Bunbury is an actual surname, giving it an added layer of inconspicuousness.

The meaning of Bunburying has aroused a great deal of interest in critics. Bunburying plays a rather small part in the play but the secrecy and subversive statements made in connection to it have understandably made it a fascinating subject of analysis. Various critics

have suggested more meanings for the term, but the ones I have evaluated here are the ones I have judged most convincing. The term “Earnest” has also raised similar speculation. A connection has been drawn to “Uranian” or “uraniste” which were terms used to refer to Ulrichs’ third sex, and an allusion suggested to *Love in Earnest* a Uranian collection of poems (Sinfield 1994a, 34-35). I agree with Sinfield to some extent that Wilde’s modern status as a gay icon can lead to overzealous and ahistorical queer readings (1994a, 34-35). At the same time, this is not a valid reason for dismissing all queer readings of *Bunbury* or *Earnest*.

Let us consider the role of the green carnation at the premiere of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Wilde wore the flower himself and had several other men in the audience wear one as well (Gagnier 1986, 163). When asked for a reason he replied that the mysterious and unexplained presence of the flowers would make the audience wonder about something that according to him meant nothing (ibid. 164). Of course the green carnation was actually a symbol of the aesthetic movement and although the English audience would have been unaware of it, worn by “homosexuals” in Paris (ibid. 163). I would argue that a connection could be drawn between *Bunbury* and the green carnation in the sense that for most of the audience they might seem curious but ultimately inconsequential, while a few would be able to access another level of meaning.

It can be concluded from the story that Wilde enjoyed toying with his audience, playing on them a private joke that only a precious few would be able to understand. This suggests that finding hidden meanings in Wilde’s text is not necessarily just a product of an overactive imagination. One of Sinfield’s main complaints is that if the meanings suggested by various critics were known in Wilde’s time, he would not have been able to get away with using them (1994a, 35), but as the green carnation story exemplifies, it is not a matter of either knowing or not knowing, there are levels of awareness and ambiguity at play.

#### 4.4 Sexual Identity

In her book *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the phrase “male homosocial desire” to refer to a continuum between homosocial and homosexual (where homosocial refers to “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1985, 1)). She theorises that “male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry and hetero- and homosexuality was in an intimate and shifting relation to class” (1985, 1). That is to say, she is hypothesising homosociality as potentially erotic and structured along lines of class.

For Victorian men, Sedgwick distinguishes three rough categories according to class with respect to homosocial/homosexual style. In the first group are aristocrats and some of their friends and dependents (such as bohemians or prostitutes) for whom a distinct homosexual subculture was in existence (Sedgwick 1985, 172). It was at once both courtly and criminal, and its existence alongside a hostile dominant culture was enabled by money, privilege and the ability to command secrecy (ibid. 173). The second group consists of the educated middle class who enjoyed a significant amount of sexual freedom, particularly if they were single and as such had avoided the restrictions of family life (ibid.). The middle class man did not have easy access to the subculture of the aristocratic group resulting in sexual behaviour that was characterised by resourcefulness and found various genital outlets (ibid.). The people below middle class mainly figured in as the object of the other two groups' desire (ibid. 174). Sedgwick suggests that they viewed homosexual acts mainly in terms of violence (ibid.) but it is unnecessary to go into the details because most, if not all, of the main male characters in Wilde's plays fall into the first two categories.

Since the Victorians did not have an understanding of homosexuality like ours, Sedgwick argues that aristocrats (as seen by the middle class) filed it under licentiousness that was strongly associated with effeminacy (1985, 173-174). As for the middle class, the public school was imperative for the formation of their homosociality (ibid. 176). Of course both

aristocrat and middle class youths would attend public school, but for the latter there was no shared community that would have accepted homoerotic behaviour for adults (*ibid.*).

Therefore, argues Sedgwick, the middle class male came to associate the erotic end of the homosocial spectrum with childishness (*ibid.* 177).

Jack and Algernon are both likely to be products of public schools, though in my opinion they seem to belong to the upper middle class and as such fall in between the aristocratic and middle class categories that Sedgwick presents. They do not seem to be taking part in a discrete homosexual culture, rather, in a show of resourcefulness, they have created their own way of expressing same-sex desire. Algernon seems rather delighted to find out that Jack has been taking part in the same activities as he has: "...now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying" (*IBE* 14). The notion of homosocial bonding over their shared proclivities is understandably exciting to Algernon who has heretofore been missing a peer group. However, the two have rather different attitudes towards the practice. Jack denies being a Bunburyist and insists that if Gwendolen agrees to marry him, he plans to kill off his imaginary brother, that is, to stop leading a double life. This sparks the following exchange:

ALGERNON: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married...you will be extremely glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen...I certainly won't want to know Bunbury. (*IBE* 14)

First of all, it should be noted that unlike Jack, Algernon is not willing to stop his Bunburying even in the event of marriage. Furthermore, his statement about the necessity of Bunbury in a marriage appears to advocate the idea that limiting yourself to sexual encounters with just your wife is "tedious" and unnecessarily limiting. This, of course, is in complete contradiction with the belief that homosexual acts were immoral, not to mention illegal, and that

heterosexuality was basically the only legitimate choice. Bunburyism speaks against the discourse that aims to essentialise the homosexual as a perversion, and goes to back to understanding sexuality in terms of pleasure. Interestingly, though Jack maintains that he would not want to know Bunbury, he acknowledges that “a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness” (*IBE* 13). It seems that unlike Algernon, Jack is willing to compromise his happiness in favour of a heterosexual marital agreement that is sanctioned by the society.

But even Algernon is not oblivious to rules he is circumventing. Although he can generally be trusted to say perfectly wonderful things about Bunbury, he does rather insistently refer to him, and by association to the act of Bunburying, as an “invalid”. This works as a reference to the poor health of Bunbury and consequently as a convenient excuse for him to avoid his obligations. It also shows that Algernon is aware of the invalidity of his same-sex adventures in the eyes of society. Though he may recognise that according to society’s norms Bunbury is an invalid, he continues his exploits without a trace of guilt. The notion that Bunburying would define Algernon as a sexual degenerate is rejected. In fact he remains an “eligible young man” (*IBE* 60), fit for marriage and high society.

Even if Bunburying was not read as inscribed with same-sex desire, but instead as heterosexual philandering, it remains subversive to cultural ideals. Algernon's insistence on the necessity of Bunburying in marriage undermines the normative marriage which only has two participants and anyone interfering is an outsider, distraction or a possible threat. Far from being threatening, in Algernon's view Bunbury is actually an inextricable part of the union and conducive to its success. Additionally, even if heterosexual, the act remains inscribed with anal sexuality, the promoting of which is still very much controversial because reproductive sexuality was the acceptable norm.

One way of looking at sexual identity in the play is through the different signifiers that form Jack's persona. At the beginning of the play the character of John Worthing is divided: there is Jack and there is his imaginary brother Ernest, both in fact the same person. We can consider, as Craft suggests, these names as a pair of signifiers that enable his double life (1990, 25). Jack is the “good” brother, who wishes to marry Gwendolen and to comply with the expectations of the society. Ernest is the “bad” brother, the Bunburyist whose life is defined by Jack. While Jack declares that he is “going to get rid of Ernest” (*IBE* 14) if Gwendolen accepts his proposal, what actually happens is that at the end of the play these two parts are fitted together when it is revealed that his name is neither Jack nor Ernest but Ernest John. So we have two different signifiers that have the potential to affect his identity, but instead of it being defined wholly by one of them, we have both present but neither dominant. Even though the marriages provide a perfect heteronormative ending that requires that Bunbury is “quite exploded” (*IBE* 50), the same-sex passion signified by Ernest is still present.

My argument regarding Jack and Algernon’s sexual identities is that even if they have taken part in what is nowadays regarded as the most stereotypical of male homosexual acts, anal sex, from that does not automatically follow that they are homosexuals. One reason is that as I mentioned, the identity was not yet fully formed, but I think there is a more important point as well. What I am referring to, is the idea that one specific act could completely define a person’s identity. It is the same concept I already examined in the context of gender. I think it is visible in the play that a person should be able to go Bunburying, get married or both, and not have either one of those actions be the one thing that defines their identity and confines them into a specific category, be it heterosexual, homosexual or anything else.

As I have mentioned, the medicalised view of sexuality is based on the assumption that knowledge produced through scientific research would reveal the “true nature” of sexuality.

However, the view taken in *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not subscribe to the belief that science can objectively examine life. The following is a discussion regarding the manner of the death of Jack's imaginary brother, Ernest:

Algernon: . . . You can hardly have forgotten that someone very closely connected with you was very nearly carried off this week in Paris by a severe chill.

Jack: Yes, but you said yourself that a severe chill was not hereditary

Algernon: It usen't to be, I know – but I daresay it is now. Science is always making wonderful improvements in things. (*IBE* 52)

As Lalonde argues, Algernon's clearly sarcastic final point about science making “wonderful improvements” can be seen as criticising the belief that science is capable of discovering absolute truths (2005, 667). By association, then, it also rejects the medicalised model of sexuality that among other things theorised an inherent constitution for the homosexual.

The dandy character is an excellent tool for exploring the delicate subject of sexuality because he is afforded such great freedom. It is precisely because of that freedom and the ambiguity it allows that multiple readings are viable, some of them in line with heteronormative values, some not. Like Jack and Algernon's, Lord Illingworth's actions require some examining. Alan Sinfield makes the case that Illingworth is “on the brink of manifesting ‘the homosexual’” (1994a, 36) in his excessive attachment to young Gerald Arbuthnot. Sinfield has the same idea as Sedgwick's continuum of homosocial desire, in that both examine the line between homosocial and homosexual attachment.

In *A Woman of No Importance* the dandiacal Lord Illingworth has offered the young Mr Arbuthnot a position as his private secretary and it is observed that Illingworth seems to have taken “quite a fancy to him” (*WNI* 11). Illingworth also asserts that Mr Arbuthnot “will be of considerable use to me in something I am foolish enough to think of doing” (*WNI* 19). To Gerald he declares that “[i]t is because I like you so much that I want to have you with me”



(*WNI* 30). Sinfield points out, that to us, the language sounds amorous but to Illingworth's peers, it is quite within the limits of decency (1994a, 36). Several of them enthuse about what a great opportunity this is for Gerald which would certainly not be the case had they detected any impropriety. Additionally, Gerald turns out to be Illingworth's illegitimate son which affirms Illingworth's heterosexuality and legitimises his feelings as those of a father's towards a son (Sinfield 1994a, 36).

And yet there remains an inconsistency. Lord Illingworth's constant flirting with women, even kissing one and having produced a son certify him as a heterosexual. However, at the same time his behaviour towards Mrs Arbuthnot in her youth proves him selfish and he seems unchanged. Illingworth practically revels in his wickedness, declaring his good fortune in never having been subjected to a good reputation because it is the only thing one cannot live down. It seems quite illogical that Illingworth's strong interest in Gerald would be explained by wholesome fatherly devotion. Illingworth's claim of familial ties merely highlights the strangeness of his strong attachment (Sinfield 1994a, 36).

The beauty of Wilde's plays is that they allow multiple readings. In Lord Illingworth's case there might be nothing sexual going on with Gerald, and indeed it would be difficult to prove that there was. The point is that the suggestion is there. As Sinfield says, Wilde goes up to the brink but no further. In his position virtually above suspicion, the dandy enables the simultaneous existence of suspicions of same-sex passion and a protective layer of heterosexuality which the hostile environment in which Wilde was writing demands.

#### **4.5 Female Sexuality**

My analysis of sexuality has thus far concentrated on men. The simple reason for this is that female sexuality received far less attention during Wilde's time and as such is not as prominent in his plays. The Victorian double standard afforded greater sexual freedom to men

while chastity was expected of women (Weeks 1989, 22). Showalter argues the same by pointing out that Odd women were expected to stay celibate but the unmarried man faced no such restrictions (1992, 25). For a woman who wanted to stay respectable in the eyes of society, the alternatives were few: heterosexual affairs would get one labelled a fallen woman, and lesbianism was hardly even recognised in discourse regarding sexuality (ibid. 23). As Kaye points out, in patriarchal societies female same-sex desire was regularly ignored not because it did not exist but because from the point of view of the dominant power it was rather inconsequential (2007, 69). For instance The Criminal Law Amendment has no mention of sexual acts between women and the medical discourse was almost entirely focused on men. Lesbianism was not considered acceptable, but it never reached such levels of public debate as male homosexuality did (Weeks 1989, 106).

While issues concerning female sexuality are less prominent in Wilde's plays there are a few points I would like to make. In typical complication of straightforward sexualities, Jack and Algernon's brides-to-be, Cecily and Gwendolen, also exhibit some tendencies towards same-sex passion. A better word, though, would probably be autoerotism since their attraction is mainly directed towards themselves as opposed to other women. This interest is perhaps best shown in their diaries. It is revealed to us that Cecily keeps a diary where she records her quite active private life. In the world created in her diary, she has been engaged to Ernest three months before she even met him. She has also broken the engagement off once and then gotten back together with him. Furthermore, she has bought herself a ring and written herself love letters on his behalf. I would argue that she is enamoured with herself rather than any man, as it is essentially herself that she is engaged to. Ernest merely works as a cover and an enabler for the copious amounts of self-love she is exhibiting. Even when Algernon, who is posing as Ernest, turns up, she is much more interested in taking notes in her diary than actually listening to his romancing: "I delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached

‘absolute perfection.’ You can go on” (*IBE* 40). Another explanation for Cecily’s behaviour is that in the absence of a socially acceptable outlet for her sexual feelings, she has begun to almost fetishise the romantic idea of courtship.

Gwendolen, too, appears to have a close relationship with her diary and by association, herself. She asserts that she never travels without it as “one should always have something sensational to read in the train” (*IBE* 46). It is left up to the reader’s imagination what exactly is so “sensational”, but the implication is that she has concocted similar fantasies as Cecily, possibly even something more explicit. Gwendolen also declares that “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” (*IBE* 44). Either Gwendolen does not like attractive men, or she does not like being attracted to men. I would argue that this is because any unrelated feelings of attraction would distract her from the love-affair she appears to be having with herself. Because these women are so restricted by social norms, turning their sexual desires towards themselves is one of the few options they actually have available.

There is a situation in *A Woman of No Importance* that also sheds light on the repression of female sexuality. Because Lord Illingworth is bragging that there is “no woman in the world who would object to being kissed” (*WNI* 32), Mrs Allonby dares him to kiss Miss Hester Worsley, the Puritan. Hester holds a rather strict moral code that elevates purity and self-sacrifice, which is why Mrs Allonby predicts that if kissed by Lord Illingworth, Hester will either marry him or strike him with a glove. When faced with sexual advances, objecting to it as a violation of their purity or marriage are the only two valid options for anyone subscribing to the conventional notion of woman’s role in society. Lord Illingworth’s attempt takes place offstage, but Hester is clearly not charmed by his advances as she enters the stage “in terror” (*WNI* 92), screaming that he has insulted her.

Another aspect of the kissing debacle is that it can also be read as an expression of same-sex desire because the kiss originates from Mrs Allonby. Lord Illingworth is merely an instrument that conveniently legitimises the action as a heterosexual one. Though the kiss is an affront to Hester, the Society women quite adore Lord Illingworth's wicked behaviour. Hester is extremely offended and Gerald even threatens to kill Lord Illingworth for "insult[ing] the purest thing on God's earth" (*WNI* 92), while the Society women do not seem to see anything wrong with Lord Illingworth's behaviour. In fact, they are quite surprised and dismayed that Gerald plans to turn down Illingworth's job offer. There is clearly a vast disconnect between views on sexual permissiveness held by the leisure-class and Hester as show in their respective reactions to Lord Illingworth's behaviour. For a woman like Hester, whose views on female sexuality are very strict, a simple kiss can have far-reaching consequences.

## **5. Marriage and Family**

Representations of marriage and family in the plays cannot be completely separated from issues of gender and sexuality so there is bound to be some overlap between the sub-chapters. However, because of the importance of marriage and family as institutions in the late-Victorian society and the prominence with which they are dealt with in the plays, I want to examine them in a chapter of their own. I will first overview the historical background of the institutions and then move on to analysing the different views present in the plays.

### **5.1 Historical Context**

The importance of family was being reaffirmed in the nineteenth century in response to social changes like industrialisation and urbanisation (Weeks 23, 1989; Showalter 1992, 3). The family, rather than the individual, was considered the basic unit of the society, and the respectability and stability of family life was entered through marriage (Weeks 1989, 24). The function of family was to perpetuate the existing values and social order, particularly to regulate sexuality (ibid.). Compared to earlier family forms, the Victorian family was intimate and long-lasting, which made it the ideal site for maintaining “the existing social order economically, ideologically and sexually” (ibid. 25). The family was seen as a microcosm of society and the stability of the family was necessary for the stability of the entire society: one of its purposes was to secure the legitimacy of children (ibid. 29), which was of paramount importance particularly to the upper classes because titles and property were strictly hereditary.

While in previous centuries arranged marriages had been acceptable, in the nineteenth century the role of romance and compatibility in marriage was beginning to become more emphasised. Alongside with social or economic aspirations, a person could now choose their spouse based on personal feelings (Vanden Bossche 1999, 89). The traditional patriarchal

male-dominated marriage was also being challenged by the idea that husband and wife should be equals, though in practise the woman was still largely confined to the domestic and financially dependent on the man (ibid. 89-90). However, Vanden Bossche also points out that while ideas about marriage were changing, equality in practise was far from widely accepted (1999, 89). Additionally, while romantic affinity could be a consideration in marriage, arranged marriages among the upper classes were by no means abolished.

## **5.2 Marriage in the Plays**

There is no shortage of married people or opinions on marriage in Wilde plays. This stands to reason since most of them take place during the London season where “[p]eople are either hunting for husbands or hiding from them” (*IH* 7). Furthermore, with the relative idleness of the upper classes, marriage is one of the few things they take an interest in.

There are three different views on marriage present in the plays. Though they are not completely distinct or devoid of overlap, I will examine them one by one. The first one is the traditional patriarchal view, the second is a romantic ideal that emphasises the importance of love and the third one regards marriage as a trivial institution the only value of which is in the legitimacy it bestows.

### **5.2.1 Traditional View**

Lady Bracknell, Lord Caversham and the Duchess of Berwick are proponents of the first view. For instance, when Gwendolen declares she is engaged to Jack, Lady Bracknell strongly disapproves:

Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father . . . 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. (*IBE* 19)

Quite clearly, she does not much care for this new thinking in which personal feelings are a consideration. In fact, she is not in favour of long engagement either, because “[t]hey give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage, which I think is never advisable” (*IBE* 59). Lord Caversham takes the same stance, telling his son regarding marriage: “It is I who should be consulted, not you. There is property at stake. It is not a matter of affection” (*IH* 51).

As one might imagine, for Lady Bracknell, it is wealth and social status that are important considerations in arranging a marriage. She asserts she does not approve of mercenary marriages, but then undermines that by relating that “when [she] married Lord Bracknell [she] had no fortune of any kind. But [she] never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in [her] way” (*IBE* 59). While she has initially been quite reserved towards Cecily, who wishes to marry her penniless nephew, Lady Bracknell’s mind is quite changed once she hears about Cecily’s great fortune, highlighting the view of marriage as an economic transaction.

As for the Duchess of Berwick, like Lady Bracknell, she spends the better part of the play getting her daughter engaged to her chosen candidate. She is not quite as openly forceful as Lady Bracknell, but is rather like the puppet master behind the curtains. This change in approach might be a reflexion of the dwindling acceptability of arranged marriages, though these women get their way all the same, with the help of some manoeuvring.

In addition to securing her daughter’s marriage, the Duchess has time to offer some marital advice to Lady Windermere. The Duchess informs Lady Windermere of Lord Windermere’s supposed affair and instructs her to take him away from London:

[T]ake Windermere away at once to Homburg or to Aix, where he’ll have something to amuse him, and where you can watch him all day long. I assure you, my dear, that on several occasions after I was first married, I had to pretend to be very ill, and was obliged to

drink the most unpleasant mineral waters, merely to get Berwick out of town. He was so extremely susceptible. (*LWF* 8)

The implication of the Duchess's advice is that extramarital affairs are just something men do, and the wife needs to accept that as an unchangeable state of the world and work around it to maintain the marriage. As the Duchess sees it, men are invariably bad and susceptible to wicked women while women are good ("some of us are, at least" (*LWF* 6)). What Lady Windermere should do is "not to take this little aberration of Windermere's too much to heart" (*LWF* 9), and importantly not make a scene because men hate them. In other words, she should behave just like a good little angel-wife.

It is only after the woman has done her duty that she can hope to achieve personal satisfaction. Talking of Lady Harbury whose husband has recently died, Lady Bracknell observes that she "never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger" (*IBE* 15). In his typical manner, Wilde plays off the reader's assumptions: we expect to hear that she looks older from grief. In a similar inversion, we find out that "her hair has turned quite gold with grief" (*IBE* 15). According to Lady Bracknell the widow "seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now" (*IBE* 15), presumably because with the death of her husband she has been relieved of her duties as the self-sacrificing saint.

Like Lady Bracknell, The Duchess also places emphasis on the financial aspect of marriage. While an affair is a "little aberration", (*LWF* 9) the real scandal is in Lord Windermere having given large sums of money to the woman. The Duchess is inclined to point out that while the Duke may have strayed as well "he never gave any large sums of money to anybody. He is far too high-principled for that" (*LWF* 8). As Peter Raby argues, marriage is portrayed as a transaction in which the woman receives financial security, and in exchange the man's infidelity is overlooked (1997b, 146).



### 5.2.2 Romantic Ideal

The second view stresses the importance of love in marriage. To the Duchess's accusations of infidelity against her husband, Lady Windermere answers that they "married for love" (*LWF* 9). She also believes in equality between the man and wife. She agrees that "there should be the same laws for men as there are for women" (*LWF* 4), and that there should be no exceptions. Likewise the Chilterns' marriage is based on love and although Lady Chiltern asserts that the rules of society should be exactly the same for everyone, she does seem to elevate her husband to a higher standard based on the fact that "we women worship when we love" (*IH* 22).

Though not yet married, Hester from *A Woman of No Importance* belongs in this group as well. Her whole view on life is very earnest and idealistic, down to her opinions on equality and relationships. She is puzzled that in England (as opposed to her native America) it is considered inadvisable to "allow . . . friendship to exist between a young man and a young girl" (*WNI* 11). When Hester enthuses about meeting Gerald, who she has taken quite a liking to, she is informed that "English women conceal their feelings till after they are married" (*WNI* 11). Hester's view is quite clearly shown in contrast to the dandiacal views of the society ladies. In fact, Hester, Lady Windermere and Lady Chiltern all differ in their sincerity from the flippancy of the female dandies. Hester's views on equality are predictably moralistic. She declares that there should not be "one law for men and another for women" (*WNI* 50), again in striking contrast with opinions of the ladies listening to her diatribe.

Both the Windermeres and the Chilterns go through some marital difficulties but both couples also end up saving their marriages in two seemingly happy endings. However, closer examination might prove that their respective futures are not quite so bright and shiny. The Windermeres continued marriage is contingent on Lord Windermere never finding out that his wife intended to abandon him for another man. He, in turn, is keeping from her the real

identity of Mrs Erlynne. In the case of the Chilterns, I have already detailed how Lady Chiltern must compromise her values for the “happy” ending to be reached. Of the three, Hester seems to be the one with a chance for a genuinely happy loving marriage. She and Gerald end up declaring their love for each other and Hester even “adopts” Mrs Arbuthnot as her mother, planning for the three of them to leave the country and live happily elsewhere. Ironically then, it is the outsiders of English Society (Hester an American, Gerald a bastard and Mrs Arbuthnot a fallen woman) that best succeed in forming a happy loving family.

### 5.2.3 Dandiacal View

The dominant view in the plays is the third one which is marked by the triviality and facetiousness characteristic of the dandies. Seemingly the only valuable thing about marriage is the legitimacy it grants. This is the attitude of the dandies and socialites which undermines the earnestness of the romantic view.

Though present in all the four plays, trivialising marriage is most prominent in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play begins the mockery of marriage from the very first page and from there it hardly lets up. Algernon and Lane commence the play with a discussion on marriage, with Algernon observing how demoralising it is. Lane asserts that he believes that it *is* a pleasant state though he also notes that “I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person” (*IBE* 7). This casual dismissal sets the tone for the whole play. The attitude towards marriage oscillates somewhat, but the overall feeling is one of careful but systematic ridicule. One of the main driving forces of the plot is that Cecily and Gwendolen insist that their fiancés are named Ernest. For them marriage is something so trivial that its success can be completely dependent on something as inconsequential as having a pleasing first-name. This attitude undermines the formality and importance the institution of marriage is traditionally imbued with in the late-

Victorian society: it is the creator of families which were viewed as the elementary unit of society.

Marriage is not seen as an institution upholding order in society; rather, it is a matter of fashion and whim. In *An Ideal Husband* Lady Markby asserts that “nowadays people marry as often as they can, don’t they? It is most fashionable” (Wilde, *IH* 3). Proposing is not a very serious business either: Tommy Trafford proposes to Mabel Chiltern “on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the Season” (*IH* 67), although she thinks that “once a week is quite often enough to propose to any one, and that it should always be done in a manner that attracts some attention” (*IH* 35).

Unlike the traditional view that infidelity is a male flaw, the view held by the dandies rejects such limitations on sexual behaviour within a marriage. Infidelity is not limited to just men (although women certainly have to be more careful) nor is it necessarily viewed as a bad thing. Speaking for Lady Basildon and herself, Mrs Marchmont declares that “[their] husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that!” (*IH* 10). According to Cecil Graham a married woman’s devotion is something “no married man knows anything about” (*LWF* 37). As for the men, Lady Plymdale wants her husband to be taken to meet a woman of a questionable reputation so the husband’s attention would be drawn to her instead of bothering his wife. In Lady Plymdale’s opinion “women of that kind are most useful. They form the basis of other people’s marriages” (*LWF* 21). Mrs Cheveley seems to agree: “I don’t mind bad husbands. I have had two. They amused me immensely” (*IH* 57). The husbands are expected to stray and be inattentive in order to allow their wives a relative freedom as well. Interestingly, this dandiacal view is in accordance with the sexual liberationist idea I discussed in connection to the debate over New Woman sexuality. Clearly, then, these female dandies think that equal sexual freedom for both genders is the solution.

In contrast to the romantic view that emphasises the role of affection in marriage, according to the dandiacal view, love and happiness are quite separate from marriage. Lady Stutfield notes that bachelors and married men can be told apart by “a very, very sad expression” (*WNI* 39) in the eyes of the latter. Mrs Allonby states that good husbands are “horribly tedious” (*WNI* 39) and the absent husband she repeatedly abuses verbally has fallen into her disfavour because “he never loved anyone else” (*WNI* 43).

I have already touched upon the subject of Jack and Algernon’s attitude towards marriage. As I mentioned, neither one of them seems to have an entirely wholesome opinion of it, yet by the end of the play, each one of them ends up engaged. Of the two, Algernon, who describes himself as a “serious Bunburyist” (*IBE* 50) is the one who is more reluctant to marry. He notes that getting married is “extremely problematic” (*IBE* 14), that “divorces are made in Heaven” and remarks that marriages are a matter of business rather than pleasure (*IBE* 9).

When Cecily and Gwendolen find out that neither one of their fiancés is named Ernest they break off the engagements. Jack refers to this as a “ghastly state of things”, but Algernon claims that it is “the most wonderful Bunbury [he’s] ever had” (*IBE* 50). In addition to showcasing Algernon’s distaste for getting married, the latter statement raises some additional questions as to what exactly he has been doing during his time in Hertfordshire. While Jack holds a less cynical view than Algernon, it still applies to both of them that getting married would validate their status in the society. As Craft sees it, Jack and Algernon’s marriages are mostly about seeking access to women and the legitimacy and wealth that that would result from them (1990, 25).

The legitimacy offered by marriage is the answer to the question of why get married at all since it seems so objectionable. Lord Caversham states that “[b]achelors are not fashionable any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them” (*IH* 48). As

Bristow points out, marriage is an escape from the scrutiny of one's personal life (1997, 214). The idea that marriage actually brings with it a certain degree of freedom is present elsewhere as well: In *A Woman of No Importance* Lady Hunstanton argues that "all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men" (*WNI* 39). Precisely because marriage is considered such an important institution in society, is it possible to turn it into a kind of masquerade.

Wilde's plays are filled with married people or people looking to get married but there is hardly a happy couple in sight. Furthermore, when the purpose of a marriage is to establish a stable family in order to perpetuate existing values and to regulate sexuality, none of the marriages represented seem like resounding successes. The kind of marriage promoted by the likes of Lady Bracknell seems old-fashioned and its permanence is dependent on the degrading sacrifices of the woman. Her stance is also hypocritical since in her own family she is in a position of influence: it is other women she expects to become good little wives. The romantic ideal also fails to live up to the job of enabling a stable family environment. The structural inequality between the genders is so considerable that a relationship truly based on love and equality is a rare occurrence.

The most interesting of the three representations is the last one because the characters have such disparaging views on marriage, yet they still choose to take part. In using marriage as a legitimating structure they manage to turn it on its head: instead of maintaining the heteronormative values the society is based on, marriage affords precisely the kind of freedoms (sexual and otherwise) that it seeks to regulate.

### **5.3 Family in the plays**

As institutional structures in society, marriage and family are tightly wound together. It is no wonder, then, that the critical attitude I have explored in regards to marriage continues in

Wilde's representations of family. As an example of the disruption of marriage and family as the stable underpinnings of society, let us consider Algernon's continuation to his argument that a married person will be very glad to know Bunbury:

ALGERNON: ...You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none.

JACK [*sententiously*]: That, my dear young friend, is the theory that corrupt French Drama had been propounding for the last fifty years.

ALGERNON: Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time. (*IBE* 14)

As Lalonde points out, Algernon's initial comment threatens the patriarchal institution of marriage as a stable relationship confined to two people (2005, 668). In addition, Algernon calls into question the whole stability of the English home. Lalonde continues by noting that Algernon's suggestion of corruption in the English home is only possible because it works as a punch line, even though in laughing the audience at least subconsciously acknowledges that there is some element of truth in the statement (*ibid.*). This is one example of how humour works with the subversive elements in the plays, which I will be examining more closely in 6.2.

The above is not the only instance of criticism directed towards the family unit. Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the character of Lady Bracknell assumes the role of the head of the family, which would traditionally have been the place of the father in a patriarchal society. She is the one that interviews Jack to find out whether he is suitable for Gwendolen and it is her permission that both Jack and Algernon require in order to marry. Lord Bracknell does not appear in the play at all, and is only spoken of in less than flattering terms: "Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man" (*IBE* 44). It

seems the traditional roles of husband and wife have been inverted, leaving Lord Bracknell as the stay-at-home husband.

But if the home is the sphere of the man, that does not guarantee that he holds the power even there, as is apparent when Algernon informs Lady Bracknell he will have to give up the pleasure of dining with them:

LADY BRACKNELL [*frowning*] : I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that. (*IBE* 16)

The man who would conventionally be considered the head of the family, who has already been confined to the home, is deemed so unimportant and replaceable that he can be banished from the dinner table, and apparently not for the first time either. Furthermore, the table arrangements that Lady Bracknell is concerned about dictate that there must be an equal number of men and women. Therefore, the fact that Algernon's removal from the dinner table would necessitate Lord Bracknell's removal as well, quite clearly implies that one of them is considered to be in the position of the woman. While Algernon may be effeminate, Lady Bracknell has herself had a hand in moulding him into "an extremely... eligible young man" (*IBE* 60) and is unlikely to cast him as the female of the pair. I would then argue that the role of the woman falls on Lord Bracknell, completing the reversal of the traditional gender roles.

Lady Bracknell is an fascinating character because as has just been shown, she has adopted the dominant role of a matriarch. Yet at the same time, as discussed in 5.2.1, she imposes traditional ideology on other people in insisting on arranged marriages (arranged by her, naturally) and rejecting the notion of marriage based on personal compatibility. Lady Bracknell's independence almost invites a comparison to the New Woman, but in fact the New Woman advocated equality between the genders whereas Lady Bracknell goes much

further than that in actually assuming the dominant position and constricting her husband to the inferior role.

The role of family as the determinant of one's character is also questioned in the plays. For instance, Lady Bracknell questions Jack on his parentage in order to determine his eligibility and is quite scandalised to find out that Jack's parents are unknown because he was found in a hand-bag. In Lady Bracknell's view "[t]o be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life" (*IBE* 22). She goes on to strongly suggest that Jack acquire some relations as soon as possible: "You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter . . . to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel." (*IBE* 23)

This interaction clearly shows the importance of family relations in regard to status and marital eligibility. More than that, though; the sheer ridiculousness of Lady Bracknell's clearly impossible demand that Jack "make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent" (*IBE* 22) makes a mockery of the whole system. The farce continues when Jack actually does manage to find out his parentage through the most unlikely of coincidences. As if by magic the name of the father resolves everything and all is well in the world. Although the play finishes in perfect form (with no less than three probable marriages), the great concern over Jack's parentage seems completely out of proportion. That Jack is only able to comply with Lady Bracknell's demands through an incredibly unlikely coincidence and a fantastic piece of luck only highlights the fact that her demands are unreasonable in the first place.

Similarly in *A Woman of No Importance* the family as an institution quite fails to live up to the importance bestowed upon it. We have Mr Kelvil, a Member of Parliament who feels that English home-life "is the mainstay of our moral system" (*WNI* 25). Yet, as Peter Raby points out, Kelvil's own wife and eight children are at the seaside, and their absence does not



much seem to bother him (1997b, 152). It is even implied that Mrs Kelvil might prefer the separation since the public engagements which keep Mr Kelvil away from them are said to be “a great source of gratification” (*WNI* 26) to her.

In contrast to the Kelvils we have Mrs Arbuthnot, the fallen woman, and her home. Having raised a bastard son under an assumed name, her home hardly conforms to society’s expectations of an ideal family. However, when Mrs Allonby and Lady Hunstanton visit, they find “quite the happy English home” (*WNI* 96) with “[f]resh natural flowers, books that don’t shock one, pictures that one can look at without blushing” (*WNI* 96-97). Compared to the rooms of most women in London, Mrs Arbuthnot’s is that “of a sweet saint” (*WNI* 96). Where the MP has failed in creating a stable family life, it seems the woman cast aside by society has succeeded.

The question of legitimacy also comes up in relation to Mrs Arbuthnot and her illegitimate son with Lord Illingworth. On learning that he has a son, Illingworth proposes to bequeath Gerald his property:

According to our ridiculous English laws, I can't legitimise Gerald.  
But I can leave him my property. Illingworth is entailed, of course,  
but it is a tedious barrack of a place. He can have Ashby . . .  
Harborough . . . and the house in St. James Square.  
(*WNI* 111)

The actual distinction between Gerald and a legitimate heir is in his parent's lack of marriage which boils down to a few words on a piece of paper. But it is clearly a very powerful social contract because it has the potential to make a great change in Gerald's position. Gerald cannot have his father's estate or title, though Lord Illingworth rather unconvincingly argues that “a title is really rather a nuisance in these democratic days” (*WNI* 112). The only reason Gerald would be able to inherit property is because Illingworth has no legitimate heirs, which is why he assures Mrs Arbuthnot that he has not got “the slightest intention of marrying” (*WNI* 112) and therefore producing a legitimate heir to preempt Gerald's inheritance.

With it making such a vast difference, it is no wonder that Gerald's illegitimacy is treated as a very delicate subject by Mrs Arbuthnot. She has gone into great lengths to hide it, even Gerald himself is not aware of his own parentage. Once Lord Illingworth's offers have been rejected he goes on to say that “[i]t's been quite an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one's own rank . . . one's mistress. And one's -” (*WNI* 118), at which point he finds himself on the receiving end of a strike from Mrs Arbuthnot. She then falls sobbing on the sofa, upset that “he would have said it” (*WNI* 118). The “it” she is referring to, is the unsaid “bastard” that is wrought with meaning. Mrs Arbuthnot herself refers to Gerald as “nameless” (*WNI* 109), and even that only once. It is of course known to her that Gerald is illegitimate but Lord Illingworth was about to rather casually name Gerald as more than that. As powerful as the label “legitimate” is, its existence is entirely contingent on its opposite, the illegitimate. Without the category labelled as illegitimate, legitimacy would lose its meaning: if everyone was legitimate, no one would be legitimate, because there would be no point of comparison. So in order for the legitimate to stand out, the category of illegitimate needs to be created and maintained by constant marginalisation. The process of naming that polices the boundaries between legitimate/illegitimate is a powerful tool, and one that Mrs Arbuthnot is trying to save her son from.

The late-Victorian ideal was that the family would be a model of society in miniature and marriage was the pact through which families were formed. The representations in the plays tell another story. Happy, stable families that conform to the norms of society are nowhere to be seen. I think it is fair to say, as Lalonde puts it, that “Wilde celebrates the breakdown of the traditional family unit” (2005, 668). The traditional patriarchal rule is inverted and its naturalness is called into question. Even the heterosexuality inherent in the institutions of marriage and family is undermined. The family ideal is shown to be a construction and the most powerful and affluent are able to use the naturalised assumptions

implicit in the institutions to their own advantage. Even though the plays end in reaffirmation of marital bonds or creation of couples on their way to marriage and building their own families, both concepts have been so ruthlessly undermined that their success seems quite dubitable.

## **6. The Consequences**

In this chapter I will examine Wilde's trials and their influence to concepts of homosexual identity, particularly the connection between effeminacy and same-sex desire. I also want to look at the literary part of the trial in which there was an effort to use Wilde's writings as evidence against him to prove his sexual deviance. It is evident that the subversive ideas in Wilde's plays that I have examined were delivered to a "hostile" audience in the sense that they undermined the status quo. Therefore it would have been necessary to maintain a kind of plausible deniability. Finally, I will briefly examine how humour relates to upholding appearances and getting away with transgressing social norms.

### **6.1. The Trials**

The Wilde trials took place in the spring of 1895 when he was at the height of his fame. I say trials, because there were three: Wilde was the plaintiff in the first one, suing the Marquess of Queensberry for libel for publicly accusing him of sodomy (Foldy 1997, x). During the first trial Wilde was implicated in same-sex affairs which led to Queensberry's acquittal and Wilde being indicted for "acts of gross indecency" under the Criminal Law Amendment Act (ibid.). The second trial ended in a hung jury after which Wilde was convicted to two years of hard labour in a third trial (ibid.). Because of Wilde's fame and the nature of the crime, the trials garnered a huge amount of public attention (ibid. ix).

The way Wilde was portrayed in the press is relevant to the discussion of sexual identities. For one, the results of the trials were not a foregone conclusion as is clear from the fact that the first trial ended in a hung jury. According to Michael S. Foldy, even in the second trial against Wilde the general expectation inside the courtroom was that Wilde would be acquitted (1997, 48). Alan Sinfield argues that, Wilde, an effeminate dandy himself, was not obviously "gay" to his contemporaries. Sinfield asserts that even people who knew Wilde,

including his lawyer, thought him innocent (1994b, 1-2). The significance of this is that features like male effeminacy that signal homosexuality to us did not do so unequivocally before the trials.

Based partly on Ed Cohen's analysis of the coverage Wilde's trial received in the press, Bristow and Sinfield argue that the public understanding of same-sex passion transformed from thinking in terms of behaviour to thinking in terms of personality (1997, 200; 1994b, 3). Because the sexual acts Wilde was accused of were unmentionable, the press framed Wilde's crime in terms of his very persona (Sinfield 1994b, 3).

the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image. (ibid.)

That is to say, Wilde himself became the personification of his alleged offence, to the point that his very name would be used as a euphemism for a homosexual (ibid.).

Though inside the courtroom the expectation was for another hung jury, the coverage of the daily newspapers gave a very different view of the situation (Foldy 1997, 48). The reaction to Wilde in the press was extremely hostile: he was depicted as a deviant and when he finally did get convicted, "the overwhelming general sentiment was that Wilde had simply got what he deserved" (ibid. 66). Considering the stigma attached to same-sex passion in the 1890s, it is hardly surprising that the reaction was negative. However, rather than the extent of the reaction, I am more interested in how it was framed in the press and public opinion, and why.

Michael Foldy has examined the press reports of the third trial arguing that though a complete account of the public response is impossible to achieve, the press coverage did both reflect and modify general public opinion (1997, 49). Foldy argues that Wilde's crime was framed in terms of a failure to fulfil his moral duty to society (ibid. 89). As Dollimore points

out, sexual degeneracy was connected to an overall corruption of morals (1991, 67). As such Wilde's crime was seen as a threat to the family and to the society in general (Foldy 1997, 53). As I have argued, regulating sexual behaviour was one of the major functions of marriage and the family and that the family was seen as an integral unit of society. This is why Wilde's transgression of the accepted norms of sexual behaviour was seen as an affront on the entire society. The acts of gross indecency Wilde was convicted of were not the real crime, rather it was "his general efforts to subvert and undermine the official status quo" (ibid. 152).

In my analysis of Wilde's comedies, I have repeatedly noted that even as they subvert heteronormative values, the plays still maintain a kind of heteronormative decorum. Wilde's ability to create these kinds of layers of meaning has been noted by other critics as well (Cohen, Craft, Sinfield among others). Why this maintenance of appearances was necessary becomes evident in the light of Wilde's trials.

What Foldy refers to as the "literary part" of the case consisted of Wilde being questioned on the morality of various works of his (1997, 5). Though none of Wilde's plays were among the texts, the list did have fictional works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which had already raised accusations of immorality on its publication (ibid 5, 80). The literary works were never a great part of the case; at most they could cast doubt on Wilde's morality and character (ibid. 6). However, that they were included in the trials at all shows that perceived transgressions of society's norms were not without their consequences.

Wilde's response to the questioning of the morality in his works was to assert that people interpreted his writings based on their own values and perspectives and that he was not responsible for their impressions (Foldy 1997, 6, 12). This rejection of accountability for readers' interpretations of his works is very much in line with the Aesthetic and Decadent notion of divorcing art and beauty from morality. In fact, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Wilde asserted that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” (*Dorian*, 5), a view which was repeated in the trials. The reason why Wilde's literary works did not amount to very much evidence against him was because it was very hard to prove that they actually contained anything untoward. In essence, the textual “gaps, blanks and indeterminacies” (Foldy 1997, 116) of Wilde’s works enabled him to retain plausible deniability and to argue that the reader, not the author was accountable for any immoral notions (ibid.).

## 6.2 Layers of Meaning

In 1890 Wilde published a shorter serialised version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though Wilde's style was already rife with ambiguity, he had to revise the text for the novel version to remove parts that were more explicit in same-sex desire. As Denisoff points out, this shows that Wilde was conscious of the societal values that he was writing within (2007, 40). So far I have argued that Wilde criticises, undermines and subverts the values of his society, however, now I would like to examine precisely how Wilde manages to do this in the plays that were enormously successful and popular prior to the trials.

Christopher Craft observes that Wilde achieves his criticism “without the slightest breach in heterosexual decorum” (1990, 23). Since *The Importance of Being Earnest* deals with sexuality more than any of the other plays, I would argue that the construction of ambiguity and indeterminacies is most visible in it. This because of all the topics I have covered here, sexual transgressions were considered the most severe attack against society, as Wilde’s trial should show.

In my section on sexuality I discussed the concept of Bunburyism and a few other similar linguistic puns. Therein I noted that ambiguity or even obscurity was paramount, because staging a play openly referring to same-sex sexual behaviour would have been

impossible. Craft emphasises the role of language, specifically puns, and argues that homosexual desire is represented as the “punning other of a dominant signification” (1990, 24), meaning that it is present but hidden at the same time.

Jonathan Dollimore and Ed Cohen both recognise the same quality in Wilde’s writing. Because of the cultural climate Wilde and his contemporaries had to devise ways of expressing same-sex passion without explicit violations of the dominant heterosexual norms (Cohen 1987, 805, 810). For instance, *Bunburying* allows readings with varying levels of subversiveness. I have also shown how same-sex passion was explored through the legitimate cross-sex structures. Dollimore specifies that Wilde’s tactic is that of inversion: a transgressive aesthetic that questions and displaces from within the dominant structures of society (1991, 14). Throughout my analysis I have shown that Wilde uses inversion in his representations. In dealing with gender and sexual identities inside and outside the institutions of marriage and family, the dominant values are constantly undermined, but at the same time also reproduced, for instance in the plotlines that end in seemingly affirmative marriages.

It is appropriate for Wilde's Society comedies to contain layers of meaning as the world he depicts in them exhibits a great deal of concern over appearances. As Lady Bracknell puts it: “we live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces” (*IBE* 58). Of the philosophy behind *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde wrote “we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (quoted in *IBE* ii). Lalonde suggests this could be used as a kind of reading strategy for the play: “the triviality of the play should be taken as a signal that beneath the most trivial matters, in the heart of the self-avowed trivial play, there is something serious lurking” (2005, 665). This seriousness has been identified by some critics as a homosexual subtext, but I agree with Lalonde that that is a limited view and Wilde goes much further and undermines some of the most important institutions in society (*ibid.*). It has been noted by several critics that in the



staging of the plays Wilde used the appearance of surfaces to his advantage (Gagnier 1997, 27; Kaplan 1997, 252). The presentation of Society was extremely luxurious, glamorous and fashionable, that is to say, very flattering, while at the same time their moral flaws and hypocrisies were exposed and mocked (Kaplan 1997, 252). This mix of flattery and mockery made it very difficult to reject outright the entirety of the plays.

Humour also plays its part in making the plays “pass”. The effect of humour is that it allows for more room to deal with social taboos without encountering as much opposition. Laughter (or even amusement) gives the audience emotional pleasure which in turn makes them less resistant to ideas that might otherwise be considered quite incendiary (Ziv 1984, 2, 40). Discussing Algernon’s disparaging comments on the “happy English home” (*IBE* 14), Lalonde notes that out of context they could be mistaken for a diatribe condemning the deterioration of family values (2005, 668). That is, if the tone was lamenting rather than celebratory (*ibid.*). Actually Algernon’s claim that “in married life three is company and two is none” (*IBE* 14) and the punch line that follows, solicit laughter that at the same time implies agreement with the sentiment (otherwise it would hardly be funny) and makes the subversiveness of a statement seem far less threatening. As Lalonde points out, the kind of subversive discourse that Algernon's comments exemplify can only exist within the protective environment of humour (2005, 668).

Wilde's humour is mainly consistent of his brilliant epigrams that work because they exploit the reader's (or audience's) expectations. For instance, Algernon's assertion that “divorces are made in heaven” (*IBE* 9) clearly refers to and counters the established proverb “marriages are made in heaven”. The implications of Algernon's statement are not dwelled on, as he quickly moves on to a more pressing matter, namely, cucumber sandwiches. In this way, the audience's laughter is aroused without them having time to really consider the significance of what they are laughing at. As Lalonde argues, “time and time again, the

audience is duped into laughing at what they might otherwise consider a real threat to established patriarchal order” (2005, 668).

The importance of the layers of meaning and ambiguity achieved with humour and wordplay becomes particularly evident during and after the trials. Even before the actual conviction, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, which were both having very successful runs in the West End, were taken off the stage (Kaplan 1997, 253). Joel Kaplan suggests that this was caused by the fact that in light of how Wilde was being represented in the press (as a degenerate), audiences were suddenly seeing the plays' “men with shameful secrets or alter egos” very differently (1997, 253). With Wilde's persona becoming so firmly fixed in perversion, any hint towards transgression in the plays, no matter how ambiguous, could be seen as incriminating. Where before Wilde could have maintained plausible deniability, after the immense publicity of the trials it was impossible. However, while people undoubtedly saw Wilde's works in a different light, because Wilde became so infamous, I suspect his plays would have been taken off the stage even if they contained no subversive material whatsoever.

Once the plays started to get performed again in the early twentieth century, the dandy was a problematic figure because dandy effeminacy was then indelibly linked with homosexuality. Characters like Lord Darlington, Lord Illingworth or Lord Goring had to be masculinised because they appeared “queer” in the post-trial public consciousness (Kaplan 1997, 257). Despite this, Wilde's plays remained in demand, and have continued to be so both on stage and as motion picture adaptations all the way to the twenty-first century. Though I have concentrated on Wilde's social criticism throughout this thesis, it should be noted that Wilde had an incredible talent with language and I suspect his witticisms and turns of phrase are one of the reasons his writings have enjoyed such longevity. Additionally, though cultural values have changed considerably since the late-Victorian period, so much so that Wilde's

plays no longer appear particularly subversive, the plays still raise issues that are a part of today's society: things like gender equality and the importance of institutions like marriage and the family are still discussed. When these things are packaged in Wilde's ingenious paradoxes and epigrams it is no wonder the plays remain as engaging as ever.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to examine how Wilde represents gender, sexuality, marriage and family and how those depictions compare to the dominant norms of the 1890s. The fin de siècle can be characterised with a concern over the breakdown of traditional values, and Wilde's plays certainly fit into that view. He rejected the notion of essential identities and it shows in his writings. Whether it is the morally respectable fallen woman, the New Woman adopting traditionally male characteristics, the dandy who reclaims effeminacy and still remains more effective than the manly man, or the female dandy who wields power beyond the allowance of a conventional woman, Wilde's characters largely challenge what it means to be a woman or a man, feminine or masculine. Even figures like the angel-wife that seem to comply to the norms of the late-Victorian time have their believability undermined.

The same kind of opposition to essentialist categorisation that challenged the idea of separate spheres for men and women is visible in Wilde's representations of sexuality. While the medicalised discourse claimed an innate core to homosexuality, the sexualities depicted in the plays resist such easy categorisation instead making the case for socially constructed sexuality. In accordance with the more complicated view of sexuality advanced in the plays, the relationship between homosociality and same-sex desire is also explored through the fascinating figure of the dandy who uses to his advantage the very same patriarchal power that seeks to regulate sexuality.

As for the representations of marriage in the plays, the most prominent view propagated by the dandies completely undermines the institution and its purpose in society. Wilde's dandies used the respectability and the legitimacy provided by marriage as a cover to transgress the kind of family values the institution is supposed to foster. The more progressive view of marriage that considers romantic love essential is shown to fail as long as the

inequality of genders prevails. Similarly, Wilde's depictions of family life show families failing to propagate the values they would be expected to as the miniature model of society.

I mentioned in the introduction that the play also contains an aspect of conformity. The fact that all the comedies end in either the reaffirmation or the creation of new marriages is one example of how the plays reproduce heteronormativity. There is also the curious character of Lady Bracknell, who herself goes against the patriarchal ideology, but at the same time actively polices other people's transgressions. I hope I have made clear that the fin de siècle audience would have been hostile to open criticism of prevailing gender roles or the institutions of marriage and the family. Sexuality in particular was a risky topic, as the range of acceptable sexual behaviour was very narrow (basically only reproductive heterosexuality), and there was a strong drive to regulate sexuality, even by legal means, as Wilde would discover.

Wilde used various techniques to achieve the effect of layers of meaning that work on different levels and allow him a kind of plausible deniability. Spectacular staging, humour, wordplay and ambiguity are all used to distract from the subversion that seems to be almost constant. From our twenty-first century perspective it might seem that Wilde might have easily gone further than he did, but if we take into consideration the cultural context, I think he actually treads the line between conformity and subversion carefully and quite skilfully.

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