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The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and “Modern” Women

MARGARET DIANE STETZ

WE need not search far to discover what Oscar Wilde meant to the men of his day. The letters and memoirs of his contemporaries and associates, from Frank Harris to Max Beerbohm, are well known and readily accessible.¹ So too are the various works by male dramatists and novelists that Wilde inspired, from W. S. Gilbert's *Patience* (1881) to Robert Hichens's satire *The Green Carnation* (1894). But to learn about Wilde's significance for late-Victorian women, especially for those who were also writers, we must go farther afield—into the still-too-neglected world of female-authored prose, to works such as Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894).

Though rarely read today, Dixon's novel fulfilled many important functions in its time. It was a classic bildungsroman, tracing a female protagonist from idealistic girlhood to disillusion-

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¹ See, for instance, Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves*, ed. John F. Gallagher (New York: Grove Press, 1963); *The Playwright and the Pirate: Bernard Shaw and Frank Harris, a Correspondence*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1982); *Letters of Max Beerbohm, 1892–1956*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: John Murray, 1988); Max Beerbohm, *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964); and *Max and Will: Max Beerbohm and William Rothenstein, Their Friendship and Letters, 1893–1945*, ed. Mary M. Lago and Karl Beckson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975).

sioned maturity, that brought the genre forward into the new territory of Social Darwinism and French-influenced naturalism even before Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896).² It was a roman à clef, reflecting its author's own experiences as a professional journalist—experiences that made her aware of her privileged class position, yet that also demonstrated the limits of privilege when it came to gender and, thus, the links between herself and working-class or even “fallen” women with no privilege. It also embodied a nonstandard genre of narrative, as a New Woman novel with a political thrust, urging along both its heroine and its woman reader toward an increased feminist consciousness. And, though this may be less obvious to us now, Dixon's fiction also played a fourth role—that is, as a conduct manual.

Like eighteenth-century examples of the genre, *The Story of a Modern Woman* acted as a guide for young ladies, previewing the pitfalls and opportunities they would encounter on leaving the shelter of domestic life. In this regard, however, Dixon's novel served in particular as a didactic text for would-be women artists and writers—for those coming to London to make a living on their own and negotiating simultaneously the spheres of “Grub Street” publishing and of upper-middle-class society, with its receptions, theater parties, and kettledrums. The narrative's modernity lay not only in the kinds of experiences for which it prepared its female readers, with an emphasis on the workings of the literary profession, but also in the new social types to which it introduced them.³

If, as the novel's title suggests, the protagonist's experiences were meant to be representative, then one of the seemingly representative experiences for “modern” women in gen-

² See Margaret Diane Stetz, “Ella Hepworth Dixon,” in *Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists, Second Series*, ed. George M. Johnson, vol. 197 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999), pp. 99–109.

³ In this aspect, Dixon's novel was much like another novel of the period that also functioned as a conduct manual for would-be female authors, *A Writer of Books* (1898), by “George Paston” (Emily Morse Symonds). For more about similar guides for “modern” women, and especially for women authors, see Margaret Diane Stetz, “*New Grub Street* and the Woman Writer of the 1890s,” in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s*, ed. Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 21–45.

eral in the London of the late 1880s and early 1890s was to encounter Oscar Wilde: he turns up in Dixon's narrative not once but twice, in two different guises and in two contexts. Wilde's first appearance is as Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, with his double-barreled surname reflecting both a British persona in its first half and an Irish one in its second (bearing more than an echo of Thackeray's scaliwag Redmond Barry from *Barry Lyndon* [1844]). At a party given by Lady Jane Ives, an aristocratic society hostess, Bosanquet-Barry makes his entrance wearing "Parma violets in his coat" and accompanied by "a pale-faced boy with tired eyelids and an exaggerated button-hole."⁴ Lest anyone doubt the identities of this pair, the "pale-faced boy" is named "Beaufort Flower, though he was usually briefly addressed as 'Beaufy'" (p. 80), an unmistakable allusion to Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas (also known as "Bosie"). Mr. Bosanquet-Barry is not only a fixture of Lady Jane Ives's set, but he is also the editor of a magazine called the *Comet*; he and his circle of "boys," all "nice and hot from Oxford" (p. 79), are an integral part of the publishing scene to which "modern" women aspire to belong. As Lady Jane's daughter explains to the female protagonist, a budding author and journalist: "Mary, you must be introduced. You'll have to know these people if you're going to be an artist" (p. 79).

And so, too, the female reader who wishes to be a "modern" woman must be introduced to Wilde by this novel. Indeed, she is introduced, a second time, through the character of the nameless editor of *The Fan*, a magazine for women modeled after Wilde's *The Woman's World*, to which Ella Hepworth Dixon contributed several articles and short stories in the late 1880s. Like Oscar Wilde, who, as Talia Schaffer explains in a recent essay, "constructed himself as a grateful and appreciative inheritor of women's culture" by emphasizing his role as an inheritor of women's couture, Dixon's editor-figure is an expert on ladies' dress.⁵ The novel presents this gender-blurring expertise

⁴ Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Merlin Press, 1990), pp. 78–79. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁵ Talia Schaffer, "Fashioning Aestheticism by Aestheticizing Fashion: Wilde, Beerbohm, and the Male Aesthetes' Sartorial Codes," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28 (2000), 41.

as a sign of newness, of modernity, though perhaps of a discomfiting sort for the woman writer on a budget:

to [Mary] the young man who spends his life describing petticoats was as yet an unknown entity. She felt vaguely uncomfortable as the supercilious editor's eye dwelt upon her, not feeling sure that he would approve of the shape of her sleeves, and being morally certain that he was by this time aware that her gown was not lined with silk. (p. 113)

Comfortable or uncomfortable, the experience of meeting Wilde, of dealing with him both socially and professionally, and even of allowing oneself to be surveyed and judged by him, was—as Dixon's novel suggests—part of the very fabric, so to speak, of life for “modern” women, particularly for would-be women authors. What was true in fiction was also true in actuality: since the early 1880s Wilde had made himself an integral and indispensable part of the careers and personal histories of his female contemporaries. He often served as a source of literary commissions—as he does for the protagonist of Dixon's narrative—not only during his stint at *The Woman's World* in the late 1880s but also, before and afterward, through the exercise of influence with editors and publishers. He played the role, too, of an unpaid literary advisor. In 1886, for instance, when E. (Edith) Nesbit sent him *Lays and Legends*, her first volume of poetry, he wrote back to praise it and to say: “Any advice I can give you is of course at your disposal.”⁶

The offer to Nesbit might have seemed patronizing, considering that Wilde was only four years her senior and had published his own first collection, *Poems* (1881), a mere five years earlier. Yet it took into account the reality of the “modern” woman's dilemma, which was present even when that woman had become a published author. Men still had greater access to and information about the world of books and letters, and thus, regardless of their feminist principles, women writers had to rely upon male contacts in pursuing careers. And many took up Wilde's offer of assistance. Indeed, few prominent men of

⁶ Wilde, letter to E. Nesbit, November 1886, in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 190.

the day did more than Wilde to encourage the ambitions of female artists and to promote their access to the public sphere or to influence the social climate in ways beneficial to middle- and upper-middle-class women seeking advancement or financial independence. As Schaffer justly asserts, "Oscar Wilde's generosity helped many women's careers."⁷

Given this close identification and interdependency of the "modern" woman with Wilde, it is both shocking and somewhat puzzling to consider what happened in 1895, just a year after the publication of Dixon's novel. During and after Wilde's trials, denunciation by Philistine mobs was only to be expected. But to be renounced by the Bohemian elite, the inhabitants of the "New Grub Street" (to use George Gissing's term), who were seemingly Wilde's kindred spirits, was really an appalling betrayal. This was especially true when the hostility came from women writers.

One of the harshest private pronouncements on Wilde's conviction appeared in a letter that Alice Meynell sent from Clevedon to her husband, Wilfrid, shortly after the verdict was issued. Meynell, born in 1847, was a figure of great distinction in the literary 1890s. She occupied the center of an important circle of men—all of them entranced by her charms—that included the novelist George Meredith and the poets Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson; women, such as the Irish writer Katherine Tynan, also doted upon her. She was widely known both for poetry and for essays on modern life and literature, and her publisher—John Lane, sole proprietor of the Bodley Head firm, following his split from Elkin Mathews—happened to be Wilde's publisher as well. As a young woman Meynell had converted to Roman Catholicism, a move that Wilde himself was several times on the verge of making. Her sphere and Wilde's, while by no means identical, overlapped through a number of acquaintances and intimates. Moreover, in his role as editor of *The Woman's World* Wilde had written to her in 1887, inviting her to be a contributor to the magazine.⁸

⁷ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 20–21.

⁸ See Wilde, letter to Alice Meynell, September 1887, in *Letters*, pp. 204–5.

It is, therefore, quite astonishing now to read her words upon the court's sentence: "As *seclusion* two years are far too little. As punishment one wishes they might be made more tolerable. But while there is a weak omnibus horse at work or a hungry cat I am not going to spend feeling on Oscar."⁹

What was going on here? Certainly not just an overzealous interest in animal rights. One could of course point to a degree of ignorance that was hardly unique, given Meynell's gender and class. As a lady, she would have had no firsthand acquaintance with the horrors of late-Victorian prison life. A sentence of two years, even at hard labor, probably conjured up no images in her mind that approached the physical, as well as psychological, tortures that Wilde was about to undergo. She may also have assumed—wrongly, as it turned out—that Wilde's status as a gentleman would have ensured special privileges and easier conditions of imprisonment than those afforded the so-called criminal classes. Thus, these pitiless words may have reflected her belief that Wilde had merely been dishonored, not that he was about to endure sufferings far worse than those of tired horses or starving cats.

But Meynell's judgment also reveals the fact that she saw this disgrace as deserved. In her view—as well as in the eyes of some female contemporaries, such as the novelist Mary Augusta Ward, who had entertained Wilde and his wife at her house on several occasions in the mid 1880s—Oscar Wilde was an immoral character and possibly a dangerous influence.¹⁰ And here we run up against Victorian homophobia, which was by no means confined to muscular men of the Rudyard Kipling and W. E. Henley type, but was also shared by women—even by sophisticated, intellectual, "modern" women.

Yet homophobia alone is not the whole story of why some women condemned Oscar Wilde or passed lightly over his

⁹ Meynell, quoted in June Badeni, *The Slender Tree: A Life of Alice Meynell* (Padstow, Cornwall: Tabb House, 1981), p. 115 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ See John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-eminent Edwardian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 191. In fact, as Jean Moorcroft Wilson reveals, Ward was also the main instigator behind the firing of Aubrey Beardsley from *The Yellow Book*, because she associated Beardsley with Wilde and his supposedly immoral circle. See Wilson, *I Was an English Poet: A Critical Biography of Sir William Watson (1858–1936)* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1981), p. 125.

downfall. Most likely, it was not even the sole force behind Meynell's seemingly cruel dismissal of Wilde's fate. In the case of society women—who, because of Victorian patterns of social life, often knew both Wilde and his wife—there was a greater emotional identification with Constance Lloyd Wilde, as well as a tendency to feel for her as the supposedly injured party who, through her husband's actions, had lost her social position and economic stability for herself and her children. This feeling would have been just as true had the cause been financial impropriety or an allegation of treason, rather than an offense against statutes forbidding sex between men. Women understood that, under both Victorian law and custom, wives had no separate status or identity; their own existences were determined by the actions of the men they had married and whom they could divorce only at great cost and at the price of wearing the unsavory label "divorcée." As Anne Clark Amor, in her biography of Constance Wilde, puts it: "Any woman suddenly left alone with two small boys to provide for has to face up to major difficulties. But in Constance's case she had to cope with scandal, exile and the whole web of legal and financial problems that Oscar's disgrace had brought upon her."¹¹ In Meynell's seemingly heartless words may lie the anger of one wife on behalf of another, within a system where women—even "modern" women—often felt powerless.

Certainly, it would have been easier for many upper-middle-class Englishwomen to sympathize with the wife who learns that her husband has been cheating on her than with the husband who cheats. The world of the social elite was rife with evidence of mistresses and of liaisons between gentlemen and working-class women. But it was also a society in which most gentlemen who had been through the public school system, and then through the homoerotic environments of Oxford or Cambridge, had enjoyed sexual and "sentimental" attachments to other men—often men with whom they continued to socialize later in life. The outrage that Meynell and some of her female contemporaries displayed toward Wilde

¹¹ *Mrs Oscar Wilde: A Woman of Some Importance* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983), p. 193.

might thus have been generated by a more personal anxiety. Yes, Wilde had been consorting with rent boys in Alfred Taylor's brothel, but did any lady who spent the summer in the country really know where her husband went when he said that he had to run up to town on business? Literary men may have shunned Wilde, immediately before and after his conviction, out of fear of meeting the same end at the hands of Victorian justice, yet his female literary acquaintances were more likely to scorn him out of distress at the thought of sharing the fate of Constance Wilde.

But even before the trials of 1895, and despite Wilde's own professed respect and admiration for women, there were, in fact, some women writers who had found him objectionable on a variety of grounds. Perhaps one of the most peculiar instances of such aversion is recorded by Gertrude Atherton in her lengthy 1932 memoir, *Adventures of a Novelist*. Atherton was a transplanted American, from the hard-drinking and quick-shooting world of a California ranch, who cut a figure in English society rather like that of a character in a Mae West film, such as *Goin' to Town* (1935). Atherton was blowzy yet glamorous, lavishly overdressed, and given to spinning tales about herself. As a professional writer she turned out a series of sensational, overheated novels, but she began her English literary career in the mid 1890s quite respectably, as an author published by John Lane's Bodley Head, the firm that also published Oscar Wilde. Given her rough-and-tumble background she had surprising pretensions to being an aesthete: she considered herself both a connoisseur of the beautiful and a receiver of psychic vibrations, and it was in this capacity that she recoiled from Wilde. As Atherton reports in her memoir, she had called upon Lady Wilde, Oscar's mother—whom she describes as “a laboriously built-up terribly old woman who subsisted mainly on indigestible cake”—during an 1889 visit to London:

The room was close and stuffy, the furniture as antiquated as herself; the springs could not have been mended for forty years. She talked . . . in a weak quavering voice, mainly of the triumphs of her exalted son . . .

“I see little of him,” she said sadly. “He is so very busy. . . . But he has promised to come to see me next Saturday, and I should

be delighted if you would come too. I will write him about you and I am sure he will bring you a lily."

Of course I responded with fervor

I intended to go on the following Saturday, for who would not have welcomed in those days the opportunity to meet Oscar Wilde? But a day or two later I saw a photograph of him. His mouth covered half of his face, the most lascivious coarse repulsive mouth I had ever seen. I might stand it in a large crowded drawing-room, but not in a parlor eight-by-eight lit by three tallow candles. I should feel as if I were under the sea pursued by some bloated monster of the deep, and have nightmares for a week thereafter. I sent a telegram to Lady Wilde regretting that I was in bed with a cold.¹²

Atherton seems at least to have kept her offensive opinions to herself during Wilde's lifetime. But Lady Colin Campbell, a society beauty painted by Giovanni Boldini, did not: she let it be known in the 1880s that the tall, pale, pudgy Wilde reminded her of a "great white caterpillar," or, according to other versions, "The Great White Slug."¹³ After the circulation of this bon mot she and Wilde were never again on speaking terms, a situation made awkward by the fact that she worked as a journalist and editor, just as Wilde himself did before his theatrical successes. Literary London at the end of the century was, as Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* suggests, an incestuous scene. In 1889, at a banquet given by the Society of Authors, Lady Campbell and Wilde found themselves seated next to one another, and Wilde complained bitterly afterward of the discomfort this had caused him. For Wilde, to whom dinner-party conversation, especially with women, was the stuff of life and also the occasion for trying out lines that would later appear in print, nothing could have been worse than a frosty evening of silence on one side.

Yet, at least before the trials, such instances of women in artistic circles loathing Wilde were very much the exception. From the beginning of his fame, Wilde's version of aestheticism

¹² Gertrude Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist* (New York: Liveright, 1932), pp. 183–84.

¹³ See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 298n; and *Letters*, p. 222, n. 1.

had involved a political dimension. It had embraced not only an abstract celebration of female appearance or an interest in women as decorative ornaments but also a wholehearted concern with the conditions and details of modern women's lives—especially with the lives of women who were creative artists themselves and who were trying to forge careers. Just as important to Wilde as how a drawing room was furnished was the question of who inhabited it, and what she faced when she left its confines. A cartoon of 4 February 1882 for *Punch* hit close to the mark in imagining an aesthetic maiden bidding a sad farewell to Wilde, as he embarked upon his yearlong American lecture tour.¹⁴ Numerous women in England were indeed unhappy to lose his company and his help, for in the few short years since graduating from Oxford in 1878 he had already made a wide circle of female friendships.

In this regard Wilde was truly unusual, for he was moving outside the pattern of masculine behavior within his class. We may argue forever over whether Wilde was homosexual or bisexual, but what we can say with assurance is that he was *bisocial*. An upper-middle-class boy, whether Irish or English, entered an all-male environment from the time that he began school, and he remained in it until completing his university education. That was certainly Wilde's own experience, from the time that he entered the Portora Royal School at Enniskillen at age ten until he left Oxford at age twenty-four. On arriving in London and choosing a profession, a gentleman, gay or straight, was expected to demonstrate his allegiance to the homosocial sphere that Elaine Showalter calls "Clubland":

Clubland reinforced the spatial as well as the social boundaries separating men and women. . . . Clubland operated as a lifetime training ground for men wishing to exclude women . . . [and as] the stronghold and headquarters of opposition to women's suffrage The London gentleman could spend his entire life moving through "a maze of clubs," athletic, political, and social. . . .¹⁵

¹⁴ See "Ariadne in Naxos; or Very Like a Wail," *Punch*, 82 (1882), 58.

¹⁵ *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), pp. 11–12.

The late-Victorian man who married did not need to change this way of life. His working hours and his hours of leisure alike continued to be spent largely with men; only his holidays abroad might necessitate passing the time in the company of his wife and daughters. Wilde, too, moved easily among men, with numerous male friends, heterosexual and homosexual alike. Just how much the masculine preserve of Clubland mattered to Wilde may be gauged by the fact that he initiated his foolhardy lawsuit against the Marquess of Queensberry, Bosie's father, only after an insulting message invaded the sanctity of the Albemarle Club. Yet Wilde was also a social rebel—almost a traitor to his gender—in seeking out the company of women and demonstrating how comfortable he was inhabiting their sitting rooms or going with them to their dressmakers, while also publicizing the pleasure he took in doing so. Such conduct might have been forgiven an Irish upstart if his intimacies had been formed only with duchesses, for they could better his position in London or pay for his literary ventures, and social climbing was something that all English gentlemen could understand. From the outset, however, Wilde befriended women who worked—especially women who worked in the arts—and who, in the eyes of other men, were creatures to be viewed with suspicion, if not hostility.

In the post-Freudian twentieth century, mothers were often accused of having “made” their sons gay. But I think that Lady Wilde, Oscar's mother, should be credited with having made her son *bi-social* and for having given him an appreciation of professional women that was rare among late-Victorian men of his background. Through her own career as a poet—an occupation that she continued to pursue seriously after marriage and, even more radically for a woman of her class, after motherhood—she accustomed him, from an early age, to seeing notions of female ambition and accomplishment as natural. She had been writing and publishing since her youth, but her first collection of poetry appeared in 1864, when her son Oscar was ten, and her second when he was thirteen years old. Lady Wilde thought of herself as a great artist; perhaps more important, she considered herself a professional one. Late in life,

when financial setbacks left her in precarious straits, she would apply for assistance from the Royal Literary Fund, which existed specifically for the benefit of professional authors.¹⁶ Thus, Wilde escaped the effects of the social brainwashing, so common in his day (and even in our own), that encouraged gentlemen to look down upon such women—working women, talented women, and women hungry for success—as failures or freaks.

Applying his mother's lessons, Wilde supported his spouse, Constance Lloyd Wilde, in her efforts at writing and public speaking, even after the births of their sons. According to Amor, Constance at one point considered going on the stage but decided instead to write about it, turning out unsigned articles for *The Lady's Pictorial* and other periodicals. She produced two slim volumes of children's tales and poems, and her involvement in the Rational Dress Society led her both to take the platform as a lecturer and to assume the editorship of the Society's quarterly.¹⁷ In 1895 she also privately printed a collection of her husband's epigrams, called *Oscariana*, which she had chosen and arranged herself. In each of his wife's projects Oscar Wilde was, by all accounts, helpful and encouraging.

Wilde, in fact, already had much practice in being helpful and encouraging to women who were attempting to make their livings in the arts. Neither Moisés Kaufman's recent play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997), with its all-male cast re-creating only Wilde's relations with men, nor Brian Gilbert's 1997 film *Oscar Wilde*, which erases all female friendships except one (with the comic novelist Ada Leverson), does justice to this side of Wilde—to his bi-sociability and his readiness to treat women as professional allies rather than as competitors. The list of women authors with whom Wilde was on friendly terms—often extremely friendly terms—is impressively long. It includes not only Leverson but also the popular novelist known as "Ouida"; the lesbian niece and aunt who wrote poetry together as "Michael Field"; the short-story writer and magazine editor who called herself "John Strange Winter"; the

¹⁶ See Ellmann, p. 7.

¹⁷ See Amor, pp. 66–67, 70.

Anglo-Jewish novelist Julia Frankau and her journalist sister, Eliza Aria; turn-of-the-century writers of fiction such as Julia Fletcher and Violet Hunt; and the Irish poet and political nationalist Katharine Tynan, among others.

In her 1913 volume of memoirs Tynan speaks of her first meeting with Wilde, in the 1880s, at his mother's house: "Then and always I found him pleasant, kind and interested. . . . I found nothing in him of the witty impertinence other people record."¹⁸ Of both Lady Wilde and her son, Tynan goes on to say: "My memory of them is entirely grateful. They were very kind to an obscure Irish versifier. Later on I contributed a series of articles to a magazine which Oscar edited for a time. . . . It is one of the kindnesses I owe to Oscar Wilde that he should have remembered and enrolled me among his contributors" (p. 151). The magazine to which Tynan alludes was *The Woman's World*; actually its title had been *The Lady's World*, until Wilde himself changed the name on accepting the position of editor in 1887—a change, however, that was suggested first by Dinah Mulock (also known as Mrs. Craik), author of *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1857).¹⁹ As Wilde explained in arguing for the use of the word "woman," the reference to ladies would "not be applicable to a magazine that aims at being the organ of women of intellect, culture, and position."²⁰ He might have said, more accurately, that it would not suit a magazine set on combining book reviews and writings on fashion, horseback riding, and other genteel occupations with contributions by women notorious for their social and political radicalism.

The contents of each issue of *The Woman's World* gave testimony to the breadth of Wilde's female friendships, for the majority of pieces had been solicited from acquaintances. Among the contributors was Olive Schreiner, who provided two prose allegories for two issues in 1888. In retrospect it seems extraordinary that Wilde would have asked Schreiner to be a contributor—rather as though someone today were to ask Andrea

¹⁸ Katharine Tynan, *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1913), p. 149.

¹⁹ See Simon Nowell-Smith, *The House of Cassell, 1848–1958* (London: Cassell, 1958), pp. 149–50.

²⁰ Wilde, quoted in Ellmann, p. 292.

Dworkin to write for *Good Housekeeping*—for only five years earlier Schreiner had turned the publishing world upside down with her fire-breathing feminist novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). The speeches of its protagonist, with their call for women to be allowed to enjoy both liberty and power, had both outraged and excited readers. At the time when Wilde knew her in the late 1880s, Schreiner, on a prolonged stay in London from her native South Africa, had become closely allied with the founders of English socialism and was interlacing socialist principles with her insistence upon equal political access and the opening of male-dominated occupations to women, along with an end to the sexual double standard. A former nursery governess who arrived in England without money or connections, Schreiner was the prototype of the sort of feminist reformer soon to be labeled in the popular press—and not often kindly—as the “New Woman.” As such, she was a most unlikely candidate to write for a mainstream women’s magazine that was looking to boost its circulation. That Wilde thought of her from the start as a potential contributor, and that she trusted him sufficiently to wish to be one, says much about how deeply Wilde identified with the issues dear to his female friends and how far he would go to promote both the causes and the women who espoused them.

Wilde brought this same readiness to make gestures of kindness and helpfulness to his relations with another group of working women: actresses. It is easy today to forget the dubious social position that even the most celebrated of these figures still occupied in the 1880s, the period when Wilde went out of his way to befriend them. Gentlemen might visit them backstage in their dressing rooms; gentlemen certainly might acquire them as mistresses, pay their bills, and even take houses for them; but gentlemen ordinarily would not treat them as social acquaintances like any other, to be called upon in the daylight and invited to call in return. Wilde cared not a jot for the respectability or lack thereof of his friends’ reputations, and, long before he took up this issue polemically in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), he had already defied the system that classified women as either “good” or “bad.” Both Ellen Terry (painted by John Singer Sargent in 1889 as the epitome of tow-

ering, unfeminine ambition in the role of Lady Macbeth) and Sarah Bernhardt (who let herself be photographed in a fearless, gender-bending version of Rational Dress in the studio where she sculpted) were, by any definition of the term, “fallen”; they were “bad” women—actresses known for their multiple affairs, whose presence increased the glamour but lowered the moral tone of their surroundings. Wilde socialized openly and delightedly with them, as well as with Lillie Langtry, the famous beauty and royal mistress, with whom Wilde basked in the notoriety of a very public acquaintance.

It has often been suggested that Wilde was using these women, Langtry in particular, to attract the notice of the press and thus to establish his own fame. So, too, he may have cultivated them and their contemporaries in the theater, such as Helena Modjeska and Mary Anderson, in order to recruit them for the stage projects that he was planning and composing early on, long before his hit plays of the 1890s. If so, then he was certainly casting his net widely and indiscriminately, for he was also ready to befriend female performers whose stars shone less brightly. For instance, on 7 September 1882, while in New York during his American tour, he wrote to Laura Don, an actress whom he had seen onstage the night before, with detailed advice about her costume:

Your dress, as the Princess, was quite delightful, and the silver bracelets you wore were very beautiful indeed. If you would allow me to suggest a change, I would ask you to consider whether the formal black and red horizontal stripes in the lining of your cloak in Act Five do not destroy by their over-definiteness the effect of your drapery and the long lines of your figure? Do you not think a plain dull red lining would give you the same colour-effect without the distraction of a commonplace pattern?

(*Letters*, p. 126)

Whatever use Wilde made of these actress friends was more than outweighed by his readiness to put himself at their disposal, in order to further their professional success. There is no disagreement about the fact that he served for a time as informal mentor both to Lillie Langtry and to the American-born actress (and later writer) Elizabeth Robins during the early

phases of their dramatic careers. Indeed, Wilde is credited with having talked Langtry into going on the stage in the first place.²¹

In an essay titled "A Verdict of Death: Oscar Wilde, Actresses and Victorian Women," Kerry Powell casts doubts upon the results of this altruism and concludes that the advice that Wilde gave Robins was ultimately unwise and not very useful to a woman negotiating a male-dominated world. Powell points in particular to what seems to him an instance of duplicity, or at least selfish indifference to the welfare of women, on Wilde's part:

Robins tried to enlist Wilde's support for a visionary "theatre of the future" which would rise above the commercialism and egoism of theatres in the hands of actor-managers. Wilde seemed excited by the idea, and agreed to "speak for it" and write an essay in support of it, Robins recalls in a manuscript memoir about Wilde. In the end, however, he did nothing of the kind, and went on to make a successful career for himself in the theatres of leading actor-managers.²²

I would suggest a different interpretation of Wilde's actions. The failure to follow through, even on explicit promises, was common in Wilde's dealings with men and women alike—a manifestation neither of misogyny nor of callousness, but of restlessness. To put it bluntly, Wilde, in every aspect of his emotional and artistic life, got bored more often and more quickly than those around him. He admitted this tendency himself, though in other contexts. In a newspaper interview in 1884, for instance, he spoke of the principle of changeability as a virtue, as Richard Ellmann relates:

Observing *Le Rouge et le noir* among the books, the reporter asked, "You go to Stendhal again and again?" "Yes. And he is one of the few. For my part, I think the most exquisite thing in reading is the pleasure of forgetfulness. It is so nice to think there are some books you cared for so much at a certain epoch in your life and do not care for now. There is to me a positive delight in cut-

²¹ See Ellmann, p. 116.

²² Kerry Powell, "A Verdict of Death: Oscar Wilde, Actresses and Victorian Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), p. 184.

ting an author and feeling I have got beyond him." "And do you extend that observation to persons?" "Undoubtedly," Wilde replied. "So we all do, only I would make it a positive satisfaction instead of a regret. Why should we not joyfully admit that there are some people we do not want to see again? It is not ingratitude, it is not indifference. They have simply given us all they have to give." (Ellmann, p. 250)

Wilde demonstrated this changeability in the professional as well as the personal sphere. The opportunity to advance women's causes through editorship of *The Woman's World* at first inspired a bout of enthusiasm, but, as H. Montgomery Hyde notes, "after a time his enthusiasm showed signs of waning, particularly as Cassell's did not allow smoking in their offices and Wilde had by this time developed a strong liking for Turkish cigarettes."²³ In his 1913 "Oscar Wilde as Editor," Arthur Fish—assistant editor at *The Woman's World* in the late 1880s—recalled with rueful good humor the speed with which Wilde grew bored with his editorial responsibilities, noting that this "was, indeed, a case of 'Pegasus in harness.' . . . [and] the very fact that regularity in any form became a factor in his life seemed an incongruity."²⁴

Matters of the heart took the same course for Wilde. Undoubtedly it was his own temperamental inconstancy that kept the affair with Lord Alfred Douglas going on for so long, for Douglas was even more changeable (to the point of mental instability) than Wilde. Their pattern of sudden breakups alternating with intense intimacy—and thus of frequent separations—precisely suited someone whose interests shifted regularly and whose attention otherwise flagged. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that what Constance had working against her in her marriage to Oscar Wilde was the very virtue embodied in her name.

For the same reason that Douglas's conduct enthralled Wilde, the company of actresses appealed to him. Their volatility, their extravagant expressions of sentiment, their tendency

²³ *Oscar Wilde: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 111.

²⁴ Arthur Fish, "Oscar Wilde as Editor," *Harper's Weekly*, 4 October 1913, p. 18.

to immerse themselves in a role and to alter their offstage behavior while playing it, their fondness for feuds, and, most of all, their long absences while on tour all made them intoxicating and utterly appropriate companions for Wilde. He sought them out and helped them eagerly, knowing that the demands they made could be all-consuming but were invariably short-lived. And, to be fair to Wilde, he expected from these actress friends nothing more than the same treatment in return. For instance, at the time of Wilde's arrest in the spring of 1895 he had known Bernhardt for sixteen years, meeting with her intermittently but always on the warmest terms. When the legal expenses of the trials overwhelmed Wilde and bankruptcy became inevitable, Robert Sherard, acting on his behalf, approached the Divine Sarah with a plan for her to buy the rights to *Salomé* (1893) as a way of covering some debts. According to Ellmann, "she expressed sympathy, dithered, and did nothing" (p. 458). Following his release from prison, Wilde evidently did not view this inconsistency as an obstacle to their passionate reunion. In 1898, while at Cannes, he went backstage after her performance in *La Tosca*; as Ellmann records: "She threw her arms around Wilde and wept, and he wept, 'and'—as he said—'the whole evening was wonderful'" (p. 571).

Wilde's personal ideology of friendship, which he embodied in several literary texts, fit well with the lives of professional actresses, whose work brought them into close and intimate relation with groups of people for unpredictable periods of time, but also kept them on the move. His ideal for relationships approached what we might call a "high-spot" model, or better yet a "performance" model: true friends respond spontaneously with an extraordinary, almost excessive, intensity of involvement to a situation of limited duration, take their bow, and then disappear. In Wilde's 1888 fairy tale "The Happy Prince," for example, a sparrow lays down its life to actualize the vision of the statue that it has landed upon by sheer chance. "The Devoted Friend," another fable from the late 1880s, extols the readiness of little Hans to rise to the occasion in an instant and save the son of the ungrateful Miller, and then die. And in *Lady Windermere's Fan* we see the nobility of Mrs. Erlynne's grand, one-sided gesture to aid her daughter—who, of course, will al-

ways believe that this was an expression not of maternal feeling but of spontaneous goodwill and concern for a virtual stranger. As Mrs. Erlynne says to Lord Windermere in Act IV, this action has produced an epiphany in her: "I thought I had no heart. I find I have." Yet Mrs. Erlynne goes on to state unequivocally: "a heart doesn't suit me."²⁵ She follows up her spectacular *performance* of assistance not by seeking out a relationship or turning it into a future of prolonged and daily intimacies, but by leaving. The audience is invited to think none the worse of her for rejecting domestic attachments, with their necessary repetition and predictability, and going on her way.

No one should underestimate Wilde's daring here in shaping a heroine who casts aside the demand for women to devote themselves to the rigors of permanent family connection, or his helpfulness to the cause of the most radical feminist reformers, who were advocating greater freedom from the domestic ties that bind. Wilde's creation of Mrs. Erlynne was itself a gesture of fellowship with the circle of independent and autonomous professional women around him—many of whom had forsworn motherhood or had put limits on its place in their lives—even as it was also a fulfillment of his own concept of friendship as something impulsive, mutable, and showy.

Needless to say, though, the kind of social relationship that Wilde preferred, and that succeeded so nicely with actresses, did not please all of his female acquaintances. In "The Female World of Love and Ritual" Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes the closeness and durability that characterized most nineteenth-century women's friendships with one another, even those among "modern" women.²⁶ These were, in many ways, marriages—in some cases, lesbian in a full erotic sense;

²⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in "*Lady Windermere's Fan*"; "*Salome*"; "*A Woman of No Importance*"; "*An Ideal Husband*"; "*The Importance of Being Earnest*," ed. Peter Raby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 54; Act IV, ll. 244–45.

²⁶ See "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, 1 (1975), 1–29. See also the fictionalized relationships in the "New Woman" novels of the 1890s that depicted "modern" women befriending one another and forming enduring alliances. These include the close and affectionate bond between Mary Erle and Alison Ives in Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, along with the possibly lesbian attachment of Bess Heywood and Cosima Chudleigh in *A Writer of Books*, by "George Paston" (Emily Morse Symonds).

in others, lesbian in a more strictly intellectual and emotional dimension. Women, including professional women such as writers, had been socialized since girlhood to rely upon one another and to value commitment and unswerving loyalty in the behavior of those around them. Indeed, in a misogynistic world, middle- and upper-middle-class women depended upon the buttress of one another's unflagging support. When, in Wilde's bi-social experiences, this ideal of reliability came up against his own vision of friendship as spontaneously changeable, it was the women who felt baffled and injured. There is, for instance, a rather pathetic passage in the journals kept by Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote collaboratively under the pseudonym "Michael Field," and who had known Wilde since 1890.²⁷ Cooper describes an incident of 1892:

Oscar comes up. He shakes hands with Mrs. Costelloe, and therefore I put out my hand, which he takes (afar off) and never addresses a single word to me after. I have not often seen such rudeness—he is not of the men who can be rude offensively and yet escape. . . . When he shows himself as a *snob* he is disgustingly repulsive. We were not well dressed, as the day had begun with rain—we do not belong to the fashionable world—so Oscar rolls his shoulders toward us. When next I meet him in my choicest French hat, I will turn my back on him, and that decisively.²⁸

Cooper tries to frame an explanation for conduct—i.e., the sudden coldness of a friend—that seems to her inexplicable: Wilde must have been motivated by snobbery. More likely, though, Wilde was acting upon the whim of the moment—a moment in which there was no particular incentive, no special reward or interest, in *performing* the part of friendship. For Wilde, under such conditions, the pleasure in withdrawing from the role of the friend could be nearly as great as the plea-

²⁷ It is worth noting that, as Karl Beckson suggests, "the two seem to have first met Wilde at an 'At Home' held by the American poet and journalist Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton (1831–1908) on 21 July 1890" (*The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* [New York: AMS Press, 1998], p. 99). Thus, this was another instance of Wilde frequenting the drawing rooms of women—in this case, of a woman author—and taking the opportunity there to extend his contacts with other professional women writers.

²⁸ "Michael Field," *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), pp. 139–40.

sure of behaving kindly and generously under different circumstances. Within a year of cutting "Michael Field" in public, Wilde was deep in correspondence with the two poets over a staged reading of one of their verse dramas, offering helpful suggestions and declaring himself their "sincere admirer."²⁹

If this divergent idea of friendship complicated Wilde's otherwise quite remarkably positive adventures in bi-social living, then it also exposed him to retaliation, particularly by literary women with a satirical bent. Dixon, a feminist and something of an aesthete herself, was evidently put off and even offended by the social inconstancy on which Wilde prided himself. Her response was to make Wilde the recognizable target of one long episode of her comic novel *My Flirtations*, published in 1892 (two years before *The Story of a Modern Woman*) under the pseudonym "Margaret Wynman." The accompanying illustration by J. Bernard Partridge helped to seal the identification of Wilde with the fictional character "Val Redmond," who "liked the society of women," but never for long. The female narrator says:

One of his least pleasing characteristics was a tendency to flout and pout. He was constantly having little quarrels with his intimate friends. His intimate friendships lasted, on an average, exactly six weeks. In other houses where they talk scandal it is usually about acquaintances, but in Val's drawing-room you generally heard his bosom friends deprived of their reputations. This is a trait which makes society feel uneasy, and to it one may perhaps attribute the brief duration of Val's friendships. Ours, for instance, though it was never perfervid, lasted but a brief two months.³⁰

The rest of the chapter tells of the inevitable end of her relations with this figure, who "renews his friends as often as the bouquets in his buttonhole" (p. 71).

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of Wilde's most mutually satisfying connections were with women who shared his passion for novelty and whose own temperaments put them

²⁹ See Wilde's letters of September and October 1893, in *Letters*, pp. 345–46.

³⁰ "Margaret Wynman" [Ella Hepworth Dixon], *My Flirtations* (1892; Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1893), pp. 60, 61.

at odds with the majority of their female acquaintances. Such a person was the parodist and novelist Levenson, to whom Wilde referred lovingly as “Sphinx.” Her biographer, Julie Speedie, observes: “If one of Ada’s greatest fears was her dread of publicity, this was matched, if not surpassed, by her horror of boredom.”³¹ Like Wilde, Levenson was drawn into sexual affairs, after her marriage, with men who demonstrated their “inability to commit [themselves] to a lasting relationship,” and, like Wilde, she “harboured no resentment” against such lovers for their “fickleness” (p. 32). Levenson is known today to devotees of Wilde for having performed two extraordinary acts of kindness toward him when he was at his lowest ebb: first sheltering him in her daughter’s nursery between the trials, and then going to visit him in 1897, on the morning of his release from prison. Less often remembered is that in the three years afterward, up until his death in 1900, they saw each other on only one other occasion, in Paris. Theirs was in many ways precisely the kind of “high-spot” friendship, centered upon grand gestures and followed by quick exits, that both of them appreciated but that few women enjoyed who were not associated with the theater. Indeed, as Speedie says of Levenson: “Ada did not number many women amongst her close friends” (p. 44). But, of course, in this respect she was quite unlike Oscar Wilde.



In recent years we have had a number of representations that have focused upon Wilde’s homosocial environment and asked us to see him as valuable or relevant primarily to other men, in his time and in ours. These representations, whether on film or on stage, appear to show Wilde moving only between two worlds, an “unreal” heterosexual one and a “real” gay one. I would prefer to consider his relationship

³¹ *Wonderful Sphinx: The Biography of Ada Levenson* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 10. See also Margaret Debelius, “Countering a Counterpoetics: Ada Levenson and Oscar Wilde,” in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 192–210. Debelius notes that what brought the two writers together initially was their “finding common ground in their shared love of conversation and the absurd” (p. 194).

to two different “real” worlds, one occupied by men and the other by women, and to illuminate the latter, which has been forgotten. Though his sexual orientation may be in dispute, Wilde was bi-social, and his literary works benefited greatly from this other kind of orientation. As a play such as *Lady Windermere’s Fan* demonstrates, this firsthand knowledge allowed Wilde to compose scenes that were set among the groups of men of Clubland or between men and women, as well as passages of dialogue between women of the same class in their own drawing rooms, with no men present. In his own day Wilde was an important ally of feminists and of working women in general, as well as an advocate for women in the arts in particular. Whether or not individual literary women chose to like him or sympathize with him in the time of his trials, Wilde’s downfall also changed their lives. After his arrest, cautious editors and publishers instituted a period of unofficial censorship that influenced what they, too, could expect to get into print. The first to suffer in this changed climate were the New Women writers—such as Wilde’s Irish compatriot “George Egerton” (Mary Chavelita Dunne)—who found their challenges to patriarchal authority linked, quite rightly, to Wilde’s challenges to Victorian norms, and thus suppressed.

In retrospect, therefore, Alice Meynell’s flippant remarks—“while there is a weak omnibus horse at work or a hungry cat I am not going to spend feeling on Oscar”—seem more than merely callous; they are, in fact, witless and stupid. Wilde’s causes were also the causes of the women who identified themselves as “modern.” His life and his fate were bound up with the fate of feminism at the end of the nineteenth century, and they still are today, at the start of the twenty-first.

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