

# Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde

Paul L. Fortunato



STUDIES IN MAJOR  
LITERARY AUTHORS

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# Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Background: Wilde's Social Circles and Consumer Culture	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Newspaper Culture in the <i>Pall Mall Gazette</i> Years (1884–1890)	15
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
The <i>Woman's World</i> (1887–1889) as Fashion Magazine and Modernist Laboratory	37
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: The Aesthetics of Fashion in Baudelaire, Wilde, and Tomson/Watson	61
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Consumer Fashion and Modernist Aesthetics in <i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i> (1892)	87
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
Mrs. Eryllyne as Modernist: The Artist of Consumer Image and Ritual	113
Conclusion	139
Notes	145
Bibliography	153
Index	159

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# Preface

In 1891 Oscar Wilde published his essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” a work that proclaims the value of socialism and that defends the artist against a Philistine public: Wilde takes a stance against consumerism, against the practitioners of consumer culture in both journalism and fashion.<sup>1</sup> For example, he attacks popular periodical culture, which “makes use of journalists,” and even gives “absolute freedom to journalists, [while it] entirely limits the artist” (AC 277). Yet less than a year later, his play *Lady Windermere’s Fan* was a box office success at a major West End theater; Wilde thus turns to the genre most oriented to consumer culture and the mass audience, doing so at one of the main commercial theater centers in the world. Also, of great significance to my point, the play was so obviously a vehicle for marketing expensive fashion that when the summer parody of the play was put up, the main character’s name was “Lady Winterstock.”<sup>2</sup>

Critics have therefore been somewhat unsure of, and even uncomfortable with, Wilde’s relationship to consumer culture, a culture embodied in both journalism and fashion and whose icon is the woman of fashion. For example, even as Regenia Gagnier aligns Wilde’s plays with his contemporaries’ “critiques of industrial capitalism and mass society,” she is forced to qualify her claim:

The commodification of Wilde and his works, of the artist in general and bohemian artists in particular, in consumer society, complicates the pursuit of individuality and freedom of thought and expression. (27)

Although she analyzes the content of Wilde’s commodification very ably, Gagnier wrongly sees as “complication” what should be seen as the key to Wilde’s artistic project.<sup>3</sup> John Sloan is better at deciphering Wilde and showing that this “complication” is really the core of his aesthetics. He points



out that his very defense of the artist's autonomy was itself implicated in consumerism: "the appeal to the 'man of taste,' the connoisseur, in arranging and decorating one's surroundings, was an advanced version of capitalist consumerism" (135). Sloan sees a direct link between aspects of Wilde's "high" appeal and aspects of his mass cultural appeal.

Building on the work of Sloan and others, I argue that Wilde cannot make art—and tends not even to conceive of art—that is not commodified. His is a consumer modernism. I use the term consumer modernism because I approach Wilde's work as both consumer culture product and as a foundational moment in modernist aesthetics. His aesthetic descendants managed to utilize the aesthetics while they simultaneously "ghosted" Wilde (and his consumerism). Ann Ardis devotes an entire chapter of her *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880–1922* to "Inventing literary traditions, ghosting Oscar Wilde and the Victorian *fin de siècle*." I argue—together with theorists like Ardis and Edward Said<sup>4</sup>—that there is no modernism without Wilde, and particularly without Wilde's commitment to an aesthetics of surface. This aesthetics of surface he theorizes by building a philosophy of art through an analysis of consumer fashion. Also, it is true that several high modernists used elements of consumer culture in their artistic creation—Joyce in *Ulysses* and Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example.<sup>5</sup> The difference is that Wilde created art that was itself, and could not exist separate from, consumer culture.

We get a glimpse of Wilde's ideas on this consumer-based aesthetic when, in "The Decay of Lying," he playfully re-works the relationship between "Art and Life." There he describes the impact of Pre-Raphaelite paintings on large numbers of middle- and upper-class women consumers.

We have all seen in our own day in England how a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two imaginative painters [Rossetti and Burne-Jones], has so influenced Life that whenever one goes to a private view or to an artistic salon one sees, here the mystic eyes of Rossetti's dream, the long ivory throat, the strange, square-cut jaw, the loosened shadowy hair. . . . A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher. (AC 307).

Rossetti's paintings of women like Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris were not just popular paintings that were reproduced over and over in prints. They created fashion styles and set trends in dress and interior design, those trends being reflected in popular Arts and Crafts wallpapers and popular "aesthetic dress" styles. And Wilde significantly links this fashion phenomenon to

marketing within a mass culture—hence the reference to the “enterprising publisher.”

Because he makes the desire to impact a mass audience so central, the elements of Wilde’s consumer modernism are superficial ornament and ephemeral public image—both of which he links to rituals of consumer culture.<sup>6</sup> By surface I mean the opposite of substance, what is usually thought of as “mere, deceptive surface.” By image I refer to the photographs and reproductions that proliferate in consumer culture and advertising, as well as the public images cultivated by celebrities and their public relations consultants. By rituals I mean the stylized, conventional dances by which persons interact with groups of bodies—at balls, department stores, and theaters. Wilde takes up these elements, surface, image, and ritual, all as a strategy to force us to re-conceptualize our ideas on culture and art. That is, he elevates the marginalized elements—things gendered feminine, considered as bodily rather than rational, and often marked as Oriental—in order to de-center the Western, rationalist, masculinist subject. He offers a conception of art that is not anti-Western but otherwise-than-Western.

Thus, in *Lady Windermere*, Wilde achieves what Rossetti had achieved in painting: Art—including the fashions and superficial social rituals of his characters—influences Life, or in other words, the mass audience. He thematizes through fashion, and particularly through the woman of fashion, Mrs. Erlynne, how art functions in society generally. I further suggest that his conceptions of the surface image, the bodily, and the ritual were foundational elements of what became twentieth-century modernism—thus we can call Wilde’s aesthetic a consumer modernism, a root and branch of modernism that was largely erased.

After a background section (Ch. 1), this study first of all engages in a cultural studies analysis of the periodical (Ch. 2), fashion (Ch.’s 3 and 4), and theater (Ch.’s 5 and 6) industries of late-Victorian London. In the midst of that analysis, I use Wilde’s theorizing about aesthetics, particularly an aesthetics of surface, image, and ritual, to account for his activity among these industries: as a journalist, magazine editor, commentator on dress and design, and popular playwright. Finally, I use all of the above to do a fairly traditional close reading of a canonical text, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, and doing so, I offer a new reading of the play.

Other critics, for a variety of reasons, have not asked questions about such things as: how Wilde fuses popular mass culture and modernist aesthetics; why Wilde invested so much of his energy, from 1884–1890, in the newspaper and magazine industries; why, after publishing his great critical essays in *Intentions*, Wilde would write an apparently standard comedy, and

one that dealt not with any “serious” social issues, but with superficial fashion and the inner workings of high society.

### A NOTE ON THE EDITIONS USED:

The texts I used (and the abbreviations) for citing are the following:

- AC *The Artist as Critic*. edited by Richard Ellmann. (1969)  
 CL *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. edited by Merlin Holland et al. (2000)  
 CW *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. edited by Robert Ross. (1909)  
 LWF *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. edited by Ian Small. (1980)  
 OW *Oscar Wilde*. Richard Ellmann. (1988)  
 PDG *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Norton Critical Ed.* edited by Donald Lawler (1988)

The critical essays I draw from *The Artist as Critic*. In that collection, Ellmann uses the text that Wilde published with the Bodley Head firm in the book *Intentions* in 1891. These versions are substantially different from the original versions that were published in magazines, up to six years earlier. I am, however, not so much interested in how these texts evolved as in what Wilde’s ideas on aesthetics were. Therefore, I simply chose the texts which were published last. The essays contained in *The Artist as Critic* include: “The Decay of Lying,” “The Critic as Artist,” “The Truth of Masks,” “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.”

When citing newspaper and magazine articles, I cite from the *Complete Works*. A new critical edition of Wilde’s works is being produced now, published by the Oxford University Press, but only a few volumes have come out so far. Occasionally, I cite from other sources for articles because the CW does not contain them. Usually, these citations are from AC.

Citations for *De Profundis* are from the *Complete Letters*, an edition of the text that has many critical tools (index and footnotes). All other letters are cited from the CL as well. Citations for *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* are from the Ernest Benn, Ltd. critical editions. These editions are excellent critical editions, published in the early 1980s, and edited by Ian Small and Russell Jackson.

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I dedicate the project to my parents, Dominick and Loreta, who inspired me to love ideas, to love theatrical performance, and to have excellent taste in clothes.

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## Chapter One

# Background: Wilde's Social Circles and Consumer Culture

How did a bohemian anarchist find himself writing West End comedies about elite society? To set the stage for this study, it is necessary to look at the world Wilde moved in, and to approach Wilde within this context. It is worth pointing out that, in his commingling of high and mass culture, of detached aestheticism and engaged reformism, Wilde was like many other writers and artists in late Victorian Britain. Kathy Psomiades notes that that culture, particularly among the aesthetes, was characterized by a close connection between art and mass culture.

In aestheticism, we can see the process whereby the private, lovely woman who signifies aesthetic experience shades gradually and imperceptibly into the public, tawdry woman who signifies the vulgarity of mass-cultural and commodity experience. (13)

Late-Victorian culture was a particularly fertile soil for the kind of consumer modernist work that Wilde engaged in. Here was a culture that frequently saw a fusion of high artistic production and efforts at middle-class taste-education. As Psomiades notes above, the woman aesthete often stood at the center of these efforts. And since she stood there, she was a creature of both high risk and high possibility, a quality that seems to have attracted Wilde to them. Not unaware that this was a potentially volatile combination of elements, Wilde and others worked the tensions within this cultural mixture, making them essential tools in their art.

Therefore, one major component of this study involves addressing Wilde's context, his artistic and personal relationships with the people in the circles he moved among, particularly in the early parts of his career. It is clear that Wilde was a professional networker, and someone who knew that it was part of his job to build strong relationships with people who would

help get his work before the public—Wilde had no intention of becoming a starving artist. He established himself in the heart of the capital of the major empire in the world. Wilde was conscious that his work was best carried out in enormous commercial cities. He thus saw that, in order to be most fully himself, he needed an *immediate relationship* to the cosmopolis, even for the sake of his creativity. Kerry Powell makes the point that Wilde needed London and its dramatic milieu as “an arena of cooperation and conflict which [was] essential to his work as playwright” (143).

One writer of an 1890 article, “Literary Women in London Society,” makes note of the changing face of that Society. In the past, the inner circle included people in the court and “only a few representatives of literature and art, and those most privileged by birth” (*North American Review* 151.329). However, by the 1880s, the writer notes that things had changed:

[A]ristocratic exclusiveness is a thing of the past, and fashionable people are only too ready to welcome as friend the men and women who amuse them or make them think. The English craving after social sensation has become rather a by-word among nations, but at least the craving is a healthy sign of dissatisfaction with the vapidness of ordinary social life. There is place in Society now for the leading members of almost every art and profession. (329)

Wilde certainly was adept at both amusing members of society and making them think. It was his expertise with these strategies that enabled him to ingratiate himself at the highest levels. The one circle that encompasses many of the other circles Wilde moved in is precisely the aesthetes, particularly the women. I use the term *female aesthete* according to Talia Schaffer’s definition in her groundbreaking book, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000). This group of women writers—or we should say *groups*, because they did not all form any formal group—is key to the re-reading of Wilde that I am offering.

Towards the “high” end of society is the elite social group of men and women who called themselves the ‘Souls,’ which included some female aesthetes. One group more in the middle is the Arts and Crafts movement of such figures as William Morris, E.W. Godwin and Walter Crane. And a group towards the lower end is the growing cadre of young London journalists, people like Bernard Shaw, Graham R. Tomson/Watson, and Richard LeGallienne. Also, a group that was present among all these groups was gay London. In fact, Wilde’s lover Lord Alfred Douglas was a member of one of

the Souls' major families: he was cousin to Lady Elcho and George Wyndham, the former being mistress of the estate *Stanmore*, one of the major Souls gathering places, and the latter being a political colleague of arch-Soul Arthur Balfour. Indeed, George Wyndham, a good friend of Wilde, worked assiduously first to try to prevent Wilde's disastrous legal action in 1895, and then to try to get Wilde to leave Britain before he was arrested. He was perhaps as much concerned about his family's dignity as he was about Wilde's well-being. (I purposely deal very little with gay London because it is much less central to his mass-cultural persona, and because it has already been written about so thoroughly.)

## THE 'SOULS'

Let us begin at the top. London high society in the 1880s and 1890s was a collection of nobility and wealthy gentry. This was a powerful group, many of the men wielding power in perhaps the most powerful assembly in the world at the time, the British Parliament. Also, both men and women elites were cultivating themselves in their exquisite lifestyle, patronizing the best that the arts world had to offer at theaters, galleries and concerts, as well as through the "decorative" arts of house design and dress. London was a place where elite society was in constant contact with leaders in the arts, a fact that allowed many artists of low estate to rise quickly—which was also something that made many more traditional people nervous. (It is striking how many actor-managers, department store owners, popular writers and the like, end up getting knighted in the 1890s. Had Wilde not been prosecuted, my guess is that he would also have been knighted.) The Souls prided themselves on being large-minded enough to associate with people who did not have means but had culture. Thus, they dared to wander beyond the comfortable confines of Belgravia and Mayfair into the more mixed-districts like South Kensington and Chelsea. Painters like James M. Whistler and D.G. Rossetti lived in Chelsea, and eventually Wilde moved to a house there with his painter friend, Frank Miles. When he got married, he also purchased a home in Chelsea.

The Souls, though they were not always admired, were undoubtedly at the center of all London society. Charlotte Gere describes them in the following terms: "The galaxy of friends known as the 'Souls' was, in a glittering era, the most scintillating social group in the country" (1). The leading figure was Arthur James Balfour, in the 1880s a rising Conservative politician; later on, he would rise all the way to Prime Minister. But it was really the women in the Souls who were the driving force, women like Madeline Wyndham,



founder of the Royal School of Art Needlework, and her daughter Mary—like her brother George, a close friend of Wilde. Mary would become Lady Elcho (and was also, incidentally, the lifelong confidante of Balfour). The Wyndhams' estate house, *Clouds*, was a major gathering site for the Souls. Designed by William Morris's associate, Philip Webb, and decorated by Morris himself, it represented the apex of British aesthetic culture. Perhaps the next two central Souls were the Tennant sisters. Wilde dedicated many of his fairy tales to Souls, including "The Star Child" to Margot Tennant and "The Birthday of the Infanta" to Mrs. W. Grenfell (Lady Desborough).

The correspondence between Balfour and Lady Elcho has been published in a scholarly edition. Balfour writes there of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Wilde at the country estate gatherings of the de Grey family (77). He also tells Lady Elcho in an 1893 letter that "I have just been invited by Oscar Wilde to go to the first night of his new play [*A Woman of No Importance*]" (93). Their box, said Balfour, was to include George and Lady Grosvenor (both patrons of the London arts scene). In fact, when Wilde set the play *Lady Windermere's Fan* at a house on Carlton House Terrace, he may have had Balfour's home (number 4) in mind.<sup>1</sup> The Elchos lived very nearby, at 23 St. James's Place, which was within a stone's throw of the theater where *Lady Windermere* played.

One of the Souls, the poet Wilfrid Blunt (a first cousin of Percy Wyndham) writes of Wilde, "The fine society of London and especially the 'Souls' ran after him because they knew he could always amuse them, and the pretty women all allowed him great familiarities" (463).<sup>2</sup> It was this social scene that Wilde thrived in. In the late 1870s, he was just out of university, was fairly poor and was barely at the beginning of a writing career<sup>3</sup>—yet because of his personality and the openness of much of fine society, he soon was walking amongst the most elite circles. Alice Comyns Carr, who would contribute to the *Woman's World*, writes that "Oscar Wilde was often of the Walton party [at the Lewis family estate]—fresh from Oxford then, and considerably esteemed as a wit himself" (129). There were several sub-groups in which Wilde also made his presence felt, including the Grosvenor Gallery and other art galleries, the West End theater world, and the Arts and Crafts world.

Wilde in fact wrote an article about the opening of the new Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. The Grosvenor was a place associated with aestheticism, Pre-Raphaelitism, and to a lesser extent, the Arts and Crafts movement. The money behind the Grosvenor came from Sir Coutts Lindsay, whose wife Blanche—another who would contribute to the *Woman's World*—was a prominent female aesthete. There were Sunday afternoons at the Gallery "at which Lady Lindsay presided over a company including all the most notable

people in Literature and Art, to say nothing of the ‘beaux noms,’ courtiers and politicians in her more exclusive set” (Comyns Carr 77). Comyns Carr wrote that the Lindsays “took a certain pride in being the first members of Society to bring people of their own set into friendly contact with the distinguished folk of art and literature” (*Reminiscences* 54).

Alice Comyns Carr was a theatrical costume designer, and apparently was delighted to be the inspiration for the cartoon aesthete character, Cimabue Brown, created and mocked by George Du Maurier in *Punch*. Alice’s husband, Joe Comyns Carr, was one of the directors of the Grosvenor Gallery, as well as a West End playwright and producer. (These links among the art gallery, aesthete, and theater worlds come up again and again. Wilde represented just one among many in his penchant for linking them all.) The Grosvenor in the late 1870s sought to offer an alternative to the Royal Academy exhibits, building around the works of Edward Burne-Jones, Walter Crane and James M. Whistler. (D. G. Rossetti, who was ailing and near the end of his life, decided not to show his work there). Later, in the 1890s, Joe Comyns Carr produced *King Arthur* for Henry Irving (the leading actor-manager of the age) at the Lyceum, with dresses designed in part by Carr’s wife, and with sets and clothing designed by Burne-Jones. Carr also wrote and produced *Forgiveness* for George Alexander in January 1892. His play immediately preceded Alexander’s production of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (which began in February). In addition, Carr—who was a remarkably active person—was editor of the *English Illustrated Magazine*, and he managed to get Wilde to write a couple of pieces for the magazine.

Another theatrical acquaintance of Wilde was Ellen Terry, the star actress, and some-time-domestic partner of the aesthete interior designer and theatrical producer, E.W. Godwin. Godwin has been described as “the most flamboyant and brilliant figure of the 1870s and 80s. [Also, he] left his mark on furniture design and helped create a radically simplified interior that was adapted from Japanese traditions, Greek, Egyptian, and English Renaissance forms” (Gere 398). One can see in aesthetic designs like Godwin’s that British imperial conquest fed right into aesthetic styles of design.

These various social circles overlapped a lot: high society, the West End theater, aesthetic dress and interior design, Pre-Raphaelite and Impressionist painting, and the Arts and Crafts movement. It is also striking that Wilde was managing to place himself so well within almost all of the circles. For a time, he and Whistler formed a sort of dynamic duo, frequenting the events in the London “Season,” and spending time with the professional beauties of the time in studios, galleries, theaters and society balls. The two were staples of the society columns. Wilde also formed a sort of public-relations team

together with actress Lillie Langtry. He performed outlandish acts like sleeping on her doorstep and walking down Piccadilly with a lily in his hand to deliver to her. He was a prime mover in getting her started in an acting career, both in London and New York. She for her part helped make sure Wilde was invited to society events.

## ARTS AND CRAFTSMEN

Wilde formed friendships also with Walter Crane and E.W. Godwin, both of whom were leaders in the Arts and Crafts movement, and who associated themselves closely with William Morris. Wilde's connection with Crane can be seen from the fact that Crane wrote for the *Woman's World*, and was more than once reviewed by Wilde in a periodical. Crane also did illustrations for some of Wilde's published collections of fairy tales. Wilde's connection with Godwin was also manifold. Wilde was friendly with Godwin's former partner Ellen Terry. He also lived in a house whose interior was designed by Godwin—indeed he wrangled with Godwin for tarrying in its completion. Wilde reviewed Godwin's theatrical endeavors, and led off his first edition of the *Woman's World* with an article about Godwin's outdoor productions. He also borrowed many of Godwin's ideas when writing his essay on theatrical costumes, "The Truth of Masks."

It is people like Crane, Godwin and Morris who most strongly exemplify the way the arts and commerce were so closely connected during that era. Morris ended up somewhat disillusioned with his own life, lamenting the fact that while he held Socialist principles, he spent the bulk of his time catering to the expensive tastes of the very wealthy. That is not to say that he did not have a real, beneficial effect on the whole of society, educating people's tastes in all sectors of society so that middle- and working- class people could decorate their homes in a more "artistic" and less purely-commercial manner. But it is a fact that, like *haute couture*, the Arts and Crafts movement operated by creating expensive commodities that only the wealthiest could afford. By virtue of that fact, the high fashion would only secondarily shape and dictate popular fashion—through the very mass-produced goods that Morris so hated. Mrs. Comyns Carr also exemplified this strategy, designing theatrical dresses for Ellen Terry. Fashion was thus disseminated by means of public spectacles and other media.

This principle is well illustrated by the "Morris Room" at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), a room that is both a work of art and a commercial advertisement. The museum was started precisely with the idea of providing models of artistic work that members of

both Society and the middle classes could view and learn from. Education and advertisement mix here. If in the past, the works of master painters were mainly to be seen by the few at private palaces and estates (with the notable exception of art in churches), by the late Victorian period, the royal family and other wealthy art collectors were displaying their paintings at museums and art galleries.<sup>4</sup> In fact, one way of understanding the existence of the Morris Room is that Morris and the museum curators wanted to *share the wealth*, they wanted Morris's designs to be seen by everybody, not just by the wealthy—a noble if not completely altruistic goal. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Wilde was one of those spending much time with Whistler and others at events at the South Kensington Museum; he would have been thoroughly familiar with the way Morris worked in both high and mass culture.

Interestingly, “Aesthetic” interiors and “aesthetic” dress, at the moment they tried to disavow a connection with modern commercial culture, ironically succeeded most fully in becoming coveted consumer items. E.W. Godwin worked first for Collinson and Lock and then for Liberty and Co., the latter being a huge department store in one of the fashionable shopping districts of London, and one associated with aesthetic interiors and dress. (It had first gotten a reputation for importing goods from the Far East, and contributed to the *japonisme* craze.) Sir Arthur Lazenby Liberty would remark of Wilde:

My ‘art fabrics’ were produced before [Wilde] became a celebrity. I gave him his opportunity, and he helped me mightily through the publicity he commanded. (article in *The British Warehouseman*, Feb. 1895)

Wilde was learning much from the people in these various social circles, people like Morris, Godwin, and Liberty.

## **THEATRICAL PERSONALITIES**

We saw that many of the ‘Souls’ were involved in the world of theater. Perhaps because of this, Wilde also formed close friendships with numerous actors and actresses, Langtry, Ellen and Marion Terry, Helena Modjeska, Genevieve Ward, Norman Forbes-Robertson, Hermann Vezin, Mrs. Bancroft . . . His letters show that he used these acquaintances in order to, as salesmen put it, name-drop. He writes of “my friend Mr. Dion Boucicault [the Irish playwright],” and writes to Oscar Browning that “I saw Lord Houghton at [Henry] Irving’s supper,” getting two important names into one phrase (20 Feb. 1880). He wrote some letters with the address line not

of his own address but of Langtry's house. He also cultivated the acquaintance of the Examiner of Plays, E.F.S. Pigott, writing a letter in which he requests "any helpful advice your experience and very brilliant critical powers can give me" (CL 98).

As mentioned above, Wilde and Lillie Langtry collaborated in promoting each other. And both Wilde and his roommate from 1879–1881, the painter Frank Miles, were giving a higher profile to Langtry's public persona. Miles sketched some acclaimed portraits, and Wilde published a poem about her, "The New Helen."<sup>5</sup> (Indeed, Miles's Langtry portraits were among the first works used by newspapers in using some of the new printing technologies. One of his portraits of Langtry was used in an insert of the September 6, 1879 *London Weekly Life*.) Wilde worked similarly with other actresses. He wrote a poem dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt and published it in the *World* in 1879. And when he had written his first play, *Vera; or, the Nihilists*, he sent a privately printed copy, bound in dark-red leather, to Ellen Terry. (She thanked him, but unfortunately did not consent to play the part.)

And it was Wilde who was instrumental in helping Langtry transition in 1881 from being a professional beauty to being an extremely successful actress. *Punch* wrote of her second stage role, that of Lady Macbeth—a few months into her career:

The fair lady's dresses (marvels of the milliner's art) were voted charming. The pale pink satin, trimmed with yellow roses, and *décolleté* with daring delicacy, sent a thrill of excitement through the audience, and evoked an impromptu sonnet from the trembling lips of Mr. Oscar Wilde, who fainted with ecstasy, and was carried out by the attendants. (Dec. 31, 1881)

One assumes that the writer is being facetious and is indulging in hyperbole in this description of Wilde. But then again it is hard to know how far Wilde would go in his public performances.

The writers at *Punch* were very aware of what the aesthetes were attempting to do with fashion and art, (and thought the project ridiculous). They add that they are glad Langtry has appeared

in a part more worthy of the high social position which she has held by the Divine right of Fashion, and from which she has been pleased to descend to extend a not ungracious hand to Art, Fashion's poor relation and protégée.

Here the writer playfully reverses the hierarchical relationship between Art and Fashion.

Interestingly, it is a popular magazine writer who is best able to understand what is going on with a celebrity like Langtry, a woman whose primary qualification for being an actress (aside from having taken lessons) is that she is the prima donna of London Society, and is one of the major setters of fashion trends, hence her “divine right.” (The phrase “divine right” perhaps also alludes to her connection with the royal family.) Writers for *Punch* also tracked Wilde’s activities with the same insightfulness, mocking Wilde through its standard cartoon aesthetes, Maudle and Jellaby Postlethwaite. Many other periodicals also made sure to cover Wilde’s antics. His activities, chronicled as paragraphs in newspapers and magazines, were so utterly “consumable.” Even a decade later, an 1890 *Woman’s World* piece, “Society Journalism,” (which defends the phenomenon of such journalism) notes that certain figures are *essential* elements of the scene: “Mr. Whistler is interesting to read about, and in the country papers one should not forget to write about Mr. Oscar Wilde” (309).

## WILDE’S PRAGMATISM AND OPPORTUNISM

But as a self-promoter, Wilde was at times willing to demonstrate what could be seen as a rather crass manner of leveraging his relationships with celebrities and prominent personages. Very early on, he wrote a sonnet protesting the massacre of Christians in Bulgaria that took place in 1876. Wilde had a plan for giving his work greater prominence. He sent a copy of the sonnet to Prime Minister Gladstone knowing that Gladstone had strongly condemned the massacre. Wilde subsequently wrote asking Gladstone to recommend the sonnet to the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Spectator*. (In the end, he did not.) Similarly, Wilde also wrote a sonnet about John Keats’s tomb, proposing to replace the present modest memorial in Rome with a much larger and more fitting monument. The current small plaque, together with a few wild flowers accompanying it, were “but poor memorials of one so great as Keats” (“The Tomb of Keats” AC 4). He sent a copy of the sonnet to, among others, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, seeking support for his project. Though he did manage to publish the poem, his overall effort did not bear the hoped-for fruit. If all had gone well, Wilde would have surfed the crest of a movement to honor Keats. He would have headed a contingent of literati going to Rome to ceremoniously re-commemorate an improved gravestone—thus getting Wilde’s name in the papers in connection with the poet. (Wilde did associate himself with Keats by dubbing his home in Chelsea “Keats House” in 1881.)

An additional way Wilde made use of the mass media was by utilizing media *scandals*. He perhaps learned from his friend, the painter J.M. Whistler, who had carried out a widely publicized libel suit against John Ruskin in 1877. Ruskin, in a book, had summarily dismissed Whistler's work as worthless and as an affront to the public. Whistler, whether by design or not, raised his own profile immensely by suing the famous art critic and Oxford sage, a David taking on Goliath. He lost a great deal of money, but this action—as well as the quality of his painting—helped raise his profile enough to even get him named President of the British Royal Academy of painters a decade later.

As for Wilde, he made hay with the notoriety—even of the negative sort—that he received during his 1882 American lecture tour, a tour initiated to promote Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience*. We get a sense for just how good Wilde was at making use of the media's coverage of celebrities in this remarkable episode. Dion Boucicault, the successful Irish playwright living in the U.S. at the time, writes a telling letter to the editor of the *New York World* in which he tries to defend Wilde from the mockery being aimed at him during the tour. He notes that “so long as Carte [the manager] and Forbes [an actor] thought Oscar was only a puppet—a butt—a means of advertising the Opera Comique of *Patience*—they were charming,” that is, they treated Wilde well. But soon, “when Oscar's reception and success threw Forbes into the shade, Forbes went into an ecstasy of rage, and ‘went back’ on Wilde, behaving more like a wild bull than a gentleman” (CL n135). Forbes had publicly insulted Wilde in Boston, where Boucicault was writing from. But the point is that Wilde had managed to pluck popularity out of the jaws of mockery, turning what D'Oyly Carte had thought was a sideshow into a platform for promoting himself and his own work. Boucicault, interestingly, was so concerned about Wilde that he offered him 2,000 pounds—an enormous amount of money at the time—to quit the tour as a way of saving him from further ignominy. It seems that Wilde, who knew what he was doing, refused and saw the tour through to the end.

A decade later, he similarly managed the scandal surrounding *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with remarkable skill. First of all, he published the novel just after the public row over the “Cleveland St. affair,” a scandal that fed a several-month-long series of articles in London periodicals. It involved a gay brothel, and the implicated parties included Lord Arthur Somerset and Prince Albert Victor, eldest son of the Prince of Wales. The scandal, which was enormous because of who was involved, was just petering out

in May 1890. Wilde published *Dorian* in June 1890. It seems to me Wilde must have known exactly what he was doing.<sup>6</sup>

The outcry against *Dorian* as a barely-veiled discussion of gay culture was immediate. Interestingly, there was only an outcry in England, Americans not taking note of anything amiss with the novel; they had not been exposed to the Cleveland St. affair. The *St. James's Gazette* accused Wilde of intending to utilize the scandal as a means to *advertise* the novel. Wilde responded with a clever retort: "I think I may say without vanity—though I do not wish to appear to run vanity down—that of all men in England I am the one who requires least advertisement" (letter to *St. James's Gazette*, June 25, 1890). Then Wilde goes on to accuse the periodical *back* for using the occasion for its own advertisement: "The English public, as a mass, takes no interest in a work of art until it is told that the work in question is immoral, and your *réclame*, will, I have no doubt, increase the sale of the magazine . . ." Of course, the end result for Wilde was also the further advertisement of the novel, first in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, published in the U.S. and distributed on both sides of the Atlantic, and then, the revised version, published in book form in England a year later, in April 1891. These episodes reveal a Wilde who was extremely conscious of the media and who was learning that it was necessary to take advantage of the opportunities it offered to aspiring artists. We can see why he would be driven to theorize art as something always already embedded in commercial media.

## THE CHANGING THEATER AUDIENCES IN LATE-VICTORIAN BRITAIN

In late-Victorian Britain, we witness the formation of perhaps the first mass audiences that we can characterize as fully "modern." They were so different from the audiences of, say, 100 years earlier—the audiences addressed by Wordsworth or Sheridan—that writers and artists were forced to totally re-conceptualize how their art was to function. One historian of literature, Richard Altick, writes: "Whereas the Victorian man of letters addressed himself to the reading audience at large, his grandson had to be content with addressing a small splinter of that audience—what [Matthew] Arnold called, in another connection, 'the saving remnant'" (Altick 151). Altick points out that those interested in doing serious, critical work were being elbowed into a corner, or at least they saw themselves as such. Wilde, however, was one who took advantage of the period's more fluid mixing of high



and mass culture. He was addressing the remnant and the mass audience simultaneously.

Altick writes that one of the factors in this changing literary culture was the expansion of the reading public. One could point to any one of a number of key moments in the previous 300 years in which this reading public expanded significantly: the era of the Elizabethan stage, that of Steele and Addison's *the Spectator*, that of Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator*, that of Dr. Johnson's educative efforts, and that of Wilkie Collins's "Unknown Public." We can identify a couple of main factors in this expansion. The first was the increasing amount of disposable income for the middle-classes. Such led them to get more and more books and periodicals. With the flourishing of phenomena like Mudie's Library and Collins' and Dickens' *Household Words*, more and more people had access to literature.

A second factor was the expansion of education. And it is the Victorian period in particular that witnesses watershed moments in education history, such as the signing of the Education Act of 1870 (and subsequent Acts) which made elementary education all but universal. The addition of the enormous audience of reading women made the expansion all the more dramatic. Therefore, George Gissing's character in *New Grub Street* (1893), Whelpdale, talks—and complains—of writing to "the quarter educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board Schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention" (496). Moreover, in London, the force of these changes was magnified by the fact that the city's population doubled in the second half of the nineteenth-century. These are just some brief comments on the reading public, and in general the mass audiences, in order to get a general sense of the social upheaval involved. My [Chapter Two](#) deals specifically with the coming of the New Journalism, a particularly dramatic—and for many, disturbing—development. This opening up of critical ideas and political discussion to the middle-classes was something not witnessed before. Aided by new printing technologies and increasing advertising revenues, publishers found themselves commanding larger audiences.

A second major factor in the expanding of the reading public was the sheer "thickening" of civil society into a mature network and infrastructure. Such a civil society is the condition for much of the economic prosperity, legal framework, and technology of communication that makes a certain kind of literary production possible. One critic writes "that, unintentionally, normal business activity demands, requires, and in turn creates a 'thickening web' of institutions, organizations, self-regulating mechanisms, and professions that comprise important components of civil society outside the state" (Berger 4).

This thickening generates the need for standards and rules, via institutions and associations; it encourages a more free media and public debate; and it calls for a set of legal, professional, educational and business institutions.

Such developments as the system of royalties and the establishment of copyright laws for writers created a situation that made possible a career like Oscar Wilde's. Likewise, such innovations as the advent of the actor-manager in West End theaters and the creation of a fashion market that worked largely through theaters were things that made possible a play like *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Earlier in the century, literary figures like Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley, Lord Tennyson, and Robert Browning had written plays, but none that had any significant provenance in actual popular theaters. For the most part, they wrote closet dramas not meant for production at all. Yet by the late 1880s, a new "renaissance"—to use H.A. Jones' word—was occurring in the English stage, such that it became more conceivable to try to bring literature to these popular theaters. One historian of theater writes that the 1880s and 1890s "saw the popularity of the Victorian theatre sustained, but playgoing taste transformed and English drama raised to the realm of literature for the first time since Sheridan and Goldsmith" (Rowell v).

The result was a theater that was fabulously popular—among members of almost all social classes—and that was a laboratory for writers for the mixing of high and mass culture. This was a unique window of opportunity. Just a generation later, the cinema would largely steal away the mass audiences. Theaters would become more and more the domain of either only the wealthy or only the progressive and avant-garde—a state of affairs that sadly continues to the present day.

This set of circumstances in journalism and theater, accompanied by Wilde's networking abilities among these various social circles, sets the stage for his literary career. The following chapters summarize that career as it leads up to his first theatrical success, *Lady Windermere's Fan*. I first look at his work for what was the most disruptive and innovative newspaper of the 1880s, the *Pall Mall Gazette*. I then turn to his work at the primary organ of female aesthete ideas, the magazine Wilde himself edited, the *Woman's World*. And I end with a discussion of the first production of *Lady Windermere*, a major example of what I am calling consumer modernism.

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## Chapter Two

# Newspaper Culture in the *Pall Mall Gazette* Years (1884–1890)

It has been noted of Oscar Wilde that, whenever he faced a choice between two opposites, he chose both. In his attitude towards journalism and the popular press, Wilde chose both to condemn it and to defend it, and even engage directly in it. As we have seen, in the essay “Soul of Man” he lashes out like an Arnoldian defender of the saving remnant, deploring Public Opinion, which “makes use of journalists,” and even gives “absolute freedom to journalists, [while it] entirely limits the artist” (AC 277). Here Wilde stands on the “culture” side of Matthew Arnold’s culture and anarchy.

But Wilde characteristically wanted both culture and anarchy, anarchy representing the uncontrollable modern world of mass media and consumer culture. The fact is that the vast majority of the pieces that Wilde wrote in the 1880s were features in a daily newspaper. And his stint in journalism was not merely a way to make money; he thrived there, and learned much about artistic creation. Moreover, this newspaper—the *Pall Mall Gazette*—was precisely the radically activist and sensationalist one that heralded the advent of New Journalism—Britain’s answer to America’s Yellow Journalism—the movement whose project was to reach the emerging mass audiences. It is worth noting that in the 1880s Wilde wrote no less than 90 pieces for the *P.M.G.*, while he wrote only eight pieces for the more avant-garde *Dramatic Review*.<sup>1</sup> (In fact, the *Pall Mall Gazette* did not have as large a circulation as its editor, W.T. Stead, pretended it had. It normally only reached about 30,000. At the same time, it had an enormous influence among the upper middle and upper classes. Moreover, Stead was, at least at times, trying to make the *P.M.G.* into a true mass-audience vehicle, managing to get circulation up to over 100,000 when special investigative stories were coming out.)

Now it is important to recognize that Wilde was just like many other writers of his time in the fact that he was what we might call a popular critic. His career represents the not uncommon narrative of a writer who starts as a

journalist, who learns much about both society and publishing thereby, and who then follows up by writing serious yet popular (i.e., economically successful) “literature.” But what I am arguing is more. I am saying that Wilde is a consumer modernist and that his aesthetics drive his journalistic writing, reviewing, and editing in the years leading up to his theatrical achievements of the 1890s. His journalistic writing reflects his modernist aesthetics in that he works with and among *surfaces*, and he thus validates the ephemeral, the mood, the sensational; of course, the ephemeral and the sensational are central features of the New Journalism. Also, Wilde focuses attention on the *act of interpretation* of the audience; he theorizes the audience’s role in shaping the artistic creation. The aesthetics also come out in part in Wilde’s keen ability to exploit social anxieties—something related to his concern with surfaces. He plays upon those anxieties, especially upon anxieties about the economics of art and about advertising culture. It is my judgment that most of today’s critics dwell so much on Wilde’s playing with anxieties in the realms of gender and ethnicity that they tend to lose sight of these other aspects of Wilde’s work.

Let me pause for a moment to reflect upon the history of Wilde studies, seeing my work as part of an effort to better determine where Wilde’s work stands in literary history. We can perhaps identify three main stages in Wilde scholarship over the last century. First, he was critically ignored in Anglo-American scholarship from the time of his death until the late 1960s. Happily, today Wilde’s journalism-criticism is fairly available to us in either his *Complete Works* (1908) or in the collection *The Artist as Critic*, edited by Richard Ellmann (1969). Yet it is indicative of how long Wilde was considered insufficiently literary that even today, the most comprehensive collection of his criticism available is one that was put together in 1908. A new edition is finally in the works.<sup>2</sup>

In the second stage of Wilde criticism, beginning with the work of Richard Ellmann and others, Wilde was rehabilitated to the point that he is now seen as one of the leading literary modernist figures of the late nineteenth century. But this rehabilitation, mixed with the politics of gender and race, have led to confusion about who the real Oscar Wilde was, particularly in relation to the popular consumer culture of late Victorian London. What I would call the third stage of criticism is represented by the work of recent scholars, like Ian Small and Josephine Guy, who have helped clarify Wilde’s engagement in the publishing industries of his time. And my work continues that clarification, focusing in part on Wilde’s involvement with the New Journalism industry.

So, for example, a second-stage critic like Ellmann, who in 1988 published the most important biography of Wilde, pays far too little attention

to Wilde's journalistic drive. Ellmann writes of the journalism in an offhand way: "Lecturing gave way to journalism, the only other means readily available to supplement Constance's [his wife's] income" (286). He covers the journalism-criticism in the course of just a few pages. Ellmann and others have painted a picture of Wilde as being very much out of place in the arenas of mass culture. In the words of one prominent critic, Linda Dowling, when Wilde hit London, he had been "thrust out of the Eden of Oxford" into "the newly democratized and vulgarized forms of art and culture on the most immediate and exasperating terms—in the form of first-night audiences [and] newspaper headline writers" (91). The idea is that he was exasperated by being forced to write in that mass cultural context, that Wilde was exasperated by that anarchy. Dowling, in her *The Vulgarization of Art*, wrongly reads Wilde as a straightforward defender of culture:

For as Wilde repeatedly attempted to browbeat the public into acquiescence with his own standards of taste, declaring 'Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself more artistic' (*Soul* 271), his object of remonstrance and satire began to fragment even as he lectured to it. (92)

Now it is true that Wilde did not set out to be a journalist (he started out trying to write poems and plays), nor did he stay a journalist forever. He steadily wrote articles and reviews for several periodicals only during the period between 1884 and 1890; and he edited *The Woman's World* for just two years, from 1887 to 1889.<sup>3</sup> But it is also true that this period of time was precisely when Wilde was creating the masterful essays of *Intentions*, a collection not published until 1891, but whose constituent essays were written between 1885 and 1890. And this is the period in which Wilde learned what he needed to know in order to launch his theatrical writing career (considering that his first attempted launch, in the early 1880s, ended in frustration). We fail to understand what is most powerful about his well-known books and plays if we ignore their connection with his journalistic-critical work; both aspects of his career are animated by the self-same aesthetic concerns and the same engagement with mass culture.

Before getting into the theoretical bases, it is worth examining the more mundane and practical forces that drove him to the vocation of journalism. As Wilde settled in London in the late 1870s, he faced the challenge of supporting himself in that metropolitan marketplace. His inherited land in Ireland turned out to be almost worthless. He had failed to secure himself an academic career at Oxford; he had failed to have his plays produced in

London (and his American production soon flopped in 1883); his *Poems*, which he published at his own expense received neither critical nor monetary success. Wilde found that he did best when lecturing to the general public, literally the *mass audience*. Besides, both his mother and his older brother Willie were making money in London as professional writers for periodicals. Lady Wilde was the first Wilde to start writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. She also wrote for fashionable upper-middle-class magazines like the *St. James's Magazine* and the *Lady's Pictorial*. She would become a member of the Lady's Literary Society. Willie, for his part, was writing for the *World*, and he would serve as a correspondent for the newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*.

Oscar, then, by the middle-1880s, also turned to journalism. He was supporting himself, and eventually also his wife and two children, by writing in periodicals.<sup>4</sup> This was at a time when journalists and writers in general were professionalizing; we witness the formation of many professional associations. Walter Besant founded the Society of Authors in 1884, and Wilde became a member. Writers were also receiving more recognition, more and more often having their names printed as by-lines. Copyright laws were strengthened, making one's writing not something owned by a journal, but a matter of personal property to be marketed—hence Matthew Arnold's, Walter Pater's, and eventually Wilde's, practice of publishing collections of one's previously published periodical essays.

Wilde explains his pragmatic ideas on professional writing in some advice to an "Unidentified Correspondent," writing:

believe me that it is impossible to live by literature. By journalism a man may make an income. . . . you should be ready to give up some of your natural pride. . . . Finally, remember that London is full of young men working for literary success, and that you must carve your way to fame. Laurels don't come for the asking. (CL 265)

Wilde shows his own understanding of the journalist profession in the middle 1880s, acknowledging the necessity of being, above all, pragmatic, of being willing to "carve" out some fame for oneself, something that requires a writer to be conscious of his audiences. Thus, professional writers like Wilde entered these economic and professional institutions at a time when the institutions were "thickening" into their more modern forms, approximating, *mutatis mutandis*, what Britain's journalism industry was for much of the twentieth century.

At the same time, because journalist-critics made a living by writing, society still retained a lingering sense that "professional" journalists were

rather low figures—like the “scribblers” of the eighteenth century. Among many that sense was fading, but slowly. Sydney Grundy’s popular play of the early 1880s, *The Glass of Fashion*, chronicles the actions of writers of a one-shilling society magazine with the same name as the play. Wilde himself would write several pieces for similar magazines, *The Court and Society Review* and the *Woman’s World* (the latter not being quite as focused on “society”). In Grundy’s play, when one high society character tells another that he is writing for *The Glass*, his interlocutor exclaims, “I thought all authors were Bohemian!” The first character’s response is, “Ah that was years ago. But now Belgravian’s the word” (4). (Belgravia is an expensive neighborhood in central London.) And even by the early 1890s, when Wilde was coming into his own in terms of book publishing, he was still hoping to land a job as dramatic or art critic, for example at the new magazine *The Speaker* (cf. letter 18 Dec. 1889, CL 417). Such would have made his career much more resemble that of Bernard Shaw, for example.

The part of Wilde’s 1880s career that most immediately prepared him for journalism was his popular lecturing. Not insignificantly, it was lecturing, both in America and Britain, that early on earned Wilde the most money and that gave him his public reputation. This was not for the most part lecturing to Oxford-educated academics or cultivated artistic elites. In this popular lecturing, he had a largely middle-class audience, and one in whom the majority of attendees were often women. Wilde’s regular lectures included titles such as “The House Beautiful,” “The Decorative Arts,” and “Dress.” Wilde had to learn the hard way how to address his ideas to these mass audiences. Before Wilde turned to such topics as “Dress,” he had attempted a more high cultural tone in his lectures. His first lecture in America had been “The English Renaissance of Art,” a lecture in which he argued that nineteenth-century England was indeed producing art that was nothing less than a real renaissance. He argued that it was an art that represented a public mission, a “desire for a more gracious and comely way of life” (*Essays and Lectures* 111).

In the event, Wilde found that this first lecture was often too difficult for his audiences, so he broadened his offering of topics, taking up more concrete themes like the titles mentioned above. His lecture “House Decoration” was given the subtitle “The Practical Application of the Principles of Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration, With Observations Upon Dress and Personal Ornaments.” In this lecture, Wilde expresses the hope “that art would create a new brotherhood among men by furnishing a universal language,” and he goes so far as to propose that schools dedicate one hour a day to teaching the decorative arts (169). And in another lecture, “Art and the Handicraftsman,” Wilde makes a startling theoretical statement:



“all the arts are fine arts and all the arts decorative arts” (186). Such may not at first seem so radical, but when we consider the implications in terms of the distinction between high art and popular art, one can see that this line of thinking became a hallmark of his conception of modernist aesthetics. Wilde here in this early lecture signals a direction he will move in, namely, the idea that “permanent,” authoritative beauty and ephemeral, “pretty” beauty have no essential difference from one another.

In these lectures, he was aligning himself with a larger movement of social reform, not so much of political change as of cultural and moral change by means of educating the middle-classes. This movement was in part what British aesthetes were up to, both authoritative thinkers of aesthetics like John Ruskin and William Morris, and the less-authoritative female aesthetes like the popular fashion and decoration writer Mary Eliza Haweis and the novelist, Ouida.<sup>5</sup> For Wilde, it was appropriate and fairly easy to move from Arts and Crafts/Aestheticism lecturing to New Journalism feature-writing and reviewing.

In fact, Wilde’s first piece for the *P.M.G.* was precisely his published letter to the newspaper on “Dress.” In the piece, Wilde outlines some of his fashion ideas. He says that the clothing of the future will represent a balancing of the “Greek principles of beauty with the German principles of health” (CL 235).<sup>6</sup> That is, he calls for fairly loose clothing that has “rich and rippling folds” (like Greek clothing as portrayed in art), as well as clothing that fulfills the principles of then-in-vogue Dr. Jaeger, who argued that it was good for one’s health to wear wool underwear and suits.<sup>7</sup> Wilde’s ideas represent a combination of Western rationalism and “Oriental” ornamentalism, a binary opposition that he developed in his aesthetics generally.

In theoretical terms, Wilde was interested in elevating the status of the decorative, the superficial. He gives a definition of “decoration” that makes it not a mere surface, something to cover the substance. Wilde says in his “Renaissance” lecture:

For what is decoration but the worker’s expression of joy in his work? And not joy merely . . . but that opportunity of expressing his own individuality which, as it is the essence of all life, is the source of all art. . . . Let it be for you to create an art that is made by the hands of the people for the joy of the people, to please the hearts of the people, too . . . There is . . . nothing in life that art cannot sanctify. (152–53)

Wilde waxes enthusiastic about the social mission of art here, which, admittedly, is not something he would always do. In a sense, by the time we get to

the major essays of *Intentions*, he has lost much of that enthusiasm. At the same time, elements of these ideas would stay with Wilde throughout, elements like an investment in ephemerality and charm and a commitment to art that addresses “the people.” Mary Warner Blanchard has written a book on Wilde’s lecture tour of America arguing that he worked to enable women aesthetes to envisage their own work as valuable. In the book, *Oscar Wilde’s America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (1998), she writes that women painters, potters, designers and critics “understood that the aesthetic quest pointed out by Oscar Wilde offered women a way out of the dead ends of conventional domestic life” (xiii). It is important to note that this enabling did not entail a subversion of the commercial culture in which women’s art works proliferated. In order to elevate women’s status, he precisely validated that commercial world. This is a pattern we see again and again in Wilde.

## THE NEW JOURNALISM

The New Journalism hit London in the 1880s like an earthquake. No one could help but be aware of the shocks the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Star* were causing in society. The figure at the center of the storm was the *P.M.G.*’s editor, William T. Stead. It was Stead who published Wilde’s letter on “Dress” in 1884 and made it the first of his many pieces in the newspaper. Theirs turned out to be, for several years, a fruitful relationship.<sup>8</sup>

The elements that characterized these new-wave London dailies were their combination of radical social reformism and mass appeal. These papers consciously sought out a mass audience by including sensational elements, heavy doses of feature writing—including elements targeting women readers—and a more accessible layout. They included features like “investigations,” interviews, and pictures. Critics of New Journalism at the time noticed that these newspapers were learning from American newspapers, and indeed right about this time, newspaper owners like William Randolph Hearst were going to the extreme measures that earned them the designation of *yellow journalists*. Perhaps Stead saw that Wilde’s experience lecturing on art, decoration, and dress throughout North America and his familiarity with the American press fit him well for his own newspaper. While he was not necessarily Wilde’s friend, Stead seems to have liked Wilde’s work a lot. Wilde wrote steadily for the paper starting in 1885. Stead and Wilde both ceased their connection with the *P.M.G.* at about the same time, in 1890.

Stead was expanding the *P.M.G.*’s investigative reporting and other more “popular” and more politically-activist pieces, the most famous of which was the July 1885 series on “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” The series

was an *exposé* of the prostitution industry and the practice of recruiting very young women, often through entrapment. There was a tremendous outcry both for and against what Stead was doing. He even served time in jail as a result of legal action taken against him. The result—what Stead was ultimately aiming for—was that the series ballooned the *P.M.G.*'s circulation, and at some stretches of time the paper more than tripled its circulation to over 100,000. People were reading the series with a combination of moral indignation at the crimes and voyeuristic curiosity of the details.

Stead had hit on a perfect combination. The moral education of the middle-classes overlapped with a sensationalistic seduction of them. Moreover, the *P.M.G.* had a real political impact. It helped create a movement that in the end succeeded in getting Parliament to pass a bill to raise the age of consent for sex from 13 to 16 (one of the issues Stead's series focused on). Stead saw himself as a charismatic leader, as someone enacting what he called in a *Contemporary Review* article "Government by Journalism." He was a crusader seeking out corruption and social ills—part Kenneth Starr, part Michael Moore—exposing such things through his newspaper, and educating the middle-classes thereby. In a sense, his middle-class reformism bears a partial resemblance to that of John Ruskin and William Morris—both of whom had a huge impact on Wilde as well.

In addition, one writer in 1890 (she happened to be writing in Wilde's *Woman's World*) links the New Journalism to a certain brand of political feminism, what we might call consumer culture feminism. The writer, Mary Frances Billington, notes that New Journalism "has become associated too much with vulgar sensationalism and discordant headlines." She adds that New Journalism's positive side is its willingness to seriously address more "feminine" things, to pay attention to "social functions, to dress, to decorative novelty, to women's domestic interests, to philanthropy, to bazaars" (8). There is a real sense, among proponents and detractors alike, that the New Journalism is more "feminine" than the more "masculine," more critical, predecessor. And New Journalist women were not typically Marxists or opponents of commodification. As can be seen from Billington's list of topics, they were deeply committed to consumer culture. In addition, one notices that contributors for the *Woman's World* often were also writing for the *P.M.G.* In the 1880s, female aesthetes like Ouida, Graham R. Tomson, and George Fleming wrote features and articles for the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

It is worth stepping back for a moment from New Journalism to briefly describe the larger cultural and economic situation of 1880s London. We witness the ongoing establishment of such things as commuter trains and omnibuses; thus newspapers were being produced specifically to be read during one's commute. We also witness the enormous growth of the advertising industry,

a development that brought much more money into the coffers of newspaper publishers—for one thing, enabling them to pay writers better. Also, newspapers had a much larger potential audience, given the steadily rising urban population and literacy rates.<sup>9</sup> Another major factor in the New Journalism was the fact that so many important technological advances took place in the years between 1860 and 1900, the invention of things like the electric telegraph, the telephone, the typewriter, the high speed rotary press, and the half tone block for reproduction of photographs (Wiener xii). It is important to let the impact of these changes sink in. This was a time of turmoil—something analogous to the revolutionary changes brought in recent years by the Internet—a time of growing prosperity for many and of increasing exploitation for others, and a time when mass media expanded very rapidly. And a paper like the *P.M.G.* was right at the center of much conflict.

Also important in the New Journalism was the waxing of the entertainment industries of sports, theater, fashion and society and celebrity gossip. Thus, Wilde was writing feature (rather than “news”) articles—reviews of books and plays, essays on celebrities, and cultural essays on things like fashion. Moreover, New Journalism periodicals presented what to many was a disturbing mixture of “journalism” and “criticism,” the latter formerly being restricted to much smaller-circulation, one-shilling (i.e., more expensive) monthlies. When Matthew Arnold criticized the New Journalism, he was in part voicing alarm at a *crisis of authority*, a fear that uncultured, uncritical writers were making statements about culture and society in a way formerly reserved to authoritative “sages” like himself. Arnold, whose project Laurel Brake describes as being “to elevate his journalistic practice into ‘criticism’ and thus to the authority of literature,” was not happy about periodicals that mixed journalism and criticism (1).

The newspaper started having regular features on football, cricket, fashion, and the theaters, in addition to having features covering the art galleries and latest books. We see such articles as:

“‘Flats’ For the Middle-Classes”

“Where London Eats and Drinks”

“A Run Through the Studios”

“Dress at Henley [a major horse-race site]”

“Wall Decoration in America”

“Women Who Write: The Literary Ladies’ Dinner,” and

“Prints and the Print Room at the British Museum”

There were also regular features like “To-Day’s Tittle Tattle.” One gets a fairly clear picture from these titles that the paper was reaching out to the middle-classes; it addressed them as people who *consume*, and who shape their class-identities by consuming certain goods. Their patterns of consumption—homes, decoration, clothes, leisure activities—had so much to do with their ability to mark themselves off as legitimately middle-class. And the look of one’s home and of one’s wardrobe has a lot to do with one’s very sense of self. These are not insignificant matters if one is interested in the formation of cultures and individuals within cultures.

Such articles, I argue, show that the New Journalism newspapers were the most important institutions of the emerging late-Victorian mass audience. Joel Wiener, in his Introduction to the important collection, *Papers for the Millions*, describes “the creation of an undifferentiated market of readers that was not sectarian in its religious or cultural outlook” (xvi). He also writes that one of the main characteristics of the New Journalism was, speaking in broad terms, “the transition from the wealthy, educated, leisured reader to the working, literate reader of the middle classes” (10). Thus, the *P.M.G.* and others were some of the first “penny-dailies” meant to be easily purchased and read quickly while one rode the train or omnibus, or during lunch break. The clerk at the door was reading it as much as the gentleman sitting in the smoking room at the Pall Mall clubs. Also, in the *P.M.G.*, a Wilde feature article about “Dress” or about “Dinners and Dishes” would appear on the page following “serious” articles covering the latest Parliamentary bills and the developments in the war in Afghanistan or Sudan. This seems to have suited Wilde quite well.

## ANXIETY ABOUT THE NEW JOURNALISM

While some, like Wilde and Bernard Shaw<sup>10</sup>, thrived under the New Journalism conditions, many more found them inimical to their work as artists and critics, and they felt that New Journalism had an extremely negative impact on society in general. These agreed with Arnold that the newspapers represented a vulgarization of the public sphere. In order to analyze the anxieties raised by the advent of New Journalism, it is useful to point to just what Arnold wrote in the 1887 *Nineteenth Century* article that gave the movement its name.<sup>11</sup> Arnold writes:

We have had opportunities of observing a new journalism which a clever and energetic man has lately invented. It has much to recommend it; it is full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, gen-

erous instincts; its one great fault is that it is *feather-brained*. (“Up To Easter,” *Nineteenth Century* XXI.638)

Arnold refers specifically to Stead, whose investigative series like “Maiden Tribute” had created such a stir. Arnold would also have been disturbed because Stead absolutely exulted when he was arrested, writing some pieces for publication from prison; he knew the arrest was something that would greatly increase the notoriety of his paper. The newspaper had a dual audience: it was aimed at upper-class businessmen and government officials as well as at the men and women of the lower middle-classes. Arnold thus perceived the *P.M.G.* as lowering its tone in order to cater to the half-cultured tastes of many in the latter group.<sup>12</sup> He was also criticizing the outlandish democratic-messianic claims—and they were outlandish—made by Stead in such pieces as “Government by Journalism” and “The Future of Journalism” (in the May and November 1886 issues of the *Contemporary Review*). Stead, progressive and egalitarian in some ways, was also disturbingly moralistic and self-important. It was this Puritanical streak that made Wilde more wary of Stead and that probably drove him away from Stead’s later publishing activities.

Perhaps the prime grievance of the critics of New Journalism was the fact that Stead was unapologetically willing to dwell within mass consumer culture and to try to do serious, critical work therein. Some, like Arnold, and like Wilde’s former professor, Walter Pater, disliked the fact that the *P.M.G.* was writing towards both sophisticated readers and the “semi-educated” middle-classes, two heretofore mostly separate reading audiences. Up to this time, there was a huge difference between a mass-circulation newspaper like the *Daily Telegraph* and a magazine like *The Nineteenth Century*. Newspapers knew their place, and in recent years never made any pretension to being anything but newspapers. The attitude of a proto-modernist like George Moore is indicative. In his *The Confessions of a Young Man* (1888), he attacked the concept of universal education, which, as he saw it, was helping promote the plague of mass consumer culture; and with universal education came a literate but not sophisticated newspaper-reading public like the *P.M.G.*’s.

Similarly, George Gissing’s character Walter Egremont in the novel *Thyrza* calls the newspaper “the very voice of all that is worst in our civilization.” He bemoans the fact that “every gross-minded scribbler who gets a square inch of space in the morning journal has a more respectful hearing than Shakespeare” (Vol. I 158). Such attitudes followed on the tradition of Arnold and Pater, and were precursors to the very strong antipathy

towards mass culture that we see in most of the high modernists of the twentieth century. In Gissing's *New Grub Street*, the sister of a successful journalist objects to the way the New Journalism catered to its audience: "Surely these poor, silly people oughtn't to be encouraged in their weakness" (498).

Others, less-elitist than Arnold or Gissing, turned to the Left Press, papers like *The Clarion*, *The Labour Leader*, or *Commonweal*. Bernard Shaw, for example, although he also wrote for popular periodicals, did some writing in Left periodicals. He held the attitude that while newspapers were indispensable, they were also "fearfully mischievous" in their manipulation of the "post-Education Act reading public" (Holroyd I 79). Shaw was unique in that he worked in both the Left press and in New Journalism. In fact, he managed to bring many of the Fabian Socialists to T.P. O'Connor's New Journalist paper, *The Star*. Then again, when O'Connor found out how truly radical they were, he fired most of them. It was only Shaw—who, like Wilde, had a more nuanced sense of the new audiences—who managed to convince O'Connor to keep him on the staff. He even became quite a popular critic, using the pen-name "Corno di Bassetto" (Italian for bassett horn) in his musical criticism pieces.

If some embraced the New Journalism and some revolted against it, Wilde oscillated between both sides, between a more elitist direction and a populist one. Wilde seems to have tried to *utilize* within his own work the tensions and anxieties between high and popular culture, between criticism and journalism. Wilde's general tendency here was to dwell in that hybrid zone in which fashion and art, advertising and education—in general "culture" and "anarchy"—overlapped each other and were inextricably linked. (When I mention this "hybrid zone" I do not mean that fashion and art are indistinguishable. They are distinct realms, as are advertising and education.

In order to work that tension, Wilde swings back and forth like a pendulum between the two directions. For example, at times he insists that "Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic" ("Soul of Man" 271). Such was something that we saw the critic Linda Dowling focusing on. At other times—and, in this case, in the same essay—he contradicts himself, implying that people should not try to be "artistic"—they should not try to be anything that is judged externally at all. That is, he says that "all imitation in morals and in life is wrong" (266). Wilde seems to have consciously worked by making strong, absolute statements and then contradicting them.

Another way of thinking of the Wilde pendulum is to see it as a larger strategy.<sup>13</sup> Consider a contemporary example: an actor like Ethan Hawke can begin as an immensely popular actor by appearing in major Hollywood films like *The Dead Poets' Society* and *Reality Bites*. Yet he can further his career, even his popular career, by associating himself with more high-culture work and spending a lot of time acting in art-dramas in Off-Broadway theaters. He recently published a critically-acclaimed novel and collaborated on the screenplay for the heady film *Before Sunset*. The high-culture work has broadened his appeal to more audiences. Moreover, it made him even more *popular* in a mass-cultural sense; even “half-educated” middle-class people like to be associated with learned culture. In a similar fashion, Wilde raised his high-cultural *cachet* by writing decadent poetry, and simultaneously raised his mass cultural *cachet*. Such a high-pop direction would later lead him, for example, to write the non-popular, Flaubertian play, *Salomé*, and to seek to have it produced at a West End theater with the most popular actress in Europe in the lead. Had he succeeded, it would have been the perfect consumer modernist literary event.<sup>14</sup> Josephine Guy and Ian Small write that it is wrong to think that Wilde saw himself as either purely literary or purely mass cultural:

Rather Wilde pursued these different ways of ‘being’ a writer as if there was no necessary incongruity or tension between them. The poet, the popular dramatist, the journalist, and the putative translator of Greek literature—these are all aspects of the same Wilde. (31)

They are describing Wilde as he was in 1880, but the characteristic holds for the whole of his career. True, Wilde did write a handful of pieces that fall into the category of *decadent* or *avant-garde*—and therefore meant for a very small audience—even during the *P.M.G.* years. For example, he published two decadent-style poems in the *Dramatic Review*, a somewhat avant-garde magazine, in 1885 and 1886. The first is “The Harlot’s House.” The second, “Sonnet: On the Sale by Auction of Keats’ Love Letters,” protests that the “brawlers of the auction-mart” are fighting over the sacred relics of the poet. Moreover, he continued to work in this genre, working for years on and publishing in 1894 the longer poem, the *Sphinx*. Yet in all, Wilde spent comparatively little time writing for elite audiences.

Because of his strategy, Wilde was able to address—and to provoke—both elitists and populists, refusing to allow either side to rest easy; nor did he worry for a moment that he was constantly contradicting himself. That is, at times he berates the vulgar Philistine: he praises Walter Pater as one who



“in these days of popular education and facile journalism [has] reminded [us] of the real scholarship that is essential to the perfect writer” (“Mr. Pater’s Last Volume” CW IX:538). But at other times, he criticizes those who shun “the people.” In a piece called “The Poets and the People: By One of the Latter”—Wilde significantly calls himself one of the “people,” not a “poet.” In the essay he calls for Robert Browning to be a popular, accessible writer. Wilde attacks him because, “He, at the hour when his country requires inspiration and encouragement, prostitutes his intelligence to the production of a number of unwieldy lines that to the vast majority of Englishmen are unintelligible jargon” (AC 44).<sup>15</sup>

I am not saying that Wilde was alone in his movement towards mixing straightforward, popular writing with more philosophically and aesthetically-sophisticated ideas. Indeed, I would argue that such an admixture is a mark of the better journalist-critics of the 1880s and 1890s. Some of the more recognizable names include George Bernard Shaw (and other Fabian socialists, whose very mission consisted of getting serious critical ideas into the mass culture), William Archer, George Saintsbury, James Fitzjames Stephens, Richard LeGallienne, and Max Beerbohm. Indeed, as striking as Wilde’s paradoxical, playfully intellectual prose looks today, the style was not that different from other journalistic writing. But Wilde’s difference was his commitment modernist aesthetics.

## NEW JOURNALISM AND MODERNIST AESTHETICS

Wilde brought specifically modernist themes and aesthetics into his popular writing, and he was conceptualizing his popular writing in modernist terms. What we see developing here in the *P.M.G.* pieces was going to show itself more fully in his strongest critical essays (the ones he eventually published in book form) and in his dramas. The modernist themes include a concern with the surface and the sensational as opposed to the enduring. Such concerns also focus the audience’s attention upon their own act of interpretation, a kind of proto-linguistic turn. These themes Wilde connects up with his playing upon the tensions and anxieties, particularly anxieties about how art and literature are embedded within industries in Victorian consumer culture—particularly the industry of periodical mass media.

It is instructive to look briefly at Wilde’s journalism-criticism in relation to some contemporaries. In looking at the *Wellesley Index*, which only includes certain more “critical” periodicals, we see that someone like Matthew Arnold published 20 pieces in *The Nineteenth Century*, perhaps the most esteemed of critical periodicals of the time. Arnold and W.T. Stead

both wrote a large number of pieces for the *Contemporary Review* (11 and 15 respectively), which was the semi-official magazine of the Established Church, and was therefore a bit more conservative than the other periodicals. Arnold, Stead, and Walter Pater all wrote several pieces in *Macmillan's Magazine*. On the other hand, Wilde wrote very little for the *Index* periodicals, four for the *Fortnightly*, four for *The Nineteenth Century*, one for *Blackwood's Edinburgh*, and one for *Macmillan's*. By contrast, Wilde wrote 90 pieces for Stead's *P.M.G.* As for magazines not in the *Index*, he wrote eight pieces for the *Dramatic Review*, 14 for the *Court and Society Review*, and 12 for *The Woman's World*. (These numbers are based on Guy and Small's *Appendix* in *Oscar Wilde's Profession*.) In numerical terms, Wilde was a New Journalist.

The first aspect of his consumer modernism is his thematic emphasis on surface and on sensation. Writing an 1887 *P.M.G.* review of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, Wilde comments that Pater "has taken the sensationalism of Greek philosophy and made it a new method of art criticism" (CW IX:174). By using "sensational" here, Wilde on the one hand comments on the "sensual" aspect of Pater's writing. He writes that Pater's work is borne of "a desire to give sensuous environment to intellectual concepts." But he is also using the word, more significantly, with an awareness that critics of the New Journalism precisely attacked it for its sensationalism. And when Wilde links the sensational to Greek philosophy, he is implying that journalism can have real critical, philosophical weight. He implies the same in another *P.M.G.* review, an August 1887 piece on a new novel, in which Wilde queries, "What is criticism itself but a mood?" (CW IX:176). Criticism for Wilde is something thoroughly embedded in the fashions and vicissitudes of its changeable journalistic contexts. Someone like his editor, W.T. Stead expressed similar ideas when he defended his huge, ALL CAPS headlines, writing "if you print in ordinary type, it is as if you had never printed at all" ("Government by Journalism," *Contemporary Review*, May 1886, 671).<sup>16</sup>

What Wilde is up to in these reviews is an alternate conception of philosophical, rigorous criticism, as well as of literary creation. Wilde rejects the notion of a straightforward distinction between substance and surface, between the significant interior and the changeable appearance. Wilde, of course, delights in staying on the surface, in finding truth in masks, philosophy in moods. At the same time, his point is a fairly straightforward modernist aesthetic point, namely, that, while it is at times useful to think in terms of a binary opposition between critical thinking and superficial sensation, the binary breaks down in certain ways—just *where* they break down is where Wilde does much of his work. (Indeed, all binaries break down at some point, so in a sense, his ideas are not necessarily all that radical.)<sup>17</sup>

Wilde continues to discuss philosophy in the above review of Pater, describing Pater's method as one in which "the philosophy is tempered by personality . . . the very performance of each principle gaining something through the change and colour of life [i.e., through the various personages Pater writes these essays about] through which it finds expression" (CW IX:174).<sup>18</sup> A critical approach does not consist of getting past the superficial appearances to the "real" matter. Rather, the object has no existence separate from those appearances. And both artist and reader are in part required to receptively respond to the superficial aspects—hence Wilde's concern with "one's mood" and "one's personality."

Wilde further discusses appearances in another review, an 1889 *P.M.G.* piece on "The New President" (i.e., of the Royal Academy of British Artists). He states:

What Nature really is is a question for metaphysics not for art. Art deals with appearances, and the eye of the man who looks at Nature, the vision, in fact, of the artist, is far more important to us than what he looks at. There is more truth in Corot's aphorism that a landscape is simply 'the mood of a man's mind'[than in the new President's statements on naturalism]. (CW IX:402)

Wilde is re-stating the artistic ideas he has learned from people like his some-time-friend, the painter J.M. Whistler; and he takes those ideas into his modernist aesthetics, provocatively using the term "mood" for critical artistic thought. He thus focuses on the *response* of the audience, the non-cognitive aesthetic *Urteilkraft*, judgment-power, to use Kant's word.

We see Wilde also commenting in the review of Pater on his portrayal of *Sebastian Van Storck* (the title of one of the essays in *Imaginary Portraits*). In Wilde's words, Van Storck embodies "a philosophical passion," as opposed to a passion of the senses. Again, Wilde links philosophy and sensation. Wilde also dwells on Pater's portrayal of *Duke Carl of Rosenmold*, a figure Pater similarly describes as combining critical philosophy and romantic passion. The Duke, comments Wilde, demonstrated a "fantastic desire to amaze and bewilder" the people around him, which for Wilde contributed to his status as a real "precursor of the *Aufklärung* of the last century" (CW IX:174). The Duke's sensational personality Wilde links with his influence on the philosophical Enlightenment in Germany; Wilde himself, of course, saw himself as standing in a symbolic relation to his own age.

In addition to his concern with surface and the sensational, Wilde also develops his modernist aesthetics by bringing to the fore the *act* of

interpretation. That is, there is an act of interpretation in any exchange between a writer (or text) and an audience, but Wilde dwells on the act itself, compelling members of his audience also to dwell on it. In one case, he uses his review of a book about the theater as the occasion to so dwell. He writes that actors' work is not merely a "surface" vis-à-vis the "substance" of the theatrical work, the script. Actors' work is essential to the work; fleeting as it is, it does make up part of the essence of the play.

In this *Woman's World* piece, Wilde draws a comparison between the actor's art and the audience's, first of all the art critic, and by implication any member of the audience who has an aesthetic response to the art work. Wilde goes so far as to say that an actor's "interpretation" of the text has a great resemblance to the work of interpretation done by literary critics. He writes,

I would be inclined to say that the mere artistic process of acting, the translation of literature back into life, and the presentation of thought under the conditions of action, is in itself a critical method of a very high order. (CW.IX:252)

He continues, praising the actress Madame Ristori by noting that her achievement was such that "she brought to the interpretation of the character of Alfieri's great heroine [Myrrha] the colour element of passion, the form-element of style" (237). Wilde here emphasizes that actors are indeed *interpreting* the work, and they do so through their "passion," through their response. He thus draws a parallel between what an actor does and what any responsive member of the audience does. Such becomes clearer when we place the above quotation next to a statement Wilde made after the opening night performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Wilde cheekily told the audience, "I congratulate you on the great success of your performance" (Pearson 199). He is making an aesthetic point, commenting on the *performance* and interpretation that all readers or audiences put on when they are presented with a work of art.<sup>19</sup>

Wilde further writes his modernist aesthetics into New Journalism by the fact that he meditates in his work on the embeddedness of art in its mass cultural and its commercial context.<sup>20</sup> Above, we discussed how it was precisely phenomena like the New Journalism and commercialized art that were producing intense anxieties in British society. It is perhaps not a coincidence that it was among these anxieties that Wilde chose to conduct his critical work.

Wilde writes of art that is embedded in the commercial world. In a review of a book by Lady Dilke called *Art in the Modern State*, he praises France because “it has remained the one country in Europe where the arts are not divorced from industry” (CW.IX:470). Far from trying, as many modernist theorists did, to distance art as much as possible from its mundane contexts, Wilde praises the joining of the two.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, he writes in positive terms of the linking of art and commerce. In an 1885 *P.M.G.* piece on “Modern Greek Poetry,” he writes that “Odysseus, not Achilles, is the type of the modern Greek. Merchandise has taken precedence of the Muses and politics are preferred to Parnassus” (CW IX:26). Wilde seems to prefer a frank embracing of the link between artistic creation and merchandising.

Wilde gives his own interpretation of the economics of art. In particular, he traces the passage from a patronage system to a system more dependent on and embedded within the commercial market.<sup>22</sup> In this 1886 *P.M.G.* article, “A Literary Pilgrim,” Wilde notes that in ancient times:

patrons had to take the place that publishers hold, or should hold, nowadays. The Roman patron, in fact, kept the Roman poet alive, and we fancy that many of our modern bards rather regret the old system. Better, surely, the humiliation of the *sportula* than the indignity of a bill for printing! . . . On the whole the patron was an excellent institution, if not for poetry, at least for poets; and though he had to be propitiated by panegyrics, still are we not told by our most shining lights that the subject is of no importance in a work of art? (CW IX:58)

Wilde is writing playfully, of course, commenting on the fact that poets must be “kept alive” somehow. He also playfully complains of the necessity of having to pay one’s own bill for printing (something he had done with his *Poems* in 1881). But more significantly he is saying that he sees nothing wrong with “tainting” one’s work by working for another. That is, there is nothing wrong with being compelled to write praise of someone or something, be it one’s patron (the panegyrics) or one’s publisher or editor—for example, William T. Stead at the *P.M.G.* Wilde also makes these commercial comments in connection with “our most shining lights,” namely theorists like Gustave Flaubert and Walter Pater, who develop a modernist aesthetics of style over content.

Most critics have paid scant attention to the mass culture contexts and industries in which Wilde published and produced his work, particularly the journalism industry.<sup>23</sup> It is all too easy to conveniently break up Wilde’s

career into two phases: an earlier, pre-1891 period in which he was immature and artistically victimized by the journalism industry, and a post-1891 period in which he wrote the *literary* work, the work he supposedly did with less contamination from financial concerns and the constraints of industries.<sup>24</sup> It is far more productive to consider Wilde's writing career as a continuum, one in which the journalist-critic Wilde was up to the same things as the Wilde who worked as a writer of books and plays. For Wilde, any art is only understood in terms of the industries and contexts in which it is produced and through which it addresses its audiences, particularly mass audiences. "Freedom" from such contexts makes absolutely no sense.

Another aspect of art's embeddedness within its mass culture contexts and industries is the phenomenon of advertising. Even before Wilde entered the scene, the aestheticism movements became directly involved with the advertising industry. In the 1880s, the Pears' Soap company first of all recruited Wilde's friend Lillie Langtry—subject of several works by aesthete painters—to become perhaps the first celebrity poster-girl. She even literally put her "signature" on the advertisements.<sup>25</sup> Pears's Soap then went so far as to actually purchase two famous paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite painter, J.E. Millais, paintings of beach scenes entitled "The Bathers" and "Bubbles." The *P.M.G.* sarcastically noted that the soap firm seemed "anxious to prove to the world by posters that the 20 figures [that the painting] contained owed their grace and their beautiful flesh carnations to the judicious use of 'Pears' Soap'" (Apr. 7, 1886, p. 3).

If Wilde was very conscious of the embeddedness of art, many others did not make a connection between art and its commercial context explicit. And Arts and Crafts artist Walter Crane—and illustrator of some of Wilde's books—was perhaps one of the artists most oblivious of how he was connecting art and advertisement. Crane saw himself as an educator of the people, and as far as he was concerned, this was all he was up to. An art historian writes of Crane that "it was not just that much of his work was openly didactic; he also believed that any object designed with love and skill could in turn help educate the public to love beauty" (Smith 13). The Arts and Crafts design firm of Collinson and Lock also sought to so educate the public taste—of course, educating taste is often indistinguishable from advertising certain consumer products. A *P.M.G.* article on the "private view" exhibition by the firm, praises their educational efforts. The writer asserts that "the firm is on the right track and cannot fail to influence the public taste for good" (June 26, 1886, p. 3).<sup>26</sup> Another *P.M.G.* article celebrates a later Arts and Crafts Exhibition saying "their influence for good

can hardly be overestimated.” This writer adds that he is glad to hear the exhibition “has been a financial success” (Nov. 30, 1888, p. 3).

Wilde, himself engaged with the aestheticism movement, would have in general approved of such sentiments. At the same time, Wilde would never have agreed with Crane’s and others’ negative attitude to the mass culture contexts of art, and its involvement with advertising culture. For example, Crane asserts that the artistic “individualism” which results from being an art producer in a commercial context is an evil. Crane also criticizes painting when it “becomes more and more a matter of individual expression or impression,” and he bemoans the fact that “modern economic and commercial conditions favour this individualism” (*Reminiscences* 2978, as quoted in Smith 13).<sup>27</sup> Nor would Wilde ever imply, as Crane does, that art is ruined the moment it becomes private property: “. . . the decline of art corresponds with its conversion into portable forms of private property, or material or commercial speculation” (*Claims of Decorative Art* 16, as quoted in Smith 13). Crane in fact favored public art over private, the fact that such work was “of the people” somehow preserving it from being tainted by commerce.

We saw above that Wilde had called on Robert Browning to write to a more popular audience. In the same vein, Wilde’s 1886 *P.M.G.* review, “Beranger in England,” laments the fact that much of modern poetry is inaccessible to the mass audience:

The fact is that most modern poetry is so artificial in its form, so individual in its essence and so literary in its style, that the people as a body are little moved by it. . . . [Beranger] wrote to be sung more than to be read; he preferred the Pont Neuf [a bridge in Paris] to Parnassus; he was patriotic as well as romantic, and humorous as well as humane. (CW.IX:61)

Wilde agreed with the modernist aesthetics of “modern poets,” but he had a problem with their refusal to address “the people as a body,” i.e., the mass audience. A poet like Beranger did not disdain the popular song forms, nor the sensuous and pleasing themes of romance or humor, or even patriotism.

In contrast to Wilde, a writer like Walter Pater spent much more time extolling the achievements of arch-modernists like Flaubert—something Pater does at great length in his essay “Style.” Pater’s view of art entailed a definite distance from the mass audience, and from the industries of commercial society. Perhaps for this reason, when Wilde reviews

Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, he focuses on a danger in a modernist "asceticism of style." Wilde laments that Pater can tend to "become somewhat laborious," and

one is tempted to say of Mr. Pater that he is 'a seeker after something in language, that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all' [a parody of a Paterian sentence]. The continual preoccupation with phrase and epithet has its drawbacks as well as virtues. (CW IX:174)

In these comments, we sense Wilde's rejection of the idea that stylistic "surfaces" that appeal to the mass audience are merely superfluous.

Wilde realizes that he owes Pater much, as we witnessed in his statements cited earlier in this chapter. At the same time, he clearly distances himself from Pater's ideas and practice with respect to his concern with mass culture and its institutions. For example, in a *P.M.G.* review of George Sand's letters, Wilde indicates that he sees problems in Flaubert (the novelist whom Pater most idealizes). Wilde praises Sand and proceeds to quote her attacking Flaubert's stylistic project in a letter she wrote to him:

I am aware that you [Flaubert] are opposed to the exposition of personal doctrine in literature. . . . [A]s soon as you handle literature, you seem anxious, I know not why, to be another man, the one who must disappear, who annihilates himself and is no more. What a singular mania! (335)

She is not being fair to Flaubert here, it is true. But Wilde still finds it worthwhile to record her criticism. Wilde makes much of Sand in this piece, calling another of her letters to Flaubert "perhaps her best piece of literary criticism." She writes, "You consider the form as the aim, whereas it is but the effect. Happy expressions are only the outcome of emotion and emotion itself proceeds from a conviction. We are only moved by what we ardently believe in" (335). It is clear that Wilde is interested in more than a rigorous modernist detachment, such as that of Flaubert. Wilde is also intensely interested in the capacity to move a mass audience. In spite of Wilde's delight in style, he does not condemn the use of a mass-appeal element like sentiment, what Sand calls ardent "emotion."

Wilde thus praises writers who engage scholarly ideas, but who are willing to be broadly accessible. For example, in his *P.M.G.* piece called "Mr. Symonds' *History of the Renaissance*," he praises the book as a whole precisely because "Mr. Symonds' learning has not made him a pedant; his culture has widened not narrowed his sympathies" (105). Wilde is conscious of an



audience that is turned off by writers whose erudition tends to make them too elitist. For him, the best type of learning “widens” one’s sympathies, that is, makes a writer sensitive towards the mass audience’s needs and tastes, and therefore makes a writer a more powerful and effective, a more marketable, communicator.

We have traced the journalist-critical writing career of Wilde from 1884 to 1890. It is not insignificant that the majority of his journalist-critical work appeared in a New Journalism newspaper. He invested much of his energy in establishing himself among the institutionalized networks that professional writers were obliged to work within. He did only a very small amount of work for more avant-garde magazines like *The Dramatic Review*; he did no work for any Left newspapers or magazines. Given this track-record, critics like Josephine Guy and Ian Small note, “it is necessary to explain why he spent so long working for such quintessentially capitalist institutions as the English periodical press” (18).

My answer is that Wilde as consumer modernist wrote his modernist aesthetics right into his popular journalism, and that he found London New Journalism a congenial place for the development of his aesthetic project. These ideas included a commitment to the surface, and to the sensual, with a resultant philosophical focus on the audience’s act of interpretation. Here, a philosophical validation of surfaces bleeds into concern with the mass audience. Wilde’s writing also fed off of society’s anxieties, particularly anxieties about creating art in mass culture industries and in advertising.<sup>28</sup> Wilde learned through his New Journalism that, in late-Victorian Britain, artistic creation was something that *needed* a conscious relationship with modern commercial mass culture:

. . . the work that seems to us the most natural and simple product of its time is probably the result of the most deliberate and self-conscious effort. For Nature is always behind the age. It takes a great artist to be thoroughly modern. (“A Note on Some Modern Poets,” *Woman’s World*. Dec. 1888. CW IX:356)

Wilde wrote with a “deliberate and self-conscious effort” to the burgeoning group of middle-class consumers, doing so through the powerful institutions of modern journalism.

## Chapter Three

# The *Woman's World* (1887–1889) as Fashion Magazine and Modernist Laboratory

. . . since the apostles of real aestheticism preach the gospel of their garb, since Kate Greenaway [female aesthete illustrator] is never weary in drawing and colouring the prettiest costumes for young and old, since Mr. Godwin, Messrs. Liberty, and other leading houses of business take infinite trouble to show how elegance, art, and health can be combined in women's dress . . . and since at the Health Exhibition not only the sanitary dresses, but most of the historical costumes, have spoken for themselves, there is surely no longer any need for [specialists] to find out what to wear. ("Ladies' Dress: Real and Ideal. II," *Pall Mall Gazette* 16 Apr. 1885: 4)

Here, a writer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* writes about fashion, one of the topics New Journalism was beginning to cover regularly. This writer comments on the proliferation of aesthete ideas and styles, a proliferation primarily among middle- and upper-class female consumers. The fact that aestheticism was tied very palpably to consuming is evinced by the references to identifiable brand names, those of interior designer E.W. Godwin, the department store run by Messrs. Liberty, and the "other leading houses of business." Incidentally, these brands are cited as a sign that consumers *are* being educated in aesthetics and taste, a sign of a democratization of a formerly exclusive world. We also have a reference to the 1884 International Health Exhibition in South Kensington, an opportunity for historians, as well as designers, to show to the mass audience dresses from various eras of the past—an opportunity to windowshop-down-through-the-ages.

Oscar Wilde's 1880s work makes connections between aesthetic theory and commercial fashion. Indeed, the New Journalism discussed in the previous chapter and this female aestheticism were beginning to work as congenial partners at this time. For example, Wilde published one writer's article in the *Woman's World* that defended aspects of New Journalism. In the article,

“Journalism as a Profession for Women,” the writer praises the New Journalism periodicals because of the fact that they “give prominence to social functions, to dress, to decorative novelty, to women’s domestic interests, to philanthropy, to bazaars . . . ” (1890.5). This writer focuses on those elements of culture that are often depreciated, and wishes to assert the aesthetic value of them. In this chapter, I will discuss how Wilde placed his own work in the female aesthete milieu, what the central ideas of female aestheticism were, and who some of its key figures were.

Let me first explain that I use the term female aestheticism to refer to a number of groups and movements of women who, while not being a single movement, did share some main characteristics. Talia Schaffer is the scholar who first defines the term in her *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000). The chronology I trace is the following. The early female aesthetes had developed their ideas in books and magazines in the late 1870s and early 1880s, and Wilde linked his own career up with the work of these women. By 1887, when Wilde assumed editorship of the *Woman’s World*, he had placed himself at the vanguard of the movement, and it is his texts that are seen by the women as aesthete manifestos. This second generation of female aesthetes tends to quite consciously imitate Wilde, particularly in his penchant for an aesthetic of surface. In her book, Schaffer distinguishes the “*Woman’s World* aesthetes” from the “*Yellow Book* aesthetes”, or at least distinguishes the way they were perceived. For, if the *Yellow Book* aesthetes were characterized by a more and more restricted coterie, mostly made up of men, the *Woman’s World* aesthetes represented mostly female connoisseurs addressing a largely female, and an ever broader, mass audience. The two groups of course overlap a great deal, which is evident from the fact that Wilde was at the center of both.

At first sight, *The Woman’s World* may not seem to be so important a magazine, nor so important a part of Wilde’s career.<sup>1</sup> In it we see no scandalous Beardsley pictures, no articles with shocking titles like “The Truth of Masks” or “The Decay of Lying.” There are also almost no names that most literary critics can recognize, and some figures, like Ouida, are generally not highly regarded. One could very well understand why most scholars have, until very recently, paid so little attention to the magazine.<sup>2</sup>

However, I argue that, it is in this magazine that Wilde is developing his consumer modernism. It is, in a sense, as if Harold Bloom were writing about *Ralph Lauren*, collaborating with Martha Stewart, and editing *Cosmopolitan!* Wilde was like a Bloom who could not do philosophy in isolation from mass culture. Also, Wilde built his aesthetic project into popular movements—New Journalism and female aestheticism—something that colored

both his project and the movements. As such, he was forced to constantly collaborate with—and learn from—others, particularly from women. When one is working with popular media, one necessarily relies on many others in gaining knowledge of markets, audiences, and current trends. Understanding these “forgotten female aesthetes” is essential to understanding Wilde.

## **WILDE AMONG THE FEMALE AESTHETES**

Let us begin with the first generation of aestheticism. Well before he got involved with the *Woman's World*, in the late 1870s and early 1880s, Wilde was already clearly identified by society as an aesthete. He was a frequenter of art galleries and theaters, a lecturer on art, dress, and decoration, and spent much of his time talking to groups of women. In this regard, we can learn a lot about aestheticism from popular caricatures. How Wilde's activities were perceived is made clear in the Gilbert and Sullivan musical *Patience* (1881). The main character, Bunthorne (primarily modeled on Algernon Swinburne) spends his time preaching about art to Society ladies, who adore him. They utterly ignore the “masculine,” military Dragoons, who in turn cannot understand why the women are so interested in the aesthete. The point was that the women were fashion “victims” of the aesthete, that they were dupes to his theories, even taking on aesthetic styles of dress and employing styles of interior decoration that were ridiculously pretentious.

Such is also the import of the bulk of the 1880s aesthete cartoons by George Du Maurier in the humorous society magazine, *Punch*. Du Maurier created such aesthete characters as Maudle and Jellaby Postlethwaite; many times his drawings of these characters bear a close resemblance to Wilde. They often have long hair, speak with a certain pretentious language, and walk around carrying flowers, particularly lilies. (Wilde once famously carried a lily down a major street, Piccadilly, delivering it to Lillie Langtry.) One cartoon features a “mutual admiration society” of women and the set of young male aesthetes—painters and poets—who fawned upon them at art galleries. A similar, fictional, aesthete victimizer of women was Prince Borowski in Sydney Grundy's play *The Glass of Fashion*, produced in 1883. The Prince takes advantage of society women as a sexual predator. The title, *Glass of Fashion*, refers to a women's society magazine that, in this play, causes much of the trouble. Moreover, Grundy's play also presents the moral that Society women should not aspire to be celebrities, women who get their pictures in magazines. In fact, even to read such magazines is a bad sign for Grundy.

Similarly, William Frith's painting, "The Private View," portrayed several contemporary figures in the art scene, all looking at paintings in a gallery. A private view was a society event with invitation-only audiences viewing works at an art gallery. In Frith's painting, the dominant figure on the right side is Wilde, who stands with a "herd of eager worshippers surrounding him," including the actresses Lillie Langtry and Ellen Terry, each in aesthete styles of dress (Frith 41). Frith wrote that "I wished to hit at the folly of listening to self-elected critics in matters of taste, whether in dress or art" (Frith 41). The fact is, Du Maurier, Grundy, and Frith did as much to publicize aestheticism as criticize it—something Wilde was aware of. The painter J.M. Whistler (at the time a friend of Wilde, and also considered an aesthete) claims to have approached Wilde and the cartoonist Du Maurier together at some gallery event and said "I say, which one of you two invented the other, eh?" (Whistler 241).

Here in the early 1880s, we also see Wilde's alliance with female aestheticism in his lecture tours in America and in the U.K. Some of his staple lectures, as we have seen, were "The House Beautiful," "The Decorative Arts," and "Dress."<sup>3</sup> He did draw upon the ideas of non-aesthetes like John Ruskin and William Morris, and indeed he takes some ideas directly from Morris, (Wilde was always being accused of plagiarism). But he learned at least as much from leading female aesthetes like Mary Eliza Haweis, who was theorizing art in connection with cosmetics, fashion and the decoration of middle-class homes. In fact, during his American tour he specifically requests in his letters that one of Haweis's books be sent to him, presumably to be used in developing the content of his lectures.

Two of Haweis's books, *The Art of Dress* and *The Art of Beauty* (first published in 1878-79), were inspirational source texts for all the female aesthetes. In the *Art of Beauty*, she declares, for example, "We cannot all hope to develop into Turners, Burne Joneses, Wagners . . . yet the mother of originality is freedom, to think for ourselves and to do as we like. What are we to do? In dress, in home-adornment, WE MUST DO AS WE LIKE" (224). (She was referring to Matthew Arnold, a main antagonist of female aestheticism, who had famously condemned the idea of "doing as one likes" in his 1867 book *Culture and Anarchy*.) Haweis challenges art critics to take fashion seriously. According to her, they wrongly see fashion as a monster

who turns a ceaseless wheel for the benefit of some millinery-master. But 'fashion' is no phantasy of idle minds, no random despot, but a tendency worth study, and eminently instructive, rightly understood, being, with all its blunders, as direct an outcome of the love of beauty as schools of sculpture and painting. (*Art of Dress* 13)

Haweis sets out a project that later female aesthetes, and to some extent Wilde, would take up in the coming two decades. Writers like Graham R. Tomson would do precisely what Haweis prescribes; Tomson/Watson wrote art historical essays on styles of dress, some for the *Woman's World*. Haweis asserts that designing dress and appreciating such designs is as valuable an art as the traditional fine arts. And she characteristically focuses on “the love of beauty” as something that people need to cultivate through study and artisanship. Also, Haweis consciously sought out greater artistic authority for herself, even purchasing and living in the house that had belonged to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a home whose interior had fame as an exemplar of aesthetic taste. Her home at 16 Cheyne Walk was also just a couple of blocks from Wilde's Tite St. home.

Wilde and the female aesthetes underwent some changes in the middle 1880s. When Wilde transitioned into married life and middle-class respectability in 1883–84, he also changed his look, taking on fairly standard clothing and hair styles. We see a mock advertisement in *Punch* that announces the sale of “the whole of the Stock-in-trade, Appliances, and Inventions of a Successful Aesthete, who is retiring from business.”<sup>4</sup> Wilde, however, was not retired yet. We now enter a second-generation of aesthetes, and it is this later group who become the core set of writers for the *Woman's World*.

Wilde reveals some of his ideas about aesthetics in the correspondence he writes while he was considering editing the then-*Lady's World* in mid-1887. For example, he suggests to Wemyss Reid, a manager at Cassell's Publishing, that the magazine's “name should definitely separate itself from such papers as the *Lady* and the *Lady's Pictorial*” (CL 318). Here he signals that the magazine will not be just one more fashion magazine. Wilde then gives as an example that the editors of *The Girls' Own Magazine* had changed its name to *Atalanta*, and had thereby raised its status.<sup>5</sup> These editors were thus able to attract writers who had such high status—and who were men—as John Ruskin, Walter Besant, and H. Rider Haggard. Wilde thus implies that his vision included bringing together people like Mary Eliza Haweis and John Ruskin in the same periodical.

At the time that Wilde met *The Lady's World* it was a standard one-shilling middle-class monthly. It had been begun in November 1886, just six months before Wilde began getting involved with it, and one year before he became its editor. In an April 1887 letter to Reid, he astutely writes about his understanding of the magazine's present and potential audiences, indicating that, though it was already a female aesthete periodical, it is now “too feminine” and not “sufficiently womanly.” (In fact, as we see below, he did not

transform the magazine so radically as he made out.) He then gives his own vision of the female aestheticism movement:

No one appreciates more fully than I do the value and importance of Dress, in its relation to good taste and good health . . . but it seems to me that the field of the *mundus muliebris*, the field of mere millinery and trimmings, is to some extent already occupied by such papers as the *Queen*, and the *Lady's Pictorial*,<sup>6</sup> and that we should take a wider range, as well as a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel. (CL 297)

What we see in this passage is that Wilde understood something about the current status of the London women's magazine market, as well as the various players in the market. He also wants to broaden the magazine, adding some "art criticism" of dress and design. Wilde adds that the magazine "should be made the recognized organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life, and yet it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure, and consider it a privilege to contribute to." He was perhaps a bit too much ahead of his time, hoping that many men would be willing to take fashion and design culture seriously, particularly in the context of a women's magazine. Wilde saw female aestheticism as being also concerned with "modern life," including changing styles and changing social roles for women. While there is no mention here of Parliament or the suffrage movement, it is clear that politics of a certain sort is to be central to the magazine.

As such, Wilde made sure to pay special attention in the magazine to developments in women's education and women's participation in the world of business. For example, he writes in the February 1888 edition about the International Technical College, which was primarily for women. He praises the curriculum: "classes will be held for various decorative and technical arts, and for wood-carving, etching, and photography, as well as sick-nursing, dressmaking, cookery, physiology, poultry-rearing, and the cultivation of flowers" (CW IX:310). Here Wilde validates the decorative arts. Cookery and flower cultivation are treated as serious subjects. And he places these subjects alongside more recognized arts like etching and wood-carving (the latter being the kinds of things people like William Morris worked in). In a sense, he is merely taking Morris' thought one step further into the "world of women," a step that most male critics were not willing to take.

Similarly, he makes note in his column of an article in another magazine called "Ladies as Shopkeepers." And he quotes the article's description of

the career of a female clothing and decoration designer, Charlotte Robinson. Robinson, the article says, has so far set up stores in London, Manchester, Glasgow and Brussels. And Wilde quotes the article: "At first she had some difficulty in making people understand that her work is really commercial, not charitable" (CW IX:287). The female aesthetes were not to be mere amateurs in the sense of people who engaged in the activity as a hobby. They were designing things as an art, but also as work. They were going to compete in the marketplace, just like William Morris and E.W. Godwin.

It is important to stress that the magazine was not a fully feminist periodical like the *Englishwoman's Review*, the organ of the suffrage movement. The *Review* consciously eschewed a "pretty" look, and bore no resemblance, in terms of the illustrations or the style of writing, to a fashion magazine. The editors of the *Lady's World/Woman's World*, however, did not want to delete the fashion content of the magazine, but to refine it and to add something more to it. The magazine *was* very concerned about its appearance. By the time Wilde's first edition came out in November 1887, the *Queen* (the fashion magazine which had Queen Victoria as its patron) was praising its new look and new contents:

Ambitious of higher honour than they have yet received, the publishers have sought not only to improve the appearance of this serial by adding to and enlarging its pages, and rendering it as beautiful as they can, but also by securing the active co-operation of many ladies eminent for their rank or talent, or both.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Wilde writes to the publisher about the importance of the cover; in the world of consumerism, readers are supposed to judge a book by its cover. The *Lady's World* had had on its cover the subtitle "A Magazine of Fashion and Society," whereas the *Woman's World* was to have the prominent subtitle "edited by Oscar Wilde." (Wilde was never one to run down egotism.) The move was equivalent to what Haweis had been doing by making reference to male (and more authoritative) critics like Ruskin. Wilde conjoins the genre of the fashion magazine with that of the critical magazine. Like any good marketing director, Wilde takes a calculated risk, and hopes that he has discovered a new emerging market.<sup>8</sup> The new *Woman's World* is going to include pieces by society ladies—and he lists several prominent women, Lady Verney, Lady Margaret Majendie, Lady Lindsay, and Lady Gregory.<sup>9</sup> But it will also include pieces by critical sages like John Ruskin and Walter Besant. (Significantly, he does not mention Walter Pater or Matthew Arnold).<sup>10</sup>



In fact, it is likely that he got the very idea of editing a woman's magazine from the high society coterie, the Souls. As we have seen, the Souls were both men and women who lived in the wealthy neighborhoods of central London, and they saw themselves as having the mission to educate the society around them by the example of their superior taste. They saw themselves as a model, helping others by living beautifully, as it were. (Others did not always see them as models, and they were frequently also mocked in the press as pretentious snobs.) The women in the Souls, some of whom count among the female aesthetes, once thought of founding their own magazine (Abdy 6). In the end, they did not have to because they would write for Wilde. In addition to these Society ladies, Wilde also mentions getting scholarly women to write. He mentions, for example, that he hopes to get a certain Mrs. Brookfield, who recently published on Thackeray's letters in *Scribner's Magazine*, as well as a Miss Stoker, who wrote an article on Sheridan's letters in *English Illustrated Magazine*. Thus he enlists writers who will appeal to the larger audiences of middle and upper-class women, as well as the smaller, more scholarly audiences of intellectuals.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE AESTHETICISM

Wilde both helped form and was formed by this second generation of female aestheticism. The movement, or set of movements, had a few main characteristics that were shared by the various members. These characteristics include: the idea that they validated the world of charm by connecting artistic taste with women's ordinary activities; the idea that women can create themselves by their education in taste and in consumerism; and the idea that art is at home among the mass culture industries such as fashion and interior design.

First, we have this validation of charm. And here it is important to note that the female aesthete had a fairly-developed set of ideas about their movement and its agenda. Such is evinced by the fact that the *Lady's World*, even before Wilde arrived, was *already* a female aesthete vehicle. Wilde's predecessor editors had a good sense of the shape of their product. We see such articles as "Artistic Homes, and How to Make Them," and "Artistic Occupations for Ladies," titles similar to typical *Woman's World* articles. There are also articles like "A Student's Experiences at Girton College" and "The Society of Lady Artists." There is even an article taking the Rational Dress Movement seriously, although in the end the writer is forced to conclude that Rational Dress clothes are in many instances "too honest" in their refusal to enhance a person's figure. As always, the female aesthetes wanted to defend the power of surfaces, the art of putting up facades that in part tell lies.

Moreover, in the pre-Wilde magazine, we see some aesthetically sophisticated and creative articles like “Art in Dress—Colour” and “Art in Dress—Form.” The writer proposes that artists take seriously things like the design of dresses. She remarks on the fact that, in France, the Minister of Fine Arts has been making statements regarding dress, and adds: “Imagine Mr. Ruskin lecturing on the cut of bodices or width of crinolines, or Sir Frederick Leighton [a painter] designing tea gowns for a fashion magazine!” (*Lady's World* 124). Or imagine Oscar Wilde editing a fashion magazine... Also, the writer calls on women to cultivate themselves, create themselves, by means of educating themselves in taste. That is, they can be “greatly helped by careful inspection of portraits and pictures in the National Gallery, and of the matchless marbles in the British Museum,” all as a means to gaining a keen aesthetic sense. And that sense will make them perhaps more than mere “consumers,” and make them artists of their own dress and interior decoration. A woman's own individual manner of dress should demonstrate both her beauty and her aesthetic knowledge. This *Lady's World* writer was already invested in the female aesthetic project.

When Wilde took over, in part he simply continued running the magazine the same way it had been run. He made some changes that would be considered improvements, and some that perhaps would not. Wilde removed the “Fashionable Marriages” and the “Society Pleasures” sections, probably an effort to lessen the perceived frivolous tone. He similarly reduced the Fashion sections from four to two (removing coverage of Berlin and Vienna while retaining coverage of London and Paris). On a less positive note, Wilde strangely also discontinued the “Dramatic Notes” and “Musical Notes” sections; one is curious about why he made such changes, but his letters do not reveal anything. (When we get to the next chapter, we will discuss more of what Wilde himself brought to the magazine and to the movement.)

The female aesthetes, in both the *Lady's World* and the *Woman's World*, undertook to validate the stereotypically “feminine” aesthetics that lay in things like sentiment, charm and melodramatic excess. These writers did not disdain “pretty” styles of writing or design, and they retained some aspects of the traditional *Angel in the House* and Pre-Raphaelite modes of femininity. (The aesthetic fashions of dress drew from “historical” dress styles of the past, and in particular from the look of female figures in Pre-Raphaelite paintings.) As Talia Schaffer writes, “it is precisely because aestheticism was a ‘fashion,’ a material culture, that so many women writers found it such a hospitable medium”(3).

Thus, the female aesthetes constructed this brand of aesthetics by developing the connection of aesthetic connoisseurship with women's crafts, fashion and ephemera. They compromised with late-Victorian culture by

working within the culture of fashion magazines while at the same time they asserted their connection with “sages” like Ruskin and Morris; Wilde would not have been considered as authoritative, but he was in the same general category. He seems to have learned from these women, and to have crafted his own career in a way that built on their work. In turn, Wilde furthered their work by means of his own reviews of female aesthete writers. For example, he validates a certain woman novelist’s work<sup>11</sup> by noting that her writing has “delighted the realists by its truth, [and] fascinated Mr. Ruskin by its beauty” (CW IX:233).

One reason the female aesthetes were forgotten was because they were committed to the decorative. Well into the twentieth-century, much of art and literary criticism continued to carry a distinct bias. Andreas Huyssen titles one chapter of his book on modernism “Mass Culture as Woman,” detailing how both late-nineteenth and twentieth-century writers have expressed biases against various mass culture and against women as icons of that culture. Such linking of the feminine and the mass cultural also occurs in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* and in Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. These thinkers react against a contamination by charm, and particularly by the “pretty” woman as the subject of art. In contrast, Wilde and the female aesthetes retained charm as central, though they also added some aesthetic complexity to the concept. For example, rather than looking exclusively through the eyes of the painter, they begin to look through the eyes of the model as well. Elsewhere in Wilde’s work, this reversal takes place in the male model, Dorian Gray. For one female aesthete, Vernon Lee, it is her character, Miss Brown, (from the novel of that name) who begins to question the motives of the painter of her portrait. This painter professes love, but seems more interested in her as an aesthetic object. Twentieth-century modernists like Ezra Pound tended to react to aestheticism and its focus on a woman’s beauty by rejecting surface beauty, doing so in order to avoid being “seduced” by the body.

Given the female aesthetes’ investment in material culture, it is important to point out how this group was distinct from other feminist groups, particularly the political-minded New Women. We have already seen that the *Woman’s World* was no suffragist periodical. Many of the female aesthetes used male pseudonyms, among other things a sign that they did not want to be associated with “women’s writing” or to take political stands in their work. They were usually not suffragists and were often critical of *mere* political goals. Wilde and these female aesthetes tended to reject a feminism too focused on Liberal notions of rights and autonomy. Wilde, for example, seems to reject a Stuart Mill notion of liberty (the basis for Mill’s 1869 essay on women), citing in a *Woman’s World* piece another writer’s “clever attack

on John Stuart Mill” (W 12.148). (Wilde’s essay, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” with its focus on an extreme Individualism, can be read as in part a parody of Mill’s “On Liberty.”)

Talia Schaffer, in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, writes of one writer, Mrs. Roy Devereaux, who

complains about ‘mannish’ New Women who overreach themselves in trying to be professional artists, and she reduces women’s artistic activities to the traditionally feminine role of dress designer. On the other hand, her text attempts to exalt the Victorian women’s sphere, to push it into the high status of an aesthetic achievement. (Schaffer 112)

Devereaux was perhaps more extreme than most female aesthetes, but one gets an idea of how their politics often focused more on dress than on votes. The female aesthetes also tended to view women’s leisure not as an enforced inactivity but as the freedom from petty practical concerns of men so that they could perform the “non-work” of aestheticism. Women were to focus on self-cultivation, a cultivation that includes buying, wearing, and decorating. Wilde notes in the *Woman's World* that “the women of America are the one class in the community that enjoys that leisure which is so necessary for culture” (“Literary and Other Notes” CW IX:199). Because of such attitudes, the female aesthetes have tended to be seen as too conservative and mass cultural to be considered serious writers—hence the fact that they were almost completely ignored by the early twentieth-century modernists.

## CONSUMER CULTURE AS ENABLING SELF-CREATION

The second main characteristic of female aestheticism was its focus on how women could create and fashion themselves, in part by means of what goods they consumed. Writers like John Ruskin or William Morris were in favor of a male-centered aestheticism, one which tended to criticize the “lower,” more “pretty” tastes of women. As Schaffer writes, “whether described as ignorant young ladies or silly fashion plates, such amateur women were made into enemies of the aesthetic professionalization of taste” (251). In contrast, Wilde tended to affirm the women in their own styles and attitudes. In doing so, and in spite of the caricatures, Wilde was not victimizing women or making them his commercial fashion-prey. (That is not to say Wilde did not take advantage of women’s insecurities and their desire to be seen as having “taste”.) It was rumored that he was dictating styles to women like Lillie Langtry and to his wife Constance. But it is more accurate to say that he was enabling them to

take ownership of their own fashions. For example, an actress like Mrs. Bernard Beere (who would eventually play the lead in *A Woman of No Importance* in 1893) is described in *The Lady's World* as “one of the few actresses with sufficient originality of style to be able to wear gowns which seem as though they had been invented solely and expressly for her own edification” (311). To be given such praise was the object of many a female aesthete.

Similarly, Lillie Langtry was very self-assertive about her own dress, mentioning in her memoirs that she often dictated her own styles. Langtry writes in a letter to Wilde, for example, the following: “I wanted to ask you how I should go to a fancy ball here, but I chose a soft black Greek dress with a fringe of silver crescents and stars, and diamond ones in my hair and on my neck, and called it Queen of Night. I made it myself” (quoted in CL 5n.). The dress she describes was one that created a sensation in the society press, and one that established her as an exemplar of aesthete styles of dress. As is apparent from the letter, Wilde did advise her at times, but he was more a consultant and a public relations agent for her than a manipulator. Similarly, Constance Wilde was not Wilde’s “doll” as was implied in some society columns. It was said that Wilde had forced her to wear pants in public.

What was true was that they sometimes did coordinate their dress. A *Queen Society* columnist writes that, during one ball, “The dim green colour of the otter-trimmed coat worn by Mr. Oscar Wilde was carried out in Mrs. Oscar Wilde’s picturesque costume of moss green plush and silver grey fur.”<sup>12</sup> But such evinced not Wilde’s control, but his penchant for social performance. In fact, Constance was herself an active lecturer on dress. Her independence can be seen from the fact that she worked extensively with the Rational Dress movement, while Wilde himself never joined it. (He tended to affirm artifice too much, and even defended items like the much-maligned corset.) In addition to writing a few pieces for the *Woman's World*, Constance served as editor of *The Rational Dress Society Gazette*.

Such practices by women fit with Wilde’s ideas on self-cultivation and self-culture, which get developed in essays like “The Soul of Man” and “The Critic as Artist.” Wilde even remarks in “Soul of Man” that the aesthetes and Arts and Craftsmen did educate the public for the better:

Beautiful things began to be made, beautiful colours came from the dyer’s hand, beautiful patterns from the artist’s brain, and the use of beautiful things and their value and importance were set forth. (AC 281)

The result is that “now it is almost impossible to enter any modern house without seeing some recognition of good taste” and there has been a

successful “revolution in house-decoration and furniture and the like” (AC 281). In his essays, Wilde generally advocates a radical Individualism, which requires a good deal of study and education, but which enables one to set one’s own styles, to be the artist of one’s self. And he affirms self-expression via modern, commercial decoration styles, as in the above quotation. One could spell out what Wilde is talking about by pointing to firms like Liberty Fabrics and Morris & Co. as those who represented “the dyer’s hand” and the “artist’s brain.”

Also, Wilde’s statement indicates that aesthete styles of dress soon became integrated with mainstream dress. As usual, even attempts at rebellion get absorbed by the market, which is by no means a bad thing as far as Wilde is concerned. Thus, the *haute couture* firm, Maison Worth, began incorporating elements of aesthetic dress into their designs. And although Liberty and Co. dresses had been early on perceived as eccentric, the firm managed to eventually cross-over and attract a much bigger audience. By 1885, a fashion writer in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, notes that the aesthetic dress style, “though apparently not much advancing, . . . is quietly making its way and there is not the slightest doubt that it will triumph at last.”<sup>13</sup> The author remarks that the values of art, hygiene, comfort, and economy, are the hallmarks of the styles. Similarly, the *Queen* has an 1887 article in praise of Liberty and Co. The article, “Liberty Fabrics,” notes that the firm is “well-known for their art-dress materials and picturesque ornaments.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, a writer (possibly Graham R. Tomson) in 1889 pens an article “The Return of the Cimabue Browns” in which she writes, “Those who have clung to the law of Liberty during the past years of darkness and crinolette [i.e., popular, un-aesthetic styles] are now beginning to reap the reward of their patience.”<sup>15</sup>

One person, writing a decade later, comments that “Such plays as ‘Patience’ and ‘the Mikado’ have developed our instinct for colour and form,” showing that the plays were as much educational vehicles as caricatures for aestheticism. *Patience* was a direct caricature of aestheticism; *The Mikado* was set in Japan, and in part caricatured the *japonisme* craze that many aesthetes were involved in. In fact, for both plays, W.S. Gilbert employed none other than Liberty and Co. to design the dresses. The above-mentioned writer also points to actresses (and to some extent female aesthetes) like Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Terry, and Lillie Langtry as having laid “a refining hand” on popular styles of dress (Gardiner 90). One writer at *The Lady’s World* describes the ideal approach towards self-fashioning: “Every woman should, therefore, ascertain her particular style by careful study, and then adapt a dress which would set her off to the greatest advantage, and at the same time have a *cachet* of its own” (“Art of Dress—Colour.” I.124) And Bernhardt was often cited as

having achieved this ideal. The same writer notes: “Mme. Sarah Bernhardt, who is *artiste* to the tips of her fingers [a reference to her skill as a sculptor], is above all a consummate dresser. By skillful treatment her very defects are converted into charms.” Rather than trying to be something she is not, she chooses styles that work for one who is, by their standards, thin. And she started such styles as the “Bernhardt mantle,” and the “graceful loose-fronted gown” (“Art of Dress—Form” I.158). Figures like Bernhardt, Langtry, and Wilde were thus showing that women could create themselves, fashion their personalities, by means of consuming clothing and decorative items.

The third characteristic of female aestheticism is related to this self-creative consuming. It was the movement’s tendency to be at home in the mass culture industries—something very characteristic of Wilde in the context of New Journalism in the last chapter. The female aesthetes were particularly at home in the industries of fashion and design culture. In contrast, figures like Ruskin and Morris tended to react negatively to the developments of the industrial, consumer economy. But their negative responses did not prevent their aesthetic pronouncements from quickly becoming subsumed into commercial culture—Ruskin’s Gothic architecture becoming all the rage, and Morris’s arts and crafts becoming high-priced commodities for wealthy consumers. As we saw in [Chapter Two](#), journalists would accuse them of being “Crafty Artists” because they were so adept at marketing their wares without seeming to do so. We can see advertisements in *The Rational Dress Society Gazette* for “Mr. Ruskin’s Homespuns,” a new line of clothing. In contrast, the female aesthetes and Wilde tended to be fairly frank in their willingness to work in consumer culture, and that frankness perhaps allowed them to retain some authorial control that the others did not.

Indeed, some of Wilde’s contemporaries would have seen his very association with a women’s magazine as confirmation that his work was tainted and that he had forged an improper dependence on consumer culture. It was the female aesthetes, like the novelist Ouida, who often provocatively defended consumer culture. For example, she wrote in defense of “luxury” in an 1892 piece in the *Fortnightly Review*, “The Sins of Society.” In the piece she says that:

Luxury itself is a most excellent thing . . . It is not for its luxury for a moment that I would rebuke the modern world: but for its ugly habits, its ugly clothes, its ugly hurry-skurry . . . . Luxury is the product and result of all the more delicate inventions and combinations of human intelligence and handicrafts. (58.783)

Ouida thus provides a justification for indulging in expensive tastes and pleasures. Doing so is merely appreciating human achievements and works of art, something on the order of a duty.

Indeed, female aesthetes had a specific motivation to put into play the standards of cultural authority. M.E. Haweis, for example, in her 1879 book *The Art of Beauty*, points out the double-standard used to assess women's work versus men's work: "Why is many a mediocre architect to rank as an artist . . . while a decorator is considered on the plane of the tradesman?" (210).<sup>16</sup> Also, many male art critics treated women as amateurs who were insufficiently critical or learned. It was standard practice for book reviewers to strongly criticize popular female aesthetes like Ouida and Marie Corelli, for example. And they often did so precisely by pointing out "errors" that revealed their lack of knowledge of language or history, or their lack of knowledge of the latest literary movements. For example, Ouida parodies this criticism and makes her point through *In a Winter City: A Story of the Day*. The tale begins with the narrator bemoaning the cultural decline of this (unnamed) city, which had been a center for medieval and Renaissance art and culture, and had now "become the universal hostelry of cosmopolitan fashion and fashionable idleness," the emblematic symbol of which is the fact that the local restaurant is now named "Il Bar Americano" (510).

But then the narrator shifts, and we realize that these sentiments are being written as part not of Ouida's novel, but of the *character's* (Lady Hilda's) novel that she is composing in front of the reader. Moreover, these "were not [Lady Hilda's] own ideas that she had written," but those of a *man* who had been expounding them to her. (Such idealizing of earlier ages is standard practice in Victorian and modernist writing, from that of Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold to T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.) She herself did not believe such things about modern culture. Rather, she is a female aesthete, both a woman of fashion, and a woman of some cultivation. And Ouida praises her for her tastes:

she liked her horses, she liked M. Worth, she liked bric-à-brac . . . .  
[And she] was dressed in the height of fashion—i.e., like a medieval saint out of a picture; her velvet robe clung to her, and her gold belt, with its chains and pouch and fittings, would not have disgraced Cellini's own working. (511)

She dresses like a Pre-Raphaelite maiden, while at the same time being very much immersed in the fashion of the day. In addition, she "had so educated her eyes and her taste that a *criard* ("loud") bit of furniture hurt her . . . . She



had in a way studied art of all kinds, languidly indeed and perhaps superficially, but still with some true understanding of it" (513). In other words, she is the type of "amateur" female aesthete whom male professionals tended to criticize. Yet the story is told in a way that exposes the unfairness of such criticism, and that validates Lady Hilda as a genuine female aesthete.

Similarly, Tomson/Watson defends female aesthete practice. In one of her pieces for the *Scots Observer*, "Woman's Wit," she writes a dialogue between Mumphius and the Pedant.<sup>17</sup> The Pedant, the typical male critic, delights in the "pleasure of finding someone pretending to speak learnedly," the definition offered in another *Scots Observer* essay on "the Pleasures of Pedantry" (238).<sup>18</sup> In that essay, there is a definite feminist bent, and the author makes reference precisely to Ouida, who is often the brunt of criticism. The author notes that, given Ouida's somewhat sloppy allusions, she "is the pedant's favourite novelist; perhaps no lady has made more, and more amusing, mistakes" ("Pleasures" 238). In Tomson/Watson's "Woman's Wit" piece, Mumphius and the Pedant have the following exchange:

Mumphius: . . . but did a woman say that thing you quoted about Humour being a substitute, in woman, for morality and religion?

Pedant: No.

Mumphius: Then it was Oscar--

Pedant: No; it wasn't; it was a man named Kipling . . . ("Woman's" 291)

In a humorous move, the character mentions Oscar Wilde without mentioning him. The overall point is that women with wit do not need morality, which is partly a joke, and partly a statement of the detachment of art from morality, a central aesthete idea.

As we have seen, such materialistic ideas alarmed writers of the time like Ruskin and Morris. And they seem to have made writers like George Gissing furious. If someone like Gissing's *New Grub Street* character Jasper Milvain was seen as unscrupulous for entering the New Journalism, he was seen to be even more so for getting involved in popular publishing for women. (Milvain's name and personality, as well as his involvement in popular editing and publishing, suggest that Gissing may have in part modeled him on Wilde.) One can sense Gissing's disgust when the narrator in *New Grub Street* describes Milvain's keen interest in enlisting his sisters to become active writers for women's magazines. Milvain also gets involved in publishing children's books, another growing market (something Wilde

got involved in with his fairy tales, though he was also writing them for adults).

It is useful to pause here and, without giving an absolutely precise definition, expand a bit on what mass culture is generally, and how it functioned in particular in Victorian Britain. Mass culture is, necessarily, a vague concept. One way of reducing the vagueness is by discussing it in terms of concrete institutions. We have looked at the institution of the New Journalism newspaper, and now we are discussing that of the women's magazine. In late-Victorian England, these institutions of mass media rise to a level of power and influence never before possible. One function of these institutions was to communicate ideas of taste, both among those in the elites, and—more importantly for us—from the elites to the middle-classes. This function is what defines them as mass-culture institutions.

Also, this transfer of tastes, particularly to the middle-classes, had the following economic component. Members of the middle-classes would be less likely to buy more expensive six-shilling monthlies, but they could easily purchase penny-dailies like the *Pall Mall Gazette*. And middle-class women could not afford dresses from Maison Worth or tapestries from Morris and Company. But they could purchase the mass-produced versions, available at department stores like Liberty and Co. and Collinson and Lock, and other stores whose names are now long forgotten. Such mass-production and mass-consumption was often what made many defenders of culture, such as George Gissing and Matthew Arnold, so anxious. And it was probably because of these anxieties that Wilde set up shop here; it was here that he would conduct his literary and critical work. Wilde seems to have recognized that bourgeois women and middle-class homes lay right at this cultural crossroads, the conjunction of on the one hand high art, and on the other consumer culture, of culture and anarchy.

Thus, in late-Victorian Britain, there is this strange resemblance between the way art functions in society and the way consumer goods function in society. Regenia Gagnier points this out when she remarks that both Art and products in the marketplace can equally be seen as “the expression of the people's needs and desires” (667). Cultural authority has passed into the realm of commerce. As ecclesiastical or royal authority wane, art and consumer goods “rule” by means of a sort of squatter's sovereignty. If you inhabit a prominent place in the marketplace, you *ipso facto* can claim authority by residing there. And artists and salesmen utilize the power of the media to stake their claims, and establish themselves as public personae, as celebrities who have a real, quantifiable power. By sheer numbers of fans, by numbers of people buying one's products, one could exercise power, even a “political”

power insofar as one could influence large numbers of people. And it was even more power when those many consumers paid the artist, and allowed him to wield financial power. It is rule by Neilson ratings or market share, to speak a bit anachronistically. If in the past, the mass audience watched lords and ladies and priests in their public “performances” at public events, by the 1880s they were also watching the public “performances” of celebrities, people whose authority stemmed from the bare fact that they were so prominent. In fact, Queen Victoria herself seems to have had some sense of this new situation. People are starting to call her “the first media monarch.” We have seen that she had a popular magazine named after her—perhaps the prime competitor of the *Woman’s World*. Also, she and her advisors took advantage of occasions like jubilees to orchestrate enormous public spectacles full of media messages. We will deal more with public image and the way Wilde uses and comments on it in the coming chapters.

Another general aspect of late-Victorian mass culture is that the network of social institutions, like magazines and clothing companies, thickens, while at the same time, mega-institutions grow at the expense of more local institutions. We see advertising agencies, public relations people, and the various ancillary industries like sign printing, photographic reproduction, and paper production beginning to flourish. We see the infrastructure of service industries also “thickening.” Among the more powerful industries are the theater and the popular press, the two primary locations for Wilde’s work. A newspaper like the 1880s *Pall Mall Gazette*, with its extensive use of advertising and its circulation at times reaching 100,000, represents one such mega-institution. While the *Woman’s World* does not become nearly so large a mega-institution, it is in fact a publication of a fairly large corporation, Cassell’s Publishing. And Wilde, though he had a great deal of leeway to shape the magazine in his own image, was also forced to reckon with the demands of the corporation.

When speaking of Victorian mass culture, it is difficult to meaningfully characterize, in terms of class, occupation, and gender, the audiences for these institutions. The constituency of mass culture is thoroughly inchoate, un-crystallized, difficult to define, and changeable. And yet it is a definite institution, one that culture producers (both publishers and writers) are very aware of. Again, it is a question of sheer numbers. If the audience is numerous enough to economically sustain a commercial magazine or theater, it is by definition a mass audience. Similarly, members of the audience, in spite of their shifting allegiances and tastes, also know the institution of mass culture is there to be reckoned with, whether they join together with it or reject it. One historian writes that the audiences “variously embrace, modify or resist

[the products'] meanings," that they both consume the products and resist the products (Bailey 10). So we can talk about the mass audience in this attenuated, yet still useful sense. Oscar Wilde was perfect for his historical moment, a moment in which the mass culture institutions and audiences had reached new levels of influence and power, so much so that they offered new possibilities—and dangers—for art. Wilde enjoyed such potential for growth as well as such risk.

Having discussed some of the main contours of female aestheticism and the functioning of mass culture, I turn now to some of the second-generation female aesthetes themselves, particularly those who knew Wilde and even wrote for his magazine. These include Alice Comyns Carr, Graham R. Tomson, Alice Meynell, Violet Fane, Ouida, and Lady Archibald Campbell. By looking at this group, we get a clearer sense of the world Wilde was moving in. We also see the women who did much of the work for and who created much of the content of the *Women's World*. Again, by seeing Wilde against this background, we will be able to come up with a new reading of Wilde's more canonical works, like his critical essays, and ultimately his popular dramas.

### **THE SECOND-GENERATION FEMALE AESTHETES AT THE WOMAN'S WORLD**

I begin with Alice Comyns Carr, a female aesthete who was very involved with dress-design and theater. She was also the wife of Joe Comyns Carr, a man central to both the aesthete painting exhibitions at the Grosvenor Gallery and to aestheticism's impact on the West End theater. She herself was a writer, and has an article in the *Woman's World* called "A Lady of Fashion in 1750," which at first glance seems to simply tell the stories of major Society women of the mid-eighteenth century. But when one considers the article in terms of female aestheticism, one can see that the text is a kind of manifesto for the movement. Comyns Carr places the text *safely* in the past, thus affording her more freedom to make daring statements about the place of women in society. It was safer because it was not an overt political statement about the present. Such was a typical strategy of the aesthetes. Furthermore, the article documented the lives of powerful, assertive women who were assuming prominent places in the public sphere. And though few of these women were writers, many were learned in the decorative arts and in clothing design. In fact, they were the professional beauties of their time, and many portraits of them could be seen at the National Gallery.<sup>19</sup> Comyns Carr's writing is characteristic of the tendency of Wilde and the aesthetes to theorize the role

of popular sex symbols, charismatic women who set the fashions and the standards of beauty for their times.

Another major female aesthete who worked with Wilde was Graham R. Tomson. “Graham R. Tomson” was the pseudonym (the name of her second of three husbands) of the poet and journalist who eventually was named Rosamund Marriott Watson. (I will generally refer to her as Tomson/Watson.) Apparently Wilde once sent a portrait of himself to her with the inscription “To a poet and a poem” (Kernahan 197). Talia Schaffer describes Tomson/Watson’s work in validating women’s artistic activities:

She writes about the aesthetics of name cards, menu holders, window boxes, tea cloths, dried flowers, table settings, and lampshades. In this way, [Tomson/Watson] used interior design’s professionalization to enhance the status of quotidian feminine objects. (87)

Tomson/Watson wrote two 1889 *Woman’s World* articles on “Beauty, from the Historical Point of View.” In the pieces, she defends “superficial” women from their critics. She finds nothing wrong with the fact that the “personal appearance—fair or otherwise—of most women is considered as being of the utmost importance by them.” Also, she praises English styles of beauty, that “most healthy and glorious type—to wit, the ‘Athletic British Matron’ with the head of Mrs. Langtry upon the superb shoulders of the Venus de Milo; and she is no inane waxen ideal, but a magnificent reality” (541). She thus writes of the movement that Langtry had started, setting a variety of styles that many middle- and upper-class women consciously cultivated in themselves.

In addition to writing for *The Woman’s World*, Tomson/Watson ran a fashion column in and contributed poetry to W.E. Henley’s conservative *Scots Observer* (eventually the *National Observer*).<sup>20</sup> In a piece for that journal, she validated women’s desire to show off their beauty: “For the true morality is that it is every woman’s duty, as well as her privilege, if she have any good looks at all, to set them off to the best possible advantage.”<sup>21</sup> She would become editor of her own female aesthete magazine, *Sylvia’s Journal*, from 1893 to 1894. The monthly, like the *Woman’s World*, was a hybrid of fashion magazine and critical journal, covering fashion, decoration, literature, music, and painting. She displayed the work of the female Arts and Crafts painter, R. Anning Bell. She included articles on poetry, wood-carving, and pottery, as well as on gowns, lace, and Remington typewriters (this last being an important mass-produced item that was helping budding writers to begin their careers). One can see that she had learned much from the *Woman’s World*.

Tomson/Watson, like Wilde, was connected with the worlds of both New Journalism and the Souls. Her third husband, H.B. Marriott Watson, was an editor at the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the early and middle 1890s, when it was edited by a leading member of the Souls, Harry Cust. Tomson/Watson, like Wilde, happened to write for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, although not at the same time. And she was also a true consumer modernist in that she wrote a fashion column there, while incorporating aesthetic theories—albeit not as radically modernist as Wilde's—into her work. She and several other female aesthetes contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette's* long-running critical fashion column, “The Wares of Autolykus.” Moreover, Tomson/Watson was knowledgeable of “male” decadent aesthetics and incorporated these into her own poetry. Wilde writes a review of her poetry, saying that “some of her shorter poems are, to use a phrase made classical by Mr. Pater, ‘little carved ivories of speech’” (CW IX:509). He also makes note of her use of archaisms and fairy tale elements, things that Wilde himself made much use of. For example, Linda Hughes has written a chapter called “Feminizing Decadence: Poems by Graham R. Tomson,” which is in *Women and British Aestheticism* (1999). Tomson/Watson takes aestheticism to its logical extreme and asserts that what matters is not content; rather an artist can fashion artworks out of the very ephemera of everyday, out of even social rituals like serving tea. One thinks of Wilde's *Earnest* and its use of social ritual. (We look at her work in theorizing the aesthetics of fashion more in the next chapter.)

And another friend of Wilde, the most popular writer among the 1880s female aesthetes, was Ouida. Wilde praises her as a *lionne* (celebrity) in his letters (CL 331). And she would write four essays for Wilde's *Woman's World*. He, along with a set of writers, journalists, and society ladies, frequented her *salon* at her rooms in the fashionable Langham Hotel. She never married—although she herself proposed to a man—and was fiercely independent. One of the most popular novelists in England from the 1860s to the 1890s, she was among those most responsible for the popularization of aesthetic ideas, especially among women. Ouida's novels, building on the dandy tradition of Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton, were the immediate precursors to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Talia Schaffer convincingly argues in her recent essay, “The Origins of the Aesthetic Novel: Ouida, Wilde, and the Popular Romance.” In a letter, Ouida writes that “I knew Oscar Wilde very well; he sent me *Dorian Grey*, and I *did* understand it.”<sup>22</sup>

She, like Wilde, was adept at the art of writing to multiple audiences. Her novel *Princess Napraxine* (1884), for example, was both a sensational Gothic novel and a work imbued with elements of aestheticism. In the novel,

one character comments on an unaesthetic color-pattern, saying “though, no doubt, it is utterly wrong, and would give Oscar Wilde a sick headache, yet one must confess it is pretty and suits the sunshine” (11). Her *mondaines*, female dandies like Princess Napraxine, would display their aesthetic connoisseurship by their taste in art and design, and would exchange witty aphorisms, much as Wilde’s characters did. Also, she is sometimes credited with popularizing the epigrammatic style; it was perhaps Ouida who taught it to Wilde.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, when Wilde writes a *Pall Mall Gazette* review of her novel *Guilderoy* (1889), he makes a point of listing sixteen of the best epigrams therein, including:

*To endure the country of England for long, one must have the rusticity of Wordsworth’s mind and boots and stockings as homely.*

*Moralists say that a soul should resist passion. They might as well say that a house should resist an earthquake.*

*The whole world is just now on its knees in adoration before the poorer classes; all the cardinal virtues are taken for granted in them, and it is only property of any kind which is the sinner. (CW IX:497)<sup>24</sup>*

Wilde signals that he values her work by dedicating a full review to her novel. Usually, his reviews of single works involve writers like William Morris, W.B. Yeats, or Walter Pater, more “serious” writers. Wilde was certainly aware of Ouida’s importance to his own art. He praises the novel, saying that, although she has a “manner full of exaggeration and over-emphasis,” she also has “some remarkable rhetorical qualities, and a good deal of color.” He adds that she is a true aesthete, being perhaps too “fond of airing a smattering of culture,” although it is true “she has a certain artistic insight into things, and though she is rarely true, she is never dull” (498).

And in Ouida’s pieces for the *Woman’s World*, we see the same female aesthete concern for beauty in the ordinary, and often fashionable, concerns of daily life. One piece, “Appropos of a Dinner,” details strategies for giving a dinner party for “fashionable London.” But she tries to elevate the party to the status of *salon*, an event of artistic importance. In her essay “The Streets of London,” she calls on architects and planners to combat the ugliness then being constructed. She says that a style of architecture made up of:

buildings constructed without an idea . . . repeating its own nullity again and again and again, as an idiot repeats its mumbling nothings— affects the minds of those who live amongst it, and the sickly anemia of the

factory or the servant-girl becomes the dyspepsia and the boredom of the woman of fashion . . . . The influences of beauty on the mind are never sufficiently remembered. (*Woman's World*. 1889.481)

Here she expresses some important aesthete ideas, including the idea that it is necessary to surround oneself with beautiful objects in order to be healthy and “good.” She also shows her predilection for the “woman of fashion,” the middle- and upper-class women who are the vehicles of aesthetic culture, whose leisure and cultivation allow them to carry out the aesthetic program in society.

Another central female aesthete Wilde knew was the society lady and proponent of drama, Lady Archibald Campbell. When Wilde first edited the *Woman's World*, the opening article he chose was one called “The Woodland Gods” by Lady Archie. Her article chronicles the open-air theatrical productions in 1885 and 1886 directed by prominent aesthete E. W. Godwin. (Godwin, affectionately referred to in Wilde's letters as “Godwino,” had designed some of the interior decoration of Wilde's home.) Earlier, Wilde himself had also praised Godwin's productions in his *Dramatic Review* piece, “The Truth of Masks.”<sup>25</sup>

Lady Archie was a renowned beauty of the time, like Langtry the subject of many artworks, including a famous painting by J.M. Whistler, “Arrangement in Black.” The painting celebrated her independent fashion sense. She herself was an original thinker of aesthetics as well. In 1886 she published a book, *Rainbow-Music; or, the Philosophy of Harmony in Colour-Grouping*. Campbell's ideas on art are not of the type that Wilde would espouse; she is committed to “going to Nature,” something Wilde would probably oppose. For example, the open-air theater was an attempt to use the natural setting as a way of merging the natural environment and the stage set. Yet Wilde probably printed “The Woodland Gods” not because of Campbell's aesthetic ideas, but because he was interested in what she represented—a Society woman, an inspirer of art and an artist, and one who was recognizably a female aesthete.

Wilde dealt with several other female aesthetes. He approached for his magazine Alice Meynell. An accomplished poet, Meynell was conscious of her debt to Wilde. She highly praised his “Decay of Lying” and indicates how his work influenced her in an essay for the *Scots Observer* in 1889. In the end, she did not publish anything in the *Woman's World*. Wilde also solicited work—this time successfully—from Violet Fane, saying in an October 1887 letter that “a capital essay might be written on ‘The Demoralizing Influence of Nature.’” He thus indicates that they shared important ideas on the relation of art to nature. He also praises her, saying she “live[s] between



Parnassus and Piccadilly,” that is, between the world of high poetry and the world of consumer capitalism (CL 324).

All these women impacted Wilde and his ideas on aesthetics, and Wilde was aware of the effect they were having on society. He would comment on the way female aestheticism as a popular movement was having a beneficial impact on the culture. In “The Truth of Masks” he writes of that impact in the context of precisely the open-air theatricals that Lady Archie wrote about:

Besides, in England, at any rate, the public have undergone a transformation; there is far more appreciation of beauty now than there was a few years ago; and though they may not be familiar with [archeological details in Godwin’s productions], still they enjoy whatever loveliness they look at. And this is the important thing. (AC 426)

Thus Wilde and the female aesthetes at times used institutions of mass culture as media of education, or, better, as the medium wherein art should dwell and should open up culture to new possibilities. Wilde develops such themes even in “The Critic as Artist,” an essay that ostensibly has much more to do with elitism and Individualism than with popular movements. There he writes that the “mission of the aesthetic movement is to lure people to contemplate” beauty, more than to create beauty (396). Also, there he writes that art is popular: “Art does not address herself to the Specialist. Her claim is that she is universal” (400). It is important to acknowledge this enduring concern with such populism, a concern that co-exists with Wilde’s more famous statements about elitism in his essays.

Through his collaboration with these various female aesthetes, particularly in the *Woman’s World*, Wilde furthered the movement of popular female aestheticism, a movement that in turn fed into Wilde’s consumer modernism. To refer to the quote that opened this chapter, he and these women were the “apostles of real aestheticism,” a truly effective and engaged movement, although it also represented a surrender to what Matthew Arnold called “anarchy.” For Wilde and the female aesthetes, this anarchy, this mass culture, was the site *par excellence* for art. Immersed in this mass culture, they validate their concern with surface and charm, and they celebrate the self-creative power afforded one by means of consuming goods in the fashion and design industries. In the chapter that follows, I will look more closely at the theoretical bases for such a conception of art, a conception that merges female aestheticism with a modernist aesthetics of surfaces, performance and image.

## Chapter Four

# Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: The Aesthetics of Fashion in Baudelaire, Wilde, and Tomson/Watson

*Beauty is made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable . . . and on the other, of a relative circumstantial element which we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion.* (Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" 392)

Oscar Wilde had learned much from the first-generation female aesthetes of the late 1870s and early 1880s, so much so that by the mid-1880s, he was perhaps the leading aesthete figure. He was the one initiating and laying the groundwork for the critical-fashion discourse of the second-generation female aesthetes. In a sense, Wilde's method was simply to bring Charles Baudelaire's proto-modernist ideas into contact with those of early female aesthetes like M.E. Haweis. That is to say, he brought a discourse that was "authoritative" in the eyes of many critics (that of Baudelaire) into contact with a less authoritative discourse (that of Haweis).<sup>1</sup> The result was the 1887–1889 *Woman's World* magazine. The magazine became the primary site in London of female aesthete ideas. It also served as the model for second-generation female aesthete writers like Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriot Watson) and George Fleming (Julia Constance Fletcher). I wish to underline the fact that it was during and immediately after the *Woman's World* run that Wilde's important critical essays are written, and many of the female aesthetes wrote their important essays in the first part of the 1890s. Thus one gets a fuller sense of both Wilde and the female aesthetes by reading Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying" alongside an article like Tomson/Watson's "The Seductiveness of Dress." Both are manifestoes in defense of superficiality and of manipulated images.

But perhaps the problem with Wilde's intense involvement in fashion culture—as I noted in the Introduction—is that it makes us uncomfortable.

Some critics today go to great pains to argue that Wilde was either too elitist or too subversive to have really been so involved in commercial industries, including the industries of journalism and fashion. In the last chapter, I argued that Wilde and his art were thoroughly immersed in those industries, and I did so by placing Wilde among the female aesthetes. What we discover through this juxtaposition is that Wilde's very aesthetics make his immersion in commercial industries essential to his art. Those ideas, including an aesthetic of seductive surfaces, of the desire to shine, and of style as worldview make up the heart of what I have been calling consumer modernism. Here is an aesthetics of fashion markedly different from, say, the later Italian Futurists or Russian Constructivists, who would argue that the only genuine fashion was that which expressed avant-garde theories. It is also an aesthetics that diverges from the dominant line of European aesthetic theorizing that tended to distinguish "taste" from "beauty," and that elevated an aesthetics of pain and tragedy, as for example in the statue of the Laocoön, over an aesthetics of charm and pleasure, things often gendered feminine. Therefore, part of my task in this chapter is to explain how Wilde validates his aesthetics of fashion, that is, to defend those aesthetics as an under-recognized philosophical achievement. Afterwards, I also point out just where I believe Wilde goes wrong in his aesthetics. I critique them as an aesthetics that are too apolitical, too detached from ethics.

### **WILDE'S INVOLVEMENT WITH FASHION CULTURE AND OTHERS' NEGATIVE RESPONSE**

Before giving a full account of the aesthetics of fashion, it is necessary to provide some background, the context in which that aesthetics was deployed. First of all, Britain had undergone radical sociological changes in the previous half-century, changes that shaped the fashion industry. Clothing design was completely transformed by industrialization and other changes in the second half of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, dress largely became a "democratized" realm, and this created a lot of anxiety as a result. Also, Iris Marion Young writes that:

the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a revolutionary proletarianization of the image with the invention of cheap methods of color printing. By the early twentieth century it would seem that the experience of clothing, especially women's experience of clothing, is saturated with the experience of images of women in clothing—in advertising drawings and photographs, catalogs, and film. (64)

As a result, people in the upper echelons of society were distressed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell what class a person belonged to from his or her clothing. Ready-made clothes at lower and lower prices changed the look of society. Large numbers of people, especially of the middle classes, were looking more and more the same. And even when the rich were able to sport expensive *haute couture* dress, the clothiers would imitate those fashions and mass-produce them. As just one example, a new technology, that of dye-making, was instrumental in making dress more democratic. Now, the girl-next-door was able to buy fashionable mauve dresses, even as the Empress Eugénie was setting the mauve-craze with her Maison Worth dresses at Paris theaters and balls.

In this charged atmosphere, writers like Wilde knew that they could make quite an impact on society by writing about and theorizing dress. He also knew that many of his contemporaries would be critical of what he was doing. The fact is, many of the more progressive women in the 1880s and 1890s attacked Wilde and others who were involved in fashion culture. The New Women often shaped their identities precisely by strongly rejecting the popular trends and standards of beauty. In an 1893 article, “What is Fashion?,” a certain writer attacks “the cost, the tyranny, and the uselessness of fashion.” Fashion, the writer notes, feeds on imitative fads, as well as on capitalist competition (*Nineteenth Century* 33.235). And while this writer was perhaps not a New Woman, such was an attitude shared by many of them. The New Woman was perceived, even by her critics, as an enemy of fashion. One writer notes that “prettiness is one of her pet aversions,” for example, in the short, unadorned hairstyles she tended to wear (*Cornhill Magazine* 70.365).

Wilde himself was chastised by a writer at the *Pall Mall Gazette* because the *Woman's World* was paying excessive attention—his critics felt—to silly fashion fads. The writer criticizes fashions that utilize “the bodies of dead birds,” including a craze for hats with such adornment. Wilde had validated the fashion by putting a picture of such a hat right on the magazine's cover. (It is very possible that the writer was Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian.) Wilde does not hesitate to defend his action. He responds, “it is quite easy for the children of light [i.e., enlightened people] to adapt almost any fashionable form of dress to the requirements of utility and the demands of good taste” (CW IX:238). Wilde was not one to be culturally-sensitive towards people who opposed the use of animal skins as adornment for humans. For Wilde, morality had no place in discussions of art, including the art of fashion. Fashion—that is, “utility” and “good taste”—ruled. Again, Wilde was blending the concepts of “taste” and “beauty” into one another, treating them as one

and the same thing. This is something different from many other theories of beauty, like those of Kant, Hegel, or Lessing.

What the *Woman's World* attempted to do was forge a middle course between pure commercial fashion and pure antagonism to fashion, advocating its own idiosyncratic style of both feminism and fashionableness. (While there was certainly a gray area between these extremes, most feminists of the time were critical of fashion discourse.) Therefore, Wilde and his writers created a certain balance in the way they addressed women's politics. On one hand, we see "progressive" *Woman's World* articles like "Woman and Democracy," "Life at Girton [the women's college at Cambridge]," "The Legal Status of Women," and "Women's Suffrage." On the other hand, we see articles like "Reasons for Opposing Women's Suffrage." We see an article called "Journalism as a Profession for Women" in which the writer takes as a given that women should *not* write about such important, "masculine" topics as Sport, Money, or War.

Moreover, the majority of the pieces in the *Woman's World* deal not with politics but with literary works, clothing, and women prominent for their philanthropy or culture. Each issue has two large sections detailing the "Latest Fashions," one of London, one of Paris. We see titles like "Treatise on Hoops," "Dressing as a Duty and an Art," and "Muffs," this last one, incidentally, written by Wilde's wife, Constance. Therefore, there were several times that Wilde had to defend his magazine from New Women's attacks. We saw the above attack on improper fashions. In another instance, a woman critic was horrified that educated women were taking jobs as dress designers. Such was not an activity that this critic approved of; for her, progressive women should take "serious" professions, like those of medicine and law and politics. Wilde counters in his *Woman's World* column that dressmaking is indeed a serious, challenging art. It is one that requires one to "construct a costume that will be at once rational and beautiful," and he adds that "the artistic feeling of a nation should find expression in its costume quite as much as in its architecture." Finally, he says that:

just as the upholstering tradesman has had to give place to the decorative artist, so the ordinary milliner, with her lack of taste and lack of knowledge . . . will have to make way for the scientific and artistic dress designer. (CW IX:267)

Wilde makes clear that he wants dressmaking to be a more cultivated art, one that calls for more than what the "ordinary milliner" can produce. Dress is serious business.

As such, Wilde also worked to maintain high standards of “taste” in his magazine by controlling the *way* fashion was displayed. In an April 1887 letter to Wemyss Reid, the publisher, he argues for some balance in the magazine’s use of illustrations. Of the fashion illustrations, Wilde notes, “many are charming . . . but many look like advertisements and give an air to the magazine that one wants to avoid, the air of directly puffing some firm or *modiste*” (CL 298). He does not want to do away with the illustrations or with consumer culture, but he wants them to be done in a decorous and not so obviously commercial manner.

Thus, Wilde elevates fashion writing into an “art criticism,” including some criticism of the fashion columnists of his own magazine. One critic has written that Wilde uses a “method of directly communicating his interests and views in the magazine. . . . As a result, the thirteen articles [in the *Woman’s World*] cumulatively provide a substantial outline of his theories and assumptions about art and literature,” and, I would add, dress (Ksian 419). Specifically, he takes issue with some of his columnists’ pronouncements. A woman calling herself “Mrs. Johnstone” wrote on London fashion, and someone called “Violette” wrote on Paris fashion. In one issue, Wilde comments on Mrs. Johnstone’s ideas, criticizing some of the fashions that she outlines. Specifically he tells his readers to read the fashion column, but to feel free to alter the styles it presents:

The Sarah Bernhardt teagown,<sup>2</sup> for instance, figured in the present issue, has many good points about it, and the gigantic dress-improver does not appear to me to be really essential to the mode. (CW IX:238)

In other words, Wilde is making an editorial comment on the fashion column, stating that the dress shown is better *without* the “dress-improver,” i.e., the stays that constrain the figure. He then adds a further criticism of Mrs. Johnstone: “and though the Postillon costume of the fancy dress ball is absolutely detestable in its silliness and vulgarity, the so-called Late-Georgian costume in the same plate is rather pleasing.” Also, he writes that just because he includes certain fashions in his magazine does not imply “any approval of the particular forms that Fashion may adopt” (CW IX:238).

One way of describing Wilde’s strategy is as an attempt to balance “rational dress” ideas with ideas from popular fashion—a balance characteristic of aesthetic dress, generally—seeking to make his readers women who participate in the popular styles, but who have sufficient knowledge to tailor those styles to their own needs and wants. Similarly, Wilde had made the opening page of his first edition of the magazine a picture of a woman

dressed as a man, in fact a picture of an actress playing Rosalind, who in *As You Like It* dresses as a man to hide her identity. (The article was Lady Campbell's "Woodland Gods.") Now Wilde is exploring transvestism, locating it in relation to Shakespeare in order to legitimize it (as he would with his story *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, about a boy actor in Shakespeare's company). But he is also in part promoting the ideas of the rational dress movement; the clothing shown in the pictures strongly resembles some of the suits shown in the *Rational Dress Society Gazette*.

And such balance between consumerism and self-cultivation was the general thrust of most of the advice in the fashion columns of the female aesthetes. While self-cultivation in part is about rigorous study and creating things for oneself, in part it is also about buying the right things, and adorning oneself and one's home with tasteful consumer goods. For example, Tomson/Watson, in an 1891 "Spring Wear" piece in the *Scots Observer*, advises readers to be the authors of their own fashions, "but so gracefully and unpretentiously as to achieve that Golden Mean between modishness and originality wherein abides the secret of successful choices" (429). It was precisely such a Golden Mean that many New Women said did not exist.

In a similar balancing gesture, Wilde writes in a June 1887 letter to a potential contributor about how best to write about fashionable life:

I do not think that the fashionable life in the Colonies [the topic this person proposed] is sufficiently interesting . . . but I should be glad to receive an article on Colonial Society generally, giving an account of the mode of life, the amusements, the *social grades and distinctions*, the intellectual and artistic *coteries*, if any. (CL 304)

Wilde is interested in fashionable society, but not just for gossip. He wants society commentary that includes a kind of cultural studies analysis of class and of art, as well as of entertainment. Wilde goes on to mention that the writer should address the clothing of ladies, the architecture of houses, and the life of the Theater and of the Churches. He was selective in choosing how to deal with fashion and fashionable life in the magazine. At the same time, he also saw these fashion elements of culture as central to his conception of art.

In a signal of how seriously he took fashion, Wilde actually compares a "how-to" book on fashion with the work of the progressive playwright and modernist iconoclast, Henrik Ibsen. Wilde says that both the book and the playwright work effectively for the emancipation of women.

The book was Teresa Dean's *How to Be Beautiful: Nature Unmasked*, a title that suggests that Wilde was more interested in a politics of self-fashioning than of loud protest. Also, it is interesting that some female aesthetes openly rejected the Ibsen phenomenon. Below I argue that Wilde's plays are a direct retort to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

## AESTHETICS OF FASHION

The writings of Charles Baudelaire, Wilde, and the female aesthetes provide a developed theoretical framework for an aesthetics of fashion. In their theorizing, they assert that art *needs* the material, commercial world. The second-generation female aesthetes, particularly Tomson/Watson, both learned from and taught Wilde, and therefore I will place some of their writings alongside Wilde's essays to show the mutual borrowings. All three figures, Baudelaire, Wilde, and Tomson/Watson, share common lines of thought, those lines tracing a compelling modernist aesthetics. Those aesthetics consist of a defense of the seductiveness of surface, a theorization of the desire to shine, and an analysis of style as representing nothing less than the worldview of a culture.

But first I also go backwards in time to look at the roots of such ideas in the work of Charles Baudelaire. (Note that the three are not contemporary. Baudelaire was writing his aesthetic ideas in France in the 1850s and 1860s. Wilde's main statements of aesthetics, apart from the letter *De Profundis*, come between 1887 and 1891. Tomson/Watson's major statements come between 1889 and 1895.) Wilde points to his debt to Baudelaire, for example, when he quotes him in his *Pall Mall Gazette* article on J.M. Whistler's lecture on dress: "*Les grands coloristes, savent faire de la couleur avec un habit noir, une cravate blanche, et un fond gris*" (AC 17).<sup>3</sup> The basic point of the statement is that the best artists can create with the merest materials, nothing but a black suit, a white tie and a gray background. It is a statement about how dandies can express themselves stylistically through their clothing. It is also a statement about using color, and a lack of color, something apparently superficial and inconsequential, as an expressive aesthetic language.

But the first core idea that Wilde had gotten from Baudelaire was one that was key for theorizing surface. It was the idea that beauty had the following two aspects: first, "an element that is eternal and invariable," and second, "a relative circumstantial element which we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 392).<sup>4</sup> Any artwork has an aspect that lies



on the surface of reality, expressing the object's, or the individual's, beauty. Baudelaire writes of this fashion-aspect of beauty as "the amusing, teasing, appetite-whetting coating of the divine cake" which is inside (392). Using words like "amusing" and "teasing" was not usual in theorizing aesthetics. It is quite different from the language of Kant or Hegel, who tend to speak in terms of "aesthetic judgment," "the sublime," and "the Absolute."

Baudelaire adds that fashion is a "symptom of the taste for the ideal [beauty] that floats on the surface of the human brain, above all the coarse, earthy and disgusting things that life according to nature accumulates." Thus, the surface aspect of beauty can be seen as a "sublime distortion of nature [*déformation sublime de la nature*], or rather as a permanent and constantly renewed effort to reform nature" (426).<sup>5</sup> The sublime distortion, the lying, is the expression of beauty to the viewer of Now, of today; that is why he used words like "contemporaneity" and "fashion." Also, note that here he brings the very word "sublime" into his writing about surface.

Baudelaire was fascinated by urban modernity and he made it a focal point of his critical ideas. In the "Painter of Modern Life" essay, he expresses interest in what is Now precisely because it is now. The past has a value as past, and we appreciate archaism and things which were made centuries ago. But the present also has a value, a beauty "from its essential quality of being the present" (391). He goes on to write about "modernity" as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable" (403). It may not be perhaps as "important" as the eternal element, he writes, but if we lose the transitory element, we "inevitably fall into the emptiness of an abstract and indefinable beauty, like that of the one and only woman of the time before the Fall" (403). In a fascinating analogy, Baudelaire hypothesizes about Eve in the garden prior to the Fall; she has complete control of her faculties (according to Christian theology) and thus has no shame of being naked, nor therefore any desire to adorn herself with clothing, no desire for fashion.

Wilde takes up Baudelaire's line in his dialogue, "The Decay of Lying" (1887, 1891).<sup>6</sup> He makes much of Baudelaire's idea of surface beauty as a sublime distortion, as a deliberately manipulated image. In the dialogue, one character objects to the idea that art should be called a mirror (something famously said by Hamlet), saying that "it would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass" (AC 306). (Interestingly, James Joyce in *Ulysses* takes up the metaphor of the cracked looking-glass as an iconic representation of Irish art. Buck Mulligan uses it in his opening chapter discussion with Stephen Dedalus.) The character implies that genius consists of seeing through a cracked mirror, a mirror that shows the world as it is not,

in a distorted, perhaps even disfigured way. Wilde, of course, greatly values stylization, a conscious and visible refiguring of an image.

Wilde also extends this conception of how geniuses create art to how critics see and know. He writes: "To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence" (AC 312). Wilde theorizes the aesthetic judgment of the viewer, the responsiveness and susceptibility to beauty. Such is what allows the viewer/critic to truly see the thing, not as it is in itself (to paraphrase Matthew Arnold) but as in itself it is not, something Wilde says in his later essay "The Critic as Artist." In "Critic," Wilde playfully has the character, Gilbert, state: "I live in terror of not being misunderstood" (AC 350). Throughout these essays Wilde is theorizing how the surface aspect of beauty is not only not a "flaw" in vision or understanding, but is the central aspect of vision and understanding.

### THE DEFENSE OF THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF SURFACE

I now read Wilde side by side with some works by the *Woman's World* aesthetes. Doing so reveals how important Wilde was to this group of writers, as well as how Wilde's work takes on a different timbre in light of their work. That is, Wilde's high aesthetic theorizing is misunderstood unless it is read in the light of the consumer culture that helped form it, in particular the fashion culture. I begin by reading two Graham R. Tomson articles for the *Scots Observer*, "The Seductiveness of Dress" and "The Grace of Style" (Aug. 16 and Sept. 6, 1890). By this time, she had already known Wilde for some years, and had contributed some articles to the *Woman's World*. The *Scots Observer* articles are characteristic in that they link the artistry of dress with modernist conceptions of style.

In the first, Tomson/Watson gives her essay a title reminiscent of Wilde's "Decay of Lying," both a deliberate provocation of the literalist and a serious statement of aesthetics. One could imagine that she could write essays on "The Truth of Fashion," and "The Consumer as Artist." (Incidentally, her "Seductiveness" article appears just three pages before Wilde's published defense of *Dorian Gray* in the same edition of the magazine; her editor, W.E. Henley, was perhaps aware of the connections between the ideas of the two writers.) Her article is also a provocation to "critical" persons, and indeed to *men*. She speaks of a female domain, into which a man may enter "with his small wondering philosophy," hoping to "put forward his few inferior thoughts." She writes specifically against some writer who claimed that "the admiration of man [i.e., his admiration of a woman] is independent of raiment" (328).<sup>7</sup> That writer's statement was heresy to a female aesthete.

Thus, her goal is to defend the seductiveness of dress, and even to defend the idea that “it is now the dress that halloweth the form [the person], and not the form that sanctifies the dress” (328). The mask itself has greater value than the face. Wilde had expressed much the same idea in “Decay of Lying.” He wrote that it is not the *genuine* interior life of a person that matters, “not the reality that lies behind the mask,” but rather “the mask that each one of them wears” (AC 298). He also writes of Hans Holbein’s portraits, which, because they are so stylized, seem so real. “It is style that makes us believe in a thing—nothing but style” (AC 312). And in “The Truth of Masks,” he wrote, “The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks” (AC 432). Here, Wilde links stylization to belief, and doing so he links artistic/critical style to worldview, to the formation of a culture. Wilde and Tomson/Watson work this mask theme thoroughly in their essays.

Later, in *De Profundis* Wilde would note: “Like Gautier [the French *symboliste* poet] I have always been one of those *pour qui le monde visible existe*” (CL 777). The fact that fashion lies only on the surface, that it is purely of the visible world, does not make it any less important for Wilde. That is perhaps why Wilde was so obsessive about the details that went into the “look” of the magazines and books he published. He tellingly wrote to one publisher that “The public is largely influenced by the *look* of a book. So are we all. It is the only artistic thing about the public” (CL 984). Such a statement directly links consumerism and aesthetics.

Tomson/Watson, in “Seductiveness,” continues her discussion of the mask by extolling this “material foundation of [woman’s] sex.” She even claims that “‘tis her dress that captivates you; it is her dress that assumes new shapes, that manifests new feelings, that quickens new thoughts, that betrays new sweet, unreasonable moods” (329). She adds that dress should be seen as “the manifestation of her, as is the smiling earth of God’s divinity” (329). The woman is to God as the dress is to the earth, the latter two being the visible manifestation of a spiritual glory. Moreover, throughout she teases those of more “critical” bent, those who belittle the “superficiality” of her values. She writes that her critics’ fears “are but the morbid vision of him who has found dress *too* seductive” (329). She is delightfully brutal toward her critics.

## DESIRE TO SHINE

Part of what Tomson/Watson is up to is a philosophy of art that begins from the desire for self-expression, though this is a self-expression not in a Romantic sense, like that of, say, Wordsworth, but in a deliberately distorting and seducing sense. M.E. Haweis, that first-generation female aesthete,

had written in her *Art of Beauty*: “To be beautiful implies to be seen, and it follows that one of woman’s first duties is to be visible,” “visible” here meaning striking, arresting and alluring (273). Even as he was beginning to read Haweis’s work in the 1870s, Wilde was making the acquaintance of another female aesthete, Julia Constance Fletcher. Wilde had dedicated his award winning poem, “Ravenna,” to her in 1878. In his letters, he mentions having exchanges with her on aesthetics, and discussing Walter Pater’s work with her (CL 58). She was one of those who, by the late 1880s, was a leading second-generation aesthete, writing under the name George Fleming.

She published an important (and humorous) dialogue on women’s appearance provocatively called *For Plain Women Only* (1895). (The book was rather highly regarded by its publisher, the Bodley Head—the publisher for most of Wilde’s works—and was made part of a series that included works by H.G. Wells and G.S. Street, as well as another female aesthete, Elizabeth Robins Pennell.) Fletcher/Fleming’s book lays out the idea that there is no such thing as a plain woman; a woman is the artist of herself, and if only she will “know herself”<sup>8</sup> and study something of the art of beauty, she will be able fulfill her proper calling. The dialogue resembles Wilde’s dialogues in its humor and in its interplay between a rather earnest character and a more disruptive aesthete character—the one who voices most of the shocking epigrams.

For example, the earnest narrator, Theodore, challenges his Aunt Lavinia by declaring he prefers plain, un-superficial girls. He puts no stock in mere appearances, which tend to deceive. Dwelling on her nephew’s preference for the plain woman, Lavinia quips, “There is nothing quite so unattractive as stale and impotent virtue” (103). She also says that “Appearances express women. They may deceive fools. . . . Or—I will go a step further—I will say her appearance does it, amply, for such as have eyes and can see” (79). Like a fashionable Friedrich Nietzsche, Aunt Lavinia asserts the importance of mere appearances. (Incidentally, Wilde seems never to have read Nietzsche, the latter’s work not reaching the English-speaking world until after the turn of the century.) She philosophizes dress, asserting that what is at stake is the important “question of costume and appearance, and the manner in which such appearance acts, and reacts, upon the entire surface of her personality” (76). Here Fletcher/Fleming’s character presents a science not just of surface, but of the way surface relates to the life of the person. She theorizes that border between phenomenon and noumenon—to use Kant’s terms. She presents a kind of phenomenology of clothes. Again, we have a defense of concern with surface because such concern is something of a duty, something related to the person’s ability to express him or herself.

In “Decay,” Wilde himself had theorized aesthetics in terms of self-expression by Art, and imitation by Life—reversing, as was his wont, the usual way of seeing Art’s relationship to Life. For any individual, existence in the world consists of:

simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt. (“Decay” AC 311)

The artistic individual fashions him or her self, creates an artistic “form,” as a means to expressing the individual’s beauty. “Life,” that is, other individuals, seize on those forms, those artistic styles (or “looks”). And the individual does so at times unconsciously, such that one may even harm oneself. I return to a quote from Wilde that I used in the introduction:

We have all seen in our own day in England how a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two imaginative painters [D.G. Rossetti and E. Burne-Jones], has so influenced Life that whenever one goes to a private view or to an artistic salon one sees, here the mystic eyes of Rossetti’s dream, the long ivory throat, the strange, square-cut jaw, the loosened shadowy hair. . . . A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher. (AC 307).

Thus is created an ephemeral fashion. On one hand, such imitation can be read as a failure by people to fashion themselves. But for Wilde, they are doing the right thing, learning from Art, taking forms that are to some extent ready-made, and adapting them to their own purposes, using them to express themselves.

This phenomenon is what culture is; it involves not just the way they look, but the way they see, their worldview—religion, in a certain sense. And Wilde significantly links the phenomenon to popular, consumer culture—hence the reference to the “enterprising publisher.” He is being playful, but he is also indicating how seriously he takes mass culture. He is implying that high artists themselves tend to use ready-made, pre-existing genres, which lead to “movements” and “schools” of art, be they Impressionists, Pre-Raphaelites, or what not. Thus the popular fashions and movements in styles of dress are seen to be entirely appropriate for people to indulge in. Wilde is most interested in art and fashions that directly address and impact a mass audience.

For the aesthete, the surface and its ability to *seduce* is of utmost concern. Note that these writers use a term that suggests an *improper* image, something as far removed as possible from detached objectivity. We will look more at the question of visual impact in the coming chapters, particularly in terms of public image as Wilde uses it in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Another thing we saw in the last chapter was that Wilde encourages people (particularly women) to focus on elements like charm or sentiment. "For the aim of the liar [read artist] is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure" ("Decay" 305). That is, an artist must seek to charm, and charm is by no means something incidental to art. Though it lies on the surface, it is the heart of what art is about. An art object cannot simply sit there. It must *distract* the viewer. It must provoke some response. That provoking element is essential to art. To lie, to seduce, to distort—all are used by Wilde and the female aesthetes to get at artistic expression, both in literature and in self-construction through dress.

## STYLE AS WORLDVIEW

Thinking this way about style as culture-shaper brings us to another aspect of the aesthetics of fashion. Specifically, it is by theorizing style that Wilde, Tomson/Watson and others provide a theoretical basis for their intense concern with surface.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, their treatment of style is extremely important to me, because it has everything to do with making surfaces and masks do cultural work. Now, "Style" had been the title of an important essay by Walter Pater, one certainly known by all these writers. It was an essay that celebrated the emerging movement of modernism (although he does not use the term), particularly in the person of Gustave Flaubert.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when Tomson/Watson writes her "The Grace of Style," she is linking female aesthete discourse with Flaubertian modernist aesthetics.

She asserts that a writer's style functions in an indefinable way, working as a strong misreading or sublime distortion, in order to aesthetically move and motivate the reader. Specifically, she writes:

Now [the style] is in a metaphor which illustrates and illumines, now in a word which floods a sentence with light, and now in an image of express radiance. There are in this paragraph a dozen scintillations, each a separate thrill, which, flashing simultaneously, fuse into the one, full, human, significant, and appropriate passion of the occasion. (404)

The literary style, certainly present in spite of its indefiniteness, lies in the various surface elements of the text—a metaphor, an image, a series of images

that scintillates. In the “Seductiveness” essay, Tomson/Watson had written similarly of the way a viewer receives “a separate thrill for each successive change [of fashion style she assumes]” (328). Style is expressed and contained in the “dress that halloweth the form,” to use her phrase. It, like the fashion-aspect of beauty, causes the “bare matter”—if we can use that improper term—to shine. And she says style gives a text that sublime distortion by means of which “there flows from the gaping chinks of a score of words the light by which [the matter] may be viewed and is transfigured” (405). The style embedded in the text functions like openings through which light can flow out, can shine on the viewer/reader, with the result that “you are being moved” (405).

Wilde also theorizes style so as to explain the functioning of surface. In a *Woman’s World* “Note on Some Modern Poets,” for example, he asserts that rhyme is not a mere decoration. (For Wilde decoration is never mere decoration). Rhyme, with its rules and conventions, is one of those enabling constraints which are so important to Wilde. They are both conventional and embedded within culture. Here, he expounds on the powerful use of style, specifically in terms of rhyme, by W.E. Henley (the same who is Tomson/Watson’s editor at the *Scots Observer*, by the way). He notes that rhyme “gives that delightful sense of limitation which in all the arts is so pleasurable” (CW IX:348).

The limitation, by its indefinite and indefinable “suggestion,” opens up new artistic possibilities that are beyond any conceptual framework that the artist works with. In “Critic,” he develops this idea, writing that rhyme, “in the hands of a real artist becomes not merely a material element of metrical beauty, but a spiritual element of thought and passion also . . . opening by mere sweetness and suggestion of sound some gold door at which the Imagination itself had knocked in vain” (“Critic” 345). That is why Wilde criticizes poetry like Robert Browning’s, which too often eschews rhyme. Browning, he laments, is like a Jimi Hendrix of poetry who can only make music “by breaking his lyre,” such music presenting an interesting phenomenon, but ultimately a very limited one. (By this comment Wilde suggests that he would perhaps not be very interested in much of twentieth-century modernist art.)

A corollary of this conception of rhyme is that form suggests what content should fill it. Thus, when one creates, one must rely on the styles and fashions that have come before, on the tradition, as it were. Therefore, in the “Critic” essay, Wilde writes that “the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. He does not first conceive an idea”; rather, “the mere form [e.g., the genre of the

sonnet's rhyme scheme or the genre of the ball gown] suggests what is to fill it and make it intellectually and emotionally complete" (AC 400). In one review he asserts that there is "no such thing as Style; there are merely styles, that is all" (CW IX:355).<sup>11</sup> It is vain to seek after some ideal mode of expression, some ideal form. It is all on the surface, all is seen via style-informed masks, masks that are conventional and, to an extent, biological because we experience styles in our bodies, and in the interaction between our bodies and those of others. They are the stuff of culture.

Also, in one *Woman's World* piece, Wilde writes about style as it functions in not just the audible but also the visible aspect of a text. He describes the beauty of Japanese script, and says that "it is decorative in its complete subordination of fact to beauty of effect, in the grandeur of its curves and lines." Here Wilde shows how artistic constraints help the artist, in this case, the constraint of highly-stylized pre-existing visible forms. He goes on to note that "there is also an intimate connection between their art and their handwriting or printed characters. They both go together and show the same feeling for form and line" (CW IX:392). Wilde indicates how committed he is to visible script and audible sound, to these surface and material aspects of writing, aspects that strike the audience not just in their minds but also in their bodies. The desire to express oneself through these stylized realities is itself a constituent part of the message. Note that anyone who sees Wilde as an iconoclastic enemy of convention is completely misunderstanding him.

Another way of talking about style's cultural function is to consider the visual aspect's relation to the inner life of the artist and the inner life of the audience. That is, these writers theorize the way a surface impacts its audience, a surface in the form of a woman adorned with clothing. As we saw in the previous chapter, Tomson/Watson, for example, uses such aesthetic ideas to say that "the true morality is that tis every woman's duty, as well as privilege, if she have any good looks at all, to set them off to the best possible advantage" (211).<sup>12</sup> And in "Seductiveness," she praises woman as "that high artificer," claiming that "we have admitted the artifice of raiment into our ideal of Nature" (328). She thus plays with the Art-Nature binary in order to make her statements more startling, something Wilde often did.

And she defends a concern for appearance precisely because it does have something to do with a woman's interior life: "Has she a new thought, she puts on a new dress; she fits her adornment to the condition of her heart; and her very hopes are ever known by her hues" (329). Even *mere* color is not something incidental, but is, or at least can be, an expression



of a woman's deepest hopes and desires. By using words like suggestion and passion, Wilde and Tomson/Watson point to the person's psychology and to his or her stylized means of controlling and at the same time releasing in measured ways one's emotions. We are at the threshold of the personality, the worldview, all by means of stylized forms and rituals.

## SURFACE AND EPHEMERALITY

One thing that follows on this concern with surface is a commitment to ephemerality. Literary style and beautiful fashion alike are necessarily ephemeral and embedded in their historical moment. For example, one of Tomson/Watson's essays is entitled "A Plea for Inconstancy" (38).<sup>13</sup> (It is interesting to note that several of these aesthete writings are written in a playfully defensive tone, as in this title, or in "A Plea for the Indifferent," "[a defense of] The Seductiveness of Dress," or Wilde's "The Decay of Lying: A Protest.") Here she declares that Nature "is immutably fickle," and that women are fickle as well: "we weary of a dress, we weary of a certain fare, of a scene, of a company . . ." (38). Her point is that when one wearies of something, one should change. Such is not a confession of failure, but a celebration of artistic energy and creativity.

All this mutability, of course, makes it uncommonly difficult to define style or fashion. In her "Style" essay, Tomson/Watson writes, "[Style's] uses are confusing . . . and what or how much it signifies upon any one occasion of its employment the poor general instinct has never yet determined" (404). But this confusion is a positive thing, a motor for producing culture, a sign of vitality. She writes of the necessarily changing, evolving series of styles in writing, for example:

In this age they lean to archaism and to long Latin balances; in another they affect the Anglo-Saxon monosyllable and the crisp sentence. . . . In each successive change they obey the steadfast laws of movement, and are determined partly by the example of favourite models. ("Grace of Style" 405)

Style, whether expressed through literature or fashion, is necessarily ephemeral. The moment a standard is set and is imitated by others, it is immediately challenged, distorted, and thus renewed, by change. For style to have its power to move, it must necessarily combine both old familiar elements and new, disturbing elements. A culture, particularly a dynamic one, requires a series of new artists, each giving a strong misreading of

previous generations, though also fully participating in that cultural tradition.

It is striking how parallel her writings on literary styles and on fashion styles are. Tomson/Watson had earlier written a two-part essay in *The Woman's World* called "Beauty, from the Historical Point of View." (The article is similar to Alice Comyns Carr's "A Lady of Fashion in 1750," discussed in the previous chapter.) Therein, she traces the history of pictorial art, looking at standards of beauty in different eras and cultures. Each standard of beauty is a "viol" on which artists played—viol here serving as a metaphor for any age's current style. Eighteenth-century painters (many of whose works were and are displayed at the South Kensington Museum and the National Gallery in London) produced a series of portrait paintings of famous society women—painters like Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Romney had painted portraits of famous beauties like the Duchess of Devonshire, Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Robinson, and Lady Hamilton. The female aesthetes theorized these painters' styles and these women's fashions.

What Wilde does with this general concern with ephemerality is to extend it by making the provocative claim that *criticism itself* is a matter of ephemeral moods. He writes that "each mode of criticism is . . . simply a mood, and we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent" ("Critic" 390). It is necessary, for Wilde, to be inconsistent. Striving to have a coherent, unified theory of art that endures for one's life, let alone all time, is a mistake. Critic/artists, by making aesthetic judgments, are surrendering themselves to their bodily responses, albeit cultivated bodily responses. And they are participating in culture at that historical moment and place, not as an isolated individual but as a member of a group, a culture, a tradition. Note that both "traditional" and the "radical" artists are fully immersed in a tradition—otherwise those terms would have no meaning. Similarly, Tomson/Watson, in "Seductiveness," wrote that "'tis her dress that captivates you; it is her dress that assumes new shapes, that manifests new feelings, that quickens new thoughts, that betrays new sweet, unreasonable *moods*" (emphasis mine 329). Like Wilde, she makes the viewer of fashion styles an *art critic* of fashion. And she utilizes "mood" to express an important aspect of aesthetics, to describe aesthetic judgment itself.

Wilde makes the related claim that it is wrong for the critic to attempt to break out of this stream of fashions or moods, as if that were even possible. In "Critic," he implies that to try to get outside of any style or movement is to ruin art: "The man who sees both sides of a question

[in art] is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all” (AC 392). I read this quotation in the context of fashions or styles as worldviews, as ways of seeing and understanding the world. To imagine that one can get outside of any worldview (i.e., without immediately entering another worldview) is simply to make an epistemological error.

## BEAUTY IN TERMS OF THE PUBLIC PERSON

A final core idea Wilde and the female aesthetes were interested in was the status of the beautiful public person. Beautiful people were both art and inspirers of art (a claim also connected with their ideas on celebrity culture). Such was something that had been pointed out to them by Baudelaire. He wrote in his “Painter” essay: “Woman is well within her rights, and is even fulfilling a kind of duty, in devoting herself to the task of fostering a magic and supernatural aura about her appearance” (427). Baudelaire even has a section called “In Praise of Make-Up,” saying that make-up “immediately approximates the human being to a statue, in other words a divine or superior being” (427). He gets so specific as to comment on eye-liner and rouge, saying that these evince “a supernatural, excessive life.” Such a conception of women is in line with Tomson/Watson’s idea of women as “high artificers.”

In addition, Baudelaire pays special attention to the public woman who either becomes an artist-celebrity or who is the artist’s “inspiration” and subject-matter.<sup>14</sup> He comments on the significance of the beautiful women of any age: “the goddesses, the nymphs, and sultanas of the eighteenth century are portraits of the spirit of their day” (403). The *Zeitgeist* may have walked the earth in the person of Napoleon, but it also walks in the woman of fashion. The courtesan, as well as the actress, he writes, is “a creature of show, an object of public pleasure” (431). Actresses fashion themselves and serve as inspiration for artists. They aim to win favor “not only by pure physical beauty, but also by talents of the rarest order. If on the one hand, the actress comes close to the courtesan, on the other hand she reaches up to the poet” (431). There was a distinction in nineteenth-century Europe between respectable women of fashion and *demi-mondaines*, who were not respectable. But there was also a twilight area, such women sometimes being called *demi-reps* (reputable). These were often actresses. In fact, being on this borderland could afford a woman a great deal of leverage because having slightly less respectability would also give one perhaps more freedom.

As for Wilde, it was precisely women like Lillie Langtry whom he treated as poems and poets. Others he so treated included Ellen Terry, Madame Modjeska, and Sarah Bernhardt, all of them actresses. And he created poetry out of these women; that is, he used them as inspiration to write poems, including “The New Helen” for Langtry and “*Impression du Théâtre*” for Bernhardt. If Helen of ancient Greece had been instrumental in producing *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Wilde seems to be saying, such can also be said of Langtry and Bernhardt with regard to producing art, including fashion-styles and personality-styles, in the 1880s. A fashion celebrity is put on the level of a figure out of classical literature. Similarly, in the *Lady’s World*, a “Society Pleasures” column lists those invited to the Grosvenor Gallery, including “a much be-photographed actress, lately a model to Sir Frederick Leighton,” namely Langtry. The column also lists “Mrs. Beerbohm Tree and Mrs. Oscar Wilde” and comments: “Need I say that, with such attractions on the floor, the Vandycks on the walls were somewhat neglected?” (136).<sup>15</sup> The society woman fulfills her desire for self-expression by dressing up and appearing in public, an artwork among other artworks.

We can perhaps get a better sense of how Wilde makes use of Baudelaire’s aesthetics by comparing Wilde to a contemporary couturier. In fact, the world of aesthete writing and the world of *haute couture* fashion can be seen as parallel. Both designer Charles Frederick Worth (of *Maison Worth*) and Wilde were aware that their art had no existence separate from either the celebrities of the time or their mass audiences. Thus, Worth strategically used celebrities, both of the court and the theater, to promote his designs. He cultivated an image as a kind of autocratic *doge* in Bohemian garb, and earned the name “*le tyran de la mode*.” And he managed to become the personal designer for the Empress Eugénie. One contemporary *Harper’s Bazaar* writer describes him thus: “Around him were a bevy of women . . . listening to his observations with the rapt attention of the disciples of a sage. He called them before him like schoolgirls, and after inspecting them, praised or blamed their dresses” (quoted in Olian 4).

Wilde did not design dresses, but he had been a fashion consultant in the early 1880s of the *prima donna* of English fashion, Langtry, as well as of others. He also advised women on matters of dress through his magazine, particularly through the fashion art-criticism he included in his columns. Doing so put him in a position rather parallel to that of Worth. But there is a major difference between these two artists. Both Worth and Wilde were steeped in fashion culture, treating it as a serious aspect of life and human history. But Wilde in addition to creating fashion was a literary critic of fashion, a kind of “cultural

studies” artist, playing with the tensions that lay within fashion culture, as well as within the literary arts, particularly that of the theater, which were implicated with fashion culture.

The theory behind such literary practice is explained in one of Wilde’s “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young”: “One should either be a work of art or wear a work of art” (AC 434). Each individual ideally will be the artist-creator of him or herself, both by fashioning one’s personality, and by wearing artistic fashions. Wilde similarly had written in 1883 to the poet Violet Fane that she is “a poem and a poet in one, an exquisite combination of perfection and personality, which are the keynotes of modern art” (CL 216). In this regard, Wilde also indicates his fellowship, perhaps surprisingly, with the classical philosopher, Plato. It was Plato, Wilde notes, who theorized how a spectator/critic passes from physical beauty to spiritual beauty in his *Phaedrus*.<sup>16</sup> In “Critic,” one character in the dialogue notes that the place where they stand resembles “the meadow where Phaedrus bathed his feet,” a reference to the fact that Socrates encountered Phaedrus outside the city by a running stream (AC 347). The character also mentions the beautiful young men, Alcibiades and Charmides, who had served as the inspirations to works of art and literature. Wilde would continue the idea of the beautiful person as inspiration for art in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, of course. In these works, Wilde works in terms of homoerotic inspiration.

Let me parenthetically state that there is a lot of tension within this self-creative female aestheticism, in large part because it is hard to distinguish between the aesthetes’ individualism and their conformity to a mass. The latter has also much to do with the commodification of the celebrity and bourgeois aspiration. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of being bourgeois is that, at the moment one is submerging into a mass culture, one is also simultaneously trying to distinguish oneself as unique. That is, as a woman purchases aesthetic items from department stores, she is also trying to demonstrate that she is not merely modish but rather has genuine cultivation and taste. There is great similarity between being very fashionable and being consciously non-fashionable as a means towards establishing a new fashion. It is in [Chapters five](#) and [six](#) that I address the idea of the self-creating woman, and the tensions and creative energies inherent in the gray areas between consumerism and artistic self-cultivation.

## WHERE WILDE GOES WRONG

With consumer culture in mind, I turn to that aspect of Wilde’s aesthetics and artistic practice that I criticize as being improperly detached from political and ethical concerns. It is important for me to make this critique

because I wish to isolate it from the positive achievement of creating an aesthetics of fashion. Wilde wrote that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.”<sup>17</sup> Wilde is right, declaring that a commercial building, or fashion design, or wallpaper should not be criticized on ethical grounds. The clothing-design industry should not be attacked for its business practices, but should be judged on the beauty of its works. We witnessed above that Wilde defended his magazine from such moralizing attacks. The magazine industry, he argued, should be judged only on the quality and beauty of its criticism. But Wilde wrongly uses these ideas as justification to ignore class injustice and conflict.

Thus, in “Critic” Wilde makes an economic argument defending materialism, defending frank immersion in the material, economic world. He is in part justified when he writes:

They rage against Materialism, as they call it, forgetting that there has been no material improvement that has not spiritualized the world. . . . What is termed Sin [i.e., materialistic consumerism] is an essential element of progress. . . . Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. . . . Self-denial [i.e., in getting and spending] is simply a method by which man arrests his progress . . . (AC 361)

Here he focuses on the tension that arises because large parts of his audience are strongly opposed to crass materialism. Wilde seems to be responding especially to people who would divorce art from anything commercial. What Wilde defends is the progress that has accompanied industrialization—the things that have made the fashion, periodical, and theater industries such potent forces in Victorian Britain. And he rejects the idea of self-denial; he opposes the idea that people should reject the products of these industries. And Wilde faces up to the fact that the realms of art and commerce are always already interdependent.

It is worth noting that at no point does Wilde entertain a notion of one’s work being *alienated* from oneself—rather he sees positive possibilities in this “individualism” and “material progress.” Labor in the industrial workplace, for Wilde, is not something structurally set up in such a way that the worker relinquishes a relationship with his or her work. It is true that in “Soul of Man” Wilde praises working-class people who rebel against their status. But he does so in a tone that I read as tongue-in-cheek. That is, he says that all manual labor should be done by machines, something that his society could work towards, but something that no society could ever reach.

And I have to believe that Wilde knew this, and was speaking in part in a deliberately unrealistic way. Instead, the tension between artisanship and commerce is a productive tension, as are most social tensions for Wilde.

In an unsigned art criticism piece in the *Scots Observer*, a writer (possibly Tomson/Watson) expresses an attitude towards commerce similar to Wilde's. The writer mocks the self-loathing of Arts and Craftsmen, saying:

At a time when the false prophets of the Art and Craft are cutting themselves with knives in the marketplace, it is refreshing to examine the designs of one who [artist Alfred Stevens], an infinitely greater craftsman than any of his successors, respected his art too highly to babble of his moral ideals. ("The British School at Burlington House")<sup>18</sup>

The writer prefers, as do I, a frank embracing of the fact that art is always embedded in some sort of market, and is tired of the histrionic self-torture some artists indulge in.

The fact is that Wilde was probably building on ideas he had gotten from writers like the above critic, or like female aesthetes like M.R. Lacey, who wrote an essay, "A Plea for the Indifferent," for the *Woman's World*. She published her essay in 1888, three years before Wilde wrote a similar "plea" for indifference in "Soul of Man." Lacey criticizes the philanthropists, those who dwell on "the duty of working for Others (with a very large round O of solemnity)" (I.417). She numbers herself among the Indifferent, those who cannot embrace all the "earnestness, and noise, and talk, and altruism" (I.417). In "Soul of Man," Wilde writes at length about what is wrong with altruism. The problem with poverty, for Wilde, is not so much that the poor suffer, but that the middle- and upper-classes are forced to be altruistic: "The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism. . . . Charity creates a multitude of sins" (AC 355–6). The positive side of Wilde's analysis is that he argues that art needs to first of all be concerned with excellence in style and in impacting a large audience. The negative side is that he derides concern for the poor.

I continue to discuss the positive side of this aesthetics, a side which enabled Wilde, Tomson/Watson, and Lacey to explore this materialistic, consumer-centered side of aesthetics. And therefore they are also able to theorize commercial artistic, mass culture work as a thing of possibility. Also, they can work the tensions in positive ways, rather than being either paralyzed by them or blind to them. Another contributing factor for Wilde here was that he was by temperament a de-mystifier, an importunate exposé of the mundane realities behind masks of respectability.

He goes so far as to say that he sees an artistic renaissance taking place in Victorian England—this much-vilified, consumer-driven, Victorian England. He writes:

All over England there is a Renaissance of the decorative Arts. Ugliness has had its day. Even in the houses of the rich there is taste, and the houses of those who are not rich have been made gracious and comely and sweet to live in. (“Critic” 396)

He adds that “there is no reason why . . . this strange Renaissance should not become almost as mighty in its way as was [the Italian Renaissance]” (398). Wilde is of course celebrating the popular aesthete movement, and his own commitment to helping middle class women (and some men) become artists as they engage in the interior decoration of their homes. He commits a sort of modernist heresy, given that not many modernist theorists of art would use a word like “renaissance” in relation to late Victorian Britain. “Wasteland” and “corpse” are more common descriptions. Therefore, for better *and* for worse, I would argue, Wilde embraced a certain *laissez-faire* attitude towards consumer culture, and towards art’s place therein. The attitude allowed him as an artist to theorize and play with his embeddedness in the institutions and industries of consumer culture. Such has been my analysis of Wilde up to now.

On the negative side, however, his ideas tended to justify the idea of surrounding oneself with aesthetically-pleasing consumer goods, and in hiding from *any* social responsibility. He thus argues for an art that is completely detached from ethics. For example he notes that:

The aim of most of our modern novelists seems to be, not to write good novels, but to write novels that will do good; and I am afraid that they are under the impression that fashionable life is not an edifying subject. . . . They have made the novel the mode of propaganda. (“Literary and Other Notes” CW IX:441)

Wilde is right to say that an artist makes a mistake when he or she relies not on art but on the fact that his or her heart is in the right place. But what Wilde fails to consider is the fact that, while they are not absolute, social structures do place significant limits on those under those structural restrictions, particularly those without political or economic power. He also sounds a strange, blindly optimistic note, considering the horrors that industrialization has brought on “those who are not rich,” to use his phrase from an earlier quote.



Even as he utilized the consumer culture *form* in creating his art, it seems that the consumerism *content* overwhelmed him, as it were. Therefore, he justifies his own detachment from social concerns and ethical questions by limiting himself to talking only about style. The sad part is that he in part compromised with the very elements—superficiality, lack of ethical concern—that his critics attacked him for compromising with. The result was that it was perhaps quite easy for later modernists to justify their ignoring of Wilde. Thus we see the ethically-blind, bourgeois side of Oscar Wilde, the aspect that says things like:

In literature we require distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders. ("Decay" AC 296)

He justifies this attitude aesthetically, saying that art is "properly concerned with useless things, that don't concern us, don't affect us" (299). Thus, his aesthetics could also do damage to his art. When playing with masks of respectability, he played with the very consumeristic masks and veils that justified the status quo. And his manner of life, particularly once he started making a great deal of money in the 1890s, was one of conspicuous consumption. He therefore attacks the work of Charles Reade, who, after writing great literature and popular plays, then turned to works that had the explicit purpose of raising social awareness of the injustices committed in prisons and asylums ("Decay" 300). (Ironically, several years later, Wilde himself would do the same as Reade in his biggest selling published work, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." The poem, accompanied by Wilde's letters to the newspapers, would help raise awareness of the inhuman conditions in prisons.)

He argues against political action, saying that it is impossible for certain people to form a "disinterested intellectual judgement," people like a "noisy politician, or brooding social reformer, or poor narrow-minded priest blinded by the sufferings of that unimportant section among whom he has cast his lot" ("Critic" 389). Wilde was absolutely intent on high success, even to an extreme degree. Although he was committed to his art, that did not prevent him from at times compromising his standards. He writes to a friend in March 1877 that he is serving his two great gods, "Money and Ambition" (CL 39). Two years later he writes to another friend from the country, saying that he has come to Hampshire "to kill time and pheasants and the *ennui* of not having set the world quite on fire as yet" (CL 89). When he writes to the Examiner of Plays, Pigott, he confesses "I am

working at dramatic art because it's the *democratic art*, and I want fame" (CL 98).

Wilde rationalized his success-fever to some extent also on aesthetic grounds. He tends to assert that an artist needs to be surrounded by beautiful things and beautiful people, thus justifying the practice of cutting himself off—at least so his writings put it—from the ugly aspects of life. Such for example is his argument in "Soul of Man," in which he declares that sympathy with the poor and suffering is very unhealthy. And even at the beginning of his career, he writes that he requires expensive and beautiful surroundings to make his art flourish. He writes to a friend: "I have not yet finished furnishing my rooms, and have spent all my money over it already, so if no manager gives me gold for the *Nihilists* [an early, never-produced play] I don't know what I shall do; but then I couldn't really have anything but Chippendale and Satinwood—I shouldn't have been able to write" (CL 103). It is significant that Wilde chose Chippendale and Satinwood, which were typical furniture for the female aesthetes, signifying a predilection for the Eighteenth Century.

Of course, Wilde did not follow these aesthetic ideas with complete consistency; he was at least true to his ideal of being inconsistent. And it is perhaps more accurate to describe Wilde's work as born of the dialectic between a pure, detached aestheticism and an extreme sentimentalism and obsession with tragedy, this latter aspect coming out periodically, as in the end of *Dorian Gray*, and reaching a high point in *De Profundis*. Indeed, Wilde writes about himself in *De Profundis* as having passed through a pleasure-focused phase. And he announces his entry into a new phase, in 1897, one focused on "sorrow," an aesthetic response to the suffering of others and of oneself.<sup>19</sup> While Wilde's separation of his career into two phases is largely artificial, it does shed light on what he saw himself as accomplishing through his consumer modernist work. And what Wilde achieved, through his borrowings from Baudelaire, and his collaboration with the female aesthetes, was the forging of an aesthetics of fashion. By theorizing fashion in terms of an aesthetics of surface, Wilde and the others manage to use surface and public image, in the context of consumer culture, as engines for art. I count this an important achievement because it enables a type of "modern" art that is an alternative to the various other modernisms that define themselves by rejecting consumer culture.

With Wilde's consumerism education in the periodical industry complete, the stage is set for his entry into the West End theater. Indeed, in a review of a production of Shelley's play the *Cenci*, Wilde—inaccurately—asserts that Shelley would have sought to have the play "produced during

his lifetime at Covent Garden, with Edmund Kean and Miss O'Neill [the major leads of the time] in the principle parts" (347).<sup>20</sup> Wilde's entry into the West End theater was not merely accidental. The worlds of magazines, fashion, and the theater were parallel worlds that involved an essential connection between artist and mass audience. Nor was Wilde's move to the theater an abandoning of his literary modernist or aesthetic concerns. It was the full expression of his modernist aesthetic concerns.

Chapter Five

## Consumer Fashion and Modernist Aesthetics in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)

*Lady to the Poet: "Now tell / What made you take to writing plays instead / of patronizing Art?"*

*Poet: "Because I've said / All that had ever been said about pictures."*

*Chorus: "His young disciples expressed surprise*

*They said 'dear dear! Do you think it wise?'*

*The Poet-author made no reply.*

*Merely winked his left pellucid eye.*

*The piece came out, and it stood the test*

*For he'd borrowed only the very best."*

(from Charles Brookfield's satire "Poet and the Puppets: A Travestie Suggested by 'Lady Windermere's Fan,")

For several decades, critics have taken a serious attitude towards Wilde's critical essays, as well as towards plays like *Salomé* and *Earnest*. And in recent years, critics also are beginning to take Wilde's other plays seriously. One recent critic, Neil Sammells, for example, has written that, in a play like *Lady Windermere*, Wilde's "modernity lies not in the degree to which he dispenses with the old, but in the designs he fashions from it—the style he holds it in" (Sammells 85). He adds, perhaps with a bit of overstatement:

these plays are *all* surface. . . . It is my contention that Wilde's deployment of commercially successful formulae is not a matter of compromise or laziness, but rather of assiduous and increasing stylization, and it is consistent with the theoretical thrust of the essays . . . (82)

Critics have thus been looking at Wilde's modernist style, in spite of the obvious similarities between Wilde's plays and what Sammells calls "the old," i.e., the standard melodramatic fare of 1890s English theater. I build on Sammells' work and argue that, in his first commercially-successful play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), Wilde is joining the popular comedy to the modernist aesthetics that he had laid out in the essays in *Intentions*—ground-breaking essays like "The Decay of Lying," and "The Truth of Masks."

But we have the lingering problem that these plays *are* strikingly similar to the popular plays of the time, something the satirist Charles Brookfield pokes a great deal of fun at in his "travestie." The quotation at the head of this chapter shows how Wilde's contemporaries had no doubt that Wilde had "borrowed only the very best." William Archer writes in reference to "Ideal Husband" that "For Mr. Wilde's good things I have the keenest relish, but I wish he would imitate Beau Brummel in throwing aside his 'failures,' not exposing them to the public gaze" (18). And, while he called "Earnest" "delightful to see, it sends wave after wave of laughter curling and foaming round the theatre," he adds despondently, "but as a text for criticism it is barren and delusive" (57). *Lady Windermere* is a comedy about high society that uses the standard elements of the genre. It is a delightful play that was calculated to be fabulously popular with a mass audience. Given the way literary critics are trained, it is generally easier to explain the achievement of writers like, say, Henrik Ibsen, whose plays relentlessly expose social problems and plumb psychological depths—getting into serious themes like insanity, suicide, and incest. His plays electrified London in the late 1880s and early 1890s, and helped spawn the Independent Theater there. We can more easily view Ibsen's plays, which are neither comedic nor meant to satisfy the bourgeois audience, to be culturally and aesthetically significant works.

I argue that the fact that Wilde sought to satisfy the bourgeois audience is *central* to his aesthetic achievement in his plays. He creates his art by working with the fashion, entertainment and theater industries. I use "industry" both because late Victorian London was an industrialized culture and because industry is a term that has negative connotations for most theorists of modernist art. I want to challenge the thinking of such critics as Regenia Gagnier and Peter Bürger. For Wilde, art was unthinkable except in relation to a mass audience. He was interested in the culture-forming type of art, art that gets embedded in the heart of bourgeois culture, art that made the poet the unacknowledged (or acknowledged) legislator of Shelley's ambitions. We are at a moment in which the common, community-building images, social rituals, and public personages gain their ascendancy not by religious or aristocratic authority but by market-share.

It is no small thing to address one's art to this audience. This is the audience that is fickle, impatient, and consumption-minded. Henry James, in *The Tragic Muse*<sup>1</sup>, describes the West End theater audience as:

the *omnium gatherum* of the population of a big commercial city, at the hour of the day when their taste is at its lowest, flocking out of hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with food, stultified with buying and selling and with all other sordid speculations of the day, squeezed together in a sweltering mass, disappointed in their seats, timing the author, timing the actor, wishing to get their money back on the spot, before eleven o'clock. (48)

As we saw with Wilde's work in journalism and fashion, his conception of art entails a direct connection with this multi-class, mass audience. I identify the characteristics of the consumer modernism of his plays as, first, that the art work has no essence separate from these various industries; second, that his art builds directly onto the conventional genres of the time; and third, that an immediate relationship to a mass audience is an essential element of this art. (In the next chapter, I analyze how Wilde thematizes consumer image and ritual themselves.) Oscar Wilde is a useful figure here because, he, until about the 1970s, had too mass cultural a context to bear much critical study. And now that so much interest is being lavished upon him, we can use him to revise our views of modernism at the same time that we are revising our views of Wilde.

My task here is not easy. Wilde himself had a difficult time communicating to his audiences that he was up to a serious aesthetic project in his popular comedies. This serious attitude is evidenced in the way he treated the play. One could imagine that Wilde could have made a distinction between his more literary work and his less literary work. In the early 1890s, he was treating a "serious" play like *Salomé* and a poem like *The Sphinx*, for example, as high art works, as weighty texts written in a serious tone. He enlisted famous artists (Aubrey Beardsley and Charles Ricketts) to illustrate his published versions of them.<sup>2</sup> He also worked very closely with John Lane at the Bodley Head firm to publish them not as mass consumer items, but as *very* limited editions. The firm specialized in art books, including many of the female aesthetes' books, significantly. The Bodley Head represented a cross between the Kelmscott Press (of Arts and Craftsman William Morris) and the *Woman's World*. Given this high art treatment of the *Sphinx* and *Salomé*, we might expect Wilde to treat the publishing of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a popular, "conventional" work, quite differently. But that is not the case. He

published this play, and others, in virtually the same way, with the same publisher and the same limited edition runs. (Josephine Guy and Ian Small, in *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, do yeoman's work, detailing Wilde's efforts to publish books in an "artistic" mode. He did not primarily have the intention of making money on the books, but rather of gaining *cultural* capital.)

In addition, Wilde made sure to encourage some of his French modernist friends to see the play. He was perhaps trying to convince them that the play *was* serious, that it engaged some of the same modernist aesthetic issues that decadent poetry did. Thus, we see him in his letters inviting the French poet Pierre Louÿs to attend a performance of the play. But in the end, it seems that Louÿs was not interested (CL 528). After not hearing whether Louÿs had attended the play or not, Wilde sent follow-up letters. He looks quite pathetic as he keeps asking in the letters to Louÿs, "Pourquoi pas de lettre?" ("Why no letter?").<sup>3</sup> What this episode demonstrates is that it was hard for Wilde to convince his contemporaries to take his popular work as seriously as they did the coterie-work. He could say of his book of *Poems*, as he did in a letter to a magazine, that "there are only two people in the world whom it is absolutely necessary that the cover [of the book] please," viz., the illustrator and Wilde (CL 501). He could make no such claim about *Lady Windermere*. So he was forced to try to show that his work was serious by the way he published the work and the way he presented it to people like Louÿs.

## ART FROM WITHIN INDUSTRIES

The first important aspect of Wilde's consumer *theater* modernism is the fact that he creates his art not separate from, but within the various industries connected with the theater. As Bernard Shaw noticed of him, Wilde plays among, and with, everything, "with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theater" (*Saturday Review* 79.44). By *whole theater* I believe he means the theater industry together with its ancillary consumer industries. He should have added fashion and interior design. On the other hand, many critics have argued that Wilde's project entailed both using and *undermining* consumer culture. The idea is that he at the same time utilizes and subverts the images of consumption presented in the plays of high society. (Implicit here is the idea that we can forgive Wilde for using consumer culture because he does the good deed of subverting it, too.)

But I have argued that, at the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Woman's World*, Wilde was doing something a bit more complicated, that he creates art in and from mass consumer culture. Here I argue that the same applies to the plays. Some critics perhaps are too quick to assume that he was interested in

undermining consumer culture. Regenia Gagnier, Tracy Davis, and Richard Allen Cave are some who argue this way. Cave for example wrongly says that “Wilde’s audience have cunningly and effectively been led into participating imaginatively in a satirical deconstruction of their own culture and moral sensibility” (xxii).

A better and clearer way to put it is that Wilde uses whatever cultural elements are at hand. The elements that are at hand in his London are the industries of mass consumer culture. He bears out Michel Foucault’s thesis in the *History of Sexuality* that the Victorians were not so much inhibited as enabled by their cultural constraints. I argue that he has *no* interest in *undermining* consumer culture. He does not want to undermine it first of all because he is indeed interested in enjoying a rich man’s lifestyle, and he wants to conspicuously consume. Secondly, and more importantly, he constructs art that needs that culture. Thus, he resists the temptation to complain about how the structures of consumer culture can be obstacles to art, and he proceeds to use those structures (industries, genres, social rituals, commercial venues) to achieve his own artistic and critical purposes—in particular his purpose of directly addressing the mass audience. Wilde the artist needs those media industries and that Society-comedy genre as both channels in which to settle and as foundations on which to build.

How do Wilde’s consumer modernist aesthetics relate to modernism generally? I turn briefly to a statement by one theorist of modernism in order to better define Wilde’s place therein. Jochen Schulte-Sasse has written that, in modern commercial society, particularly in something like popular theater, “the mode of reception undermines the critical content of works” (Introduction to Bürger xi). That mode of reception refers to the way the work is presented to the audience. That is, they “receive” the work in a commercial context, a situation in which they are consumers. They receive the work in a context mixed and “contaminated” with many non-literary elements, like fashion culture, star actors, spectacular theaters, and the various entertainment industries. For theorists like Schulte-Sasse, the mode of reception is an obstacle to the real critical work that the artist is trying to perform. Such is one understanding of modernism’s reason for being. For Wilde, however, modernism arises differently. For him, the mode of reception is the most important part of the critical work.

Wilde carries out his work right in that mass culture context such that his work seems to be—and in important ways *is*—just like other popular work. Wilde was not just *pretending* to be mass cultural in order to better critique society, like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He was a sheep all the way through. He was mass cultural in the very manner in which he created his



art, from beginning to end. Wilde is working in the years *before* what Andreas Huyssen calls the moment of the “Great Divide” between modernist culture and mass culture.<sup>4</sup> And he takes advantage of the more fluid mixture of cultural elements afforded him by his late-Victorian context.

Wilde, as we have seen, developed his art in direct connection with the female aesthete movement. That location necessarily also placed him in the upper-middle class world wherein the industries thrived. Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell point out that, particularly with regard to fashion:

by the mid-eighties Londoners could read about Worth’s [*haute couture*] theater gowns in the fashion pages of the *Queen* or Oscar Wilde’s *Woman’s World*. They could also see them firsthand in the stage wardrobes of Lillie Langtry [whom Wilde had advised on dress]. (9)

Such was the world wherein Wilde wanted to do his artistic work. Therefore, given Wilde’s relation to female aestheticism, as well as his friendships with the prima donnas of the London and Paris theater, the move towards Society Comedy for Wilde could not be more fitting. Wilde’s first successful play embraces and makes direct use of the fashion industry and the high-society-comedy genre. Implicit in his involvement in this “woman’s world” is that he uses all of the above industries as means to get at his audience. It is characteristic of Wilde that he is interested in the fashions on the stage and off it. For example, he takes special note of the fashions worn by theater audiences in his letter to the female aesthete Mrs. W.H. Grenfell. Specifically, he complains of the audience at a performance of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*: “the pit full of sad vegetarians, and the stalls occupied by men in mackintoshes and women in knitted shawls of red wool” (CL 477). People wearing such clothing were people among whom Wilde would not be caught dead.

Let me pause to make clear that I am not saying that Wilde was completely self-conscious in the way he used and manipulated these various cultural elements, or in the way he embarked on a path I call consumer modernism. Since Wilde was largely just using whatever elements were at hand, we can say the elements to some extent were writing Wilde, as he was writing them. What Wilde says about *public image and social ritual*—about the way a person both mimics and self-creates through consuming—reveals a lot about how Wilde conceived of himself as artistic creator. Such becomes clearer when we get to our discussion of and consumer image and ritual in the next chapter.

Wilde’s art was embedded in commercial industries, and he reflects on this fact in the 1897 letter *De Profundis*. Discussing his plays, Wilde writes that:

I would say that my unique position was that I had taken the Drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the Lyric or the Sonnet, while enriching the characteristics of the stage. . . . (CL 874)

Wilde sees himself as having personalized an “objective” art, an art that is not just a matter of one person expressing himself. Rather, it is an art that is radically external to the artist, or better, that greatly softens the distinction between interior and exterior, between self and ambient culture. This is an art which requires the artist to play the games that the commercial industries have set up; to get a play produced on the West End, you have to win over the right producers, actors, and public relations people, and to satisfy them that the play will be commercially successful. Wilde was uniquely qualified for this precisely because he had such a strong (and productive) addiction to consumer culture. In describing Wilde’s work, one critic uses an analogy to contemporary music forms, such as hip hop, and says that Wilde “samples” various other elements of music, fashion, and dramatic culture in weaving the tapestry of his society comedies.<sup>5</sup>

One corollary to this connection with the ambient culture is that Wilde, in his plays, was not above setting “non-literary” sweets before the masses as a means of making his work more delectable. We see a humorous and telling “Dialogue on the Drama” that appeared in the *Nineteenth Century*—and that may well have been a response to Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest*. The “Dialogue” treats of the value, and the series of consumables, one gets for one’s money at a play:

I think I go because, on the whole, I like it, and I certainly think, as things go, I get my money’s worth there. A stall costs me ten shillings; well, I get a nice pretty comfortable place to sit in, say a shilling for that; music, another shilling; acting, that is always fair and often very good indeed, five shillings; pretty scenery, a shilling; extra display of feminine loveliness, costume, and general fascinations, a shilling; the pleasing illusion that I am in the habit of calling dukes by the diminutives of their Christian names, that’s worth sixpence at least—I say! that only leaves sixpence for the play! Oh, take it all round, it’s cheap! (Kennedy 325)

A nice seat, music, set design, beautiful women, beautiful clothing . . . Such were the many “values-added” that one consumed at a West End theater. In the above dialogue, another speaker praises playwrights who do “not have to bolster up their interest by the introduction of cynical dukes and costumes

from the emporium of M. Worth" (Kennedy 324). Such a criticism is aimed precisely at people like Wilde, whose comedies always involve cynical aristocrats like Lord Darlington and expensive costumes from the houses of fashion. (The other cynical aristocrats include Lord Illingworth of *A Woman of No Importance* and Lord Goring of *An Ideal Husband*.)

But these non-literary, "superficial" aspects were not mere incidentals for Wilde. One aspect of his philosophy of art was that he elevated the importance of things that were "merely" decorative or ornamental—something we saw in the chapters on *The Woman's World*. Someone pointed out to me that by far the longest piece of prose that Wilde wrote for the *Woman's World* was a review of Alan Cole's *Embroidery and Lace*.<sup>6</sup> Lace is a significant choice of topic, being the most superficial and least substantial aspect of dress (dress itself being a surface).<sup>7</sup> For Wilde, to dwell entirely on the surface is a virtue. "It is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper nature is soon found out," writes Wilde in one of his "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." He also writes that "those who see any difference between soul and body have neither" (AC 433). Such a focus on the superficial is, on the one hand, a playful reversing of hierarchies. On the other hand, it is a philosophical position with regard to surface and substance, namely that the distinction between the two does not work, or that like most binaries, it breaks down in important ways.

1880s and 1890s London was a place where portrait painting, interior design, the Arts and Crafts movement, and fashion were all linked. Wilde was only distinguishable from his peers in that he linked things more closely, and he did so more explicitly, than people like William Morris and Walter Crane. We saw that Morris had succeeded in creating the ideal showcase: the Morris Room, at once a free advertisement for his wares and a well-paid artistic project given high art status in the South Kensington Museum. Such was also an age which saw the rise of *haute couture*, of such firms as Worth and Doucet, as well as the firm contracted by George Alexander for *Lady Windermere*, the designers Mesdames Savage and Purdue. These fashions are reflected in the paintings of contemporary artists like J.M. Whistler, John Singer Sargent, and Louise Jopling. (The book, *Whistler, Women, and Fashion* (2003) details the ways Whistler's art was connected with the fashion designs, including those of the aesthetes, of the 1880s and 1890s.)

Such painters were also chronicling styles of interior design by Arts and Crafts and other designers. Wilde had a keen interest in interior design, as we saw when he enlisted E.W. Godwin and Whistler to work on his own home. This transferred to the theater, which like the museum, served as a

showcase for such designs. One of the set designers for *Lady Windermere* was Walter Hann, an interior designer who was an acquaintance of Wilde. (Hann would also do designs for *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*.) In reference to Hann, Wilde declares that it is time to “restor[e] the scene-painter to his proper position as artist” (CW IX:10).<sup>8</sup> He also writes, “I have never seen any reason myself why such artists as Mr. Beverley, Mr. Walter Hann, and Mr. Telbin should not be entitled to become Academicians” (CW IX:10). The scenery description, for example, for Act IV of *Lady Windermere* reads: “Lady Windermere’s boudoir: White woodwork, panels of crushed strawberry silk. Green carpet, Louis Seize furniture. Silver-framed mirror on table.” Hann did have exquisite taste.<sup>9</sup>

Wilde had also praised Arts & Crafts designer E.W. Godwin’s productions and theater sets in his *Dramatic Review* piece, “The Truth of Masks.” William Morris and Co. was also producing set designs for the theater, and getting advertised on playbills, as with H.A. Jones’ play, the *Crusaders*, at the Avenue Theater in 1891. Other male aesthetes also were involved in the theaters, for example, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, who were designing sets for Henry Irving at the Lyceum. In late Victorian-Britain the Royal Academy of Art mixed fairly freely with the entertainment industry in the theater. Such made people like Morris and Crane at times somewhat uncomfortable. It seems not to have bothered Godwin or Burne-Jones. It made Wilde feel right at home.

It is of course significant that the title of the play is *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the fan being a very fashionable consumer item at the time. In the fashion magazines, there were full illustrations of the dresses of the leading female characters in the play, and there were fine illustrations also of the enormous, ostrich-feather fan. As Kaplan and Stowell have shown in *The Theatre and Fashion*, the major women’s magazines tended to have a theater costume critic who detailed the styles at the West End productions. For example, *The Illustrated London News* has illustrations of the dresses—and the fan—from Wilde’s play. At the same time, Wilde was continuing to work against the fashions—that itself being a fashionable move—by having some of his characters dress in attractively “plain” dresses, most notably Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman*, who looks somewhat like a Pre-Raphaelite in her unadorned black velvet gown.

In *Lady Windermere*, one fashion critic enthusiastically writes: “Lady Windermere played the scene in a short Russian coat of mushroom velvet, Mrs. Erlynne in what was described as an equally smart mushroom brown overdress and Russian jacket braided in the Hussar manner” (quoted in Kaplan and Stowell 18). And many fashion columnists were greatly interested

in the ostrich feather fan that Wilde put at the center of the play. The above critic writes that the fan consisted of “16 white ostrich feathers fixed to a handle of yellow tortoise shell, with the name ‘Margaret’ in diamonds.” And indeed, Wilde’s play may have contributed to the sales of such fans. They certainly were popular. For example, in Liberty and Co.’s catalogues from the 1890s, fans were a major item, and in 1894, the year following the production of the play, the catalogue includes 17 types of ostrich feather fans to choose from. Such a close association between Wilde’s work and the latest fashions was something that bothered many of his contemporaries.

It is ironic that the ones who perhaps best understood what Wilde’s play was about were those who satirized it. In Brookfield’s satire of the play, *The Poet and the Puppets: A Travestie Suggested by “Lady Windermere’s Fan,”* the title figure’s name is Lady Winterstock—a reference to the fashions she displays. At one point, at her ball, she tells the butler, “Parker, my fur-lined cloak is up the ‘spout.’ / Go round to ‘Attenborough’s’ and get it out” (17). Again, the satirist was striking at the fashionable-advertising that the play participates in. But for Wilde, the fashion industry, and its superficiality, for ill and for good, was very much a central part of the play. Bernard Shaw similarly makes note of how central fashion was to the theater in one dramatic review (of S. Grundy’s “Slaves of the Ring”): “The stage-mounting and colouring were solidly and expensively Philistine, the dresses in the last act, and the style of domestic decoration in the first, epitomizing the whole history of plutocracy in England during the expiring century” (*Saturday Review* 79.10). Shaw’s point is that the set design, the interior decoration, and the dresses are central to what is going on on-stage. And it is the styles of the wealthy that are on display there, both to advertise to wealthy audience-members and—such being a major theme for Wilde—to educate and influence the taste of the middle-class audience members.

Also, to get a fuller illustration of how *Lady Windermere* is linked to various industries, one need merely look at its playbills. They are typical advertisement-packed West End playbills of the time. We see noted that the “furniture and draperies” were provided by Frank Giles, and Co., Kensington, and the dresses by Mesdames Savage and Purdue. The floral decorations come from Harrod’s Stores, the major elite department store of London. We see advertised the names of the interior designers (for the sets), for example, Walter Hann. In this modern commercial context, authorship and brand name bleed into each other. (Critics have noted that it was in haute couture that brand-name labels became so important. It was designers like Worth who first began making sure to include the brand-name label on their items.) The music that accompanies the play is also given prominent position on

the playbill, with the list of songs from mostly highly-acclaimed composers, including Mozart, Rubenstein, and Paderewski.

Thus, the popular theater was *the* prime location of mass consumer culture. One can also see this in the newspapers and magazines of the time. By the late 1880s, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, for example, listed the plays at the major (mainly West End) theaters, as well as the music halls, not just every day, but every day on the *front* page. And it has been noted that “more British periodical publications were devoted partly or wholly to the theater (interpreting that word in its largest sense) during that time than any other” (Stedman 162). One critic writing twenty years later notes that in the 1890s,

the public was more familiar with the plays and took a greater interest in a comparison of the players [than later generations]. . . . [A]nd the cinema had not yet made its alluring appeal. The theater was *the* entertainment. . . . The play was the excitement and the relaxation. (Mason 17)

Thus, both Wilde and the industries were shaping his play, all within a context in which play-producing, taste-educating, and commerce were in open contact with each other.

A corollary to this linkage with various industries is that Wilde was not only willing to but actually thrived on working with both star actors and commercially-driven managers. Wilde knew at the outset that he was going to be entering an artistic domain in which all kinds of constraints and demands were going to influence his finished product. For example, as he was writing *Lady Windermere*, Wilde was negotiating and shaping his play *The Duchess of Padua* with the help of actor-manager Lawrence Barrett in New York. In July 1889, Wilde wrote that he would “be very glad to make any alterations in it you can suggest” (CL 406). And he goes so far as to say he would even leave the alterations “in your hands” (CL 456). (The play was produced under the title *Guido Ferranti*—so that it would not be recognized as Wilde’s failed play of a decade earlier—in New York from January 28 to February 14, 1891. Barrett, however, suddenly died, and the play was discontinued as a major billing of the theater company.) He may have felt that his plays were as personal as sonnets, but the plays were shaped at every step by the actor-managers, as well as by the West End audiences which Wilde and his managers were angling for.

Such collaboration and such artistic constraints were not things all writers were willing to entertain. Like Wilde, Henry James would also attempt to work with George Alexander with his play, *Guy Domville*, in 1895. But

the humiliating debacle that ensued convinced him to stick to writing novels and short stories. And when the playwright John Galsworthy attempted writing for Alexander two decades later, he complained to Alexander that “you yourself are the attraction to half the public, and half the commercial value of the play.” He added that he could not find a way to balance “the essence of my play” with the star-effect of Alexander (Mason 19). There was no “essence” of Wilde’s play that was separate from the surrounding conditions and constraints.

We get a sense for just how much Alexander shaped *Lady Windermere* from the fact that he himself, first of all, convinced Wilde to write it. Even though Wilde was drawn towards popular-comedy-writing, it seems that an external impetus was instrumental in pushing him to actually take that step. His first two plays, *Vera; or, the Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*, had been tragedies; they had plenty of popular, melodramatic elements, but they strove to maintain a serious tone, and had fairly exotic settings. It was Alexander who advanced Wilde those fateful £50, asking him to produce a *comedy*, and to make it a standard Society comedy. *Vera* Wilde had set in the Nineteenth Century, but in the exotic location of Czarist Russia. And *Duchess* he had set in Renaissance Italy. Wilde had tried to entice Alexander with *Duchess*, but to no avail. Alexander seems to have sensed that Wilde could do much better in a comedy with a contemporary setting, perhaps seeing glimpses of the possibilities in *Dorian Gray* and in the *Intentions* dialogues. Wilde had to alter his aesthetic thinking somewhat, given that he says things in his essays like the following: “the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject matter” (“Decay” 319). But Wilde was a pragmatist, and promptly changed his mind.

We also see Alexander’s influence in a certain letter he writes to Clement Scott. There he writes that the play has taken “a world of labor” by himself “to get it as right as it is” (quoted in Kaplan 62). Of course, that is Alexander’s assessment of the collaboration, just one side of the story. But it is clear that he and Wilde had some heated debates over the shape of the play. By the time it was in rehearsals in Feb. 1892, Wilde writes to Alexander that he hopes there would be “no repetition of that painful scene of last night” (CL 514). He also complains about some change Alexander has made, especially since “after a long consultation on the subject . . . you agreed to have what is directed” (CL 512).

By far the biggest bone of contention involved the question of when to reveal the mother-daughter relationship between Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere. As Joel Kaplan demonstrates in his “A Puppet’s Power: George Alexander, Clement Scott, and the Replotting of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*,”

Wilde surrendered perhaps more writerly authority than he realized. Apparently, Alexander schemed with the critic Clement Scott before the first night, formulating a plan that would coerce Wilde to accept Alexander's change. The plan was to allow Wilde his version of the play on the first night, only to hit him so hard in the reviews that he would be forced to accept the change. And that is exactly what happened, in spite of Wilde's insistence to the *St. James's Gazette* to the contrary. He wrote them that the reason he made the change after the first night was because a group of his personal friends had unanimously advised him to do so at a dinner afterwards. He also writes that "the criticisms of ordinary newspapers are of no interest whatsoever" (CL 521). However, what Scott wrote seems to have interested him. Scott's point was that truly great playwrights like Sheridan, Dumas, and Sardou "never fogged their audience for three acts in order to startle them with a bombshell in Act IV," appealing perhaps to Wilde's desire to be among that elite group (quoted in Kaplan 62).

By the second performance the change was made. That was also the version that Wilde eventually published. My point is that working in the popular theater involved a writer in an arena in which he would have to be willing to compromise and be influenced by others. Today, before a film or popular novel, for example, is released, much market research is conducted, and focus groups are gathered to gauge audience responses. In 1892, things were not quite so sophisticated, but Wilde must have known that, to successfully reach the mass audience, he would have to rely on the expertise of many others. Alexander and Scott were two experts. And Alexander must have had a production team with years of experience marketing West End plays and bringing in audiences.

### **LADY WINDERMERE AS "CONVENTIONAL" IN RELATION TO SERIOUS DRAMA**

Wilde's playwriting needs pre-existing matter. The pre-existing matter—the genre of the Society comedy, the genre of the Ibsen tragedy, the industry of the popular theater, the industry of fashion, and so on—all are what Wilde uses in creating his play. It is by no means a creation *ex nihilo*. He is constantly plundering the wares of other artists and entertainers and the wares of the London marketplace. It is perhaps not accidental that his critics often accused him of plagiarism.<sup>10</sup>

To illustrate Wilde's relationship to his audience, it is useful to contrast him with many of his contemporary playwrights. On much of the continent, for example, playwrights were taking advantage of the state-sponsored



theaters. (There were state-sponsored theaters in France, Russia, and Germany, groups like the Théâtre Libre, the Moscow Arts Theater, and the Freie Bühne. Also, soon the Irish would have the Abbey Theater.) These writers therefore could focus more on the act of creation because they were freed of having to produce work that was commercially viable (though of course state-sponsorship was another type of constraint).

The following is by no means exhaustive, but rather is meant to give a rough sense of the theater in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, across Europe. In France, writers like Jacques Offenbach were producing satiric musicals like *Orphée aux Enfers*, a work of “high” art, with music of a level of complexity that puts it on a par with “classical” music. But someone like Offenbach was also *mocking* high culture in the form of Ancient Greek myth, and he was also mocking modern bourgeois society. In Germany, some, like Richard Wagner, abandoned revolutionary ideals (as he did in the process of producing *The Ring Cycle*) in favor of a combination of high art and didactic popular theater—something perhaps not that different from consumer modernism. He in fact ended up compromising more with mass culture than he had originally intended, accepting the fact that his Bayreuth experiment was at least in part a commercial enterprise, attracting more bourgeois tourists than local folk. Scandinavians like Henrik Ibsen and Auguste Strindberg took a more serious, anti-mass cultural line. In Russia, Anton Chekhov more or less followed their tradition. In England, however, writers like Gilbert and Sullivan followed in the more popular footsteps of Jacques Offenbach, satirizing British cultural institutions. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Victorian British plays, except certain works in the 1890s by Wilde, H.A. Jones, and A.W. Pinero, are today generally considered “insignificant” (and I generally agree with this assessment).

Meanwhile, in London, the works of “serious” continental playwrights like Ibsen and Gerhardt Hauptmann, if they were performed at all, would have to be put on by the Independent Theater. The Independent Theater, founded just at this cultural moment, in 1890, was meant precisely to help introduce some of these playwrights to England, as well as to assist British writers who could not get their serious work produced in commercial venues. Shaw got his play-writing career started in the Independent Theater (though he relatively quickly turned commercial). It was not a money-making venture, nor a venture that aspired to have mass-cultural provenance.

And in order to contrast Wilde’s work with that of others, it is necessary to look briefly at the play itself. Here is a summary of Wilde’s *Lady Windermere*: The beautiful woman of fashion, Mrs. Erlynne, who years ago left her husband and small child, has returned to London and is trying to get back

into Society. While keeping her identity secret from her daughter, she uses her son-in-law Lord Windermere's help, and succeeds in establishing herself in society by appearing at Lady Windermere's ball. In the process, however, Lady Windermere fights with her husband, and is about to leave him for another man, Lord Darlington. Mrs. Erlynne then chooses to sacrifice her new-won place in society in order to both convince her daughter to return to her family and shield her daughter from shame. Erlynne thus shields her by disgracing herself and appearing to be the one having an affair with Lord Darlington. In the end, Mrs. Erlynne wins the friendship of her daughter, though without revealing herself as mother.

I read the play as an explicitly anti-Ibsen play. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* had recently made headlines in London because of its shocking story-line in which the protagonist, Nora Helmer, walks away from her family at the end of the play. The idea of a woman leaving her husband and children was just too shocking for Victorian audiences. (Below we will look at the media event that was the critical response to Ibsen in London.) Nora starts out the play as a happy middle-class housewife. She hides a crime that she has committed (forging a signature to get a loan), something she has done in order to save her husband's life. When the crime comes to light, an enormous crisis ensues, and Nora realizes that she must leave home in order to forge her own personality. In spite of the way critics read the play, Ibsen himself declared that the play was not about women's liberation, and he did not want to get involved in any directly-political movement.

Mrs. Erlynne is like Nora Helmer 20 years later, and, though not "repentant," she certainly regrets having left her daughter. Also, Erlynne prevents her daughter from becoming a Nora Helmer. Wilde makes the Ibsenite character, Darlington, seem a bit ridiculous. Darlington seems to voice the commonly-perceived message of *A Doll's House* with his overture to Lady Windermere: "Oh, go—go out of this house, with head erect, with a smile upon your lips, with courage in your eyes . . ." (70). The scene shows Darlington to be a self-important, over-earnest fool. Such a turn of events in a play of 1892 could not but strike audiences as a kind of retort to Ibsenism. It also was why many critics saw Wilde's play as completely conventional.

Thus, in 1890s London, when people spoke about serious drama they spoke primarily about the Norwegian, Henrik Ibsen, or the German, Gerhard Hauptmann. One late twentieth-century literary critic writes of Ibsen, for example, "He found the drama, in every literature but Germany's, moribund or fixed in its traditions; he left it vital and fertile" (Ellis-Fermor 8). She adds that his *Pillars of Society* "puts to shame the contemporary *pièce bien faite* in France and the turgidity of the serious British drama of the next two

decades.” Bernard Shaw came out with his *homage*, *The Quintessence of Ibsen-ism* in 1890, and William Archer, who championed the cause of progressive theater in annoyingly self-righteous terms, made himself Ibsen’s primary apostle. He was one of Ibsen’s first English translators. In his 1889 *Fortnightly Review* article “Ibsen and English Criticism,” Archer claims that, given the level of discussion surrounding his plays, Ibsen “has for the past month been the most famous man in the English literary world” (52.30).

In another article Archer writes that

I can call to mind no other case in literary history of a dramatist attaining such sudden and widespread notoriety in a foreign country. His name is in every newspaper and magazine, his ranking phrases—call them catch-words, if you will—are in every mouth. An allusion to Nora Helmer will be as commonly understood as an allusion to Jane Eyre . . . The reason of this notoriety is not far to seek; it is simply that he has succeeded in giving his plays an unexampled relevance to the spiritual problems of modern life. (52.663)

In Britain, for many serious writers it was Ibsen or nothing. George Moore, in another *Fortnightly* essay, writes that even the foremost British playwright (in his opinion) of the time, A.W. Pinero, lacked enough genius to “triumph over the obstacles which pruriency and sloth have raised against art” in the London theater.

On the other side, populists made constant jibes at Ibsen and his disciples in popular magazines like *Punch*, which ran a series of “Ibsen-ism” cartoons making fun of the phenomenon. The primary critical antagonist of Archer would have been Clement Scott, the playwright and critic at the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Illustrated London News* (and the one who helped shape *Lady Windermere*). Archer writes about Scott being the hegemonic, middle-class spokesman: “Mr. Scott represents to a nicety the average middle-class Englishman, or in other words the immense majority of the play-going public.” Archer then asserts that Scott is in the process of being left behind: “In [1890] [the theater] took a fresh start and left him (and the majority) behind; and [Scott] now shrieks to it to come back and ‘mark time’” (1893 246).<sup>11</sup> Archer of course refers to the Ibsen-phenomenon of 1890 as the “fresh start” that was leaving the mass audience behind.

Given this critical landscape, one would expect Wilde, a modernist writer interested in writing for the stage, to have much to say about Ibsen. But in fact Wilde says virtually nothing. In one letter, he does praise the Independent Theater production of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* in April 1891,

writing to Elizabeth Robins, who played the lead. But then again, that same month, he wrote to another friend of "poor Hedda," and adds that "I went there on Thursday night, and the house was dreary" (CL 477). Moreover, in the few references to Ibsen in Wilde's works, he tends to depreciate Ibsen. One of the only times he mentions Ibsen is in a *Woman's World* book review.<sup>12</sup> There, as mentioned previously, he compares Ibsen's work with the popular how-to book of Teresa Dean, *How to be Beautiful: Nature Unmasked* (CW IX:386). Of course, advocates of Ibsen like Archer or Shaw would have gone into fits at such a comparison. In fact, some female aesthetes were like Wilde in their lack of interest in Ibsen. As we have seen, the women members of the Souls came to use the word "ibsen" to mean "ordinary" (Abdy 6).

Thus, Wilde had little interest in addressing only a small, highly-educated audience. For example, in 1888, the above-mentioned Elizabeth Robins sought his advice regarding working on a literary and socially-daring play called *A Fair Bigamist*. The editors of Wilde's *Collected Letters* note that, though she "longed to accept . . . Wilde persuaded her to refuse." Instead he encouraged her to go see a mainstream actor-manager, his friend, Herbert Beerbohm Tree (CL 357 n.3). (Beerbohm Tree was to play Lord Illingworth in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).) He was one of the star actors of the age, for example, playing Svengali in the enormously successful play by George Du Maurier, *Trilby*. This was the same Du Maurier who did cartoons of aesthetes for *Punch*. And when Wilde was asked about going to see Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in 1891—as we saw in the last chapter—he wrote to a friend, recommending that they instead go to H.A. Jones's *The Dancing Girl*. Jones' play was produced by Wilde's acquaintance Joe Comyns Carr and starred Beerbohm Tree (CL 477). This was appropriate. When we look at a play like *The Dancing Girl*, we see a lot of similarities with Wilde's plays. We see the some of the same actors, like Julia Neilson (from later plays), and we see the same scenery designer, Walter Hann.

Who were the people in these mass theater audiences, the people Wilde was so interested in? If earlier in the century, theater audiences were mainly made up of working-class and lower-middle-class people, by the 1880s, the audience was truly a cross-section of society. Members of virtually all classes of society attended the West End theaters, the largest group being the middle-classes. (The poorest classes, of course, were excluded.) In writings of the time we see a standard distinction between "the pit and gallery" and the "boxes and stalls," the former serving the working- and lower-middle classes, and the latter being priced for the

upper-middle- and upper-classes. Wilde himself, in his letters, always writes of getting a box.<sup>13</sup> Even in the West End, all classes attended in significant numbers (although in some cases the “pit” was getting replaced by orchestra stalls, a trend that eventually meant that there was soon to be no more working-class audience). In an interview in 1887, Henry Irving, the most renowned actor-manager of the time, speaks of how important the pit-goers are for the theater, and specifically important for himself as an actor.<sup>14</sup> In the 1890s, the pit had their favorite actors towards whom they were very responsive, and who fed off the pit-goers’ energy. Wilde seems to have been interested in the theater because it offered this opportunity to really address all parts of society.

Therefore, Wilde was extremely conscious of his audiences. He was conscious of various segments of the audience, the working- and middle-class as much as the extreme upper-class. First of all, as Henry James noted in a letter, describing a performance of *Lady Windermere*, Wilde played to the lower orders:

the pit and the gallery are so pleased at finding themselves clever enough to ‘catch on’ to four or five of the ingenious—too ingenious—*mots* in the dozen, that it makes them feel quite ‘*décadent*’ and *raffiné* . . . and feel privileged and modern. (3.372)

By giving them such a sense of privilege, he plays on the audience’s desire to attain bourgeois standards of taste and knowledge, as well as their desire to experience the world of glamour.

On the other hand, Wilde also tailored his play to attract the upper 10,000, who were in the boxes and stalls. By writing about Lords and Ladies and setting the play in a residence on Carlton House Terrace (which runs right past the site of the St. James’s Theater) he was playing to the sentiments of the wealthy audience members—holding up a theatrical mirror to them. In Wilde’s play, the Windermere, in fact, had spent the previous night at a ball at the Foreign Office, as Lady Windermere mentions in the opening discussion with Lord Darlington. The Foreign Office is located just down the street from the setting of the play, and was the place where the powerful met to plan out the running of the empire.

Wilde thus calibrates his play to appeal to low and high. Henry James, who was at the first night, wrote in his letter that “Oscar’s play . . . strikes me as a mixture that will run . . . though infantine to my sense, both in subject and form” (*Letters* 3.372). (Knowing that James

would soon try his hand at West End drama, also writing for Alexander, one can sense just how jealous James was here.) Similarly, in his review of Wilde's later play, *A Woman of No Importance*, William Archer writes of Wilde's "pyrotechnic wit," which he realizes is something that strongly appeals to all members of the audience. Archer, like James, also sees this wit as a weakness. He calls it:

one of the defects of his qualities, and a defect, I am sure, that he will one day conquer, when he begins to take himself seriously as a dramatic artist. . . . [I]n his effort to be human—I would say 'to be popular,' did I not fear some subtle and terrible vengeance on the part of the outraged author—Mr. Wilde has become more than a little conventional. (*Theatrical World* 1893. 106, 108)

Thankfully, his wit was one defect that Wilde never conquered. The way Archer envisaged the theater, he could not conceive of an art that made its rapport with the mass audience so central. The only way he could grasp such art was as "conventional." Archer saw such work as too "feminine," or concerned with superficial things. In 1892, Archer was calling for plays of "intellectual virility," another sign that he had a conception of art much different from Wilde's (CL 532 n.2).

The more popular critics were also struck by how conventional Wilde's play was. For example, the critic at the *Spectator* writes that "we are grateful to Mr. Wilde for a straightforward comedy which professes no purpose but comedy's best and truest—to entertain" (69.767). The reviewer felt the play had no pretensions to being "literary," but was "a workmanlike play as well as a good comedy." Similarly, the leading women's magazine of the time, *The Queen*, praised the play as a pleasant surprise, a surprise because the reviewer had expected something more jarring: "he has achieved his surprise by producing a play that is conventional to the point of triteness, and that has absolutely nothing either of ideas, situation, construction, or dialogue to differentiate it from the scores of other comedies of society" (91.48). This critic seems to have expected something more like *A Doll's House*. Meanwhile, the *Westminster Review* writes that the play is really just another watered-down translation of Vitorien Sardou's *Nos Intimes*. (It was common practice to translate French plays, change them slightly, and produce them as original work in London or New York.) The writer says that another version of *Nos Intimes*, called *Peril*, is much better than Wilde's in that it has "that strength and unity which Mr. Wilde's drama lacks" (137.718).

*Lady Windermere's Fan* was, in fact, a play that audiences kept coming to. As mentioned early on, it opened at the St. James's Theater on February 20, 1892 and ran for 197 performances. It had a winter-spring run, followed by a tour of provincial theaters over the summer, and an additional fall run at the St. James's again—for the time, a typical successful play's run. Given the above reviews, it is not surprising that many literary critics have viewed *Lady Windermere's Fan* as being little more than a fashionable and conventional play.

### ART AS NEEDING AN IMMEDIATE RELATION TO THE MASS AUDIENCE

We have seen that *Lady Windermere* was a play thoroughly built into the theatrical conventions and the affiliated theatrical industries of the time. We turn now to the third major characteristic of Wilde's popular theatrical modernism: the question of why Wilde needed an immediate relation to the mass theater audience. We see the answer to this question in certain aspects of his aesthetics: first, by his theorizing beauty itself as being tied to mass audience-approval; second, by his including even financial approval and commercial success as an element of art; and third by his theorizing the artist as standing in "symbolic" relation to his or her culture.

The first aspect of Wilde's conception of art has to do with the fact that he defines beauty itself in terms of its approval by the mass audience. Wilde was not talking about beauty in the abstract. He was talking about beauty, and beautiful people, as culture-shapers, as being at the heart of what culture is. That is why he is interested exclusively in beauty and art insofar as they address a whole culture, a mass audience. H.A. Jones, another major playwright of the time, has a similar conception in his lecture "On Being Rightly Amused at the Theatre." That is, he is no high theorist of aesthetics. But he conceives of playwriting as an art that of its very nature addresses a mass audience:

The test of being amused is the primary test to apply to a play of any kind. . . . We must *be* amused before we can ask ourselves whether we are *rightly* amused. . . . The *first* end of a play is to amuse: the *chief* end of a play is to amuse rightly. (196)

At the time, there was much discussion of "amusement," which many spoke out against as being a purely Philistine concern. Amusements were the products of the entertainment industries, commercial enterprises as

opposed to artistic ones. Amusement had no authority governing it to ensure its propriety, or to ensure that practitioners did not manipulate their audiences. Jones explicitly defends those industries. Wilde tends not to explicitly defend them, preferring rather to pose, in his writing, as an elitist. It is more in his *practice* that he shows his kinship with Jones.

Jones goes on to explain that “We playwrights are in your hands. You are our masters; we obey your wishes” (225). He acknowledges his dependence on the mass audience, something Wilde rarely does explicitly. For example, in *Soul of Man*, he celebrates the value of cultivating a radical Individualism, regardless of any audience concerns. At the same time, he also states that good artwork *can* be done for the popular stage (and therefore with a direct concern with the audience):

the theater-going public like the obvious, it is true, but they do not like the tedious; and burlesque and farcical comedy, the two most popular forms, are distinct forms of art. Delightful work may be produced under burlesque and farcical conditions, and in work of this kind the artist of England is allowed very great freedom. (*Soul of Man* AC 272)

This statement jumps out at one as a momentary instance in the essay of praise for the Philistines. Wilde points out that their characteristic virtue is that they “do not like the tedious.” Their tastes, it seems, *are* important to Wilde. He surprisingly brings into conjunction the phrase “the most popular forms” with the word “art.” Similarly, he writes in “Critic as Artist” that artists have a sort of “mission” to mass culture, namely, to “lure people to contemplate” things of beauty (396). He adds there that “Art does not address herself to the specialist. Her claim is that she is universal” (398). Art is concerned with the development of a tradition, the shaping of a culture.

The second aspect of this conception of art—one that follows directly from the first—is the need for financial successes. Money is to be in large part the measure, not for the sake of the money but in order to be truly and authentically culture-shaping. When Ibsen’s plays were put on in London, the producers had no illusions about financial success. The first run of *A Doll’s House* in London, in June 1889, was at the Novelty Theater, not near the theater district. Its producers were pleased with its three-week run. Henry James’ theatrical debacle, *Guy Domville*, had as long a run. Critics like John Carey argue convincingly that modernist writers (and producers) were precisely interested in financial failure and in failure with mass audiences. Carey writes that “modernist literature and



art can be seen as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public created by late Nineteenth Century educational reforms” (1). The works of Ibsen were not going to succeed with mass culture, particularly not in the commercial London theater. And that suited the Independent Theater people just fine.

Such was not the type of event, however, that would get Wilde excited. We have seen his lack of enthusiasm for going to see *Hedda Gabler*. In the letter in which he criticizes the play, he suggests instead going to dinner with Lady Elcho and Arthur Balfour. This was the group of people Wilde wanted to spend time with, and to conspicuously consume with. Nor was Ibsen’s work the type of art that interested him. One way to put it is to say that part of the essence of the play for Wilde was immediate box office receipts. He may have been interested in writing a play “for the ages.” But he also wanted a play that would immediately “amuse,” that would impact the mass audience in the way plays are *supposed to* impact audiences.<sup>15</sup> He did not want a play that was separate from the industry and its conditions. I believe that if he had been offered the opportunity to work on the support of a rich patron (as someone like W.B. Yeats was able to do), he would have rejected that support. As Jones said, the audience members “are our masters”—not in the oversimplistic sense by which writers give the people what they want, but in the sense that an artwork has no existence separate from its audience, and a play, particularly a consumer modernist play, has no existence separate from a mass audience who is willing to pay to see it.

Thus, Wilde’s aesthetics also could make use of such popular theatrical elements as sentimentalism. Wilde, famous for his cynicism and decadence, was not above sentimentalism—something that comes out in *Windermere*, particularly its ending. Bernard Shaw in one review notes of a later play that “to complete the oddity of the situation, Mr. Wilde, touching what he himself reverences, is absolutely the most sentimental dramatist of the day” (*Saturday Review* 79.44). In *Windermere*, we witness the touching reunion of mother and daughter, as well as the extremely sentimental parting of the two at the end.

Nor was Wilde using comedy of a “dark” sort, like that of absurdist playwrights—or even of H.A. Jones, according to Bernard Shaw. Shaw writes critically:

It is safer and cheaper to depend on the taste, judgement, instinct for fashion and knowledge of the stage and the public, by which plays

can be constructed out of ready-made materials, and guaranteed to pass an evening safely and smoothly.

Shaw could be referring to Wilde here. And Shaw contrasts such work with that of Jones, who does “real live work” because he is “rousing all sorts of protests and jarring all sorts of prejudices,” something Wilde’s plays tended not to do (*Saturday Review* 79.651). Although Wilde was certainly no sycophant, he absolutely avoided shrillness or didacticism—the kind that would “jar.” That is, he did make an art out of addressing and even provoking society’s sensibilities. But he did not do so in a heavy, accusatory tone. The tone of his plays (and in most of his work) is light and genuinely mirthful. My point is that, contrary to what many of today’s critics think, Wilde did not intend to outrage the public, certainly not in the way someone like Alfred Jarry was in France with his 1895 play *Ubu Roi*, or even a novelist like Thomas Hardy, whose *Jude the Obscure* in the same time period was perceived by the public as a deliberate affront to themselves.<sup>16</sup>

The third aspect of this aesthetics involved Wilde’s statement that he himself “stood in symbolic relation to the art and culture of my age,” something he writes in *De Profundis* (CL 729). I read this statement as another side of this consumer modernist art, this art that has a direct relationship to a mass audience. In this passage, Wilde compares himself to Lord Byron, saying that Byron “was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope” (CL 729). We speak today in common parlance of a sex symbol, like a Jennifer Lopez or a George Clooney, who stands in a certain relationship towards the mass audience. It is not exactly the same, but men like Byron and Wilde also stand in symbolic relation in that their literature provides the categories and terms of discussion along which people think. Or, we can connect up Wilde’s statement with Baudelaire’s notion that art and fashion are *sublime distortions* of the reality which underlies them. Thus, Wilde as artist-celebrity was himself such a sublime distortion of 1890s Britain and of art in late-Victorian commercial culture. Indeed, one characteristic of the symbol fits quite well with Wilde’s consumer modernism: a symbol is inherently related to the audience.

In simple terms, a symbol is an outward sign that all can recognize as representing something else, a striking sign that may carry a certain undefineable area. In that passage of *De Profundis*, Wilde adds, in characteristic variety, but with some truth, “I awoke the imagination of my century so that

it created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram" (CL 729). Wilde as aesthetic symbol was a universally recognizable figure, an icon or image operating on a level beyond words, standing in for various things at various times. Earlier he had been the academic poet, then the Aesthete, then the high critic. In 1892, and by means of his play writing career, he was fashioning himself as the Consumer Modernist.

It is worth noting that Wilde describes one of his later characters in similar terms, as one who "stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it," namely Lord Goring in *Ideal Husband* (1895). Goring is a man Wilde also describes as "the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought," a title that Wilde perhaps wished to earn himself (212). He strove to be a philosopher of fashion. He failed to communicate such a message to many of his audiences—witness Louÿs, and witness the various critics, both popular and progressive, who struggle to define what Wilde is up to. I seek to more fully retrieve that message in this book.

One key moment that illustrates in part this *symbolic standing* is the evening of February 20, 1892. Here he directly addressed the mass audience in the speech he made after the opening night performance of *Lady Windermere*. The speech reached not only his immediate audience, but it was covered amply by the press, and was a real media event for most of London. The critic Clement Scott was rather infuriated by Wilde that night, partly by the speech, partly by the fact that a playwright was, in a sense, pre-empting critics like Scott. He describes the fact that Wilde "addressed from the stage a public audience, mostly composed of ladies, pressing between his daintily gloved fingers a still-burning and half-smoked cigarette" (*Daily Telegraph* 22 Feb. 1892). Scott is reacting to Wilde's informality in a setting that should be serious, and to his lack of respect for the audience.

Scott also, suggests Joel Kaplan, is reacting against "a new and . . . distressing shift in the relationship between playwrights and critics." Scott was defending "the prerogatives of his own craft" ("A Puppet's Power" 60). He did not want Wilde to "play with everything," particularly not with audiences. That was Scott's job. Nor did he want Wilde to stand in a symbolic relation to the audience. Scott was objecting to playwrights like Wilde and H.A. Jones, the latter having also recently made a similar first-night speech. Playwrights were not to be such celebrities. It was one thing that playwrights' *works* addressed a mass audience. It was another for playwrights themselves to address them. By addressing the audience, they would shape, and potentially manipulate, their relationship to the audience. To do so would potentially result in them manipulating not just audiences, but the theaters, the theater industry, and even the

theater critics. Scott was right to be upset in that Wilde was in fact interested in these things. Wilde's ambition was to shape culture.

There are varying accounts as to just what he said—again, something that Wilde would be pleased with—but we can get a fairly good sense of what happened. According to Hesketh Pearson, as reliable a source as we have, Wilde said the following:

Ladies and Gentlemen: I have enjoyed this evening *immensely*. The actors have given us a charming rendering of a *delightful* play, and your appreciation has been *most* intelligent. I congratulate you on the *great* success of your performance, which persuades me that you think *almost* as highly of the play as I do myself. (199)<sup>17</sup>

The speech reads much like one of Wilde's journalistic pieces. He is talking to a mass audience quite literally, a clear majority of whom are women, and an audience made up of members of most of the social classes. He is also operating on two levels, one that is primarily one of "amusement" and one that reflects his aesthetics of surface. Henry James, who was present, wrote to his brother of the speech that:

It was what he was there for and I can't conceive the density of those who seriously reprobate it. . . . Everything Oscar does is a deliberate trap for the literalist, and to see the literalist walk straight up to it, look straight at it and step straight into it, makes one freshly avert a discouraged gaze from this unspeakable animal. (*Letters* 4.372)

Wilde makes clear that the ideas contained in his speech reflected an important part of his thinking about the theater. He develops these ideas further, for example, in an interview for the *Sketch* in 1895:

It is the public, and not the play, that I desire to make a success. . . . The public makes a success when it realizes that a play is a work of art. On the three first-nights I have had in London the public has been most successful, and had the dimensions of the stage admitted of it, I would have called them before the curtain. (*The Sketch* 1895.495)<sup>18</sup>

Wilde thus extends the idea that art and beauty have a direct relationship to the mass audience. Specifically, Wilde presents the idea of art as a dialogue between an artist and a set of critics, who in turn collectively are the next "artist" in an ongoing train of dialogues—hence his reference to the audience

members' performance. Each statement, whether in art or criticism, is a call for a response, and subsequent responses also call for a response, and so forth. Wilde explains that "The artist is always the munificent patron of the public. I am very fond of the public, and personally, I always patronize the public very much" (*Sketch* interview 495). Wilde is joking, particularly since he knows that the public is patronizing *him*, insofar as they are paying him. But he also expresses a notion of how playwrights, and plays, and audiences, all relate to one another. We will see a fuller expression of this notion of how the audience performs in the final chapter.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* represents how Wilde builds his art out of its connection with the industries of consumer culture that surround art, how he constructs art that is consumer culture; it also represents the power of those industries in shaping art production in late Victorian Britain. So far we have looked at the way Wilde's dramatic art needed an immersion in commercial industries. We have seen how Wilde's play participates in the fashion industry, the star industry, and the design industry, among others. Also, Wilde's play builds directly onto the "conventional" theatrical genres of the time, so much so that Wilde's play was criticized for being too conventional, particularly in relation to 1890s progressive drama. And we have seen that his art brings the artist into a direct rapport with his mass audience, that he stands in a symbolic relationship towards them. What remains is to examine how *Lady Windermere's Fan* also manifests an aesthetics that thematizes consumer image and ritual and their functions as the fundamental shapers of culture.

## Chapter Six

# Mrs. Erlynne as Modernist: The Artist of Consumer Image and Ritual

In the last chapter, I started with the problem that *Lady Windermere* is a play that is almost indistinguishable from the standard society comedies of the time. But I have yet to address how Wilde manages to fuse modernist aesthetics with fashionable melodrama. I argue two points: first, the woman of fashion, Mrs. Erlynne, is to be *a modernist artist* and to create herself by means of consumer culture; and second, she is to be *an inspirer for others' art*, her art inspiring the audience to themselves become critic-artists. As icon of modernist art, she is thus to shape the culture. The first point focuses on persons as individuals, as charismatic shapers of culture. The second point, the more controversial, focuses on persons as members of the herd, as people who are acting within a choreographed group of bodies. They are creating themselves even as they are de-centering the autonomous subject within themselves, surrendering to their cultural ambience. With regard to both points, I argue that, for Wilde, fashion images and social ritual are primary media for art, and each person, both as individual and as group-member, is his or her own critic-artist.

The woman of fashion is, in fact, a character much more central to Wilde's project than is, for example, Dorian Gray. Dorian did attempt a life centered on surface and image, but he ended up destroying himself and others. As Wilde himself noted, having such an obvious moral in the novel was a defect; in fact, it "is the only error in the book" (To the Editor of the *St. James Gazette*, qtd in AC 241). Superficiality as a philosophy of life failed. With Mrs. Erlynne, however, surface succeeds. She does not end up a chastened or broken figure. She survives, and she thrives. Wilde reveals how invested he is in the character in a letter to George Alexander. He states that the climax of the play, when Mrs. Erlynne sacrifices herself for her daughter, represents "the sudden explanation of what the audience desires to know, followed immediately by the revelation of a *character as yet untouched by*

*literature*” (emphasis mine CL 516). Wilde was never one to understate his own achievements.

But how is Wilde able to make such a claim about a character that made no significant impression on the majority of his contemporary critics? We saw previously that most of them, both those praising and those blaming, considered the play and its characters to be virtually indistinguishable from standard popular theater. I suggest that Wilde is right about the fact that the creation of Mrs. Erlynne is a singular moment in the history of British theater and literature. In her, Wilde presents a figure who lives the aesthetics of fashion, who is practically *all image*, and who is high priestess of consumer ritual.

### PART I—MRS. ERLYNNE CREATES HERSELF

In the first half of this chapter, in which I look at Mrs. Erlynne as artist, I argue that the *mondaine* creates herself by fashioning a public image and identity, all by means of consumer image and ritual. I then argue that she embodies the Baudelarian sublime distortion, a highly stylized image which is calculated to shine. To shine is her essential characteristic. Finally, I argue that her very identity is created out of this economy of images, that Wilde conceives of a spectrum of performance which each person moves along throughout life, thus conceiving of life itself in terms of performance, image, and ritual.

Mrs. Erlynne, the one “as yet untouched in literature,” can confidently launch forth on the tumultuous sea of public images and masks. The point is not to critique the ritual, but to master it, which in a certain sense allows one to critique it. But above all, mastering ritual means to luxuriate in it. We observe Mrs. Erlynne’s self-creation, culminating in one of the most elaborate of social rituals, the Society ball. It is the last ball of the Season (the Season itself being one big ritual). In a very staged manner, people dress for their proper roles at this ball, and enter the scene announced by the butler. Mrs. Erlynne in the stage directions is described as being “very beautifully dressed and very dignified” (35). A ceremonial greeting by the hostess follows, repeated with each new guest. Afterwards they all form little speaking parties, or go off to perform a literal dance in the ballroom. Men, young and old, place their names on the dance-cards of ladies (the cards of young women being carefully monitored by chaperones).

In this setting, Mrs. Erlynne performs admirably; she knows her audiences and what she needs to do to impress them. And her very presence in the home of such a known Puritan as Lady Windermere—she calls herself such in the play—is the linchpin in establishing Mrs. Erlynne’s respectability. Thus, Mrs. Erlynne stands close by Lord Windermere, making sure to dance first

with him. By the end of the evening, a certain lady has struck up a friendship with her, and tells Lady Windermere that Erlynne “is coming to lunch on Thursday, won’t you come too? I expect the Bishop and dear Lady Merton” (46). Mrs. Erlynne has been completely successful in her performance.

Both the play and the character are made up of a carefully-crafted, though never completely-mastered, self-presentation. Wilde felt that, in doing so, he was not imperiling his work but rather enriching it. Instead of trying to carefully control audience-response to the images, he in a sense *surrendered* to the world of modern public images. (We see many failed attempts to control images in the works of writers—Gissing, Hardy and others—who were violently opposed to the proliferation of consumer culture.) The audience’s interpretation of image is something that by definition cannot be ruled or controlled. This reality, especially when it referred to a mass audience, made most artists cringe.

One might object that my version of Wilde’s work reduces the consumer-artist to the plaything of advertisers, a passive, unthinking, impulsive buyer who cannot resist the brightly colored wares placed within his or her view. The answer to this objection is: Yes and no. Yes, these are consumers who are susceptible to sensory stimulation and who choose not to hold themselves to a rational calculation of their objective needs. But theirs is not a simple surrender. These are also consumers who, because they are themselves adept at consumer culture, have a certain autonomy and authority in this realm, and who harness the image-power that they are immersed in. Let me emphasize again that Wilde is not primarily interested in critique. He prefers an art that does not directly moralize, that does not criticize, particularly not criticize those who are seeking some pleasure through consuming. The production of culture was a realm into which Wilde chose not to exercise moral judgment. As we have seen, Wilde wrote that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.”<sup>1</sup>

That is not to say that Wilde’s work does not train the audience to think critically, to recognize rationalizations of injustice or of the arbitrary exercise of power. Wilde’s art, and the art of his *mondaines*, serves to educate audience members and enable them to see and think in terms of the workings of advertisers, influence-peddlers, and image creators. But this education does not primarily enable people to critique advertisers and sales-people, as if they were somehow able to get outside of that world. Rather, it enables them to thrive in that world, to *be* advertisers and sales-people. If you can’t beat ‘em—and he did not want to beat ‘em—then join ‘em.

Another way of describing the *mondaine*’s self-creation is to say that she consciously makes use of her own masks. Wilde develops this theme in



“The Decay of Lying,” where he writes that, in the theater, he is interested in “the mask that each one of [the actors] wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask” (AC 296). I am reading “mask” to refer to the powerful public image, the star-power and the glamour surrounding him or her, the star-power as that Baudelairian *sublime distortion*. Wilde also wrote in “Decay,” “No great artist sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist” (AC 315). Applying this idea to self-creation, when Wilde and his characters are artists of themselves, they present images that are not “as they really are.” Characters like Mrs. Erlynne are particularly focused on presenting images that startle (and perhaps deceive), and on playing their own images off those of others and off her surroundings. Therefore does she need that consumer culture environment.

In his second society comedy, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Wilde presents the dandy fashions of Lord Illingworth and the *mondaine* fashions of Mrs. Allonby, as well as the contrasting, understated, Pre-Raphaelite fashion of Mrs. Arbuthnot. And in *An Ideal Husband*, it is Mrs. Cheveley, Mabel Chiltern, and Lord Goring who are the ones most conscious of their self-fashioning. In that play, when Wilde describes another character, Phipps, “the Ideal Butler,” he says “The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner,” illustrating the “dominance of form” (212). And virtually all the characters in his last society comedy, *Earnest*, are extremely focused on their public image.<sup>2</sup>

Because she has “surrendered” herself to consumer culture, Mrs. Erlynne has a measure of mastery over her images, as much as anyone can have in that world. The mother of a 21-year-old, she herself has never admitted being older than 30—a testament to the power of cosmetics. What we do know through passing statements in the play is that she was a middle-class woman who had married and had a child 21 years ago, and that she had soon run away with her lover. She is returning to London under a never-explained name, “Mrs. Erlynne,” a name that—suggesting as it does widowhood—gives her a great deal of freedom of movement. At one point, when one of her admirers is asked who this mysterious beauty is, he replies that she “looks like an *édition de luxe* of a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market” (38). She is a book to be judged by her cover, a cover whose design was constructed with an eye to its intended market. In several places, Wilde tends to use these references to the book publishing market. And he knows that certain goods can be presented in a way that makes them especially attractive—like an expensive edition of a “wicked” work, something like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example.

Mrs. Erlynne playfully celebrates superficiality, at one point praising her future husband's good qualities: "Fortunately [they are] all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be" (47). And she knows the power of surrounding oneself with the right milieu, telling Lord Windermere: "Even business should have a picturesque background. . . . With a proper background women can do anything" (47). Here she seems to make reference to one of the painter J.M. Whistler's ideas on color. Wilde got many of his ideas on image-making from Whistler, both in terms of a painted image, and in terms of public image. Also, it is worth noting that Wilde, far from giving us a play subversive of bourgeois culture, chooses a superficial, bourgeois aspirant as his heroine.<sup>3</sup> Such was not something many late-Victorian writers were likely to do. Perhaps Wilde was right that she was a character as yet untouched in literature.

It is essential to remind ourselves of Wilde's close association with Society, with that most visible and ever-performing group of elites.<sup>4</sup> They were the ones most invested in social rituals and forms. This fact is important because his play is so bound up with this reality—it could not be written in the same way about working-class, or even middle-class, folk. In fact, it was Wilde's connection with Society that motivated George Alexander to pursue him as a playwright in the first place. Alexander wrote to Clement Scott that he commissioned Wilde's play in order "to draw a class of people to the St. James's with whom I am not at present in touch" (quoted in Kaplan 62).

## **RITUAL AND THE SOCIETY BALL**

Wilde, I argue, makes social ritual and conventional forms important material for his and for his characters' art. He does so by theorizing rituals not as empty, limiting constraints, but as necessary human experiences, an enabling set of templates and languages by means of which people construct their identities and experience community. In the distant past, ritual was also an ordinary person's usual connection to art; it generally was a way of linking art and beauty with ordinary life. Such was what Wilde wished to accomplish in a modern version of ritual. Many other Victorians, like Morris, Marx, and the American architect Louis Sullivan, shared that general goal. Also, rituals have been spectacles in which excellent cultural products are displayed. Whether it is at a religious sacrifice in ancient Rome, or at an aristocratic parade in modern London, spectators and participants witness magnificent stages on which gorgeously dressed actors use expertly-crafted accoutrements—censers, swords, flags, and so forth. In Christian liturgy, particularly in Anglican

and Catholic forms, artists have created paintings, vestments, candelabra, and other items that are used both by clergy and ordinary people.

It is necessary to pause for a moment to consider how rituals actually work. People express their emotions and reveal their personalities not by simply emoting. They perform emotions and personalities through institutions, those institutions having pre-conceived forms and genres. Even the Romantic poet William Wordsworth does not simply “express” his emotions on the page—thank God!—but rather he controls and limits the emotions by the rhyme and meter (and the traditions linked to them), and even by the way he builds on the subject matter of previous poets, all this in spite of Wordsworth’s own efforts at a rupture with tradition.

For Wilde, form does not follow function. Forms, like masks, are both the channels for and the generators of emotion and personality, of feeling and thought, and therefore of identity. In “Critic as Artist,” Wilde’s character Gilbert says the following:

It is not merely in art that the body is the soul. In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things. The rhythmic harmonious gestures of dancing convey, Plato tells us, both rhythm and harmony into the mind. Forms are the food of faith, cried Newman [Catholic Cardinal and leader in the Oxford movement] in one of those great moments of sincerity that made us admire and know the man. (399)

Newman talked of how important it was to perform rituals—things like bowing, chanting, and marching in Eucharistic processions—as a means of growing in faith, and thus of shaping one’s religious identity. Wilde recognizes the affinity between Newman’s thinking on ritual and his own thinking on participation in the theater and in consumer culture.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to consuming material goods, consumers see the forms which they need to move within. They take those forms and join with the group of persons who share it. At the same time, they are also differentiating themselves. The leaders of consumer culture are the men and women of fashion—first of all, *women* because they were the ones most associated with consumer culture.<sup>6</sup> They, as critics and as artworks, shape those around them, almost without wanting to. Thus, in “Critic as Artist,” Wilde writes that

the influence of the critic will be the mere fact of his own existence. He will represent the flawless type. In him the culture of the century will see itself realized. You must not ask of him to have any aim other than the perfecting of himself. (399)

The *mondaine*, as critic-artist, does not preach or exhort in a political manner. She is pure image, an icon that encapsulates a culture, something I discuss further in the second part of this chapter.

## MELODRAMA AS A FITTING GENRE

Because of his obsession with ritual, it was natural for Wilde to be drawn toward melodrama. *Lady Windermere* lies firmly in the melodrama tradition—something his contemporary critics comment on amply. He chooses melodrama precisely because it is a kind of *purser form* of social ritual, with its language of highly stylized gestures. It is significant that one literary critic, Michael Booth, even accuses Wilde of having “disdained new subject matter entirely, and [having] employed ancient, creaking, melodramatic machinery in his three dramas,” i.e., the Society comedies excluding *Earnest* (20). And Booth is right. Wilde employed that machinery for all it was worth, in ways that it had been employed many times over. His Society Comedies in general have all the usual elements: big revelations, helpless orphan heroines, adventuress women with a past, and unscrupulous, cynical villains. The plays include asides to the audience, plainly spelled-out morals, and heightened rapid action accompanied by dramatic music.

In the last chapter, we contrasted the criticism of progressive critic William Archer with that of the conventional critics. Now, it is true that Archer had some qualified praise for *Lady Windermere*. But the overall thrust of Archer’s criticism was against the tradition of sentimental melodrama. In his piece, “The People’s Drama,” Archer distinguishes between popular critic Clement Scott’s “people” and “we *other* people,” the people who “prefer plays of observation and thought to plays of convention and sentiment” (*World 1893* 109). And in response to Wilde’s later play, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Archer objects specifically to the play’s melodramatic elements, for example in the big revelation scene.

In the scene, one character is prevented from killing a second person when he is told, “He is your father!” Archer complains “there is a total lack of irony, or, in other words, of common-sense, in this portion of the play” (109.). He could have complained similarly about *Lady Windermere’s* melodramatic elements. For example, when Lord Darlington is confronted with Lady Windermere’s fan being found in his home, he exclaims, aside, “She is here after all!” a statement which none of the other characters hears. Also, in a review he writes on the status of stage scenery, Wilde characteristically elevates the artistic representation above the reality. “A painted door is more like a real door than a real door is itself, for the

proper conditions of light and shade can be given to it" (CW IX:9). In the stylized world of theater, a false door or stylized gesture is more real than the real thing. The biographer of George Alexander, for example, was surprised to find out how invested Wilde was in these melodrama elements. He notes that "it was the manager," not Wilde, "who was the more anxious of the two to discard" the conventions of melodrama (Mason 33).

Wilde deploys modernist aesthetics not so as to negate the melodrama or the sentiment. Rather he uses them in a way that gives license to actually heighten the melodrama and sentiment. As Terry Eagleton has put it, Wilde's type of irony "raises the ambivalence of irony to a higher level, preserving something of its sceptical stance towards social reality but combining it with positive belief." He adds that "irony is sublated to humour and comedy," arguing that to be ironic does not entail a thoroughgoing critique, but in fact may include a great deal of affirmation of what is being made ironic (176). In *Lady Windermere*, the modernism makes necessary the melodrama.

Wilde preferred stylization not only in plot, but also in acting. He certainly disliked that 1890s theater producers and actors were more and more embracing naturalism and realism. The continental drama was moving in that direction, with the works of writers like Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, and Chekhov. And in spite of an enduring melodrama tradition, the British playwrights, particularly the more literary-minded, were turning towards realism. Wilde decries such realism in "Decay," where he complains that in British theater the characters "talk on the stage exactly as they would off it . . . , they present the gait, manner, costume and accent of real people" (303). (One notices that while someone like Bernard Shaw preferred the understated, "realistic" acting of an actress like Leonora Duse, Wilde preferred Sarah Bernhardt, a master of stylization. She was going to perform, for example, in the extremely stylized *Salomé*.)

Later, Clement Scott would complain, just as Wilde did, of excessive theatrical "realism." Scott attacks "the modern university shamefacedness and indifference to enthusiasm. . . . The stage of the last ten or a dozen years [he writes in 1899] has been afraid to act for very shame" (Scott 326). In "Decay" Wilde had written that artistic creation was forged of "the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation [i.e., its stylization] . . . and our own [Western] imitative spirit" (303). While Wilde works the dialectic between the two extremes, between a stripped-down "university" mode and a stylized, melodramatic mode, he undoubtedly leans towards the stylized.

### SUBLIME DISTORTION AND “THE IRRATIONAL”

In creating such figures, Wilde was keenly aware of how they reflected some of the salient anxieties present in British culture, anxieties related to the place of public women and to the place of art in a commercial world. I return to a statement from a critic I quoted in my Introduction:

In aestheticism, we can see the process whereby the private, lovely woman who signifies aesthetic experience shades gradually and imperceptibly into the public, tawdry woman who signifies the vulgarity of mass-cultural and commodity experience. (Psomiades 13)

Wilde alights precisely upon this area of British culture, a kind of switching station for public image, particularly for Society women. A figure like Erlynne dwells in a twilight area full of possibilities. On one hand, this is an area which is dangerous—a woman can become a “fallen woman” and be forced to bear that label. That was the subject of writers like Ibsen and Pinero. But, on the other hand, it is an area of more complex possibilities, even of power, and this is the side Wilde develops in Mrs. Erlynne.

Also, unlike other writers, Wilde was not threatened by actors’ bodies, if I can put it that way. Other artists did not want their plays to *rely* on the star-power of the actors, nor to rely on their beauty, their public-image, or their gorgeous clothing. Wendy Steiner, for example, has chronicled how modernists in various arts turned away from the beautiful female as the model for their art (Cf. Wendy Steiner’s *Venus in Exile* (2002)). Modernists more and more turned towards models and subjects that were either purposely ugly or bereft of “charm,” of any superficially-satisfying or seductive *ornament*. Now, Wilde probably did not have the absolute authority to choose who would play Mrs. Erlynne, something that was in the hands of the producer.

But as he created the character, he was certainly aware that the actress Marion Terry was very often the leading lady in George Alexander’s productions at the St. James’s. And he was aware of the figure she cut in the theater and society, being the sister of the more famous Ellen Terry. Marion was known for her beauty and for her artistic taste in clothing. One *Lady’s World* reviewer wrote in 1887, “Miss Terry’s gowns are, as usual, wonderfully artistic; their lovely colours and the exquisite draping of the soft folds, will raise much envy in the minds of all those lady theatre-goers who aspire to be well-dressed” (I.172). Marion Terry thus represented a kind of educational vehicle for female aesthetes, serving, in their eyes, as a beneficial influence on the

tastes of upper- and middle-class audience members. It was fitting that her character Mrs. Erlynne embraces her role as public image, even if that meant in part serving as something to please male eyes.<sup>7</sup>

Wilde sheds light on the *mondaine*-as-artist when, in the later play, *An Ideal Husband*, he includes a telling dialogue. There, Sir Robert Chiltern questions Mrs. Cheveley (a character much like Mrs. Erlynne, even in her returning to London under a mysterious name) about her views on men and women. Cheveley holds that men represent the rational side of life, and then Chiltern asks her if women represent the irrational. She replies, “Well-dressed women do” (200). Wilde seems to have theorized the well-dressed woman as representing this more Dionysian side (to use Nietzsche’s idiom) of culture.

It is worth walking slowly through the binaries that Wilde proposes for us in this passage. Men represent the rational. I believe Wilde meant to imply that, in consumer culture terms, “the rational” means an approach that follows the traditional Western, masculinist aesthetics. This approach involves no emotional response to advertising, theater, or fashion images. A rational response involves a flat-footed, blank stare, a disinterested assessment of information, that is, a non-response. The irrational response, then, would involve a sense-based, bodily response, a person being aroused in various senses at once—sight, hearing, touch, and so forth. This is an approach that departs from the dominant Western aesthetics. Therefore, Wilde is interested not in woman-as-such, the *Ding an sich*, but in “well-dressed women,” the thing as ornament, as scintillating creator of interest.

The rational response is also one of control, of not letting one’s sensual appetites affect one’s cognition of some proffered object. But Wilde is interested in that type of cognition which involves both mind and body. In fact, Wilde’s point is that cognition always involves both mind and body. As he says in “Decay,” “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us” (AC 312). He even, partly jokingly, implies that the gastronomic arts have their influence over our way of seeing. In “Critic,” the character Gilbert admits that dinner might have an affect on his views of criticism. That is, when his interlocutor asks if he is changing his mind about what the nature of criticism is, Gilbert responds, “I am not quite sure. Perhaps I may admit it after supper. There is a subtle influence in supper” (AC 371). As often happens with Wilde, what appears to be a throw-away line is in fact a serious statement of aesthetics. Such is the epistemology of the dining room.

Note that Wilde writes of “the Arts that have influenced us.” A woman like Mrs. Erlynne has been influenced by fine art. This influence took place

as she strolled the art galleries of London with their portraits of famous people—women of fashion like Mrs. Siddons and the Duchess of Devonshire who appear in eighteenth-century paintings by Gainsborough and Reynolds. She has perhaps attended one of the “History of Fashion” exhibits at the South Kensington Museum. But Mrs. Erlynne has also been influenced by the fashion displays she has witnessed at the department stores. Perhaps she has purchased some Japanese style clothing or some Ostrich feather fans at Liberty’s. Wilde apparently saw all these types of influence as parallel, and to an extent overlapping. Like Gilbert, Mrs. Erlynne would say that “there is a subtle influence in shopping,” or “in reading fashion magazines,” or “in attending a first night of a play.”

I wish to emphasize that this irrational aspect is not primarily a commentary on women—something that could be read as misogynistic—but rather is about Wilde’s conception of aesthetics and epistemology. He uses woman, primarily the woman of fashion, as the icon of art, a fact discussed at length in [Chapter 4](#). There I argued that the elements of consumer modernism were the seductiveness of surface, the desire to shine, and a conception of style as tied to worldview and culture. What is important in relation to Mrs. Erlynne is the notion that her investment in public images is something integral to her power to shape culture.

Wilde explores how art works influence our very conceptions of who we are, our identities. We have seen that he wrote in “Decay” about “a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two imaginative painters,” a style of womanly beauty, expressed both in the woman’s clothing and in her very physical features. It has been so effective at shaping our perceptions that we actually *see* that style of woman out in the real world. That artwork “has so influenced Life that whenever one goes to a private view or to an artistic salon one sees, here the mystic eyes of Rossetti’s dream, the long ivory throat, the strange, square-cut jaw, the loosened shadowy hair” (AC 307). Wilde means not that women have changed their appearance by having cosmetic surgery. He means that those women have always had that underlying facial structure, but having witnessed that structure celebrated in a beautiful painting, they have been liberated to express their own beauty, they have recognized aesthetic possibilities where previously they had seen none. Other women who lack that throat and that jaw will of course not physically look like that. But they may in fact seek to approximate that look by the way they carry themselves and the way they adorn their face and neck with makeup and styles of collars. Moreover, many people will have been influenced by those paintings and will see beauty in places that perhaps did not seem beautiful to them before—these are the



people Wilde is talking about when he says “one sees. . .” It is a new culture, a new worldview.

## IDENTITY AS A SPECTRUM OF PERFORMANCE

As we saw in [Chapter 4](#), a key distinction here is between critiquing surfaces as deceptive and using surfaces as tools for creating reality. To critique is to expose, to show that a surface is false, thus implying that one has access to a truer reality, some underlying substratum. To critique also means to assign blame on one’s opponent, to accuse them of sinister intent. To use surfaces, to be self-conscious in one’s use of masks, on the other hand, is to do none of that. Since the surface is all there is, all the way down, the artist of surfaces invests in no “truer” reality. Nor does the artist assign sinister intent on those who deploy surfaces. Commercial advertisers are no more evil than are socialist activists or social workers. Wilde is writing about the aesthetics of human experience itself, whether for beneficial or harmful ends, as being superficial, as an act of lying.

Therefore I propose that we think in terms of a *spectrum of performance*. We human beings drift in and out of self-consciousness. There are moments when we are extremely self-conscious about the public mask we are deploying—we see ourselves being seen. There are other moments when we have lost ourselves in the moment and act quite spontaneously. Most of the time, we are somewhere in the middle, in part conscious, in part not, about the faces, the fashions, the personality traits that we place before those around us. We can say that any given person will lie somewhere on that spectrum. And, of course, each person maintains a certain tension between the two poles at every moment of life. Someone like Mrs. Erlynne, for example, was usually very self-conscious about the public role she was playing. Someone like Lady Windermere, on the other hand, was usually not self-conscious, and she took things quite literally. Thus, in Act I, she cannot believe that her husband could be duplicitous towards her.

Wilde often writes of this spectrum of performance in reference to Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare’s art deals a lot with the maintenance of just this performance-tension, and a character like Hamlet is a perfect illustration of someone who takes that tension to the breaking point. For example, Wilde refers to Hamlet at the end of *Dorian Gray*. We see Dorian himself trying and failing to get out of a performative mode, to adopt a more simple, straightforward attitude. When asked about the painting of himself, Dorian responds that he did not like it. It was “like the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart” (163). The quotation is from *Hamlet* 4.7.108–9. There

Claudius questions Laertes about whether he loved his father, "Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart?" A corollary to the idea of the performance-spectrum is that someone like Dorian can become so adept at deploying constructed masks that one risks losing the capacity to "live" earnestly. Wilde similarly dramatizes the opposite end of the spectrum: when Sibyl Vane commits to an earnest love for Dorian, she finds that her ability to play-act has died, and she has lost her ability to perform on stage. Then she tragically kills herself not as a powerfully-acted Juliet but in real life. In contrast to both Dorian and Sibyl, Mrs. Erlynne can retain both her skill with surfaces and her experience of more straightforward emotions.

In "Decay of Lying," Wilde describes a character like Erlynne when he writes about a certain woman (one mentioned by the character Vivian, in the dialogue), who was only able to realize her personality by means of various masks and social roles. It is probable that Wilde is here making reference to Lillie Langtry, whom he assisted in her own self-construction. Vivian, the character in the dialogue, mentions that he had met this woman shortly after finishing at Oxford and arriving in London in 1879. Wilde arrived in London and was collaborating with Langtry about that time. Vivian states that this woman "seemed to have no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types" (310). Therefore, she gave herself over to many conventional roles, acting those roles, self-consciously performing them while also *constructing herself*. Mimesis bleeds into imaginative creation. By turns she devoted herself to acting, to horse racing, to mesmerism, to politics, to philanthropy . . . She was a "kind of Proteus." Wilde has Dorian Gray go through a similar set of phases or masks. Significantly, it is precisely by consuming goods and art works that Dorian constructs himself in these various masks.

Rather than imagining a relationship between one's inner self and one's external expression as that of a base to a superstructure or surface, Wilde sees both inner and outer as mutually formative. The external expression is a *medium*, and this surface medium is as much the message as is the inner substance. As discussed earlier in connection with rituals, Wilde writes of expression in a way that links life and art. In "Decay," he explains that "the basis of life—the energy of life as Aristotle would call it—is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained" (311). Art presents the various forms, and one tries them on, even as one is both actively creating and passively discovering who one is. The individual, then, takes "ready-made" forms of life, partly as a means of choosing to say something and partly as a means to discovering what to say. Wilde's approach dispenses with any goal of reaching an authentic self. One's self becomes something inextricable from the external forms

by which one inserts oneself into society and by which one also shapes that society. Wilde's is a conception of identity that works both for charismatic leaders and for members of the herd—though he would perhaps maintain that all of us fall into both categories.

Mrs. Erlynne, like Langtry, knows how to act out her roles. And she also has thoroughly studied the social templates, the ritual forms, within which she is to move and from which she can create herself. To get a clearer sense of the form and image of the late-Victorian London socialite, I turn to an article from the 1887 *Lady's World*, "Society Types: the Londoner." The writer describes women "dressed in 'battle-array,' and in a prominent place in the stalls or private boxes" (I:409). She adds defensively that "the captious may object that she is cynical, *poseuse*, and a trifle feverish in her anxiety to be in the swim. But where do we get perfection in this world?" She then gives a list of events in her daily routine: "shopping in Piccadilly," going to "be photographed in Baker St.," going to "try a dress in Bond St.," and attending "teas." She also makes a point to "be seen riding in the Park," and to be seen at the theater, particularly "at a first night" (I:409). Wilde similarly defends such superficiality. For example, in one *Woman's World* review he defends the fashionable life, criticizing those who "are under the impression that fashionable life is not an edifying subject" (CW IX:439).

Thus, when Wilde constructs Mrs. Erlynne, he does so exactly according to the above "Londoner" template. She takes a house in Curzon St., "such a respectable street, too," as the Duchess of Berwick observes (*Windermere* 18). And Mrs. Erlynne, in addition to having "this charming house in Mayfair, drives her pony in the Park every afternoon." She of course buys the right dresses and dines at the right restaurants, all paid for by Lord Windermere, whom she is, in a sense, blackmailing—she plays on Windermere's fear that she would reveal herself to her daughter, Lady Windermere. Throughout, Erlynne demonstrates a thoroughgoing conspicuous consumption. As with modern election campaigns, one can buy oneself the status of viable candidate. Even if you have gained your position mostly by means of spending money, as long as you can command votes, then you *ipso facto* have authority.

She inserts herself into the set of social rituals, the stylized dances through which people have been taught and compelled to express themselves and relate to others. Again, one common way of thinking about rituals is as evil—as inherently restrictive, violent constraints put on people's otherwise free actions. But even though Wilde writes much in favor of radical "Individualism," he tends to work as much within as against conventions and rituals. Wilde's play moves in a direction different from that of, say, Henrik Ibsen's

*Doll's House*. In Ibsen's play, social rituals must be broken and shed because they are so inherently inhuman and stifling. (I oversimplify for the moment to make a point.) Wilde's play is about something completely different. This is a conception of human existence in which it is only by performing within standard social rituals that one can realize oneself.

Of course, I am leaving out the revolutionary Left which rejected any form of bourgeoisification; but they did not have the numerical dominance in Britain that the aspiring bourgeois had. And many on the Left found themselves more and more having to compromise their ideals. For example, Bernard Shaw seems to have abandoned his interest in the Independent Theatre by the end of the 1890s, preferring to produce more commercially viable material. And by the 1910s, he was writing plays for the major West End theatres; by the thirties he was doing film. As for Wilde, in spite of professing to be a socialist, he also made clear that he had no interest at all in working-class tastes (as we saw in Ch. 4). Wilde, in "Decay of Lying," attacks the social realism of George Eliot's characters "as being like the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus."<sup>8</sup> Such words would make a real socialist like Shaw or William Morris cringe.

## PART II—THE *MONDAINE* AS INSPIRATION FOR THE CONSUMER-AS-ARTIST

In the second part of this chapter, I argue that Wilde sees his *mondaine* not just as an artist but also as an artwork, and thus as one who inspires others to be critic-artists in their own right. He wants women of fashion to move their audiences, to be public images that shape the self-creative behavior of consumers. I have discussed how this surface aesthetics works for persons as charismatic individuals. In this section, I focus on the ways the aesthetics works for persons as members of the audience, the herd of consumers, who are now transformed into consumers-as-artists. Let me note that it is a common mistake to conceive of the audience members as a soul-less herd. They are a herd—that is, they are bodies moving in unison with other bodies. But an essential aspect of human experience is to be in a herd, to be a body touching and moving among other bodies in stylized, conventional dances. Most critics have greatly under-theorized the herd.

Wilde lays out how the *mondaine* serves to inspire consumer-artists in an interview for the *Sketch* in 1895, as usual in a tongue-in-cheek manner:

It is the public, and not the play, that I desire to make a success. . . . The public makes a success when it realizes that a play is a work of art. On

the three first-nights I have had in London the public has been most successful, and had the dimensions of the stage admitted of it, I would have called them before the curtain. (*The Sketch* 1895.495)<sup>9</sup>

Wilde presents the idea of art as a dialogue between an artist and a set of critics, who in turn are the next “artists” in an ongoing train of dialogues—hence his reference to the audience members’ performance. They are newly-inspired artists, their art being nothing more than their response—in their life and in their commentary—to the art on stage.

Each statement, whether in art or criticism, is a call for a response. And subsequent responses also call for a response, and so forth. Culture is itself a train of responses. To give a simple example that Wilde himself cites, Walter Pater had been creative when he took a painting by Leonardo, namely the *Mona Lisa*, and wrote a piece of prose (his own art work), based upon it. Or, to show more of a train of responses, we can say that Michelangelo created art works which inspired a series of other artists who learned from him, though they also critically distinguished themselves from him. El Greco borrows many elements from Michelangelo, but in his “strong misreading” of him, takes that style and distorts it towards his own artistic ideas, focusing on the language of color. Caravaggio similarly borrows from Michelangelo, but transforms his style by focusing on contrasts between light and dark. Later artists continue the train, and therefore, critics and artists are indistinguishable. That is why Wilde’s essay is called the “Critic as Artist.” Wilde’s audience, when “successful,” is creative. The audience member is then a consumer-as-artist.

In Wilde’s statement in *The Sketch*, he describes a critic-artist who is really a mass audience. He stated that the audience is a group of artists “when it realizes that a play is a work of art,” and he adds that “the artist is always the munificent patron of the public. I am very fond of the public, and personally, I always patronize the public very much” (*Sketch* interview 495). On the one hand, Wilde is making a joke about patronage because it is the public which is paying him, not vice versa. On the other hand, he also seriously imagines himself an artistic patron, someone whose resources allow artists to create works of art. Those artists are the theatrical audience. Worshippers in a church engage in a set of rituals communally and then go into their daily occupations, ideally, transformed by their ritual experience. They then live their lives—working, buying, loving, relaxing—in a way informed by their ritual experience. Worshippers in the temple of the theater, then, also experience their daily occupations in ways that are informed by the images and styles that have been ritually presented to them.

The first way they are artists is as participants in the theater. They perform their roles in the social ritual of audience-hood, of gathering in neat rows, watching performances both on the stage and in the seats, particularly in prominent box seats. They have even gotten specially dressed up for their roles. Although it was Bernard Shaw who described the theater as the modern church, Wilde was the one who was beginning to really theorize this consumer culture ritual most seriously. So the first way the audience members are artists is in their performing their roles within a ritual, just as participants in a religious ritual like a Catholic Mass are not mere spectators but rather are themselves actors in that divine drama, chanting at the proper moments, bowing, kneeling, and so forth. (We know that Wilde, just like his character Dorian Gray, had a fascination for Catholic ritual and its accompanying liturgical garments and accoutrements.)

### CONSUMER RITUAL AS ELEMENT OF MODERN CULTURE

The second and more important way the audience members are artists is in their own individual self-creation. Being inspired by the art on the stage, they then follow that inspiration as they shape their own lives—by the fashions they purchase and wear, by the ideas they act on and discuss, and by the personalities they present in public. Like people in earlier societies, people in modern societies form their identities by means of social rituals. In medieval London, citizens would have shaped their lives along the narratives told them at church and by the Mummer's plays shown to them each year during special liturgical seasons. They would peruse images of people in the religious paintings and sculptures on display in churches. But for the middle classes in 1892 London, ritual and image have been largely emptied of a religious content and are rather centered on the clothing and personal items which people surround themselves with, as well as on the tastes in music, literature and personality that people take up.

Consumer spending is a spiritual activity, one in which the individual is in-spired, in which he or she both mimics and constructs identity. One reason the rituals of consumerism are important for Wilde is that he is interested in how people assume identities. As Iris Marion Young argues, to indulge in the pleasure of buying and wearing clothes is not necessarily to surrender to the objectifying, male-gaze:

The fantasies I have as I leaf through the magazine or click the hangers on the rack, or put on the outfit in the dressing room, may be fleeting and multiple possibilities of who I might be, character types I try on, situations in which I place myself imaginatively. . . .

There is a certain freedom involved in our relation to clothes, an active subjectivity not represented in the male-gaze theory. (72–73)

Young conceives of a subjectivity that has not been imagined by the rationalist, objectifying gaze of the masculinist subject. She, like Wilde, holds that a person's connection to clothes, and to images of clothed people and to rituals of clothed experience, comprises a fundamental aspect of their sense of self, of their identity.

It is useful at this point to back up and consider how culture functions more generally. Wilde, like many of his contemporaries, is concerned about what happens to culture in a modern, post-Christian, commercial world. The dominant institutions that provide the sites of social ritual are those of consumer culture. Some people responded like Max Nordau and interpreted the new situation as cultural "degeneration." Nordau's 1895 book with that title criticized, not surprisingly, Oscar Wilde. Other critics responded with exhilaration at the new perceived freedom to create culture. Two decades later, Yeats would attempt to create a kind of new religion by means of his wife's "visions." Pound would attempt something similar in his *Cantos*, and would be drawn towards fascism—with its merging of politics and art—as a result. Joyce would do something similar to Wilde in making his hero, Leopold Bloom, a bourgeois consumer. But Joyce was much less sanguine about the resulting culture and seemed to limit himself to humorous rumination over this inept, though lovable, hero. Wilde makes consumer fashion and theater, thought of as social rituals, his media for artistic creation.

Walter Benjamin wrote that the age of mechanical reproduction had separated art from its basis in religious cult. But another way of articulating the change would be to say that art is part of another type of ritual, one that is based in consumer culture rather than religion. Modern consumers have nothing but the common consumer culture, which is in fact ubiquitous, and which provides a common set of cultural talking points and a common language of styles people can fall into and shape. Thus, both the socialist and the millionaire capitalist can, in spite of their differences, equally enjoy a certain style of dress or a certain play (like *Lady Windermere's Fan*). They share a cultural heritage, but they have competing interpretations of that heritage. William Morris may enjoy the same play as Arthur L. Liberty (of Liberty's Department Store). Indeed Wilde seems to have specifically aimed at addressing both socialists and captains of industry in his essay "The Soul of Man," an essay in which he argues that Socialism should be combined with Individualism (a word used by *laissez-faire* capitalists<sup>10</sup>).

Also, the communal experience of theater-goers can be a powerful, identity shaping one. Attending the theater in those days was a more visceral, as well as a more multi-class, experience, something more like attending a World Cup match—an experience of extreme communal, nationalist emotion—than going to a play in the West End today. Also, whatever a person's ethical values, he or she will be thinking with the words, the categories, the styles, and the stories that consumer culture offers. It has been argued by people like T.S. Eliot that no culture has ever arisen except in relation to some religion. But Eliot did not conceive of consumer culture as having a potential for providing a quasi-spiritual basis for the identity-formation of individuals, nor for the communal bonding of those individuals. It strikes me that Vincent Van Gogh was thinking along the same lines when he put modern popular novels alongside the Bible in some of his paintings, for example "Still Life with a Bible" (1885), suggesting that the novel has replaced—or now exists alongside—the Bible as the source of spiritual inspiration. Incidentally, his novels were literally "yellow-books," inexpensive, yellow-covered editions of popular French novels, something that does link Van Gogh to Wilde.

Wilde was explicitly thinking of art (and criticism, which for him is art) as an activity that all the citizens of a society engaged in and produced. As his character notes in "The Critic as Artist," "It would be . . . just to say the Greeks were a nation of art-critics" (349). Note that Wilde does not take up the problem that most of the people in a city-state like Athens were in fact slaves. From this perspective, Wilde can be considered elitist. But I believe it is more proper to say that Wilde was simply more interested in the middle and upper classes because they had the leisure and income that enabled them to focus energy on consuming—and therefore could participate in what he considered art. The above character in "Critic as Artist" also says "that they invented the criticism of art just as they invented the criticism of everything else," and he notes that the two highest arts that they criticized were "Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life" (350). And Wilde shows how clearly he was linking the ancient Greeks with bourgeois London society when the character goes on to say:

I assure you, my dear Earnest, that the Greeks chattered about painters quite as much as people do nowadays, and had their private views, and shilling exhibitions, and Arts and Crafts guilds, and Pre-Raphaelite movements, and movements towards realism, and lectured about art, and wrote essays on art. . . ." (354)



He is talking about his own social milieu, a world in which artists theorized dress and dressmakers drew upon styles presented in art works, a world of which the *mondaine* was the dominant icon.

### THE IMAGE AS CULTURE-SHAPER

Moreover, Wilde was thinking of *mondaines*—and other charismatic figures—role in the shaping of a group, and even an entire culture. In various places, Wilde writes of characters, strong personalities who have a thoroughgoing and extremely wide influence on the lives of people, at times of an entire civilization. Three such personalities Wilde writes of are Willie Hughes (from *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*), Dorian Gray, and Jesus Christ (particularly in the prison letter *De Profundis*). As Jarlath Killeen has pointed out, Wilde writes of a kind of mystical, charismatic influence, one that may start at the level of surface fashions but that also cuts to the core of people's identities.<sup>11</sup> For example, in *Mr. W.H.*, the narrator is not just influenced by Willie Hughes (whom he believes was the young man addressed in Shakespeare's Sonnets) but says that Hughes' presence in Shakespeare's art "shows us . . . our own soul. . . . Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves" (AC 209). Mr. W.H. was the artwork that inspired Shakespeare's artistic creations, and therefore that shaped much of Western culture. Thus the narrator comments that "it is not too much to say that to this young actor . . . the Romantic Movement of English Literature is largely indebted" (AC 187).

Wilde describes the process like a religious—or at least a culture-founding—one, and indeed, Wilde uses extremely similar verbiage when discussing the cultural influence of none other than Jesus Christ. In *De Profundis*, he writes:

And feeling . . . that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing. (CL 746)

Wilde uses virtually the same language and ideas here. Just as Mr. W.H. inspired Shakespeare to create beautiful art, Jesus inspired more artists perhaps than any other person has ever done. And the types of artists Wilde writes about inspire not just on an artistic level but on a personal and even religious level as well, shaping the new artists' very conceptions of their own personal stories. Witness Wilde's *De Profundis*.

When one contemplates all this from the point of view of art alone one cannot but be grateful that the supreme office of the church should be the playing of the tragedy . . . : the mystical presentation, by means of dialogue and costume and gesture even, of the Passion of her Lord. (CL 743)

He writes of his own experience, via the ritual of the Mass, of Christ's *performance*, if I may call it that. And he explains further that just as "every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image," so "every human being should be the realisation of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man. Christ found the type and fixed it . . ." (746). For Wilde, Christ was, like Mr. W.H., an image that expressed a spiritual ideal, a conception of humanity, a culture. And Wilde implies, furthermore, that it is fitting that every human being "should be" shaped by some ideal, for example the one embodied in Christ.

How that shaping takes place, says Wilde, is through an experience of art, a response by spectators to the beautiful image presented to them. Thus Wilde writes that "Christ is just like a work of art" (CL 753). He also says that "Christ, like all fascinating personalities, had the power of . . . making other people say beautiful things to him" (749). This process is strikingly similar to the one Wilde has outlined for his play and for the woman of fashion. With regard to the play, we saw that Wilde was interested in inspiring the audience members to perform, to create their own art, which is like getting them to "say beautiful things."

The woman of fashion, for her part, is a spiritual presence much like Mr. W.H. or Jesus Christ. Her role is nothing less than to infuse life into a culture, to provide a quasi-religious basis for the identity-formation of individuals, and particularly to make women feel that their activities and tasks are—contrary to what Western culture has usually said—extremely valuable. Perhaps more so than a Jesus or a Willie Hughes, the woman of fashion is the appropriate icon of modern commercial culture, of consumer culture. She has a particularly powerful role, standing as she does at the crossroads between "high" and "low" culture and embodying so many of this culture's tensions and energies.

Wilde takes the *mondaine* seriously, both because she enables individuals to channel and inform their experience of beauty and creativity, and because the social rituals in which she is adept build human identity and provide communal cultural experience. Images of beautiful people are far from superficial. Wilde links in his own mind ancient and medieval paintings of Christ with early modern poems and plays inspired by a young man. And he

implicitly links all that with fashion plates in the *Woman's World* and female aesthetes performing in London's Season. I do not think Wilde is suggesting there is no difference between creative art and cheap, unreflective advertising. But what Wilde is suggesting is that what makes a beautiful image valuable is not its *location* but rather how expert it is technically (its ability to charm the eye) and how influential it is socially (its ability to shape people's lives). It is a kind of divine right of fashion that gives authority to *mondaines*.

### MRS. ERLYNNE'S ENDURING COMMITMENT TO SURFACE

I noted earlier that *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a play firmly set in the stylized genre of melodrama. But Wilde distorts the melodrama genre itself—and therefore he gives the play some surprising impact. He uses the melodrama in a way that satisfies viewer expectations, but that at the crucial point frustrates those expectations. Wilde makes this very clear, even having a character spell out what the standard melodrama ending in the play would be: Mrs. Erlynne tells Lord Windermere, “Oh, don't imagine I am going to have a pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am and all that kind of thing.” She refers to a very common repentant-woman melodrama ending:

I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent or become a hospital nurse or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. . . . [I]n real life we don't do such things—not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. (81)

She knows that “if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes her” (81). And she refuses to reveal herself. Such a refusal points to one motivation—that she wants to remain a woman of fashion.

Before analyzing the ending, we can get a clearer sense of Wilde's attitude towards Mrs. Erlynne as *mondaine* by seeing how he has responded to the literary characters who preceded her. For literary ancestors we have the long line of “fallen women,” Becky Sharp, Lady Audley, *La Dame aux Camélias*, Hedda Gabler, and Nana, to name a few. (Paula Tanqueray from A.W. Pinero's play, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, came a year later.) Most of these women either end up as unrepentantly evil or repentantly dead. Mrs. Erlynne ends up with both a loving (though distant) daughter and a fashionable, comfortable life. Also, Wilde makes Erlynne resemble the contemporary British actress-celebrity. Kathy Psomiades, as we have seen, describes this twilight area in which “the private, lovely woman” is hard to distinguish

from the “public, tawdry woman who signifies the vulgarity of [mass-culture]” (13). Wilde seems to have had a fascination for this figure, a work of art, an inspirer of art, a self-created figure who riskily manufactures her own place in Society.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of actual contemporary plays, we have two similar melodramas in Pierre Leclercq’s *Illusion* (1890) and Mark Quinton and Henry Hamilton’s *Lord Anerley: A Romantic Drama* (1890). (These are just two examples among many.) In *Illusion*, a rich, popular woman of fashion, Madame Blanche Faneuse, ends up giving away all her wealth in order to found a home for orphans. She exclaims, “I am penniless! Thank God!” Like Erlynne, she receives her long-separated daughter, Una. But here is where the resemblance ends. Faneuse does precisely what Mrs. Erlynne would not do: she reveals herself as mother, embraces her daughter, and says heroically, “Una! Do not grieve for me! My past is black! my future shall whiten it!”<sup>13</sup> We recall also that Erlynne had rejected any idea of retiring to a convent or becoming a nurse—or founding an orphanage. In *Lord Anerley*, the *mondaine* mother has conveniently passed away, and this time the daughter reunites instead with her father, whom she had thought dead. So it is the father who has the pathetic scene with the daughter, and who celebrates with her when they surprisingly find out that they are rich.

But perhaps the most important of Mrs. Erlynne’s literary ancestors is Mrs. Woffington in Charles Reade’s 1854 play *Masks and Faces*—a character based on the actual eighteenth-century actress. (The play was revived in the late 1880s, so Wilde would have had ample chance to see it or at least read about it. Moreover, Wilde refers to Reade’s work in the *Intentions* essays, praising his early work over his late work.) Woffington, like Erlynne, is a worldly, fashionable, powerful woman, a *demi-rep*. One nickname she has is “Lady Betty Modish,” and she performs in the West End theater. Like Mrs. Erlynne, she hopes to ascend into Society by means of marriage to a gentleman. And she proceeds to sacrifice that hope in order to benefit a simple, earnest young woman. She purposely ruins her own reputation, sacrificing her chance for respectability in order that the less-worldly woman may keep her husband. Woffington comes to love the other woman as “a sister” and declares that the other has “not only touched my heart, but won my respect” (72).

Mrs. Erlynne, in contrast to all these figures, remains both a heroine and a thoroughly dedicated follower of fashion. What is happening here is the same as happens in various of Wilde’s fairy tales, namely, that he takes a standard genre template, and at the very end adds an element that shows the story to be, in fact, the real world. In “The Star Child,” for example, the protagonist follows a standard series of trials in order to be united with his

parents, who turn out to be the king and queen—very much a fairy tale ending. However, at the end, Wilde adds an element of harsh realism, having the protagonist die young:

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly. (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 252)

Similarly, in “The Fisherman and his Soul,” the fisherman and the mermaid, who both died for love, are buried in a barren field. But, in fairy tale fashion, over their grave grow the most beautiful flowers the townspeople have ever seen. We expect a nice ending here. But Wilde again adds the harsh realistic element. He notes that the flowers soon disappeared forever:

Yet never again in the corner of the Fullers’ Field grew flowers of any kind, but the field remained barren even as before. Nor came the Seafolk into the bay as they had been wont to do, for they went to another part of the sea. (236)

In *Lady Windermere*, Wilde introduces the realistic element of the *mondaine* who retains her commitment to surfaces and fashion, something she is bound to do “as long as we have any good looks left.” Mrs. Erlynne has her *mondaine* power and authority, and it would be improper, and unrealistic, to have her walk away from that. Erlynne *has* changed in her relationship towards her daughter, and takes on a mother’s role. She cherishes her daughter’s affection. But she is also still committed to the modern consumer culture that has given her power. Wilde has Mrs. Erlynne retain her involvement with some of the key ideals of the female aesthetes, their self-constructive power, and their connection to fashion culture and decorative bourgeois culture. In fact, while Mrs. Erlynne does sacrifice her place in London Society—perhaps the greatest material prize, from her perspective—she by no means sacrifices all.

Mrs. Erlynne tells Lord Windermere that, now that she has lost her place in Society, she is going to leave England. And while she finds that she does have some attachment to her daughter and does have a heart, she says, “a heart doesn’t suit me Windermere. Somehow it doesn’t go with modern dress. It makes one look old. And it spoils one’s career at critical moments” (81). She thus both keeps secret her good act and maintains her commitment to her *mondaine* lifestyle. The silence preserves the bad reputation she has and at the same time enables her to continue in her ability to construct

herself. Always a survivor, she manages to find a way to continue her fairly wealthy, fashionable life, though she has to give up London. Also, she has gained a moment of deep connection with her daughter, and, partly to protect the daughter, partly to protect her own lifestyle, she leaves England. She is still able to win over one rich man, Tuppy (Lord Augustus). And he agrees to marry her—apparently she has “explained everything”—and to go live expensively on the continent with her. Her result is hardly ascetic.

Wilde wanted to make Mrs. Erlynne a woman who has not “repented.” She tells Windermere, “what consoles one now-a-days is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date” (81). She remains embedded in the milieu of materialism and acquisitive consumption. At the same time, she has discovered her own capacity to forge powerful bonds with her daughter. She has discovered a new role for herself, one she had not anticipated. But, unlike her daughter, she has “the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back,” along with “the wit [and] the courage” to pull off her own self-construction and manipulation of her various masks (57). Wilde perhaps wished to explore what he saw as a new or at least under-explored possibility for women, afforded them within consumer fashion culture. Rather than seeing possibilities primarily in the New Woman, the woman who rejects the forms and conventions that fashion imposes, Wilde focused his attention on the worldly, bourgeois, fashion-conscious woman of Society.

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# Conclusion

Wilde writes that artistic creation is forged of “the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation [i.e., its stylization] . . . and our own [Western] imitative spirit” (“Decay of Lying,” AC 303). “[T]he consciousness that constitutes its world is the body as lived in a tangible encounter with human and nonhuman others.” (Iris Marion Young in her book, *On Female Body Experience*. 8)

The human person is a rational animal, something Aristotle argued a long time ago. But Oscar Wilde conceived of the human person as also a *ritual* animal. For him, even reason itself is conditioned and enabled by the person’s experience of ritual. By ritual I refer to persons’ bodily—and by extension, clothed—experience as moving among other bodies and groups. As I.M. Young argues in the epigraph above, we see things differently when we take the body, and the body’s interaction and movement among herds of bodies, into consideration when discussing what a person is, that is, how his or her identity is formed.

In Wilde’s epigraph, he describes “Oriental” as that type of culture that emphasizes stylization and ornamentation. This embodied, ritual-embedded, and “Orientalized” notion of the person is distinct from the autonomous, rational subject—this latter having been the West’s dominant, masculinist mode of discussing personhood in both legal and cultural writing. In Western culture, we have tended to think of the subject as male, as the looker, the one who looks at and objectifies women, the looked-at. Wilde does not, however, dismantle the Western approach. He retains it while conceiving of it otherwise, elevating terms that are normally considered low and effeminate. Thus, as we saw in [Chapter Four](#), Wilde discusses the double-experience of seeing oneself and of seeing oneself be seen. That is why he emphasizes art’s ability, and one’s own ability, to shine, to have an impact.



Also, Wilde may have said that art consisted of a *dialogue* between the “Oriental” spirit and the Western “imitative,” mimetic spirit, but he clearly leaned towards the Oriental. For him, one’s consciousness and sense of identity take place only in a body; they consist of bodily experience, clothed experience, and experience not as a separate individual but as part of a herd, a group of bodies engaged in stylized, conventional movements. When theorizing art and culture in essays like “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde thought of persons primarily as ritual beings. He thought of persons not simply as texts, as interpretable *logoi*—the approach that focuses on autonomous subjects who make logical choices—but in terms of stylized consumer images and rituals.

The images and rituals are the soil (the culture, with an emphasis on the root *cultus*, cultivation or tilling) within which persons’ identities are formed. People do not enter the world on their own terms. Persons exist only in a pre-established culture, in a set of rituals and bodily interactions among groups. We are like many other mammals in our herd mentality. I specifically use “herd” in order to reject a tendency to vilify the herd, a vilification characteristic of avant gardistes, some Marxists, and some defenders of “tradition.” Even when one seeks an alternative, a sub-culture, that move is itself just joining another culture—one that is inextricably linked to, and is as hegemonic as, the previous culture.

It is easier for us to see a rebel or dissident as an authentic culture-shaper. In their artworks, writers like Wole Soyinka and W.B. Yeats were consciously defending from oppression a national identity, thereby helping many others form their own identities by means of the images in the works. Mrs. Erlynne, the woman of fashion, is harder to see as a culture-shaper, as an artist. Her identity depends entirely on the herd. But herd is, I argue, simply a way of understanding culture, a mass of people with common rituals and images. The “mass” is not something we need to get away from in order to get “culture.” It *is* culture and community. Like everything, it has the potential to be used for good or ill, but in itself it is simply culture, and it is what we all draw from, what we all are.

Rituals are embedded with style-inflected, stylized, public images. As in his creation of Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde’s art is image-based. That is, he creates images, he makes art that is physical—it plays to the rational part of a person as well as to the eye, the ear, and the body. He brings serious aesthetic thinking to bear on sensationalism—that type of cultural product that plays as much to the senses as to the mind. It is through these public images that people develop a sense of self. They look at images of persons, religious paintings and sculptures, or, in a consumer culture, consumer photographs,

advertisements, and fashion plates. And they imagine themselves in terms of and in relation to these images.

We are not only textual, logical beings. “Forms are the food of faith,” writes Wilde, quoting from John Henry Newman. Through the forms one sees and one participates in, people do two things at once: they actively create their identities and they passively are letting their identities be created. When this is taken into account, critics can see much better what is the relationship of art to culture—and particularly the vexed relationship of art to modern consumer culture. However, critics fail to adequately see these relationships when we focus excessively on individual persons merely as rational agents, doing so as if persons were completely “free,” as if they were somehow detachable from their ritual experience within a given culture. Wilde wished to introduce a new approach to theories of aesthetics and culture by de-centering this rationalist, power-oriented conception of the subject.

## WILDE AND MODERNISM

Edward Said has written that “nearly every consciously innovative major writer since Oscar Wilde has repeatedly denied (or even denounced) the mimetic ambitions of writing” (11).<sup>1</sup> Said’s point was not primarily a post-colonial one here. The sentence is a passing statement in his analysis of modernism. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to link Wilde with post-colonial theory insofar as he took an aesthetic approach that countered the dominant, Western one. It is in Wilde’s anti-mimetic, “Oriental” art that he is modernist. Wilde’s commitment to distortion, lying, and superficiality is what is central to his work, and most radical in his aesthetics. My work builds on that of critics who have begun to discuss the revolutionary modernist aesthetics at work in these seemingly standard comedies. Neil Sammells, as we have seen, declares that Wilde’s “modernity lies not in the degree to which he dispenses with the old, but in the designs he fashions from it—the style he holds it in” (85).

What does this anti-mimesis have to do with public image and consumer ritual? When artists in a commercial context create works, they make culture in the very same way that an ancient Greek sculptor made culture with a statue of Athena, or that Michelangelo made culture with his Sistine Chapel depiction of Christ at the Last Judgment. That is, artists move within their own worldviews (which are instantiated in their *styles*), and they build from and respond to that worldview even as they distort and develop it. They offer their own “strong misreadings” of their predecessors. Artworks shape people, and, if they have a strong impact on a large number, they

shape masses of people—that is to say, cultures. This insight was central to Wilde’s thought. And in a culture in which the dominant images and rituals are located in consumer culture, one has no choice but to theorize culture in terms of those consumer images and rituals.

In arguing this, I propose a different view of modernism than, say, that of Andreas Huyssen. I propose a modernism not defined by its separation from mass culture but by its anti-mimetic, superficial aesthetics—something that links it to consumer culture. Huyssen 20 years ago wrote his *After the Great Divide*, and helped a generation of theorists to move beyond previously dominant conceptions of what modernism was. He did so in part in order to distinguish the avant-garde from modernism, and therefore, from his perspective, to preserve the avant-garde from some of the deficiencies of modernism. He described those deficiencies as modernism’s

insistence on the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of every day life, and its programmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns [which were] always challenged as soon as [they] arose. (vii)

Huyssen defines modernism precisely in terms of this “obsessive hostility to mass culture,” and in terms of a distance from “political and economic” concerns.

But to define modernism in terms of this obsession and separatism is a mistake. Though it has helped many critics to bring into relief many of the modernists’ aesthetic ideas, it has also obscured the relationship between modernist attitudes towards ornamentation and towards anti-mimesis. Usually critics think of modernists as rejecting ornamentation and as embracing an anti-mimetic aesthetic and epistemology. But in Wilde, because of his feminism and consumerism, superficiality and anti-mimesis are clearly inseparable. Also, Huyssen’s analysis of modernism has ignored others’ aesthetic ideas, particularly those of the “forgotten female aesthetes,” Tomson/Watson, Fleming/Fletcher, and other colleagues of Wilde. It has also compelled critics like Regenia Gagnier and Linda Dowling to write about Wilde’s aesthetics in ways that are unconvincing and that at times seem forced.

Huyssen further writes that the above defects were “challenged as soon as [they] arose.” He is on the right track here. But his focus on the avant garde—and his ignoring of the much more prevalent and culture-shaping effects of consumer culture ritual—weakens his analysis. A better way of articulating this “challenge” is to say the following: what Wilde helps us see is that modernism’s obsession is simply one side of a coin, one aspect of an

ongoing contest over the place of art in a commercial world. This contest is not something new. It is the same struggle over art that has shaped discussions from the time of Plato to Augustine to Kant to the present day.

What the struggle has gained are some new folds and wrinkles. Indeed, precisely in late-Victorian Britain a new set of possibilities and dangers for art emerge—possibilities and dangers that Wilde, unlike most other modernists, eagerly theorized and embraced. But if much of the last century's aesthetic thinking has built on a sense of modernism's rupture with the past, I propose to use Wilde to see ourselves as not looking at a chasm but at the same continuous terrain, to emphasize the continuity across these "divides." In a sense, the more important divide occurred with the ascendancy of consumer culture and the recession of cultures that were defined in terms of a religion.

Because of the increasing secularization of the nineteenth-century public sphere, the rituals through which human persons constructed their identities and personalities had largely shifted from religion to consumer culture. Wilde saw the emerging situation as something that, though it offered some new dangers, was in itself neither good nor bad. In fact, it was good inasmuch as it offered artists like himself a whole new set of tools to work with. He also saw this culture as certainly and unavoidably the ascendant form of culture, and the way of the foreseeable future in the West. Therefore he did not theorize art in order to introduce a rupture between art—be it traditionalist or modernist art—and mass culture. Nor did he simply abandon theorizing to simply let art surrender in an unreflective way.

But he did surrender art, and allowed it to settle firmly and irretrievably in its commercial context. That is, he embraced an art world in which he was collaborating with marketers, star actors, clothing designers, and other consumer culture producers. At the same time, he conceived of art in ways distinct from the masculinist, rationalist conception that had dominated Western culture, doing so by theorizing through categories that had previously been marginalized: the superficial, the fashionable, "Oriental," the ornamental, the bodily. By emphasizing the stylized, "lying" aspect of art, he was able to re-conceptualize art's rational aspect. Thinking of Wilde's work as a consumer modernism, and perhaps also a consumer feminism, offers us a new philosophy of art and culture.

He became a practitioner of consumer culture—he did not want to critique the wolf; he wanted to be the wolf. But he was a wolf who was disrupting current hegemonies by theorizing art and culture in non-Western, Oriental, and feminine terms. Terry Eagleton, who draws heavily on Wilde's

thought in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, gets at this conception of culture when he writes that “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body” (13). Western aesthetic theory has always been somewhat at odds with itself because it seeks to theorize that which is in a sense anti-theoretical, what is bodily. What Wilde brings to the fore is that aesthetics must consciously limit itself, so to speak. It must acknowledge that logic and reason are co-dependent on the body, and therefore must conceive of personhood accordingly.

Thus, the present study represents one of a number of new works that begins a new phase in Wilde studies, one that takes Wilde’s consumer culture context as the primary key towards understanding his conception of art.<sup>2</sup> Wilde chooses as the icon of his aesthetics the *mondaine*, the woman of fashion. A character like Mrs. Erlynne is actually more central to Wilde’s aesthetics than is the much more discussed Dorian Gray because, whereas Dorian shows an aesthetics of surface leading to destruction, Erlynne shows the triumph of the aesthetics of surface. Through consumer culture, she is enabled to construct her own identity, to inspire the art of others by means of her public image and participation in consumer rituals, and thereby to significantly shape the entire culture.

# Notes

## NOTES TO THE PREFACE

1. Linda Dowling uses Wilde as a theorist of this anti-consumerism in her book, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (1996).
2. Indeed, as Kaplan and Stowell have pointed out in *The Theatre and Fashion*, these theaters were a prime location for advertising fashions. (The name of the parody was “The Poet and the Puppets.”)
3. David Sweetman goes so far as to compare Wilde to the bomb-throwing anarchist, Félix Fénéon writing of them that “[b]oth were anarchist theorists, leading revolutionaries of their day . . .” (15).
4. In *Beginnings*, Said writes: “Nearly every consciously innovative major writer since Oscar Wilde has repeatedly denied (or even denounced) the mimetic ambitions of writing” (11).
5. Rachel Bowlby, in her *Feminist Destinations* (1997), writes about Woolf’s use of consumer culture, though she does not deal with a writer who makes modernist art and consumer culture at the same time, as I do.
6. It is worth noting that some critics, for example, Michael Fried, have defined modernism precisely in terms of its anti-theatricality.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. The Balfours famously decorated with aesthetic styles. Burne-Jones’s painting of Lillie Langtry in “The Wheel of Fortune” hung in their dining room.
2. Blunt was the author of a collection of poems called *In Carcere et Vinculis*, which Wilde reviewed for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the late 1880s. Blunt had written the poems in prison (hence the title, which means in prison and chains). Wilde proposed the same title for his own prison letter, *De Profundis*.

3. In the late 1870s and up to 1881, Wilde was in fact publishing several poems, but they were published in rather tertiary journals. He finally published a book (at his own expense) of *Poems* in 1881. It did not sell well, nor was it praised in any significant way.
4. The collection at Windsor Castle, for example, with many masterpieces by Raphael, Rembrandt, Holbein, Van Dyck, Reynolds, and Gainsborough, was beginning to make it to town and be shown at venues like the Grosvenor Gallery.
5. Wilde was following in the line of operatic composer Jacques Offenbach, who had produced *La Belle Hélène* in 1864. Offenbach was famous for having his Greek gods and goddesses dance the can-can.
6. He published it in an American, not a British, magazine, *Lippincott's*. But it was a magazine that sold well in England.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Numbers are based on the *Appendix* to Guy and Small's *Oscar Wilde's Profession*. It's true that one huge factor in his newspaper writing was the fact that he had to support his family.
2. Also, a fine but limited collection edited by Anya Clayworth has recently come out.
3. Also, Wilde did not treat all his journalistic pieces the same. As mentioned, he chose only four of the pieces, all of them essays published in magazines, to be revised and reprinted in book form, that is, in *Intentions*. He did not choose pieces he had published in newspapers or in *the Woman's World*.
4. It is something of a mystery as to just how Wilde supported his own expensive lifestyle, as well as his growing family, in this period. Bernard Shaw, by comparison, was writing even more journalistic work during the same decade, and was barely supporting himself (and his more frugal tastes).
5. We will see in the next chapter how Wilde aligned himself with the female aesthetes and the brand of aestheticism that was a middle-class movement. Several of the female aesthetes actually wrote for the *P.M.G.*, although not until the 1890s. Stead had left the paper, but it retained its feature-sections. The "Wares of Autolycus" fashion column ran for several years in the 90s, with regular contributions from Alice Meynell, Rosamund Marriott Watson (who formerly used the pen-name Graham R. Tomson), and Elizabeth Robins Pennell.
6. I quote from the *Complete Letters* because this article does not appear in the *Complete Works* (1909).
7. Bernard Shaw, for example, was noted for sporting his trademark Jaeger suits.
8. It seems likely that the new editors in 1890 (one of whom, incidentally, was one of "the Souls," Harry Cust) wanted to take the paper in a new direction—they kept a fairly conservative line politically—and therefore let many of the previous writers go, including Wilde. But Wilde did not follow Stead to his

new *Review of Reviews*. Instead he wrote some pieces for another new periodical, *The Sketch*.

9. It is difficult to determine exactly what literacy rates were in 1880s London. We do know that there had been several Education Acts increasing the number of people who would be able to read, including the Forster Act of 1870. The *Cambridge Social History of Britain* tells us that a few decades before this, in 1840, roughly 70 percent of men and 50 percent of women in Britain were able to sign their names to marriage registers. Many of these were able to read, and we can guess that the numbers went up steadily in the following decades.
10. As a caveat we must add that while Wilde and Shaw were at home, they were not completely at home. Thus Shaw notes that he had to do battle with editors, at times losing: "I have twice had to resign very desirable positions on the critical staff of London papers of first-rate pretension" (*Saturday Review* 79.476. 13 Apr. 1895).
11. Arnold's article was not really about journalism but about his own opposition to an independent Ireland—something, incidentally, Stead and the *P.M.G.* spent an enormous amount of ink supporting.
12. These were not working-class papers, which were more radical politically and had much smaller circulations; working-class papers also lacked feature articles related to bourgeois cultural phenomena like fashion or popular theater.
13. Critics like Jim Collins have begun to describe the phenomenon of "high-pop," and Collins recently edited a collection of essays with that title.
14. He succeeded in recruiting Sarah Bernhardt to play the lead, but failed to get the play past the censor.
15. I quote here from Ellmann's *The Artist as Critic* because this article was not included in the *Complete Works* (1908).
16. Some have argued that some of the key terms of popular journalism were appropriated by modernist writers. Kate Campbell argues thus in her "Journalistic Discourses and Constructions of Modern Knowledge," which appears in *Nineteenth Century Media*.
17. From this perspective, modernist aesthetics are not all that shocking. Modernist literature is not much different from Plato's dialogues, I would argue.
18. Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* is a series of essays, each one dealing with one individual artist from the Renaissance.
19. I will look at Wilde's ideas on performance at length in the final chapter, in the discussion of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.
20. It is significant that, while he was publishing in popular newspapers and magazines, Wilde was also publishing collections of popular stories and fairy tales. Were they modernist fairy tales? I would say yes, but that is matter for another paper.
21. Of course, a generation later, fascists and communists would also be creating strong links between the arts and industries.
22. Whether or not Wilde's history is accurate is beside the point.



23. Wilde also worked in the magazine industry and in the West End theater industry, which I address in the coming chapters.
24. Such is the implication of, for example, the major biography of Wilde written by Richard Ellmann.
25. This was unfortunate, because a forger learned her signature and was able to steal a significant sum from her bank account.
26. Collinson and Lock had further connections to the Arts and Crafts movement. E.W. Godwin worked there, before he joined Liberty's. And the firm also began doing theatrical interiors, including the interior of the new Savoy Theatre, where Gilbert and Sullivan's works were being produced, including *Patience*.
27. Wilde would in fact bring together laissez-faire "individualism" and socialism in his "Soul of Man Under Socialism Essay," fully knowing that he was bringing together concepts that most people would see as contradictory.
28. Wilde's work feeds off all sorts of anxieties, including anxieties about sexuality, race, class, and empire. I merely focus on a couple of these.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Again, the definitive biography of Wilde, by Richard Ellmann, spends scant time discussing the magazine and the women who wrote for it.
2. For example, Catharine Ksinan begins such a reassessment in her "Wilde as Editor of *Woman's World*: Fighting a Dull Slumber in Stale Certitudes" (in *ELT* 41.4 (1998) 408-427).
3. In fact, even when writing the Society Comedies, he maintained an interest in aesthetic interiors. In the published prompt-book for *Lady Windermere* we see such set-descriptions as "Note--The furniture should be Chippendale" (i.e., one of the favorite styles of the aesthetes), and "The furniture should be handsome pink and gold" and "should be luxurious."
4. *Punch*. 31 March 1883: 155.
5. Wilde was actually wrong about what was the *Atalanta's* predecessor magazine, but he was not one to worry about accuracy in details.
6. It is also significant that, even though Wilde did not want to edit fashionable magazines like *the Lady's Pictorial* and *Paris Illustré*, he did in fact publish some of his own work in them.
7. *The Queen* (1887): 5997.
8. In the end, it seems he miscalculated, and the magazine went under shortly after he left.
9. Lady Lindsay was the wife of Sir Coutts Lindsay, proprietor of the Grosvenor Gallery. She was also a leading aesthete, and was caricatured by Du

- Maurier in his cartoon aesthete-character Cimabue Brown. Lady Gregory would famously go on to fund much of W.B. Yeats's literary activity.
10. In the event, few prominent men wrote for the *Woman's World*, whether because Wilde failed to enlist them or because he changed his mind.
  11. Wilde identifies the novelist simply as "the clever authoress of that wonderful little story *Flitters, Tatters, and the Counsellor*."
  12. *The Queen*. (1887): 45.
  13. *Pall Mall Gazette* 14 Apr. 1885: 3.
  14. *The Queen* (1887): 352.
  15. *Scots Observer* (1889): 576.
  16. Of course, some men, like Morris, eventually came to defend the "decorative arts" in just this way.
  17. *Scots Observer* Aug. 3, 1889.
  18. *Scots Observer* Jan. 19, 1889.
  19. The list of women she covers coincides almost exactly with the figures that were portrayed by famous artists, and that were on display at London's museums.
  20. The female aesthetes, in contrast to the New Women, often had conservative political stances. Alice Meynell also wrote for the *Scots Observer*.
  21. "Dressmaking at Burlington House." *Scots Observer*. (1889): 211.
  22. The letter was to Mr. Huntington Lucca, dated April 17, 1896 (*Ouida: A Memoir* 157).
  23. Alice Meynell, in "Praises of Ouida," from the August 16, 1895 *Pall Mall Gazette*, says that the 1890s-style epigram could be traced to Ouida.
  24. "Ouida's New Novel." originally in May 17, 1889 *Pall Mall Gazette*.
  25. Other male aesthetes also were involved in the theaters, for example, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, who were designing sets for Henry Irving at the Lyceum.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Baudelaire had a large impact on the British. The book, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (1985), by Patricia Clements, details that impact.
2. The Bernhardt teagown was, of course, an identifiably aesthetic style of dress. It was fairly loose, and afforded comfort and freedom of movement.
3. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 1885. "The Relation of Dress to Art." I quote from AC because it is not included in CW.
4. "The Painter of Modern Life" was an 1863 essay that discussed the work of a certain contemporary painter, one who did work mainly in magazines and with subjects taken from the day.
5. Wilde directly repeats this idea when he writes in "Decay" that art is our "spirited protest" against the ugliness and lack of form in nature (AC 290).

6. The essay was first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, and was later edited and re-published in *Intentions* (1891). I use the later version throughout.
7. *Scots Observer*. 16 Aug. 1890.
8. She refers to the ancient Greek oracle of Delphi, who had told people “Know thyself.” She thus connects philosophy with fashion.
9. Neil Sammells argues that Style is the central category for Wilde’s aesthetics. His book is entitled *Wilde Style* (2002).
10. Pater’s “Style” essay was published in the collection *Appreciations* in 1889.
11. “A Note on Some Modern Poets.” *Woman’s World*. Dec. 1888.
12. *Scots Observer*. “Dressmaking at Burlington House.” 12 Jan. 1889.
13. *Scots Observer*. 30 May 1891.
14. Some, including Kathy Psomiades, have pointed out that by the 1870s, the dominant figure for art is “the woman who courts public display—the actress, the dancer, the woman on a stage” (Psomiades 5).
15. *Lady’s World* vol. I.
16. “The Decay of Lying” can be read as a re-telling of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and there are several parallel ideas and passages that open both works.
17. From Wilde’s *Preface to the Picture of Dorian Gray*.
18. *Scots Observer*. Jan. 18, 1890.240.
19. “But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also” (DP 164).
20. Instead, the *Cenci* was never performed in London until the 1880s, and even then, it was not a popular play with famous actors at a West End theater. Rather it was produced by the Shelley Society.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. The novel has a character, Gabriel Nash, probably modeled on Wilde, who busies himself with getting an aspiring actress started on the London stage.
2. The play *Salomé* is something I do not address directly. It is different from the other 1890s plays in that it is very plainly an attempt to make a serious and progressive aesthetic statement. At the same time, I would generally see it as in line with his consumer modernism. He had managed to recruit the most popular actress of the age, Sarah Bernhardt, to be the lead. He wanted it to be a commercial success.
3. In 1897, as he was writing *De Profundis*, Wilde still longed for Louÿs’ approbation. He complains to Lord Alfred Douglas that Douglas did not help Wilde produce artistically. “My real life was with intellectuals like John Gray and Pierre Louÿs” (100).

4. Andreas Huyssen's book is entitled *After the Great Divide*.
5. cf. Neil Sammells' *Wilde Style*.
6. The book was translation of M. Lefébure's history of embroidery. Alan Cole was the son of Henry Cole, one of the founders of the South Kensington Museum. He was also a close friend of J.M. Whistler.
7. Ned Lukacher kindly mentioned this to me when I was giving a paper at the University of Illinois at Chicago.
8. "Shakespeare on Scenery." *Dramatic Review*. March 14, 1885.
9. The description comes from the published *French's Chapbook* of the play, which I am assuming draws from the original production of the play.
10. Whistler, for example, publicly accused him of plagiarizing, and many theater critics accused Wilde of borrowing heavily from established playwrights.
11. An article entitled, "The Stage for the People."
12. Elizabeth Robins does mention that she saw Wilde at Lady Seton's "Ibsen Party" at Durham House in Chelsea. But we do not know what his attitude was. (*Both Sides of the Curtain*. London, 1940. 195, 259.)
13. Given his meager income in the 1880s, he would not have been able to always afford a box. My guess is that he simply does not mention the times he was in the pit or gallery.
14. *Pall Mall Gazette*. 11 Feb. 1887: 1.
15. Such is part of the philosophy of fashion. Baudelaire had written of the aspect of beauty that is interesting precisely because it is about society *right now*.
16. Wilde would in a sense outrage the public with his first-night speech. But that was not the same kind of outrage. The audience was delighted with the play itself.
17. Pearson's source was George Alexander, a fairly reliable source. There are other slightly different versions out there as to just what Wilde said.
18. Wilde is speaking shortly after the opening of *An Ideal Husband*. The piece ran on Jan. 9, 1895.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

1. From Wilde's *Preface to the Picture of Dorian Gray*.
2. I do not discuss *Earnest* much here because the play is much different, dealing with surfaces in a more playful, less fashion-implicated way.
3. Critics like Tracy Davis, in her "Edwardian Management and the Structures of Industrial Capitalism," would argue against locating feminist resistance in figures like flamboyant society women and actresses.
4. Cf. Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*.
5. As Jarlath Killeen has noted, in the play *Earnest*, Wilde even uses the actual rituals of a Baptism and a funeral as materials for his play.

6. Andreas Huyssen, for example, has shown how prevalent this association of mass culture with woman has been.
7. Linda Hutcheon has written about opera singers in similar terms in her work co-written with Michael Hutcheon, *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (2000).
8. Here, as I have argued in Ch. 4, we have a distinct blind-spot in Wilde.
9. Wilde is speaking shortly after the opening of *An Ideal Husband*. The piece ran on Jan. 9, 1895.
10. Cf. "The soul of man under socialism': a (con)textual history," Josephine M. Guy in *Wilde Writings*, U Toronto Press, 2003.
11. Cf. Jarlath Killeen's *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* (2005).
12. Wilde has an unpublished poem in prose entitled "The Actress" in which he similarly explores the complexities of this figure.
13. I transcribe from the MS of the plays from the Lord Chamberlain's Plays in the British Library collection.

## NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

1. I have not focused on a post-colonial reading of Wilde, but one would certainly fit here. Such will be the theme of another book, I hope.
2. Other works developing this new phase include: Sammells' *Wilde Style*, Guy and Small's *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, Waldrep's *Aesthetics of Self-Invention*, as well as the work of people like Dennis Denisoff and Francesca Coppa.

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# Index

## A

- Adorno, Theodor, 46,  
female aesthetes, 2, 13, 37–60, 67–80; see  
also Campbell, Lady Archibald;  
Comyns Carr, Mrs. J.; Corelli,  
Marie; Fane, Violet; Haweis,  
Mary Eliza; Lee, Vernon;  
Meynell, Alice; Ouida; Robins,  
Elizabeth; Tomson/Watson; *Syl-  
via's Journal*; "Wares of Autoly-  
cus"; *Woman's World*
- Alexander, George, 5, 94, 97–99, 104, 117,  
121
- Archer, William, 28, 88, 102–105, 119
- Ardis, Ann L., viii
- Arnold, Matthew, 11, 18, 40, 43, 51–53, 69  
*Culture and Anarchy*, 15, 60  
New Journalism, 23–26, 28, 29  
female aesthetes, 40

## B

- Bailey, Peter, 55
- Balfour, A.J., 3, 4, 108
- Baudelaire, Charles, 61, 67–68, 78–79, 85,  
109
- Beardsley, Aubrey, 38, 89
- Beerbohm Tree, Herbert, 28, 79, 103
- Beere, Mrs. Bernard, 48
- Berger, Peter L. and Ann Bernstein, 12
- Bernhardt, Sarah, 8, 49
- Besant, Walter, 18, 41, 43
- Blunt, Wilfrid Scawen, 4, 145 n. 2
- Bodley Head, The, x, 71, 89

- Booth, Michael, 119
- Boucicault, Dion, 7, 10
- Bowlby, Rachel, 145 n. 5
- Brake, Laurel, 23
- Browning, Robert, 13, 28, 34, 74
- Burne-Jones, E., viii, 5, 40, 72, 95
- Bürger, Peter, 46, 88, 91

## C

- Campbell, Lady Archibald, 55, 59, 66
- Carey, John, 107
- Cave, Richard Allen, 91
- Chekhov, Anton, 100
- Comyns Carr, Joe, 5, 103
- Comyns Carr, Mrs. J., 5, 6, 55, 77
- Consumer goods,  
Clothing Fashion, 5, 51–55, 61–79  
in *Lady Windermere*, 95, 96, 114,  
122, 136  
in Wilde's lectures, 19–22  
Interior Design, viii, 5, 19, 37, 44, 45,  
59, 83, 94–96  
Magazines, ix, 9, 18, 29, 37–61
- Corelli, Marie, 51
- Costume Design, 5, 6, 37, 95
- Crane, Walter, 2, 5–6, 33–34, 94–95

## D

- Douglas, Lord Alfred, 2, 150 n. 3
- Dowling, Linda, 17, 26, 142, 145 n. 1
- D'Oyly-Carte, Richard, 10
- Dramatic Review*, 15, 27, 29, 36, 59, 95
- Duse, Leanora, 120

**E**

- Eagleton, Terry, 120, 143  
 Elcho, Lady, 3, 4, 60, 108  
 Eliot, T.S., 51, 131  
 Ellis-Fermor, Una, 101  
 Ellmann, Richard, x, 16, 17, 147 n. 15,  
 148 n. 24  
*Englishwoman's Review, The*, 143

**F**

- Fane, Violet, 55, 59, 80  
 Fleming, George (Julia Constance  
 Fletcher), 22, 61, 71, 142  
 Foucault, Michel, 91  
 Frith, William, 40

**G**

- Gagnier, Regenia, vii, 53, 88, 91, 142  
 Gardiner, Florence Mary, 49  
 Gere, Charlotte, and Jane Abdy, 3, 5  
 Gilbert, W.S. and Arthur Sullivan, 10, 39,  
 49, 100, 148 n. 26  
 Girton (College), 44, 64  
 Gissing, George, 12, 25, 26, 52, 53, 115  
*Glass of Fashion* (Grundy), 19, 39  
 Godwin, E.W., 2, 5-7, 37, 43, 59, 60, 94,  
 95  
 Grosvenor Gallery, 4, 5, 55, 79, 146 n. 4,  
 148 n. 9  
 Guy, Josephine, and Ian Small, 16, 27, 29,  
 36, 90

**H**

- Hann, Walter, 95, 96, 103  
 Hardy, Thomas, 109, 115  
 Hauptmann, Gerhardt, 100, 101, 120  
 Haweis, Mary Eliza, 20, 40-43, 51, 61,  
 70, 71  
 Hearst, Wm. Randolph, 21  
 Holroyd, Michael, 26  
 Huyssen, Andreas, 46, 92, 142

**I**

- Ibsen, Henrik, 66, 67, 88, 99, 100, 121  
*Doll's House, A*, 101, 102, 107, 126-  
 127  
*Hedda Gabler*, 92, 102, 103, 108

- Independent Theatre, 88, 100, 102, 108,  
 127  
 International Health Exhibition (1884), 37,  
 123

**J**

- Jackson, Russell, x  
 James, Henry, 89, 97, 104-107, 111  
 Jones, H.A., 13, 95, 100, 103, 106-110  
 Joyce, James, viii, 68, 130

**K**

- Kant, Immanuel, 30, 64, 68, 71, 143  
 Kaplan, Joel, and Julia Stowell, 92, 95, 98,  
 99, 110, 117, 145 n. 2  
 Kennedy, H.A., 93, 94  
 Kernahan, Coulson, 56  
 Ksinan, Catharine, 65, 148 n. 2

**L**

- Lady's Pictorial, The*, 18, 41, 42, 148 n. 6  
*Lady's World, The*, 41, 43-45, 48, 49  
 Langtry, Lillie, 6-9, 33, 39, 40, 47, 50, 56,  
 79, 92, 125, 126  
 Lee, Vernon, 46  
*Lord Anerley* (Quinton, Mark), 135  
 Louÿs, Pierre, 90, 110, 150 n. 3  
*Illusion* (Leclercq, Pierre), 135  
 Liberty's Co., 7, 37, 49, 53, 96, 123, 130

**M**

- Mason, A.E.W., 97, 98, 123  
 Meynell, Alice, 55, 59, 146 n. 5, 149 n.  
 20, 23  
 modernism, viii ix, 73, 89  
     aesthetics of surface, viii, ix, 28-31, 44-  
     46, 60-62, 67-73  
     theories of, 46, 89, 91, 141-143  
 Moore, George, 25, 102  
 Morris, William, 2, 7, 20, 40-50, 53, 58, 94,  
 95, 117, 130

**N**

- New Journalism, 12, 15, 16, 21-31, 36-38,  
 52, 53  
 New Woman, The, 46, 47, 63, 64, 66, 137  
 Newman, John Henry, 118, 141

**O**

Offenbach, Jacques, 100, 146 n. 5  
 Olian, JoAnne, 79  
 Ouida, 20, 22, 50, 52, 55, 57, 58

**P**

*Pall Mall Gazette*, 15-39, 53, 54, 67, 90, 97  
 Pater, Walter, 18, 25-32, 34, 35, 43, 57,  
 58, 71, 73, 128  
 Pearson, Hesketh, 31, 111, 151 n. 17  
 Pinero, A.W., 100, 102, 121, 134  
 Plato, 80, 118, 143, 147 n. 17, 150 n. 10  
 "Poet and the Puppets," (Brookfield, C.),  
 87, 96, 98, 145 n.2  
 Powell, Kerry, 2  
 Pre-Raphaelites, viii, 4, 5, 33, 45, 51, 95,  
 116, 131  
 Psomiades, Kathy Alexis, 1, 121, 134, 150  
 n. 14  
 Public image, 54, 73, 85, 92, 114-127,  
 140-144  
*Punch*, 5, 8, 9, 39, 41, 103

**Q**

*Queen, The*, 42, 43, 48, 49, 92, 105

**R**

Rational Dress Society, 48, 50, 66  
 Reade, Charles, 84, 135  
 Reynolds, Sir Joshua, 77, 123, 146 n. 4  
 Ritual, 57, 76, 88-92, 112-114, 117-133,  
 139-144  
 Robins, (later, Robins-Pennell) Elizabeth,  
 71, 103, 146 n. 5, 151 n. 12  
 Rossetti, D.G., viii, ix, 3, 5, 9, 41, 72, 123  
 Rowell, George, 13  
 Ruskin, John, 10, 20, 22, 40, 41, 45, 46,  
 50

**S**

Said, Edward W., viii, 141, 145 n.4  
 Sammells, Neil, 87, 88, 141, 150 n. 9, 151  
 n. 5, 152 n. 2  
 Sardou, Vitorien, 99, 105  
*St. James's Gazette*, 11, 99, 113  
 St. James's Theatre, 104, 106  
 Schaffer, Talia, 2, 38, 45, 47, 56, 57

Scott, Clement, 98, 99, 102, 110, 111, 117,  
 119, 120

Set Design, 93, 95, 96

Shaw, G.B., 19, 24, 26, 28, 63, 90, 92, 96,  
 100, 102, 108, 109, 120

Small, Ian, x, 16, 27, 36, 70

Souls, the, 2-4, 7, 44, 57, 103

Stead, W.T., 15, 21, 22, 25, 28, 29, 32

Stedman, Jane W., 97

Sweetman David, 145 n.3

*Sylvia's Journal*, 56

**T**

Terry, Ellen, 5-8, 40, 49, 79

Terry, Marion, 7, 121

Tomson, Graham R. (Rosamund Marriott  
 Watson), 2, 22, 41, 49, 52, 56,  
 57, 61, 82, 142  
 aesthetic theory of, 66-70, 73-78

**V**

Victoria, Queen, 43, 54

Victoria & Albert (South Kensington)  
 Museum, 6, 7, 37, 77, 94, 123,  
 151 n. 6

**W**

Waldrep, Shelton, 152 n. 2

"Wares of Autolykus," 57, 146 n. 5

Whistler, J.M., 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 30, 40, 59,  
 67, 94, 117

Wiener, Joel H., 23, 24

Wilde, Constance, 17, 47, 48, 64

Wilde, Lady Jane, 18

Wilde, Oscar,

Journalism

*Court and Society Review*, 19, 29

*Dramatic Review*, 15, 27, 29, 36,  
 59, 95

*Pall Mall Gazette*, 13, 57, 58, 63, 97  
 development of, 15-19, 22-37

Wilde writing for, 49, 53, 54, 67  
*The Woman's World*, 4, 6, 13, 17, 19,  
 22, 134

aesthetic theory in, 61-65, 73-78,  
 89-92

Wilde's editorship, 31, 37-60

## Plays

- A Woman of No Importance*, 4, 48, 94, 95, 103, 105, 116, 119  
*An Ideal Husband*, x, 88, 94, 95, 110, 116, 122  
*Duchess of Padua*, *The*, 97, 98  
*Importance of Being Earnest*, *The*, 93  
*Lady Windermere's Fan*, ix, 4, 31  
 as melodrama, 119-120  
 Mrs. Erlynne, 114-117, 126, 134-137  
 production of, 87, 95-99, 108, 110-112  
 reactions to, 89, 99-106  
*Salomé*, 27, 87, 120, 150 n. 2  
*Vera; or, the Nihilists*, 8, 98

## Prose and Poetry

- "Ballad of Reading Gaol, The," 84  
 "Critic as Artist, The," 48, 107, 128  
 modernist aesthetics, 60, 69, 118, 131, 140  
 "De Profundis," x, 67, 70, 85, 92, 109, 132  
 "Decay of Lying, The," viii, x, 59, 84

modernist aesthetics, 61, 68-73, 76, 98, 116, 120-127, 139, 140

*Intentions* (the book), ix, 17, 21, 88, 98, 135

"Soul of Man Under Socialism," vii, 15, 26, 47, 48, 81, 82, 107, 130

The Fairy Tales, 4, 53, 135, 136, 147 n. 20

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 10, 11, 46, 57, 80, 98, 113, 124, 125, 129, 132, 144

"The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," 66, 80, 132, 133

"Truth of Masks, The," 6, 59, 60, 70, 88, 95

Wilde, Willie, 18

Worth, Charles Frederick, and Maison Worth, 49, 51, 53, 63, 79, 92, 94, 96

## Y

Yeats, W.B., 58, 108, 130, 140  
 Young, Iris Marion, 62, 129, 130, 139