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The Drama of Oscar Wilde: Contesting Victorian Gender Dynamics.

PhD in Drama
2014
Aideen Kerr

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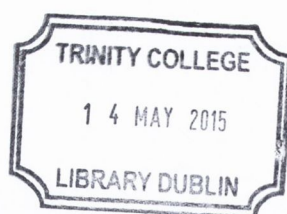
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Previous and Forthcoming Publications.

Part of this thesis has been published in Dr Lisa Fitzpatrick's monograph *Performing Feminisms in Ireland*, published by Carysfort Press in 2013, and in University College Dublin's postgraduate research journal *Emerging Perspectives* in Autumn 2011. A forthcoming chapter on *Vera or The Nihilists* is to be published in Dr Chris Collins and Dr Mary Caulfield's book *The Rest is History: Performance and the Historical Imagination*, published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2014.



Thesis 10563

*For the three people who continue to inspire me the most: my mum and dad, and, of course, the
great Mr. Oscar Wilde.*

Table of Contents

.....

Thesis Declaration. ii

 Previous and Forthcoming Publications.ii

Table of Contents..... iv

 Illustrations.vi

Acknowledgements. vii

Summary. ix

Introduction: A Challenge to Victorian Masculinity. 1

 A Wildean Background..... 1

 Methodology.....7

 Sexual Relations Between Men. 16

 Historicizing Gender. 18

 Thesis Thoughts and Structure.....34

Chapter One: Contesting Gender Roles in Victorian Society. 37

The Lady’s World to The Woman’s World.41

 Cultural Connections and Story-telling.51

 Multiple Cultural Identifications.....54

 Wilde’s Sexuality and the Trials.....61

Chapter Two: Modern Modes of Femininity in *Vera or The Nihilists* (1880) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883). 75

 Background, Production Details and Plot Summary.77

 Vera’s Quest and Gender Inversion.....82

 Theories of Suicide and Agency.....83

The Duchess of Padua: An Introduction.106

 Challenging Marriage and Becoming a Public Figure.....110

 Guido’s Submission to Patriarchy and the Duchess.119

 Ascanio and Guido’s Prohibited Relationship.....127

Chapter Three: The Satirisation of Gender Roles and Marriage in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.....130

 Production Details and Plot Summary.....131

 Lady Windermere’s Questionable Morality.133

 Mrs Erlynne: An Unconventional Matriarch and Transgressing Alternative Spaces.....137

 Lord Windermere’s Deception.159

Chapter Four: Queer Characters and Contesting Gender and Sexuality in *Salome* (1891). 164

 Production Details and Plot Summary. 164

 The Female Life Cycle Empowered and Omens of Death. 169

 Salome’s Agency. 171

 Salome and Herodias: A Matriarchal Union..... 178

 Beardsley’s Queer Illustrations..... 187

Chapter Five: Contesting Marriage and the Traditional Family Unit in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895)..... 201

A Woman of No Importance: Plot Summary..... 202

 The Matriarch in *A Woman*..... 204

 Gerald Arbuthnot: An Object of Exchange. 207

Background and Plot of *An Ideal Husband*. 215

 Lady Chiltern’s Superficial Morality and Mrs Cheveley’s Penchant for Blackmail. 220

 Chiltern’s Scandal. 223

 A Modern Relationship..... 225

Chapter Six: Gender Roles in *Earnest*: “Why should there be one law for men, and another for women?” (*Collins Complete Works* 415)..... 230

 Plot Summary and Background. 231

 Modern Women: Cecily Cardew, Gwendolen Fairfax and Lady Bracknell..... 235

 Female Spaces and Alternative Narratives. 243

 Algernon’s Hopes to Acquire Status and Ernest: An Object of Exchange..... 249

Conclusion. 258

 Bibliography. 261

 Secondary Sources..... 262

Illustrations.

From: 'Oscar Wilde Complete Illustrated Works' by CRW Publishing Limited, London, 2010; pages 492 - 517.

Figure One: Title-Page of <i>Salome</i> by Aubrey Beardsley, 1894.....	193
Figure Two: "The Woman and the Moon" by Beardsley.....	194
Figure Three: "Toilette" One by Beardsley.....	194
Figure Four: "Toilette" Two by Beardsley.....	195
Figure Five: "The Peacock Skirt" by Beardsley.....	195
Figure Six: "The Black Cape" by Beardsley.....	196
Figure Seven: "The Climax" by Beardsley.....	196
Figure Eight: "Enter Herodias" by Beardsley.....	197
Figure Nine: "The Eyes of Herod" by Beardsley.....	197
Figure Ten: "Fin" by Beardsley.....	198

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Summary.

This thesis will analyse Oscar Wilde's dramatic characters and propose that he challenged the typical Victorian gender roles on the stage, and re-imagined more modern modes of masculinity and femininity in his plays. In his plays Wilde's unconventionally strong female characters and his often passive male characters satirise the essentialist Victorian perception of gender, and suggest the need for more liberating gender roles both on the stage and in Victorian society. The characters from Wilde's earliest tragic plays to his final popular plays will be considered, in order to provide a coherent examination of the dramatic characters throughout his oeuvre.ⁱ Wilde scholars have focused on Wilde's more well-known characters in his later 1890s popular plays to date, such as those in *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *An Ideal Husband*. For the first time this study explores a range of characters from his earlier plays to his final plays, in order to present a chronological study of the gender dynamics in his plays. Wilde's plays will be considered as a celebration of the spectrum of gender and sexuality, and are analysed according to Judith Butler's gender studies framework. Many of his plays propose unconventional characters and alternative Victorian family and matriarchal units, defying the idealisation of the Victorian patriarch and implying the need for more equal gender roles. Wilde's strong female characters pervade the public and private spheres, while some of his male characters are confined to the domestic sphere. His characters challenge the Victorian conception of gender and are an alternative to it.

Wilde's identity and gender will be explored according to Richard Bauman's definition of performance; "all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, according to which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a

ⁱ This thesis analyses Wilde's completed plays; he also wrote two plays which remain unfinished: *A Florentine Tragedy* and *La Sainte Courtisane*, both plays were most likely written in 1894. According to Richard Ellmann: "The fifteen months from December 1893 to the beginning of the legal proceedings against Queensberry, with presages of coming disaster thick around him, were as productive as the beginning of the 1890s when all his powers seemed to find expression [...] During these months Wilde also wrote *A Florentine Tragedy* and most of *La Sainte Courtisane*. [...] Wilde seems to have intended a trio of short plays, variations on love's cross-purposes, but could not finish them. He blamed their incompleteness on the return of Douglas" from Egypt (387-8).

remembered original model of that action" (Carlson 5). I will propose that his strong relationships with Victorian women reflected his support for the emerging Suffragist movement. His editorship of a Victorian magazine, entitled *The Woman's World* (1887-1889), will be analysed and considered as an invaluable public forum which granted Victorian women a voice on topics such as Women in Politics, Women and Education, Women and Industry and Women and Art. Wilde's editorship of the magazine also contested the segregation of gender roles by publishing the opinions of women and men side by side in the same magazine. Wilde challenged the categorization of individuals in society, and his own life and his dramatic characters reflect this desire to contest the accepted frameworks of gender, identity and sexuality. As Richard Allen Cave notes: "As a professed individualist, Wilde's adult life was devoted to resisting such contaminating categorisation; and many of the celebrated inversions and subversions characterised his wit were calculated to explode such absolutism" (224). This thesis also proposes that Wilde's own identity challenged Victorian masculinity. Wilde's complex sexual identity was exemplified by his marriage to Constance Lloyd and his sexual relations with Lord Alfred Douglas.ⁱⁱ Wilde's gender and sexuality contested the Victorian heterosexual hegemony and oppositional gender roles. His complex sexuality is evident by his simultaneous heterosexual relations and sexual relations with men. Wilde's heterosexuality, which included his important role as a husband and father, has been overlooked by many scholars, including Francesca Coppa, who claims his three stages of public identity, but neglects this essential aspect of Wilde's sexuality.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱ Wilde had a lifelong relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, who was commonly known as Bosie. Wilde met Douglas through his friend and literary executor Robert Ross, most likely in 1891 and reunited with him in 1897 after his release from prison. Their relationship continued up until Wilde's death in November 1900.

ⁱⁱⁱ Coppa's three stages of Wilde's public performance of identity are examined in Chapter One. Wilde's heterosexual identity is also examined.

Introduction: A Challenge to Victorian Masculinity.

In order to fully comprehend the context and setting of my research it is necessary to explain the adoption of particular terms in this thesis. This thesis examines Wilde's identity throughout his lifetime and seven of his plays in total; the thesis chapters are divided by way of a loose chronological order to reflect the artistic and creative development of Wilde's dramatic output. Each thesis chapter concentrates on one play apart from Chapter Two and Chapter Five. Chapter Two examines *Vera or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua* which are distinctive from Wilde's remaining oeuvre, as they are his early tragedies. Chapter Five analyses *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* as many themes in these plays overlap. Despite the thesis structure there are references and comparisons to the other plays as many of them share similar tropes. In writing this thesis an analysis of Wilde's dramatic oeuvre is prioritised; it is the plays and the primary sources from *The Lady Eccles Bequest* and the *British Newspaper* archive at the British Library, London, which are the most important material in this study.¹ Although the theoretical frameworks adopted are essential, they take shape around the plays and the primary sources rather than vice versa.

A Wildean Background.

In order to contextualise this study of Wilde it is important to note some details from his childhood, family, and his early life in Ireland. Due to Wilde's varied cultural connections to Ireland, England and France, it is also essential to realise fully the potential influence of Wilde's Irish background. Wilde was born in Dublin on the 16th of October 1854, and was the second of three children born to Lady Jane Wilde (1821-1896) and Sir William Wilde (1815-1876). Wilde's father was a renowned eye and ear surgeon and he published widely on Irish folklore,

¹ The Wilde archive in The British Library is known as *The Lady Eccles Bequest* and it is the main source of archival and primary source material in my thesis. The British Library boasts the second biggest collection of Wildean manuscripts and related materials in the world; the biggest is the William Andrews Clark Library, at UCLA. The *British Newspaper* archive is available for members online and is in association with The British Library, London.

Irish archaeology and Irish history.² His publications included: *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852), *Ireland Past and Present* (1864) and *Lough Corrib its Shores and Islands: with Notices of Lough Mask* (1867). Wilde's mother was a gifted poet, writer and editor, and her work was often published in Ireland's *The Nation* newspaper and other journals which reflected her staunch Republicanism.³ In 1845 she stumbled upon the momentous funeral of the Irish nationalist and poet Thomas Davis in the Dublin streets, and upon learning who he was she began reading his poetry, and over time she became hugely influenced by him.⁴ Lady Wilde's first collection of poetry, *Poems*, was published in 1864, with a second collection following in 1867 entitled *Poems: Second Series: Translations*. It is impossible to measure the influence of Wilde's parents' political beliefs and interest in Irish traditions and folklore on the young Wilde.⁵ However, it is important to be aware of these cultural and literary influences because, apart from his education, the domestic sphere would have been where Wilde's initial encounter with literature and culture took place. Noreen Doody notes Wilde's bicultural upbringing: "Wilde was the recipient of a bicultural inheritance: while he was brought up speaking English in an English literary tradition, he belonged to a family who were deeply acquainted with ancient Irish culture, its folk tales, legends, history and archaeology" (248). These Irish and English influences were exercised on Wilde during his time at home, and support his later interest in maintaining close connections with both Ireland and England. Oscar and his older brother Willie

² Sir William Wilde was knighted by the Queen in 1864 for his outstanding work as medical advisor on the 1841 census (pre-famine) and as chief commissioner on the 1851 (post-famine) Irish census.

³ In 1848 Lady Wilde wrote an article "Jacta Alea Est" ("The Die is Cast"), which was published in *The Nation* newspaper and called the people of Ireland to take up arms against the English in Ireland. Following the publication of this article the editor of *The Nation*, Charles Gavin Duffy, was brought to court where Lady Wilde publicly proclaimed her authorship of the piece of writing so that he avoided arrest (Holland, *The Wilde Album* 15). The authorities ignored Lady Wilde's confession and *The Nation* newspaper was subsequently shut down and Duffy was arrested.

⁴ Wilde noted Thomas Davis's influence on his mother in an unpublished essay from his 1882 American lecture tour: "[...] the other poetess of this movement was a young girl [...] And one day in 1845 standing at the window of her lordly home she saw a great funeral pass in its' solemn trappings down the street, and followed by crowd after crowd of men and women in bitter and unrestrained grief – [...] and learned that it was the funeral of one Thomas Davis a poet [...] that evening she bought and read his poems and knew for the first time the meaning of the word country – of the quality of Speranza's poems I probably should not speak – for criticism is disarmed before love" ("The Irish Poets of 1848 II": MS 81638/3019A).

⁵ Davis Coakley denotes the influence of Wilde's parents and Irish folklore on Wilde: "Through the scholarship of his parents and his holidays in the west of Ireland, Wilde became familiar with the oral tradition of the Celts. He was also steeped in the literary traditions of his native city, which had produced such great writers as Jonathan Swift, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Charles Robert Maturin" (3).

both attended the academically renowned Portora Royal School at Enniskillen, where Wilde's Greek studies began. Wilde had a tumultuous relationship with his older brother Willie who later established a career as a journalist and wrote for the *Telegraph*. The youngest of the three children was Isola Wilde, who died tragically in 1867 at the age of ten from meningitis, after developing a sudden fever. Isola's death greatly distressed her brother Oscar who was only thirteen and at boarding school at the time, and his poem *Requiescat*, written many years after her death evokes his grief.⁶ Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland notes: "Oscar decorated an envelope and preserved in it a lock of her hair which he kept until his own death" (*The Wilde Album* 22). Sir William Wilde fathered three children before his marriage to Lady Wilde; a son, Henry Wilson, was born in 1838, and Sir William Wilde ensured that he was educated and he finally became an assistant to Wilde in his practice. Wilde's two eldest half-sisters were also financially supported by his father. Emily was born in 1847 and Mary was born in 1849; they were brought up by Sir William Wilde's brother, the Reverend Ralph Wilde, as his wards. They both died tragically in an accident at a ball in Monaghan at the age of twenty-two and twenty-four. The women were dancing past an open fire when one sister's gown caught fire and the other tried to save her, but both were severely burned and died.⁷ Although the Wildes were an ambitious and admired family, behind the closed doors of their Dublin homes, William Wilde had fathered children outside of marriage, and they suffered the tragic loss of multiple family members.

At school Wilde topped his class excelling at Classics and Greek, and in 1871 he won a Royal School Scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin, where he matriculated a week before his

⁶ Wilde's poem *Requiescat* depicts the influence of Isola's death on her brother: "Tread lightly, she is near / Under the snow, / Speak gently, she can hear, / The daisies grow. All her bright golden hair / Tarnished with rust, / She that was young and fair / Fallen to dust. Lily-white, white as snow, / She hardly knew / She was a woman, so / Sweetly she grew. Coffin-board, heavy stone, / Lie on her breast, / I vex my heart alone, / She is at rest. Peace, Peace, she cannot hear / Lyre or sonnet, / All my life's buried here, / Heap earth upon it" (*Collins Complete Works* 748-9).

⁷ There are conflicting reports of how this tragic accident occurred; most reports claim that the two sisters were dancing when one of the sister's ball gowns caught fire, and when the other sister tried to help her, her own gown caught fire and they were both burned to death. Holland claims: "one of the sisters' dresses caught alight as she danced past an open fire. The other, in an attempt to save her, was badly burned as well and both died of their injuries" (*The Wilde Album* 22).

seventeenth birthday. He came first in his year at Classics in Trinity College and was awarded the highest undergraduate honour in 1873: a Foundation Scholarship. In 1874 he achieved two further accolades; he won Trinity College's Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek, and he attained a Demyship or scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he received a First in Classics in 1878. He also won the coveted Oxford Newdigate Prize for poetry for his poem *Ravenna* in 1878. During his years at Oxford Wilde wrote and published various reviews and poetry, establishing himself as a man of Letters.⁸ On a visit to Dublin during his lecture tour in November 1883 Wilde proposed to Constance Lloyd (1859-1898), an Irishwoman who also lived in London.⁹ They were married in May 1884 and honeymooned in Paris and Dieppe, and subsequently took a lease on a house in Tite Street, London. Constance was soon pregnant with their first son, Cyril, who was born in 1885, and their second son, Vyvyan, was born in 1886. As well as the relationship he had with his wife, Wilde cherished the close relationship he had with his mother. Lady Wilde was widely published and translated Johann Meinhold's gothic novel *Sidonia the Sorceress* in 1849, and worked on her husband's folklore collections after his death. Declan Kiberd notes Wilde's close bond with his mother and her influential feminist beliefs on him, Wilde's: "love of her was melodramatic but genuine, as was his repeated espousal in later writings of her doctrines – especially her belief in a woman's right to work and to engage in political activity" (*Inventing Ireland* 34). The Wildes various literary and political activities reflected a belief in gender equality. Lady Wilde was involved in the Young Ireland Movement of the 1840s, and her poems and articles in *The Nation* newspaper advocated Home Rule and women's rights. Lady Wilde's participation in the public sphere, traditionally a male space, depicted her rejection of the typical idea of conventional Victorian femininity. According to Kiberd, Wilde "had seen in his mother a woman who could edit journals and organize political campaigns in an age when women had no right to vote; and it was from her that he inherited his

⁸ As well as winning the prestigious Newdigate Prize for *Ravenna* Wilde had articles and reviews published in magazines including the Oxford College literary magazine *The Oxford Spirit Lamp*.

⁹ Constance Lloyd was the wealthy daughter of a well-known barrister, but her father died when she was sixteen. She lived with her grandfather in London, where she had met Wilde on numerous occasions through mutual acquaintances. Constance was a well-educated and independent-minded young woman, who was most likely impressed by Wilde's conversational skills and his appreciation for art, drama and literature.

lifelong commitment to feminism" (*Inventing Ireland* 40). Wilde's approval of his mother's participation in the public sphere can be seen from Wilde's letters to his contemporaries. In a letter addressed to his friend, Oscar M. Knowles, Wilde evoked his admiration for his mother:

You probably know my mother's name as the "Speranza" of the Nation newspaper in 1848 – I don't think that has dimmed the fine enthusiasm of that pen which set the roaring Ireland in a blaze. I should like so much to have the privilege of introducing you to my mother – all brilliant people should cross each other's cycles, like some of the nicest planets (MS 81699: 1881).

In "The Irish Poets of 1848 II", written in America and dated 1881, Wilde claimed that Speranza was a leading poetess of the Irish poetic movement: "[...] the other poetess of this movement was a young girl [...] of the quality of Speranza's poems I probably should not speak – for criticism is disarmed before love" (MS 81638/3019A). Wilde's remarkable identification and idealisation of his mother could be read as a challenge to the segregation of Victorian gender roles. These letters depicted Wilde's support of female entry into the traditionally male public sphere.

As well as Wilde's admiration of his mother, there were many Victorian actresses that he appreciated, such as Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry. His wish for Sarah Bernhardt to be a part of *Salome* can be evidenced in his reflection on the banning of the play in 1892.

I met Mdme Sarah Bernhardt at Mr. Henry Irving's. She had heard of my play and asked me to read it to her. I did so, and she at once expressed the wish to play the title-role. [...] We have been rehearsing for three weeks, the costumes, scenery, and everything has been prepared, and we are naturally disappointed. Still all are looking forward now to producing it for the first time in Paris, where the actor is appreciated and the stage is regarded as an artistic medium ("Salome"; *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 29th June 1892, p. 2).

In a letter to Ellen Terry in 1881 Wilde expressed his admiration of her acting technique in a recent production, and he dedicated a poem to her which was inspired by her performance onstage:

Will you accept from me a poem which I have written to you in your character of Henetta Minmid as a small proof of my great and loyal admiration for your splendid artistic powers, and the noble Tenderness and pathos of your acting. No actress has ever affected me as you have. What I have said in my sonnet to you expresses quite inadequately the great effect your acting has had on me (MS 81699).

Not only is Wilde's admiration of women evident here, but it is his unconventional support and admiration of working women that is interesting. The influence of these personal relationships with women can be seen in Wilde's plays; many of his central characters are women, and Wilde often privileges an interrogation of female relationships over male relationships. His editorship of *The Woman's World* mirrored his belief in a woman's right to participate in a public world; a domain which was almost exclusively occupied by men. Coppa notes how Wilde's public association with women and his overt admiration of them was unconventional, and probably contributed to the public's resentment of him in 1895; "In his very public adoration of Lilly Langtree and Sarah Bernhardt, in his public obsession with fashion and interior design, in his editorship of *The Woman's World*, Wilde was not only effeminate but was displaying that effeminacy in ways potentially threatening to the larger culture" (79). As a Victorian man Wilde's public support of working women would have been unusual. Wilde's own roles in his personal life would have meant that he occupied the public and private spheres simultaneously. His role as a father and husband would have been mainly evident in the private sphere, while his involvement in *The Woman's World* displayed his occupation of the public sphere, and in the case of the magazine, his occupation of a female space. Coppa references Stetz who claims that Wilde moved much more easily between public and private spheres than most Victorian men.

Margaret Diane Stetz describes Wilde as "biosocial", pointing out that while most Victorian men could, and in fact did, spend all of their time in the all-male environments

of university, office, and club, Wilde moved easily among both men and women. Furthermore, Wilde was comfortable with women both in the traditional (female, effeminate) drawing-room setting and within the workplace; in fact, Stetz emphasizes that Wilde particularly 'befriended women who worked, especially women who worked in the arts', and that these women 'were creatures to be viewed with suspicion, if not hostility' by other men of the time (79-80).

Wilde's unconventional movement between these spheres, and his numerous close connections with working women, for example in his magazine, depicted his support of working women in society. While Wilde's role as a husband exemplified his heterosexual identity, his sexual relations with other men contested the assumed heterosexuality of Victorian men. Wilde's dramatic characters and his own multi-faceted identity will be considered in light of various theoretical frameworks.

Methodology.

It is important to introduce the main theoretical frameworks in this thesis. Judith Butler's theories of gender and performance studies provide the main framework for an analysis of the gender roles and sexualities celebrated in Wilde's plays. Wilde's identity is also noted in relation to these frameworks. Butler has published many monographs on the operations of gender in society, and these books have paved the way for thinking about gender in a new and more liberating way. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), is an important text for my analysis. In it Butler proposes that gender is a performed and repeated set of stylised acts in time, which is constructed by the performing body, and exists in relation to heteronormative expectations of what femininity and masculinity should be. Butler asserts that: "gender is unnatural, a cultural construction", and in Wilde's plays the performative nature of gender is emphasised (*Gender Trouble* 21). Sos Eltis evokes the connection between Wilde and Butler, and the influence of Wilde on contemporary thinkers such as Butler: "Wilde's model of a non-essential, performative self has proved influential and attractive to modern critics, in

particular in his anticipation of Judith Butler's theories of the performativity of gender. But the notion of identity expressed and realized through performance was not necessarily antithetical to extant nineteenth-century notions of selfhood" (Killeen 137). In his plays Wilde often challenged Victorian notions of femininity and masculinity; contesting the existing and oppressive frameworks and presenting alternative roles for men and women. Wilde and Butler reject the biological and essentialist view of gender that predominated in Victorian society. Butler prioritises a more liberal vision of gender, which includes a recognition of gender and sexuality that does not conform to the heteronormative framework of gender in a patriarchal society. Butler recognises the constructivist nature of gender and claims that gender absorbs sex:

If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this 'sex' except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that 'sex' becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access... construction [...] is the divine performative, bringing into being and exhaustively constituting that which it names, or, rather, it is that kind of transitive referring which names and inaugurates at once. For something to be constructed, according to this view of construction, is for it to be created and determined through that process (*Bodies that Matter* 5).

Butler's acknowledgment of the power of gender construction and its predominating influence over sex is important to note. She argues that the social performance of gender challenges the perceived biological determinism of sex, a process which is evident in Wilde's plays such as *Salome*. In *Salome* Wilde's protagonist's blurred gender contests the biological determinism of sex, by performing a dual gender identity in the play. Wilde played on this process even further by using ambiguous and gender neutral costume in the illustrations for the plays which he commissioned.¹⁰ Rather than viewing masculinity and femininity as an oppositional and narrow binary structure, Butler recognises society's desire to regulate bodies that are outside of this

¹⁰ Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of *Salome* are examined in Chapter Four.

accepted framework. For example a male body is not necessarily heterosexual, but would have been recognised as such by Victorian society. Butler's perception of gender as a flexible construct reflects the fluid and complex nature of gender, and its ongoing development. Wilde's play with gender in *Salome* is indicative of gender as a fluid, not a static construct.

Another of Butler's seminal monographs, *Undoing Gender* (2004), portrays the natural desire people have to be acknowledged and legitimised: a desire that originates from operating social norms, rather than from an individual's personhood. This desire can be linked to Erving Goffman's belief in an individual's desire to perform an identity to an audience that recognise it as legitimate. Goffman's definition of performance evokes the roles of performer and audience: "to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (32). Goffman's proposition denotes the performative process which individuals are constantly a part of in society, an identity or a role in which the audience either legitimise or reject. In *Gender Trouble* Butler notes the relationship between heterosexuality and the construction of a "normative" gender dynamic. She argues that sexualities which deviate from heterosexuality challenge the existing gender dynamic in society.

[...] How do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man [...] normative sexuality fortifies normative gender. Briefly, one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender (*Gender Trouble* xi).

If normative sexuality fortifies normative gender as Butler suggests, then non-normative sexuality or the implication that sexuality is differentiated as such, challenges the gender and sexual hierarchy. Butler claims that the binary gender dichotomy only provides a narrow framework to conceptualise gender. It is through recognition of the performed framework of

gender that the construction of gender can be challenged. Butler provides an insightful reflection on the concept of gender and its potential to inscribe and contest oppressive gender roles:

Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place [...] those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance [...] a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption (*Undoing Gender* 42).

Butler's insight on gender portrays a belief in gender as a spectrum, which includes many different instances and performances of gender and sexuality, and all of these performances are legitimate and should be included and accepted by society. Wilde's celebration of different performances of gender and sexuality in his plays can be linked to Butler's theoretical framework.

Gender is a social process for Butler, and involves learnt behaviours which are constantly developing and changing over time. Wilde's plays provided him with an opportunity to challenge the gender essentialism on the Victorian stage; his alternative characters reflect a preference for a constructivist approach to gender. Butler notes the subversive nature of gender, which can be applied to Wilde's expression of sexuality; such as his heterosexual marriage and his sexual relations with Douglas. Another aspect that Butler notes is the reality in which gender is reproduced and contested. Wilde constantly reproduced his own unconventional sexuality, which disputed the narrow conceptions of gender and sexuality in Victorian society. His sexual relations with Douglas challenged the assumed correlation between Victorian men and heterosexuality, questioning the compulsory belief in heterosexual masculinity. By contesting various identities and Victorian hegemonic masculinity, Wilde

acknowledged the complex nature of identity and gender, as well as their ongoing development over time. Butler proposes various methods by which one can challenge the perceived norms in society. The idea of a norm, in excluding instances of gender or sexuality outside of this reductive framework, is a dangerous concept which needs to be contested: "If gender is performative then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance. [...] these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as nonnatural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation" (Butler *Undoing Gender* 218). Butler suggests that the subversive nature of gender and performance calls governing norms into question; Wilde's challenge of gender roles in his plays is an example of the subversive potential of gender. By challenging gender norms Wilde exposed the constructive nature of these unnatural and oppressive expectations that regulated gender in the Victorian world. According to Butler, performance incorporates the potential to disrupt the boundaries of normative roles and expectations; Wilde's progressive dramatic characters challenge traditional gender roles. In the context of Victorian society, Wilde re-worked the norm: the norm being hegemonic masculinity and strict heterosexuality, and his plays continue to push the boundaries by challenging the Victorian gender power dynamic. In Wilde's case the norm was represented by his marriage to Constance Lloyd; his masculinity was exemplified by this expression of heterosexuality, which was an important facet of his identity. The regulatory powers represented by the English law and government attempted to regulate Wilde's sexuality in 1895. The removal of him from society reinforced the stringent regulation of gender and sexuality.

Another example that displayed Wilde's penchant for contesting the norm was exemplified by his unconventional feminist tendencies. In exploring Wilde's feminist tendencies the feminist objective and the feminist movement must be defined. Butler notes an important distinction between the feminist objective and the movement of feminism.

I think it is fair to say that feminists everywhere seek a more substantial equality for women, and that they seek a more just arrangement of social and political institutions [...] Feminism [...] is a movement that moves forward precisely by bringing critical attention to bear on its premises in an effort to become more clear about what it means and to begin to negotiate the conflicting interpretations, the irrepressible democratic cacophony of its identity (*Gender Trouble* 174-175).

In “seeking a more substantial equality for women”, Wilde’s need to challenge traditional Victorian gender roles in his plays displays a feminist sympathy. Wilde’s female characters, many of whom demand: “a more just arrangement of social and political institutions” between men and women will be analysed in later chapters. Gayle Austin’s feminist approach to drama is useful in its application to Wilde’s construction of female characters on the Victorian stage. Austin’s feminist framework “means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not” (Austin 2). One of the major advantages of Austin’s materialist feminist approach and Butler’s gender lens is the prominent position given to questions of class, race, and sexual preference which receive little treatment in liberal or radical feminism. Austin claims that a material feminist framework: “makes it imperative that other categories of oppression be considered, along with that of gender” (Austin: 6). The material feminist lens is appropriate when considering Wilde, his dramatic output and his personal life, as it is fundamental to consider the roles of gender, sexuality and class in this context. A feminist lens that focused only on gender would be too reductive in its consideration of Wilde and his dramatic output. Butler implies the exclusivity of a binary framework which “comes at a cost”, and reinforces the need to think about gender, class and sexuality in a more liberating way. In order to interpret Wilde’s dramatic characters Austin’s material feminist framework must be defined: “1. Minimizes biological differences between men and women, 2. Stresses material conditions of production such as history, race, class, gender, 3. Group more important than the individual” (Austin 6). Austin’s three stages of feminist criticism are a useful tool that can provide an awareness of both the potential, and the limitations of analysing Wilde’s plays in this

context: 1. "Working within the canon: examining images of women, 2. Expanding the canon: focusing on women writers, 3. Exploding the canon: questioning underlying assumptions of an entire field of study, including canon formation" (6). This thesis will span the period of Wilde's life (1854-1900), and given the focus on his plays it will naturally examine the years that he was writing and producing drama; a time when the Victorian Suffragist movement was gathering momentum.¹¹ Wilde's plays contested conventional gender spaces according to traditional gender roles on the stage, a move that depicted a need for more equal roles for men and women.

Jurgen Habermas's sociological perception of gender spaces in society provides an important theoretical framework for this thesis. Habermas published his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, in 1962. In it Habermas historicizes gender spaces and gender segregation according to the influence of the Greek city-state; the first democratic state, which influenced the structure of many modern democracies. Habermas claims that the public space is a sphere for free citizens which were men, while women were more confined to the separate domestic sphere: "In the fully developed Greek city-state the sphere of the *polis*, which was common (*koine*) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the *oikos*, in the sphere of the *oikos*, each individual is in his own realm (*idia*). The public life, *bios politikos*, went on in the market place (*agora*) [...]" (3). Despite this segregation, Habermas recognises that the master or male patriarch's public status depended upon his dominance in the private sphere, an idea which will be considered in relation to Wilde's plays. In being displaced from the public sphere and dominated in the private sphere, women did not have an assigned sphere as men had. Hanna Scolnicov's monograph *Woman's Theatrical Space* (1994), also delineates the spheres according to gender, but she fails to recognise the dominance of the patriarch in the private sphere. Scolnicov claims it as a female space, despite the reality that reproduction and family business would regularly have taken place there. Scolnicov posits the influence of Greek society on modern societies: "[...] the Greek word for legitimate wife, *damar*, is derived from two roots,

¹¹ The Victorian Suffragist movement is examined in more detail in Chapter One.

dam- (Latin *domus*,) house, and *-ar*, to order or arrange, hence 'she who administers the house'. The woman is the dame in charge of the *domus*, the mistress of the house" (7). In contrast to Scolnicov, Barbara Caine proposes that the domestic sphere was always historically a male and female space:

[...] although the private sphere is often taken to be gendered, as a female sphere and a location of femininity, it is not really in any way symmetrical with the masculine public sphere. [...] The private is the world of family, home, reproduction. It is therefore not specifically a female sphere, although women are central to it. Men, after all, not only lived in, but were economically and legally the dominant ones within the home and the family (Groenewegen 42).

Wilde's dramatic characters will be analysed in relation to these concepts, and their movements between the public and private spheres will be documented in the plays. Some of Wilde's characters refuse to be categorised definitively in relation to their gender and sexual identities, a decision that contested the Victorian need to label and define individuals. By rejecting a narrow categorization according to gender or sexuality, some of Wilde's characters become queer characters, and gain more freedom to explore alternative identities and more gender liberal landscapes in the plays. Donald E. Hall notes the interesting etymology of the word 'Queer':

'Queer,' a term commonly used to deride and vilify same-sex desiring people, was reclaimed by Queer Nation and others as an umbrella term to celebrate, rather than castigate, difference from the 'norm' at a time when the oppressiveness and implicit violence of that norm was clear and undeniable [...] political action groups responding angrily to governmentally sanctioned homophobia took back a term that immediately drew attention to itself as a (now positive) marker of difference, and that more broadly drew attention to the way language has long been used to categorize and devalue human lives and lifestyles (54).

The negative history of the word 'queer' has transformed and now 'queer' signifies the celebration of difference, a refusal to be defined and categorised definitively. Wilde's various identities, such as his marriage and his sexual relations with men, contested Victorian masculinity and depicted his refusal to be defined. In *Salome* particularly, Wilde's characters celebrate the alternative performances of gender and sexual identity, often conflicting and contradictory performances which challenged the segregation of gender in Victorian society. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer studies analysis evident in her monograph *Tendencies* (1993), will be considered as she is a key figure in Queer Theory. Sedgwick argues that queer is essentially about:

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically [...] 'Queer' seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation (*Tendencies* 70).

Sedgwick's assertion that queer could open up and multiply the possibilities of meaning, according to one's gender and sexuality, will be mapped onto the characters who celebrate their queer performances of identity.

The presentation of Wilde's character's identities and Wilde's identity will also be considered in light of sociological theories of identity. Erving Goffman was a highly influential sociologist and his leading monograph *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), examines the different aspects of self that an individual performs to various audiences. This book investigates the projection of a specific aspect of an individual's identity, which is influenced by the context of the social interaction and the audience who witness this performance. Goffman observes the need for individuals and their associated performances of identity to be recognised by wider society; thereby confirming this performance as legitimate. Like Butler, Goffman views some aspects of identity as performative, and he proposes that (depending on the social

context) each person performs a particular role and a specific aspect of self to a disparate audience. Goffman's framework claims that an individual's performance is taken as an authentic presentation of self in front of an audience, and, that the performing body drops all pretences of being other things, while performing that particular identity. Goffman compares the performativity of self with an actor's theatrical experience onstage, and he proposes that in a face-to-face interaction, individuals desire to improve or control the impression that others might make of them.

Sexual Relations Between Men.

The term homosexuality has evolved significantly since its emergence in late Victorian society. In recognising the history of the word homosexuality, the term sexual relations is adopted in this thesis to refer to Wilde's sexual relationships with men. The term homosexuality initially infiltrated medical discourse in late Victorian society, and it becomes a loaded and misunderstood term if it is used in this context. Sexual relations refers to the relationships between Victorian men during Wilde's lifetime in England (16th October 1854 – 30th November 1900), and a number of acclaimed Wildean scholars including Alan Sinfield and Neil Bartlett also employ these terms in their respective scholarly work on Wilde.¹² For Sinfield the term same-sex passion is: "the best term I have been able to find for the period up to 1900 ('passion' is intended to include both an emotional and a physical charge), while avoiding the fraught term 'desire'" (11). Sinfield's use of the term same-sex passion right up until Wilde's death in 1900 reflects the fact that the term homosexual had not yet permeated Victorian literature or discourse. David Halperin argues that before 1892, when the taxonomic term 'homosexuality' first appeared in Kraft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*: "there was no homosexuality, only sexual inversion" (Brady 10). The perception of the homosexual was inextricably linked to medical

¹² As soon as I began my research on the Victorian period I stumbled upon an interesting quandary. Many contemporary scholars referred to the island Britain and many referred to the country of England. Various scholars including Kiberd use the term England during the Victorian period, whereas Anthony D. Smith and Sinfield use the terms England and Britain in their monographs. Wilde's more frequent use of the term England has convinced me to also adopt that term throughout this thesis.

discourse and criminalised notions of sexual inversion and deviance. Halperin proposes that: “Sexual inversion referred to a broad range of deviant gender behaviour, of which homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect, while ‘homosexuality’ focused on the narrower issue of sexual object choice” (Brady 11). Homosexuality and the homosexual subject were considered as aberrant issues in Victorian society, and were not defined until after the Wilde trials. Sean Brady cites Edward Carpenter’s book *Homogenic Love*, which was published privately in 1894, and contained one of the first appearances of the term homosexuality in the English language:

Carpenter used the term homosexual for the first time in English in this work. The term had been in existence on the continent since 1869. Carpenter did not use the term as a category or species of male, but as a general descriptor of sex between men. Carpenter cited Kraft-Ebbing’s analysis of the kind of ‘homosexuals’ that were ‘mutatis mutandis’, or exclusively attracted to their own sex (Brady 203).

The term homosexual only began to appear in privately published work in England as late as 1894, just one year before the Wilde trials, so it is unlikely that the term had permeated society. Another scholar, Karl Henry Ulrich, published widely on sexual relations between men from 1864 to 1879, but had not yet identified the term homosexuality. Many scholars including Francesca Coppa claim that the image of the homosexual was formed during the Wilde trials, but if the linguistic terms were not yet available then this is an impossible assumption to make.¹³ Instead, Wilde personified the very image of ‘gross indecency’ during the trials, and publicly signified his sexual relations with men, which accounted for his severe sentencing of two years hard labour in prison. Wilde’s sexual relations with men disputed Victorian masculinity.

¹³ Wilde is often perceived as a pioneering figure of a homosexual or gay identity, but in the case of Victorian discourse this is not true as the linguistic terms for such a claim were not yet available.

Historicizing Gender.

In order to analyse how Wilde's performance of unconventional identities was perceived as a threat to Victorian masculinity and the family unit, the historical emergence of gender and its related concepts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries must be contextualized.

Thomas Laqueur reflects on the historical significance of how gender studies progressed from the eighteenth century, despite the ongoing perception of woman as other.

Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented [...] Structures that had been thought common to man and woman – the skeleton and the nervous system – were differentiated so as to correspond to the cultural male and female. As the natural body itself became the gold standard of social discourse, the bodies of women – the perennial other – thus became the battleground for redefining the ancient, intimate, fundamental social relation: that of woman to man [...] Two sexes, in other words, were invented as a new foundation for gender (Laqueur 150).

Before this dual sex model emerged it was believed that women were an inferior and less perfect version of men. This belief reinforced the notion that men and women were oppositional beings in terms of their biological make up, while men were the superior sex. When the dual sex model emerged in the eighteenth century, the development in the changing perception of gender roles in the nineteenth century had begun, but it would take time for the gender dynamic to change. Women were often perceived as an idealistic 'species of angel', whose moral responsibilities in society were confined to the domestic sphere, and exclusively related to the family unit.¹⁴ In an article published in *The Woman's World* (1887) entitled "Woman and Democracy", Miss Julia Wedgwood claims that women naturally have a stronger moral nature and responsibility:

¹⁴ I use the term 'women' with caution; as Butler notes the term can be misconstrued as denoting a common or united identity in feminist discourse: "[...] there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety" (*Gender Trouble* 6).

A woman, we often hear it said, seems older than a man at the same age. [...] Is it not a plain fact that the moral life is older in the female world than in the male? And as it is older, so it is more intense. In man it is wrought up with thought; in woman with sensation, and sensation is older than emotion, in the individual as in the race. The joy that thrills the mother's heart as her babe's cry is silenced at her breast, the anguish which she has just endured when that cry first greets her ear [...] (*The Woman's World* 340).

Wedgwood proposes that a man's natural realm is one of thought, implying their intellectual superiority to women, and women's forte is sentiment, reinforcing the presumption that women are irrational and emotional beings. Her immediate association of women with the role of motherhood, also suggests the oppressive domestic roles that women were expected to adopt. With the increasing influence of Christianity in the nineteenth century these gender roles became more extreme. The segregation of gender was evident within the confines of the home; certain spaces were recognised as typically masculine or feminine domains. The *Routledge Manual of Etiquette* provides an insight into the general Victorian view that men were the superior sex. The original publication date of the manual is difficult to clarify definitively, but the only year that the author referenced in the text was 1875.¹⁵ According to the manual, following marriage a woman's subservience to her husband was expected, while his position of head of the family unit remained unchallenged:

Now as Christ is to the Church, so is man to the wife; and therefore obedience is the best instance of her love; for it proclaims her submission, her humility, her opinion of his wisdom, his pre-eminence in the family, the right of his privilege, and the injunction imposed by God upon her sex, that although in sorrow she brought forth children, that

¹⁵ The author reflects on Victorian fashion trends and claims that: "Our foremothers who rejoiced in farthingales had, no doubt, the most costly attire, but it lasted longer, and became the inheritance of children and children's children; besides which their wardrobes were not by any means so expensive as that of a "grande dame" of 1875" (172).

with love and choice she should obey. The man's authority is love, and the woman's love is obedience (*The Routledge Manual of Etiquette* 141-2).

A husband's dominance, superior intelligence and opinion is emphasised in this extract. The recognition of him as the unparalleled thinker and leader of the family is undoubted. The connection between a woman's submission and obedience to the Church and God, invokes the continuing influence of religion on gender roles. In an article for *The Woman's World* The Countess of Portsmouth notes the Church's idealisation of marriage:

Christianity held forth to the world a picture of marriage, as a most ancient institution, a gift ever fresh in the beauty of holiness from the hand of the Great Father to His Children. So tender and lovely was the picture that it was chosen to represent the mysterious and enduring tie between the Church and Christ. [...] Poets sang and moralists dwelt upon marriage as a subject of almost transcendental perfection (*The Woman's World* 8).

It was widely believed that a woman's love was expressed through the medium of obedience to her husband, and a woman's mind, being susceptible to male influence, could ideally be moulded by her husband's desires: "[...] the fair and loving creature is disposed like pliant wax in his hands to mould herself to his reasonable wishes in all things" (*The Routledge Manual of Etiquette* 123-4). The author stresses a husband's wishes, and a wife's duty to incorporate those desires into her domestic responsibilities. The manual differentiates the public and the private spheres according to the sexes. While a husband should ideally spend most of his time outside of the domestic sphere to support his family, a wife prepares the home for her husband's return. The duties of a husband are respected and empowered. Despite whatever domestic responsibilities are left to a wife, it is her objective and privilege above all to satisfy her husband's needs, and create a loving and peaceful atmosphere.

He comes to his home weary and fatigued; his young wife has had but her pleasures to gratify, or the quiet routine of her domestic duties to attend to, while he has been toiling throughout the day to enable her to gratify these pleasures and to fulfil these duties. Let

then, the dear, tired husband, at the close of his daily labours, be made welcome by the endearments of his loving spouse [...] Let her now take her turn in paying those many little love-begotten attentions which married men look for to soothe them – let her reciprocate that devotion to herself, which, from the early hours of their love, he cherished for her, by her ever-ready endeavours to make him happy and his home attractive (150).

The emphasis in this extract is on the husband's happiness, and his working life is respected, while her wifely duties were interpreted as domestic pleasures. The author also refers to the home as the husband's home, and to the wife as his young wife, which implies that his ownership of the house and of his wife means that she is inferior within this domestic framework.

With the changing gender framework in the latter half of the nineteenth century, came a fear that the family unit and traditional gender roles were under threat. The notion of the "New Woman" emerged in Victorian society in literature and popular culture at this time. This concept reinforced the fear that women would neglect their domestic responsibilities in favour of education, independence, and a desire to move into the public sphere. Sally Ledger indicates the possibility that the "New Woman" was a fictional construct put forward to re-inscribe traditional gender roles: "If the New Woman was constructed as a threat to women's role as the mothers of the British Empire, then she was also, more generally, regarded as a threat to the economic supremacy of the bourgeois men in Britain, and this was certainly another factor which contributed to the spite with which she was condemned" (19). This fear of the changing roles of women was directly related to the anxiety that women would enter the public world, and inevitably affect the roles of men in the public sphere. The concept of the "New Woman" was originally identified in Sarah Grand's essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question".¹⁶ With the onset of the Suffragist movement, the creation of the "New Woman" was an attack on

¹⁶ According to Ledger: "It was Ouida who extrapolated the now famous - and then famous – phrase 'the New Woman' from Sarah Grand's essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (9).

the early feminist movement and women's changing roles. Various women had begun to question the strict segregation of gender roles, seeking the opportunity for education and to assert their own independent identity. The negative perception of the "New Woman" had both positive and negative effects on changing gender roles:

The widespread attacks on the New Woman – which included claims that she was a threat to the human race [...] were anti-feminist in design and may well have had the effect of undermining and controlling feminist women. At the same time, though, in Foucauldian terms the hostile dominant discourse on the New Woman made possible 'the formation of a "reverse" discourse'; the New Woman began to speak on her own behalf (Ledger 10).

The negative and unrealistic perception of women had the opposite effect, providing the opportunity for alternative manifestations of the "New Woman" to emerge. Some of Wilde's female characters can be identified as such; for example Mrs Erlynne and Mrs Arbuthnot. Wilde presents the "New Woman" in an alternative mode which will be examined in later chapters.

The diaries of Henry Spencer Ashbee (1834-1900), a middle-class Victorian man, provide an insight into the typical belief in the segregation and natural differences between the sexes.¹⁷ Ashbee was on holidays in France at the time of the following entry, and was shocked at the more liberal approach to gender that he observed.

[...] we sported about in the water swimming floating and much to our own amusement and to other people too, for there were a great many other ladies and gentlemen on the Digue looking at us; I myself never before saw such a sight as the water presented men and women promiscuously mingled together bathing and splashing in the water without any thought to the natural reserve between the sexes, we were ourselves part of the

¹⁷ H. S. Ashbee was a book collector and bibliographer who travelled extensively on business as a travelling salesman and for pleasure. He married Elizabeth Josephine Jenny in 1872, and they had four children. Ashbee had an extensive collection of erotica at a separate London address to his home and he published bibliographies of erotica privately; his collection of books was left to the British Library, London.

time we were in the water close by [...] a party of two girls and one young man who were helping each other to flounder about in gallant style (MS 88947; 23rd/7th/1954, p. 12).

Ashbee's shock in discovering "men and women promiscuously mingled together", mirrored a belief in the segregation of the sexes, or the "natural reserve between the sexes" which would have been a typical one at that time. A letter to the editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette* entitled "The Revolting Daughters", and only signed "Belle" by the author was published on the 23rd January 1894, and depicted the Victorian belief in the natural superiority of men to women.¹⁸ This letter challenges the belief that the invention of the Victorian 'New Woman' was a positive force. The author denigrates women, and by association attempts to disempower the perception of the more liberal and modern woman.

Woman may be man unsexed; she may be a shrieking sister, or the good comrade; she may even be the still re-curring Sphinx; au fond it is always the same Eve, the first woman and the last, ever ready to take all that Providence or the snake-devil will give her; ever ready to be (or seem) whatever the fancy or contemporaneous many may please to paint her. As he pipes his tune she dances. Her easy adaptability, her almost instinctive grasp of that valuable attribute, assimilation, will never fail her until she seeks to please the individual rather than the sex. Then, so far as the one kingdom is concerned, her reign is over. May I air my views as to why and wherefore of the fin de siècle woman not of reality but of romance? ("The Revolting Daughters": *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23rd January 1894 p. 5).

The author's reference to the tale of Adam and Eve, evokes the popular Christian assumption that women were responsible for the sin and destruction brought upon the world. "Belle" claims that woman may be man unsexed; a belief that mirrors the one-dimensional gender model of the eighteenth century. The image of the man as the piper and the woman who dances to his

¹⁸ It is important to note that we do not know whether the author of this letter is a man or a woman, as it is only signed "Belle"; this signature could have been adopted specifically to influence a belief that the author is a woman, but there is no definitive evidence to confirm this. Whether or not this is a male or female opinion, it is a typical Victorian one, and the fact that the editor chose to publish it reflects the reality that they believed it was an important opinion to share with the public.

tune, captures the belief in the submission of women. The author concludes by arguing that women who desire freedom and equality, a tangible reference to the increasing support at that time for the suffragist movement, only do so because it is in fashion at the time. The author undermines the cause for female equality and called on the patriarchal Christian Church to empower their movement against equal rights.

She does not really crave a latchkey, and with it her share of original sin. She has only abandoned the feminine tulle frock in obedience to the frivolous dictates of fashion, not from any morbid sense of her mission; but her actual, always predominant ambition is to pose before the world, from the Creation until the Revelation, as the central figure in the great human picture, life. To awaken love, to marry, to bear children, are all something towards this end ("The Revolting Daughters": *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23rd January 1894 p. 5).

It is clear from this extract that women's roles are perceived in relation to the family, and specifically to women's duties to their husbands and children. This narrow framework for women portrays an idealisation of self-sacrificing women, who prioritise their family's needs and desires over their own. The depiction of the self-sacrificing woman is often related to the belief that women are the moral barometers in Victorian society, and this depiction of woman exists in opposition to the perception of the "New Woman". The Contagious Disease Acts were implemented in 1864, 1866 and 1869 by the English government, as a way to curtail the increase in venereal disease, and these acts symbolised unequal Victorian laws according to gender. Under these acts, women who were suspected of being prostitutes could be forced to have a physically invasive examination, and if they were found to be infected, under English law they could be confined to an institution or asylum for a number of months or years. These acts identified Victorian women as the scapegoat for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, while men were perceived as free from any responsibility. Victorian feminists attempted to overturn this act and finally as Tara McDonald claims: "the overturning of the Acts in 1886 [...] challenged long-held perceptions of male sexuality, and the campaign helped to consolidate the

feminist activism that was to be associated with the New Woman" (McDonald 45). Many of Wilde's female characters rejected this assumption that they were the moral guardians of society, challenging Victorian perceptions of gender.

Laqueur claims that oppositional gender roles associated men and women with specific gendered spaces, and were constructed in order to maintain the male patriarchy of power in society. Wilde challenges this typical association of men with public spaces, and women with private spaces in his plays. Elizabeth Langland notes the segregation of gender spaces in the Victorian world: "Women as beings who are 'little affected by sensuality,' 'a species of angel,' 'a purer race... destined to inspire in the rest of the human race the sentiments of all which is noble, generous and devoted' (this is from a French feminist of the revolutionary era), were the cultural creation of the middle classes, men and women, with a variety of political agendas" (Langland 295). Langland differentiates the segregation of gender within the Victorian home: "Spaces were coded as masculine or feminine [...] The male domain expanded into smoking rooms, billiard rooms, and bachelor suites [...] Feminine spaces extended from the drawing room to sitting rooms and boudoirs" (295). Wilde's dramatic characters move beyond the typical spaces associated with their gender in Victorian society. The historicisation of gender, particularly the changing perceptions and roles of women is important; in order to comprehend how Wilde's female characters are alternative and modern women. Laqueur reflects on the changing perception of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and evokes the dominance of the male perspective in the classical canon:

If women were simply lesser versions of men, as the old one-sex model had it, then there would be no need for them to write or take public action or make any other claims for themselves as women; men could represent them far better than they could represent themselves [...] If women have no special interests or legitimate grounds for their social being, men could speak for them as they had in the past [...] (197).

Laqueur references the nineteenth century feminist Millicent Fawcett, who differentiated between the sexes rather than, (as the one-sex model did), comparing and inverting the female body within the framework of a male single-sex discourse.¹⁹ This is the context of the society within which Wilde's plays were originally produced and received by his audience. In order to examine Wilde's unconventional and alternative identity in terms of a more modern masculinity, it is necessary to define hegemonic masculinity. Brady defines it:

As a sociological concept [...] [It] describes the 'solidarity' of men in all classes in developed countries in upholding patriarchal power. An example of this is the persistence in assumptions that paid work is a male birthright. The upholding of masculinity involves marshalling men with very different class interests into a hegemony of dominant power over women (34).

Brady's definition of hegemonic masculinity reinforces the concept of a unified male community, who recognise their right to work in the public arena. This male right to work is contrasted with the absence of a unified female community, whose right to work and to engage in the public sphere is unrecognised, and whose place is expected to be in the domestic sphere. Through the medium of his plays, Wilde re-imagines this male dominance over women. His strong female characters from Vera in *Vera* to Lady Bracknell in *Earnest*, dispute the male patriarchal power over women. His female characters reject the traditional and limited association of women with the domestic sphere, by their participation in the public world. His male characters often incorporate male and female characteristics, challenging the segregation of gender. Wilde's wife, Constance, as previously stated, also engaged in the public sphere; Wilde published various articles by her in *The Woman's World*.

¹⁹ Various articles by Fawcett which argued for women's equality in Victorian society were published in *The Woman's World* in 1887 and 1889, during Wilde's editorship, and these will be discussed in Chapter One.

The oppressive nature of the patriarchal system on women is often more explicit than it is on men.²⁰ In Victorian society masculinity was exemplified by the role of the father and husband in the family unit, and the active role of the male head of household in the public sphere. R.W. Connell defines the oppressive concept of a hegemonic masculinity on both women and men.

The concept of 'hegemony' [...] refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. [...] the top levels of business, the military, and government provide a fairly convincing *corporate* display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men. It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority) (*Masculinities* 77).

Connell evokes the idea that hegemonic masculinity is a dominant masculinity that is exalted over all other forms of masculinity. In Victorian society the patriarch that successfully ruled the domestic sphere claimed a higher status in the public sphere, and military men, including the subjects of the English colonial empire, exuded the physical prowess and power of the nation. Connell asserts that hegemonic masculinity reinforces patriarchy, which in turn maintains the dominance of men and the subordination of women; a characteristic of the gender segregation in Victorian society. Linda Zatlin notes the pressure that changing gender roles put on the established concept of Victorian masculinity:

Any attempt at redefining femininity would involve a concomitant redefinition of masculinity, so direct challenges to social conventions were accurately perceived as

²⁰ The campaign for women's rights which began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century challenged the existing roles for women and was unequalled by a movement for men's rights; because men had the freedom to move between both the domestic and the public world and women did not, the oppressive nature of hegemonic masculinity on men went unrecognised for a long time.

endangering the entire structure by which men usurped women's rights to define themselves. And by the 1890s, women's increased independence and access to education threatened to change the concept of femininity and so the structure of social conventions (84).

It is important to note that Connell suggests that the idea of the hyper-masculine sportsman is an example of an ideal contemporary hegemonic form of masculinity.²¹ The removal of Wilde in 1895 from Victorian society to prison was an example of the oppressive nature of masculinity, and the perceived anxiety of regulation in the Victorian world. Although the sporting male body is perceived in contemporary culture to be the main form of hegemonic masculinity, Connell's vision of multiple masculinities evokes their complex forms and interactions with gender. According to Connell, the emphasis on the physical male body is important to remember: "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body [...]" (*Masculinities* 45). Despite this, similar to Butler's tendency to rally against essentialist notions of gender, Connell proposes a constructivist approach to gender. Although the domestic sphere has historically been associated and identified as a typically feminine space, the male dominance in that sphere was a characteristic of Victorian society. If men were dominant in the domestic and the public spheres, then women were displaced from an environment with which they could identify and dominate as men could. As aforementioned, Caine proposes the domestic sphere is both a male and female space. Caine emphasises the contrast between the female alienation from the public sphere, and the male dominance in the domestic sphere. While men were perceived as the head of the family unit, a status that was reinforced by the financial dependence of the family on men, women were discouraged from entering the world of work, politics and the public sphere.

²¹ Connell claims that: "In historically recent times, sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture. Sport provides a continuous display of men's bodies in motion. Elaborate and carefully monitored rules bring these bodies into stylized contests with each other. In these contests a combination of superior force (provided by size, fitness, teamwork) and superior skill (provided by planning, practice and intuition) will enable one side to win" (*Masculinities* 54).

Contemporary critics such as Alan Sinfield refer to the Victorian ‘cult of manliness’, which emerged in the 1850s in England, and can be connected to the gender segregation in Victorian society. This Victorian anxiety emerged in the educational system as a response, amongst others, to Alfred Tennyson’s poem *In Memoriam*, which was completed in 1849. *In Memoriam* was written over the course of seventeen years, and dedicated to Tennyson’s Cambridge friend Arthur Henry Hallam, who died suddenly in 1833. Sinfield asserts:

[...] the anxieties that attended the publication of *In Memoriam*, [a passionate poem about his friend Arthur Hallam] *Eric and Tom Brown’s Schooldays* [best-selling school stories] reflected and contributed to a cult of manliness, which swept through the public (private) school system, especially in the form of compulsory organized sport [...] Effeminacy is not banished by manliness; it is its necessary corollary, present continually as the danger that manliness has to dispel (62).

In Memoriam reflects on various subjects including philosophy, friendship and romance, but being addressed to a man, Tennyson’s tender tone and his language were misinterpreted and considered suspicious. The sense of loss which canto VII expresses represents Tennyson’s grief over Hallam’s sudden death:

Dark house, by which once more I stand / Here in the long unlovely street, / Doors,
where my heart was used to beat / So quickly, waiting for a hand, / A hand that can be
clasp’d no more - / Behold me, for I cannot sleep, / And like a guilty thing I creep / At
earliest morning to the door. / He is not here; but far away / The noise of life begins
again, / And ghastly thro’ the drizzling rain / On the bald street breaks the blank day [...] (20).

Tennyson’s reference to his quickening heart as he stands outside his friend’s home, his empty hand waiting for Hallam’s hand to fill his, and his affectionate language, blur the lines between the men’s friendship. The idea of Victorian masculinity was not connected to relations between Victorian men, but was directly connected to the patriarch’s position as head of the heterosexual family unit. William Acton’s (1857) account of masculinity denotes the idealisation of

masculinity and the patriarch, as the ultimate head of the family unit: "It's existence [...] seems necessary in order to give a man that consciousness of his dignity, of his character as head and ruler, and of his importance, which is absolutely essential to the well being of the family, and through it, of society itself" (Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society* 39). Acton's account of masculinity captures the societal anxiety regarding the protection of the family. This Victorian framework excluded individuals who engaged in sexual relations with men. Acton refers to the patriarchal male figure "as head and ruler" of the family and of society itself; his perception advocates the idealisation and dominance of the patriarch, both in the public and the private sphere. Similarly, in his diaries, Ashbee idealises his friend's newly married position and his family life.

[...] He seems to possess everything exquisite for happiness – sufficient income, a good wife and family, a taste for agriculture and literature at the same time. He lives a country life but does not despise as some the pleasures of the town. Mrs. Collins is also at first acquaintance a charming little woman, and as I understand an exceptional mother (MS 88947; 1st/1st/1874, p. 204).

Ashbee's patronising reflection on his friend's wife as "a charming little woman", and his immediate and only connection to her role as "an exceptional mother", indicates the belief in the superiority of men over women, and the domestic roles women were expected to play in society.

Lord Alfred Douglas wrote three untitled essays on Wilde and the 1895 trials that remain unpublished, and that reflect on idealised hegemonic masculinity and physical prowess in England. In the first essay, Douglas provides an insight into the emphasis that Victorian masculinity placed on the physical strength of men, when he evokes the praise his father received for contributing to Wilde's conviction: "The English have a great admiration for a man who, thanks to his superior strength, or because of having spent much time in developing his body at the expense of his mind, is able to box and consequently insult those who are weaker than himself; but they regard duelling with horror" (MS 81654: 1895). Douglas's essay

emphasises the hypocrisy of Victorian society; boxing was acclaimed as a manly and honourable sport despite the violence of it, while duelling was regarded with horror. The key concept is that masculinity is inherently associated with “superior strength” and sporting ability, not intellectual ability or a person’s character. In not being physically strong, one is automatically assumed to be weak and ineffectual. In chapter one of *A Memoir of John Edward Bodley*, a reflection on Victorian masculinity claims that Public Schools are “tending to turn our nation into a muscular plutocracy” (MS 81670: 1895). The Victorian government exploited the medium of sports in schools to train their future colonising subjects, in order to enforce a hegemonic masculinity over subordinated and alternative performances of masculinity. Michael A. Messner notes:

[...] the British consciously developed sports in their public schools as a means of preparing boys to one day administer the Empire. Team sports, based as they were on the twin values of dominance over others and deference to the authority of leaders, were valued as a means to inculcate ‘initiative and self-reliance’, along with ‘loyalty and obedience’ (10).

Sports provide a legitimate medium to train men to regulate and oppress performances of gender and sexuality which challenge oppositional gender roles. Another medium which legitimised the masculinity of Victorian men was colonialism. The male-dominated public world was overtly articulated through England’s performance of Empire, which had a serious effect on gender roles in the home. Kiberd notes the influence of colonialism on gender roles in England:

The colonial adventure had led not only to suffering and injustice overseas, but had corrupted domestic British society to the core. The projection of despised ‘feminine’ qualities onto Celts or Indians had led, inexorably, to a diminishment of womanhood at home. Wilde’s first act on taking up the editorship of the *Ladies World* [...] [was to] rename it *Woman’s World*; and in his plays he argued for those feminine qualities deemed irrelevant to a thrusting industrial society (*Inventing Ireland* 45).

While oppositional gender roles had become more segregated, Wilde's editorship of *The Woman's World* empowered a female voice, which infiltrated public discourse and debate. Wilde's preoccupation with women's issues and gender roles, proposed the cause for equal rights for women in a traditional, patriarchal society. Connell claims that the subjects of the colonial empire constituted the first recognizable form of hegemonic masculinity. Western rationality which was associated with masculinity became linked to the patriarchy and the Empire.

With masculinity defined as a character structure marked by rationality, and Western civilisation defined as the bearer of reason to a benighted world, a cultural link between the legitimization of patriarchy and the legitimization of empire was forged. [...] The men who applied force at the colonial frontier, the 'conquistadors' as they were called in the Spanish case, were perhaps the first group to become defined as a masculine cultural type in the modern sense (*Masculinities* 186-7).

This form of masculinity depended on the prowess of the male physical body, whose expression of masculinity was through the physical colonisation of other nationalities abroad. Edward Said's influential book *Orientalism*, (1978) examines the Western perception of colonised bodies in foreign lands:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' [...]
Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [...] European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self (2-3).

By setting themselves up against a physical body which the colonial subjects differentiated as other, they could exert their masculinity and physical prowess over other men, according to Said's framework. In performing an alternative masculinity in Victorian society, Wilde's identity undermined masculinity according to Empire, and he would be punished for it.

The arrest and conviction of Wilde for 'gross indecency' in 1895 could be considered as an attempt to regulate Victorian gender and sexuality. Wilde's identification with an exclusively female magazine can be interpreted as a public display of an alternative masculinity. Negative associations with Wilde's public identity can be evidenced in distorted Victorian caricatures of him in the 1890s; for example Beerbohm Tree's illustrations. Sinfield claims that: "The function of effeminacy, as a concept, is to police sexual categories, keeping them pure" (26). If the function of effeminacy was to police sexual categories, then Tree's caricatures of Wilde implied that his sexual identity was impure, and deviated from the heterosexual framework. Gender roles or sexual relations that departed from this framework were interpreted as a threat to the family unit, and to the very foundations of social stability. Butler notes the perceived danger that an unrecognisable individual poses to a heteronormative social world:

The person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be radically undermined if such a being, uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world [...] This violence emerges from a profound desire to keep the order of binary gender natural or necessary [...] If a person opposes norms of binary gender not just by having a critical point of view about them, but by incorporating norms critically, and that stylized opposition is legible, then it seems that violence emerges precisely as a demand to undo that legibility, to question its possibility, to render it unreal and impossible in face of its appearance to the contrary (*Undoing Gender* 34-5).

Wilde's indefinable identity would have been perceived as a threat to masculinity and heterosexuality, seeing as he performed a heterosexual identity and participated in sexual relations with men. In a letter to a contemporary, Philip Houghton, in February 1894, Wilde portrays his multiform identity:

To the world I seem, by intention on my part, a dilettante and dandy merely – it is not wise to show one's heart to the world – and as seriousness of manner is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality and indifference and lack of care is the

robe of the wise man. In so vulgar an age as this we all need masks (Hart-Davis, *Letters* 353).

Wilde denotes his awareness of society's perception of him, and he claims that his identity is more complex than it might seem. The regulation of Wilde's sexual relations with men can be evidenced by the conviction of him in 1895.

Thesis Thoughts and Structure.

Wilde's awareness of his alternative masculinity suggests an idealisation of self, which could be connected to the idealised and alternative gender models he created in his plays. His modern nature was certainly reflected by his editorship of *The Woman's World*. In *In Carcere et Vinculis* (later renamed *De Profundis* by Ross) Wilde declares: "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age [...] I felt it myself and made others feel it. 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" (*De Profundis* 57). According to Sinfield, Wilde's person and his writings are "a cultural token around which contest and change occurred, and still occur" (5). Wilde's identity and dramatic output contested the very boundaries of gender and sexuality. The adoption of the Wildean persona for Gay Rights issues and festivals around the world, reflects the fact that Wilde's name and image exemplify the idea of change and a more liberal approach to sexuality.²² By challenging the segregation of gender roles and expectations in his plays, Wilde had the opportunity to invent more equal gender roles and alternative sexualities. Wilde's admiration of women, and his editorship of *The Woman's World*, in which he encouraged women to share their experiences in a public forum, conveyed his modern belief in gender equality. In documents related to the trials as one witness noted, Wilde declared on the stand: "I think that the realization of oneself is the prime aim of life, and to realize oneself through pleasure is finer than to do through pain" (MS 81758, 1895). Wilde's complex identity and various roles

²² Such as the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival, which is Ireland's biggest national celebration of Gay Theatre; they use Wilde's face and image for their advertising campaigns.

displayed a constructivist approach to gender, which is mirrored by his alternative Victorian gender roles in his plays. Eltis describes an interpretation of identity exploration that is useful to consider:

A coherent organic self remains a utopian dream, while a performed identity – whether conscious or not – is the inevitable corollary of social existence [...] Wilde presents the self as unstable, constantly forming and re-forming in, as Walter Pater describes it, a ‘strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves’. But, unlike Pater’s, Wilde’s model of self is not walled in, confined to ‘the narrow chamber of the individual mind’. Instead Wilde’s concept of the self is one which can access multiple identities [...] Performance becomes a means of realizing alternate selves (Killeen 137).

Eltis notes Wilde’s ongoing development of identity, which would have included his expression of gender and sexuality. The development of gender and sexual identities is important in the plays; Wilde’s characters multiply the possibilities of gender and identity exploration. This proposition will be investigated in relation to Wilde’s dramatic characters, and his own gender and identity in the remaining chapters. Like Butler’s theoretical approach, Wilde’s identity and sexuality celebrated the diversity of these concepts. It is through the immediacy of the Victorian theatre that Wilde safely contested and re-imagined Victorian gender roles.²³ Wilde’s celebration of gender in his plays fits in well with Butler’s desire to advocate and accept all instances of gender. Butler emphasises the importance of not setting up particular hierarchal forms of gender within feminism, which exclude alternative forms outside of this framework. Rather, she celebrates the multiplicity of alternative forms of gender that are evident in Wilde’s plays:

It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences [...] feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of

²³ Although material from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used during the trials to implicate Wilde, his plays were not referenced in this context.

hierarchy and exclusion. In particular, I opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original [...] the aim [...] was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized (*Gender Trouble* vii-viii).

By satirising the narrow Victorian perceptions of gender, Wilde's alternative modes of masculinity and femininity challenge the oppressive Victorian gender dynamic, and celebrate alternative identities.

This introductory chapter contextualised my study of Wilde; providing some necessary background information about his family life and personal circumstances, and his different view of gender roles in Victorian society. The theoretical frameworks that will be adopted in my thesis were explained, some of which will also be considered in relation to Wilde's gender and sexual identity. Chapter One will contextualise the suffragist movement, Wilde's editorship of *The Woman's World*, his various ties to different cultures, and his sexuality. Chapter Two will analyse Wilde's two early plays, *Vera or the Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*, against the backdrop of feminist theories of suicide and space. Chapter Three explores the satirisation of Victorian marriage and gender roles in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and Chapter Four interrogates *Salome* through a queer and gender studies framework. Chapter Five investigates marriage and alternative family units in *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*. Chapter Six will analyse the gender roles and movement, and in some cases, the confinement, of Wilde's male and female characters in *Earnest*. The conclusion will weave the main threads of this thesis together and sum up some final thoughts on the topic.

Chapter One: Contesting Gender Roles in Victorian Society.

In order to contextualise the study of Wilde and his plays according to gender, it is necessary to investigate the emerging Suffragist movement. The nineteenth century Victorian movement for women's rights mirrored a need to establish a female identity in society, as well as a campaign for equal rights to education, labour and the acceptance of female participation in politics and the public sphere.²⁴ Women's education promised the possibility of independence, and the right of middle-class women to work would also provide an alternative opportunity for women to support themselves, rather than relying on their husbands, fathers or brothers for financial welfare. Working-class women had worked during the English Industrial Revolution, but their labour was accepted mainly as a means to supporting themselves, and they did not usually attach the same hopes for identity or independence with employment that middle-class women did.²⁵ Levine evokes the connection between education, employment and independence: "For women, the issue of employment was connected with their claims for independence, for a share in the public domain, and with the demand for an identity defined by self-respect. This was the case for middle-class women, at least, and one that early feminists promoted" (Levine 82). Victorian feminists also campaigned for this respect and equal rights in marriage; according to Victorian law when a woman married, her property and income (if she had any to speak of), automatically became her husband's. The Married Women's Property Act (1870 and 1882), afforded women who married after the year the act was implemented the right to maintain control over any income that they earned or inherited, but did not change the position of married women before this date. The only way married women could re-claim their property

²⁴ My analysis of the Victorian suffragist movement will concentrate on that period during Wilde's life (1854-1900), but it is important to note that many scholars including J.A. and Olive Banks suggest: "It has been commonplace to date modern feminism from the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792" (Banks 15).

²⁵ Connell notes the participation of working-class women in the Industrial Revolution, and the formation of a hegemonic masculinity that emerged with the expulsion of women from some areas of industrial employment: "Women were, in fact, a large part of the original workforce in the textile factories of the industrial revolution, and were also present in coal mining, printing and steelmaking. They were involved in industrial militancy, sometimes were leaders of strikes, as Mary Blewett has shown for the weavers of Fall River, at Massachusetts. The expulsion of women from heavy industry was thus a key process in the formation of working-class masculinity, connected with the strategy of the family wage and drawing on the bourgeois ideology of separate spheres" (*Masculinities* 196).

before the law was established, was through widowhood, and it was only unmarried women who could maintain control over their property. This law empowered the position of the patriarch, and encouraged the control of a husband over his wife. Under the act any wages or income that a wife earned (who married after 1870), was recognised as separate from her husband's earnings. Despite the financial independence that the act encouraged, women could not sell or rent property that they owned. After an amendment to the act in 1882, women's property became legally recognised as separate from their husband's, and women could buy, sell or rent their property.²⁶ In the case of parents dying where there was no will, the eldest son automatically inherited any property under English law until 1925. If a wife sought a legal separation or divorce on the grounds of infidelity or domestic violence, she had to prove her husband's guilt, an almost impossible task, and the husband was automatically granted custody of children. Shanley notes the gender inequality evident in marriage and the Divorce Act:

Prior to the Divorce Act of 1857 the only way to end a marriage other than by ecclesiastical annulment was by Private Act of Parliament, an extraordinarily complex and expensive procedure. Even under the Divorce Act, only if a husband was physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial in addition to being adulterous could his wife procure a divorce. If she left him without first obtaining a divorce, she was guilty of desertion and forfeited all claim to a share of his property (even that which she might have brought to the marriage) and to custody of their children (9).

More equal opportunities for Victorian women (particularly employment), could provide women with an alternative option to marriage; many women were aware of being financial burdens if they were unmarried or widowed, and were forced to rely on their male relations.²⁷

In an article published in *The Woman's World* (1887) entitled "The Fallacy of the Superiority of

²⁶ Shanley notes: "the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 made it possible for every married woman to hold property in her own name and to make a will without her husband's agreement. Similarly, the Infant Custody Acts of 1873 and 1886 gave mothers certain rights to appeal for custody of their minor children" (14).

²⁷ Shanley reflects on the financial difficulties for women who did not marry: "The pressures on women to marry were enormous in nineteenth-century England, and in 1871 nearly 90 per cent of English women between the ages of forty-five and forty-nine were or had been married. The plight of a woman who did not marry, who in the parlance of the age was 'left on the shelf,' could be economically as well as socially disastrous" (9-10).

Man”, Laura McLaren notes the forced dependence of women on men, and the traditional role of woman in the domestic sphere, which historically kept her isolated from the public world of employment:

Women who are dependent on fathers or husbands for the bread they eat, rarely feel justified or even find it possible to withdraw from household occupations sufficient time to achieve any real great work. A man makes the development of a literary or scientific idea the work of his life. It is for women to bring up his children; to feed, wash, and mend him while he works. The world holds that, in thus tending man, woman fulfils her mission; and it asks of her no more. On the contrary men have always resented the notion that women could have any work in view other than the care of masculine comforts (*The Woman's World* 57).

McLaren proposes that the expected role of woman in the domestic sphere was as a wife and mother; roles which isolated her from the public sphere. McLaren’s language also denotes the power of men in the domestic sphere, referring to the children as “his children” (*The Woman's World* 57). Marriage was an oppressive framework for women, and it was only in 1878 that the Act of Divorce became available to women on the grounds of marital abuse, but as there was a financial charge for divorce, it was only available to those who could afford it. Shanley concludes that although “Parliament did enlarge the rights of married women significantly in the course of the nineteenth century [...] it repeatedly rejected the invitation held out by feminists to *equalize* the rights and obligations of husbands and wives” (17).

A common Victorian misconception was that if Victorian women gained the right to work or to education, then the domestic sphere including the welfare of children would become neglected.²⁸ Many Victorians believed that the public sphere would corrupt female nature, and

²⁸ In an article in *The Woman's World* entitled “The Fallacy of the Equality of Woman” by Miss Lucy M. J. Garnett, she argues that women would most likely neglect their duties in the domestic sphere if they were granted any freedom: “What will be the terms of partnership which the Western woman will dictate when she too is no longer ‘dependent upon man for food and clothing’? Will she refuse ‘to bring up his children; to feed,

in time that that corruption would destroy the family unit and the sanctity of the domestic sphere.²⁹ In the *Saturday Review*, a popular weekly newspaper which was established in the 1850s in London, the author of an article entitled “Queen Bees or Working Bees?”, Miss Bessie Parkes depicts the fear that employment would corrupt women: “...men do not like, and would not seek, to mate with an independent factor, who at any time could quit – or who at all times would be tempted to neglect – the tedious duties of training and bringing up children and keeping the tradesman’s bills, and mending the linen, for the more lucrative charms of the desk or the counter” (Parkes, *Saturday Review*: 12th November 1859). Similarly, in *A Woman’s View of Woman’s Rights* the perception of women in the working world, was linked with the rejection or neglect of her domestic roles as wife and mother. “It was sometimes alleged, for example, that emancipated women would make bad wives and mothers. An anonymous writer in 1867 painted the picture of ‘a loveless home, a wearied fretful husband’ and neglected children, while ‘she, the mother, rules and decides the fate of nations’” (Banks 45). A woman who engaged in the working world was seen to have a direct and negative impact on the happiness of the family unit. While men participated in the public arena of industrialisation, labour and colonialism, women became more confined to the private sphere, which increased the need for a suffragist movement. Increased industrialisation in Victorian England, and the idealisation of the family unit and the domestic sphere, reinforced the segregation of gender roles in society. The idealisation of the family unit was reflected in popular Victorian mantras and ballads: “Home Sweet Home”, the enormously popular ballad song first heard in the 1870s, and mottos such as ‘East, west, home’s best’, ‘Bless our home’, and ‘Home is the nest where all is best’, which adorned the homes of many working-class houses, reflected the firm hold of the ideal in the

wash, and mend him while he works”? Or will she require him to perform these duties turn about with herself, in order that she may be able to, ‘start on the wild-geese chase of achieving worldly fame’?” (530).

²⁹ In “The Position of Woman”, an article by the Countess of Portsmouth, she notes how men were suspicious of women gaining equal rights and status to them; this article portrays the Countess’s belief in a male anxiety of female power: “There is an uneasiness in the minds of some men at the accord, with the present temper of civilisation, which gives women now a natural fellowship in its development on certain lines. Distrust, and not jealousy, may easily explain it. Possibly it lies in a fear lest women qualities be still too untried, too ‘unnatural’ to women, to insure their withstanding an attempt to use a newly-gained position of personal freedom for one of power over others [...]” (*The Woman’s World* 10).

Victorian imagination" (Shanley 4-5). The idealisation of the home and the role of Victorian women as mothers, wives and as the main domestic carer, fostered oppositional gendered expectations in society. Men were encouraged to participate in the public world, and women were defined as the moral backbones and carers of the family unit, which also meant that women were forced to become financially dependent on their husbands or male relations. The influence of the teachings of the Church reinforced women's submissive role in the home, and their moral responsibility in society. The Church's moral doctrine idealised the binary dichotomy between male and female roles in the home, and in public life, ensuring the sustained empowerment of the male voice over that of the female. Many women challenged this patriarchal doctrine, and sought to establish an independent female identity, and gain the right to education, voting and employment. In Wilde's case his acknowledgment of female participation in the public sphere was evident by his editorship of *The Woman's World*.

The Lady's World to The Woman's World.

Before Wilde's editorship *The Lady's World* promoted Victorian fashion trends for women, and did not dedicate any space to the discussion of women's issues or the publication of articles by women. The manager at Cassell Publications in London, Thomas Wemyss Reid, launched *The Lady's World* in November 1886, but it was not as successful as he had hoped under his editorship, so he commissioned Wilde as the editor in 1887 in the hopes that Wilde would revitalise it. Wilde accepted this offer, and held the editorship from November 1887 to June 1889, with Arthur Fish as his editorial assistant. *The Woman's World* was a monthly magazine which cost one shilling, and during his editorship Wilde edited twenty issues of the magazine. Forty-eight editions of the magazine were published in total, before Reid abandoned it in 1890. Wilde immediately renamed the magazine *The Woman's World*, and this title change portrayed his urgency to use the magazine as a platform to publish and promote women's issues, and

writing by women.³⁰ The magazine published articles on Art, Literature, Politics, Fashion, Employment and Education for women, and many other contemporary and controversial issues by male and female writers. By bringing together male and female writers in the public intellectual forum of the magazine, Wilde challenged the segregation of Victorian gender roles. In a letter to Miss Emily Faithfull, Wilde depicted the importance of the title change; he thanked her for her influence in alerting the public to his new magazine, and he realised his reliance on powerful Victorian women to help him launch and contribute to the magazine.³¹ “Thank you so much for your promise to draw the public attention to the magazine: but for a few women like yourself such a magazine would have been an impossibility. I have altered the title to ‘The Woman’s World’ – which is a great improvement” (MS 81699: October 1887). This move was significant; as it was one of the first magazines to provide a public forum for the discussion of women’s issues, outside of the areas of fashion and household responsibilities.³² Wilde’s new title of *The Woman’s World* denoted his modern views on female equality. According to Ross, Wilde renamed the magazine on the advice of his female friend Dinah Mulock Craik; she was a novelist and poet whose husband, George, was a partner in the Macmillan publishing company (*Collected works of Oscar Wilde* 207). Wilde’s new title of the magazine, inspired in part by Mulock Craik, contested the exclusivity of a Victorian lady as an expected ideal, and privileged a more modern and liberating idea of woman. This idea is also evidenced in his letters to women, encouraging them to become involved in this public forum. The title change also ensured that Wilde’s magazine would capture a greater market share than the class based idea of a Victorian lady, as opposed to the non-class inflected idea of a woman. Wilde’s editorship provided an acceptable male medium, through which the magazine could channel unconventional articles

³⁰ Stella Newton argues that the title of Wilde’s magazine was a connection to an earlier magazine entitled *Woman’s World*, which advocated political and legal rights for women in the 1860s (119). Although this cannot be confirmed, it is important to be aware that Wilde may have consciously forged this connection with the magazine to emphasize his belief in equal rights for women.

³¹ Emily Faithfull was an activist for women’s rights and her work concentrated particularly on a woman’s right to work. She set up *The Victoria Press*: a printing press for women, and garnered an excellent reputation in Victorian society, being appointed Queen Victoria’s personal printer and publisher. She also lectured on a woman’s right to work in Britain and America in the 1860s.

³² Other Victorian magazines for women which concentrated on fashion and domestic responsibilities for women were; *The Queen* (1861-1970), whose proprietor was Samuel Beeton, and *The Lady’s Pictorial* (1837-1901).

and opinions by women, and about women's employment opportunities, women's views on Art and Drama, and the role of women in Politics. By creating an artistic and intellectual dialogue between female and male writers, the magazine challenged gender segregation, and the belief that the Victorian woman should be confined to the domestic sphere, by granting her a public voice. Wilde's objectives for the magazine were evident in the letters he wrote to his female and male Victorian contemporaries, which expressed his hopes for the magazine and a desire for them to be a part of it. In a letter from Wilde to Merrill, Wilde relayed his objectives for the magazine and his admiration of Merrill's writing.³³

I hope you will allow me to count you among the contributors to the Woman's World, and write me a short article on some literary or artistic subject [...] When you have chosen what you would like to write on – pray let me know, so that your article may not clash with any others. I hope to make the magazine the organ through which women of culture and position will express their views, and my list would be quite incomplete without your name (MS 81699: September 1887).³⁴

This letter denoted Wilde's trust in his writers to choose a subject of their own preference. Rather than exclusively reflecting the issues and topics that the male editor wished, the magazine explored the real-life issues and topics that the writers felt were important. Wilde's letter denoted his ambition to prioritise the opinions of his female contemporaries. In a letter addressed to an unknown contemporary, Wilde detailed the unconventional areas that he wishes the magazine to interrogate: "The lines I propose to follow are literary, artistic, and social in dealing with the practical work now being done by women in England [...] Mrs. Charles Maclaren on Women in Politics [...] Wemyrs Reid on Journalism as a profession for Woman [...]" (MS 81699: July/August 1887). In being so closely associated with a medium which advocated

³³ This letter is addressed ambiguously to Merrill: only providing a surname and no forename, and is part of the Lady Eccles Bequest. Although I cannot be certain, Wilde's correspondence was most likely with Stuart Merrill, the American poet who campaigned alongside George Bernard Shaw for Wilde's release from jail in 1895.

³⁴ Wilde's reference to his magazine contributors as: "women of culture and position" reflected his target of a middle and upper-class audience as contributors to and readers of *The Woman's World*. In her article "Oscar Wilde's *The Woman's World*" Stephanie Green asserts that: "*The Woman's World* addressed an elite but expanding readership of middle and upper class educated women with literary and social credentials" (102).

the entry of women into public intellectual discourse, Wilde was an unconventional Victorian man, one who defied the notion of a hegemonic Victorian masculinity. Sean Brady's definition of masculinity which is examined in detail later in the chapter specifies: "the persistence in assumptions that paid work is a male birthright" (34). Wilde's objectives for *The Woman's World* contested the specifically male birthright to work, and challenged hegemonic masculinity by encouraging female participation in the workforce. The issues he focused on, such as employment opportunities for women, their involvement in politics and public life, depicted a belief in gender equality and in a more modern femininity.

One of Wilde's letters regarding *The Woman's World* indicated his desire to change the content of the magazine, so that it mirrored the needs and issues that were important to middle-class Victorian women. In a significant letter from Wilde to an unknown correspondent, he detailed the traditional and conservative nature of *The Lady's World*:

The Lady's World [...] seems to be [...] too feminine and not sufficiently womanly. No one appreciates more fully the value and importance of Dress [...] but it seems to me [...] the field of mere millinery and trimmings, is to some extent already occupied by such papers as *Queen* and the *Lady's Pictorial*, and that we should [...] deal not merely with what woman wear, but with what they think, and how they feel. *The Lady's World* should be made the recognised organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life [...] the wife of the young President of Magdalen, Oxford, might write on her own college, or say, on the attitude of Universities towards women, from the earliest times down to the present – a subject never fully treated of [...] let dress have the end of the magazine; literature, art, travel and social studies the beginning [...] (Holland, *A Life in Letters* 100-102).

Wilde's distinction between the idea of the feminine and the more grounded concept of the womanly, implied an awareness of feminine expectations or roles in society, which did not necessarily correspond with the more realistic concept of a woman. His intention was to

provide certain women with a voice in the public sphere. Wilde was interested in restructuring a paper with new, groundbreaking content: “we should take a wider range, as well as a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what woman wear, but with what they think, and what they feel” (Holland, *A Life in Letters* 100). The magazine provided a public intellectual space that challenged gender segregation, as Wilde brought men and women together through the medium of the magazine: “it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure, and consider it a privilege to contribute to [...] But we should not rely exclusively on women, even for signed articles: artists have sex but art has none” (Holland, *A Life in Letters* 101). Wilde wished to investigate: “the attitude of Universities towards women”; he believed it was an important subject to which other papers did not do justice (*A Life in Letters* 102). The letter concluded with the new editor’s assurance that: “I will be very happy indeed to give any assistance I can in restructuring the Lady’s World, and making it the first women’s paper in England” (*A Life in Letters* 102). Wilde’s objective was to make the magazine an organ through which he could prioritise women’s thoughts, feelings and opinions. Holland proposes that the magazine provided security for Wilde, during a difficult period of creative and financial strain: “[...] it re-established him as a front-line writer; it relieved the acute financial pressures; and above all it gave him some of those ‘finest, rarest moments’ for ‘literature’, effectively kick-starting him into the great creative years of his life” (*A Life in Letters* 125).

The content of *The Woman’s World* portrayed Wilde’s belief in the importance of publishing women’s opinions on various subjects; including women’s involvement in industry, education, and employment.³⁵ 1887 editions of the magazine included the following articles: “The Fallacy of the Equality of Woman” by Miss Lucy M. J. Garnett, “The Fallacy of the Superiority of Man” by Mrs. Charles McLaren, “The Position of Woman” by The Countess of

³⁵ Collected copies of *The Woman’s World* from 1887 and 1889 are in the Early Printed Books Library, at Trinity College, Dublin.

Portsmouth, and “Professions for Women” including Medicine by Dr. Mary M. Marshall M.D.³⁶ The magazine contained articles on fashion trends for women, men and children, but the discussion on art, theatre reviews, short stories, and articles on various subjects including industry and employment, dominated the content. The articles were written by a mix of married and unmarried women. Included in *The Woman's World* (1887) was an article by Constance Wilde: “Children’s Dress in this Century”, and a poem by Lady Wilde entitled *Historic Women*. Wilde’s publication of Constance and Lady Wilde’s articles depicted his support of their participation in the public sphere.³⁷ In “The Position of Woman” by The Countess of Portsmouth, she notes the gender segregation in society, as well as the unequal gender dynamic in marriage. She also claims that the idealisation of marriage in society was unrealistic:

Men and women have placed themselves on opposite sides, claiming an equal right to display the standards of Religion, Science, and Common Morality. [...] Poets sang and moralists dwelt upon marriage as a subject of almost transcendental perfection. Too deeply engrossed in the adoration of such ideals, who would withdraw their eyes to look upon the hideous caricature that really represented marriage to thousands of women? Marriage, as established by law and exhibited by custom, might and did very often represent to a wife a hopeless and bitter slavery. [...] The fruits of the hard toil by the wife could be spent by the husband; her industry be devoured by his drunkenness. The inheritance of a woman could act as bait for the most contemptible of mankind when these were their best as well as their most natural guardians. Women themselves suffered every outrage and wrong (*The Woman's World* 7-8).

The Countess highlights the oppressive nature of marriage on women, claiming that for most women marriage was a legitimised form of slavery. She evokes the precarious idealisation of

³⁶ Other articles by various women include: “Our Girl Workers”, “Irish Industries: The Poplin-Weavers of Dublin” and “The Oxford Ladies’ Colleges”.

³⁷ Constance Lloyd’s article traces the development of fashion trends for children, and she argues for a child’s comfort and the importance that they could play in their clothing, rather than fashionable and constraining costume (p. 413). Lady Wilde’s poem evokes powerful historic women, and idealises women as the supreme creators of men and Christ. Lady Wilde claims a matriarchal lineage in the poem: “Yes, they have lived! These women whose great names / Are graven deep on the world’s history [...] But above all creation Woman stands / Sublimely consecrated by His Will / Who chose the maiden-mother of the Christ” (*The Woman's World* 98).

marriage, and the legislation which maintained a man's control over his wife. By critically reflecting on the gender segregation and inequality in society, the Countess's article proposes the need to re-imagine gender roles. The Countess evokes the Suffragist Movement, the quest to establish a distinctive female identity in the public sphere, and alternative possibilities for women outside of marriage:

From whatever cause, women manifest an increasing determination to find happiness and to cultivate it for its own sake; to discover whatever is possible in life for them individually, which will bring interest, work, and therefore enjoyment. They trust more to their own choice, and consult their own individual capabilities. Marriage, which is not for all women, is none the less, but rather the more, desirable, but it is ceasing to be the only goal for girlhood [...] Fresh possibilities are born [...] (*The Woman's World* 9).

As women began to establish their own identities and focus on their own education and skills, the possibilities for them outside of the framework of marriage became more real, and their dependency on men diminished. Another article in this edition "The Fallacy of the Superiority of Man", which is listed in the contents by Mrs. Charles McLaren, but signed Laura McLaren, proposes that the assumed superiority of man was absurd and without scientific evidence to support the claim.

Scientific men take for granted – first, that women are inherently inferior to men, physically and mentally; and secondly, that this fact is an axiom supported by masculine inner consciousness, and not needing proof [...] man openly rejoices in superiority of all more definite qualities, mental and physical [...] If women are inferior in any point, let the world hear the evidence on which they are to be condemned. If such evidence is not conclusive, they ask that, in fairness, popular judgement be suspended till proofs are forthcoming (54).

McLaren's article disputes various assumptions regarding men's superiority including men's physical strength, labouring and employment abilities, and their intellectual superiority. She asks that women be treated fairly, and emphasises the reality that many of the assumptions

regarding gender were not based on fact or evidence, but prejudice. McLaren claims that historically, women's inaccessibility to education had ensured that they remained powerless in society and dependent upon men. She notes the gender segregation according to the public and private spheres, claiming that a woman who had pursuits outside the domestic sphere would have been severely criticised.

One insuperable obstacle to the performance of any great work by women has been the want of education. All colleges and public schools have been closed to them in every past age and in every country. [...] If even in society a woman hazarded an opinion on things profound, it has been an established custom – as we see in old novels and plays – to stop the mouth of the presumptuous one by some classical quotation, which had to her all the terrors of the unknown [...] For a woman to be learned meant disgrace. To have a serious pursuit beyond the household work was to forfeit the good opinion of every one whom she might hold dear (57).

McLaren evokes the classical canon, the tendency to isolate women from it, and silence them if they attempted to voice their opinion. McLaren's article concludes by reflecting on the world's concentration on male patriarchal power and superiority, while the education and training of women remained largely neglected.

Without technical training, without intellectual advantages, without knowledge of the world and its prevalent ideas, tastes and requirements, without freedom, and without money, in the face of public ridicule and private censure, alone, unaided by patrons and unsupported by disciples, what wonder if women have failed to make their talents felt? Men have devoted themselves to their own development; women have been devoted to the development of men (58).

She claims that society has protected and advocated men's superiority over women for centuries, that men have concentrated on their development, whereas women have neglected their own development to focus on men, as the patriarchal society required them. Wilde's publication of articles that focus on the need for women's equality, suggest an affinity with the

Suffragist Movement. The content of Wilde's magazine reflects his desire to present both sides of the argument by female writers. In "The Fallacy of the Equality of Woman" Miss Lucy M. J. Garnett disputes McLaren's argument for the equality of women, and argues that there are naturally different roles for men and women. Garnett's article expresses anti-equality views, and she implies that if women are granted equality, that they will neglect their children and their responsibilities in the domestic sphere. There is no sense that these obligations could be balanced:

What will be the terms of partnership which the Western woman will dictate when she too is no longer 'dependent upon man for food and clothing'? Will she refuse 'to bring up his children; to feed, wash, and mend him while he works'? Or will she require him to perform these duties turn about with herself, in order that she may be able to, 'start on the wild-goose chase of achieving worldly fame'? (530).

Garnett's article expresses the reality that some women were anxious over their changing roles in society, despite the promise of equality.³⁸ Wilde's publication of both pro-suffragist and anti-equality articles in *The Woman's World*, suggests that he wished the magazine to be a forum for female debates about important issues, and that both sides would be treated seriously and respectfully.

The 1889 editions of *The Woman's World* include more articles by male and female authors, whereas the 1887 editions are dominated by female authors creating an almost exclusively female content. The mix of female and male authors in the one public medium in the 1889 magazines, reflects Wilde's wish to contest the segregation of gender in society. The article titles mirror the important position of women and their opinions in *The Woman's World*, and importance of their opinions in turn to its editor, Wilde.³⁹ One article of particular interest is

³⁸ After an analysis of Garnett's article it is important to note that Garnett sometimes takes McLaren's statements in her article out of context, and adapts and manipulates them to her own advantage.

³⁹ Articles include: "Being Married and Afterwards", "Woman in Oriental Poetry and Literature", "The American Girl in Fiction", "Beauty from the Historical Point of View" by Graham R. Thomson, "Bridal Veils", "Brides and Bridal", "The Evolution of Economics" by Mrs. Swanwick, "The Latest Fashions" from London

“Women’s Suffrage”, by Mrs. Millicent Fawcett, who can be recognised as an important figure of the Victorian Suffragist Movement.⁴⁰ Fawcett argues for the place of women in the public sphere, but despite her wish for women to be accepted into that sphere, the “womanly” characteristics which she describes, reinforce the traditional perception of women as the moral barometers in society.

Let no man or woman be mistaken as to what this movement for women’s suffrage really means. We none of us want to turn the world upside-down or to convert women into men. We want women, on the contrary, to continue womanly – womanly in the highest and best sense – and to bring their true woman’s influence on behalf of whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report, to bear upon the conduct of public affairs (11).

Fawcett’s article captures the reality that although Victorian suffragists sought equality for women, their association of women with the traditional perceptions of Victorian femininity undermined their cause. It re-inscribed gender essentialism according to specific gendered characteristics. Her declaration that women do not seek to “turn the world upside-down or to convert women into men”, implies a male anxiety that if women achieved equality that they would become like men or subvert the male roles in society, displacing men. The articles in *The Woman’s World* include more traditional and unconventional subjects. By propelling women into the public sphere through the medium of the magazine, *The Woman’s World* displays more opportunities for women in the public sphere. In an article in *Harper’s Weekly* newspaper in 1913, Wilde’s editorial assistant, Arthur Fish, claims that Wilde’s modern stance on gender equality is evident in the magazine. Fish also evokes conversations Wilde had with colleagues during his editorship:

and Paris, “Field-Work for Women” by Ouida, “The Gymnasium for Girls” by Mrs. L. Ormiston Chant., “A Lady of the Renaissance” by Edith Margaret, “Irish Industrial Art” by Mrs. Jeune, and “On Women’s Work in Politics” by Margaret, Lady Sandhurst. The article titles also reflect the vast range of subjects that the magazine covered.

⁴⁰ Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929) campaigned tirelessly for women’s right to vote, and their right to higher education. In 1871 she co-founded The Newnham College, Cambridge: a college for women, and she became president of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (the NUWSS) in 1890, a position which she held until 1919.

The keynote of the magazine, indeed, was the right of woman to equality of treatment with man, with the assertion of her claims by women who had gained high position by virtue of their skill as writers or workers in the world's great field of labor. All the contributions were on a high literary plane [...] Some of the articles on women's work and their position in politics were far in advance of the thought of the day and Sir Wemyss Reid, then General Manager of Cassell's, or John Williams the Chief Editor, would call in at our room and discuss them with Oscar Wilde, who would always express his entire sympathy with the views of the writers and reveal a liberality of thought with regard to the political aspirations of women that was undoubtedly sincere ("Oscar Wilde as Editor": *Harper's Weekly*, 4th Oct. 1913 p. 18-20).

Fish notes Wilde's belief in the right of women to assert their public point of view, as well as their right to equality of treatment with men. Wilde's editorship could be considered a performance of gender equality in the Victorian world, and will be examined according to Butler's theoretical framework.

Cultural Connections and Story-telling.

Wilde's editorship of *The Woman's World* is just one example of his unconventionally close connection with Victorian women. With the notion of identity comes the awareness that a body is performing a particular identity to a specific audience, and at the same time, one is conscious of the existence of various other identities that occur in different social contexts. Wilde's simultaneous relations with his wife and Douglas contested the assumed correlation between masculinity and heterosexuality, and emphasised the possibility of an alternative sexuality. Matt Cook evokes Wilde's various roles in Victorian society:

Wilde was husband, father, bohemian, dandy, aesthete and man-about-town; identities which were not necessarily compatible but which came into focus at different times and in different parts of the city. He relished the West End cafes [...] the theatres and hotels and found ample scope to cultivate relationships and a social circle there. These arenas

provided an alternative to the domestic home base in which he nevertheless had a stake (41).

Cook reveals Wilde's complex identity, and the physical and social landscapes that influenced Wilde's site-specific roles; for example he was a father and husband in his Tite Street London home. Wilde's various roles in the private and public sphere, and among both men and women, suggested that he moved freely between these gendered spaces until 1895.

Another medium through which Wilde asserted his cultural affinity with Ireland was through the art of story-telling.⁴¹ Many of Wilde's spoken stories, like his written fairy tales, were steeped in Celtic mythology while his audience would have been predominantly English.⁴² Wilde's stories can be interpreted as his connection with his homeland, Ireland.⁴³ In an unpublished preface to R. H. Sherard's book (written in July 1936), *Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris and Oscar Wilde*, Douglas claims that: "Wilde talked even better than he wrote, and those who never heard him can only come up with an estimate of how good a talker he was [...] Wilde was probably the greatest talker that ever lived, not excepting Socrates who lacked Wilde's sense of humor" (MS 81663: 8-9).⁴⁴ The important role of the Celtic story-teller and the story as a public assertion of identity is important to note. Butler notes the nature of the speech act which includes an essential consideration of the physical body as a part of the act:

One aspect of the speech act that becomes especially important in this context is the fact that speaking is a bodily act. It is a vocalization; it requires the larynx, the lungs, the lips, and the mouth. Whatever is said not only passes through the body but constitutes a

⁴¹ Thomas Wright's monograph *Table Talk: Oscar Wilde* (published in 2000) was the first collection of Wilde's spoken stories in the English language. Guillot De Saix brought together the first collection of Wilde's spoken tales in French in 1940.

⁴² Wilde's publishers were Charles Elkin Mathews and John Lane of The Bodley Head Company, and were based in central London. Wilde's choice of an English and London-based publishing house ensured that his main target audience, at least in the beginning, was English.

⁴³ It is important to note the possible influence of Wilde's parents who published widely on Irish folklore, and Wilde's use of it in his fairy tales denoted the Irish influences of his homeland and his parents.

⁴⁴ Wilde adapted his stories on the basis of the social context: for example a moral or religious tale for adults appropriately transformed into a fantasy for an audience that included children. Wright notes that Wilde's stories were recognised as folk tales: "they are usually adaptations of traditional stories, rather than 'original' works by a single author...they generally lacked fixed or 'definitive' form" (*Table Talk: Oscar Wilde* 14).

certain presentation of the body [...] But the speaking is a sounding forth of the body, its simple assertion, a stylized assertion of its presence. I am saying what I mean: but there is a body here, and there can be no saying without that body – a potentially humiliating and productive fact of life (*Undoing Gender* 172).

During his spoken reflections Wilde's body was an immediate representative and signifier of his ties to Ireland.⁴⁵ His physical body acted as a medium by which his narrative was translated from thought into a physical presence in a public forum. Wilfred Hugh Chesson's first-hand account of Wilde in *A Reminiscence of 1898* provided an unparalleled insight into his spoken narrative techniques and his admiration for a Victorian actress:

We talked literature and he told me stories from Guy de Maupassant with enchanting energy [...] He said that he had been struck by the power of a drama he had seen acted in a French theatre [...] 'J'ai peur, j'ai peur!' She [one of the actresses] shrieks, and the curtain falls. Wilde delivered these words with a force that went into the marrow of my bones (MS 81670: 1911, 391).

Wilde embodied the actress's performance and his interest in this denotes his admiration of Victorian women. Chesson concluded with an admiration of Wilde's skill as a passionate storyteller: "He told me to read *In Mes Communions*, by George Eekhand, a story of friendship ending in disaster worse than his, and he spoke that story to me in thrilling English, which returned to me yet when I read its French, and is in me yet" (MS 81670: 1911, 393). It is vital to reflect on the power and influence the role of the narrator implied in the act of story-telling. For Wilde the act of narrating was an assertion of his literary and oratory power. Regenia Gagnier argues that: "Wilde saw that the 'self' was not inevitably indubitable, rational and progressive, but was socially constructive. It was constructed through language, which was why he waged a life-long

⁴⁵ Merlin Holland also argues that Wilde's connection to Ireland was profound and that it was sustained during his lifetime: "Wilde's Irishness does not manifest itself in his work in the same overt way as a writer like Joyce. It comes more subtly in nuances of style, or in the elements of an Irish oral tradition, or in people and events half-remembered from an Irish childhood. As a result he has been more frequently classified, particularly on the Continent, as an English writer. It is a mistake which Davis Coakley argues eloquently to correct, showing just how deeply the Irish element pervades nearly every aspect of Wilde's life" (Coakley ix-x).

subversion of conventional speech patterns [...]” (Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* 20). In being aware that the self was “socially constructive”, Wilde recognised the influence of the social and institutional powers on the construction of gender and identity in Victorian society. It is through language and those signifiers that we can construct and recognise identity. Despite the fact that Wilde recognised these powers in Victorian society, he refused to be confined by them, and his cultural ties to multiple countries is an example of how he refuted a definitive categorization of identity.

Multiple Cultural Identifications.

Wilde’s interest in Irish, English and French cultural identities depicted his complex identity, as well as displaying an unwillingness to be confined to any one nationality. Wilde was born in Dublin and educated there up until 1874, when he attained a scholarship from Trinity College Dublin to Oxford. Anthony D. Smith’s concept of national identity formation is vital in considering Wilde’s identity and gender. Smith identifies the importance of a national community for identity formation, which is important in consideration of Wilde’s cultural ties to various countries: “socially, the national bond provides the most inclusive community, the generally accepted boundary within which social intercourse normally takes place, and the limit for distinguishing the ‘outsider’” (Smith 144). The national community that Smith evokes is an English community, a community which would have identified Wilde as Irish and outside of these boundaries. Benedict Anderson asserts that the long-established historical significance of the English nation, further isolated Wilde from being considered a part of this national community.⁴⁶ If the English nation was a modern formation, then perhaps Wilde would have been assimilated into that national culture. His status as an outsider, on the periphery of the

⁴⁶ In her article “Woman and Democracy” Miss Julia Wedgwood proposes a Victorian perception of nationhood: “The consciousness of belonging to a nation is elevating to all who share it [...] National feeling opens long vistas, calls up rich varieties of association, emphasises everywhere the enduring, the perennial” (*The Woman’s World* 339).

national English community and law, meant he was never an accepted part of that community.⁴⁷

Anderson evokes Tom Nairn's historical perspective of the English nation.

[...] Alone, [the formation of the English nation] represented a 'slow, conventional growth, not like others, the product of deliberate invention [...]' Arriving later, those others 'attempted to sum up at a stroke the fruits of the experience of the state which had evolved its constitutionalism through several centuries' [...] Because it was first, the English – later British – experience remained distinct [...] (Anderson 155).

According to Victorian masculinity, which propagated a strictly heterosexual identity, Wilde's marriage and his sexual relations with men, challenged the social norms which were the very foundations of English nationalism. Due to his conviction in 1895, Wilde was publicly distinguished as a man set apart from conventional Victorian masculinity. This recognition of Wilde as outside of hegemonic masculinity was because of his sexual relations with men. In *In Carcere et Vinculis* Wilde reflected: "the two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison" (*De Profundis* 61). The two key events that Wilde pointed out, suggested his awareness that his position was as an outsider on the periphery of an English community. His first experience of this was his exile from his homeland; the second was his imprisonment and enforced exile from English society. In order to interrogate Wilde's various identities in Victorian society, it is important to briefly consider Wilde's connection with Irish, English and French cultures that are evident throughout his life. In considering identity, it is important to recognise the complex and multiple roles and identities that make up an individual's personhood. Smith identifies the various aspects of self that identity incorporates: "the self is composed of multiple identities and roles – familial,

⁴⁷ In Anderson's monograph *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), he defines nation as: "[...] An imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign [...] the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion [...] The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them [...] has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations [...] Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation [...] the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship [...]" (5-7). Anderson evokes the potent and yet imagined national ties, between a nation's citizens within the boundaries of any singular nation. Wilde's perceived otherness as Irish in a Victorian context, and his breach of law in 1895 prevented him from becoming a definitive part of a national English community.

territorial, class, religious, ethnic and gender” (Smith 4-5). Smith’s assertion will provide an interesting application to Wilde’s identity, which encompassed many important and disparate roles in his life, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. Wilde’s identity included seemingly conflicting roles as a husband and as a male lover. Smith interprets nation as: “a community of people obeying the same laws and institutions within a given territory” (Smith 9). Despite the fact that the established English nation distinguished Wilde as an outsider in 1895, he had an affiliation with an English identity. Wilde’s poem “The Grave of Keats” (1881), references Keats’s English landscape as “our English land” (*Collins Complete Works* 771).⁴⁸ Wilde’s shared claim (appropriated by his use of ‘our’) of an English land, indicated a connection to the English national community. Kiberd proposes that Wilde exuded an interest in both Irish and English cultural identities: “wavering between national extremes, emulating his mother’s Irish patriotism in one poem, only to salute Keats as ‘poet-painter of our English land’ in the next” (*Inventing Ireland* 34). Wilde requested that *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897) be placed in *Reynolds’s Magazine*, because “it circulates widely among the criminal classes – to which I now belong – so I shall be read by my peers – a new experience for me”, Kiberd notes that this “is a breathtaking statement, suggesting as it does that every one of his previous writings had been received by his enemies” (*Irish Classics* 336). This reflection exemplified Wilde’s perception of himself as an outsider; exiled from his homeland, but also remaining on the outskirts of English society. Kiberd’s distinction between Wilde and the English at that time evokes the colonial situation in Ireland; Ireland having been occupied by England for several hundred years. Doody connects Wilde’s adept use of the English language to the colonization of Ireland and Wilde’s close ties to the country.

Kiberd concurs with Eagleton that in the colonial situation, language is often used by the disempowered as a weapon. Within the context of colonization, dissimulation, ambiguity and deception were often employed by the colonized Irish in the interests of self-

⁴⁸ John Keats (1795-1821) was a prominent English poet, and became gradually recognised as one of the most influential of the Romantic poets after his premature death from tuberculosis. Keats was Wilde’s favourite poet, and his work had a lifelong influence on Wilde.

protection and survival. [...] Wilde was making use of his own folklore within his own creativity long before it became common practice in the Irish Literary Revival – another reason, perhaps, for Declan Kiberd’s designation of him as godfather to that movement (Roden 253-4).

Wilde’s family background which was immersed in Irish folklore is linked to his lifelong connection to Ireland, and Doody astutely notes the link between Wilde’s upbringing in Ireland and the English colonization of the country. When the censor, E. F. S. Pigott, threatened to ban *Salome* in 1892, Wilde emphasized his Irish connections, and distinguished himself as an outsider in Victorian society: “If the censor refuses ‘Salome’ [...] I shall leave England and take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrow mindedness in its artistic judgements. [...] I am not English, I’m Irish, which is quite another thing” (“Salome”; *Pall Mall Gazette* 29th June 1892: p. 2). Wilde’s identification as Irish in the Victorian context is presupposed by an identification of an Other; in this case an English identity, and in the same way the English must have originally identified Wilde as Irish, and outside of the boundaries of the English national identity. His assertion that he was “not English” was prioritised over his claim that he was Irish, but his claim in his poem that Keats’ land was “our land”; this signified his affiliation with both Irish and English cultures. In a letter to James Nicol Dunn in November 1888, Wilde evoked his Irish identity: “As I am very busy I think it would be better not to advertise my name as a contributor. Besides I hear your paper is anti-Home Rule – and I am a most recalcitrant patriot... In the mean time I send you a poem...” (MS 81699: Nov/Dec 1888).⁴⁹ Wilde evoked his connection to a distinctly Irish culture. Umut Ozkirimli notes that: “History changes our conception of ourselves. Key to this change, [...] is the

⁴⁹ Wilfred Hugh Chasson reflected on Wilde’s Irish intonation during the 1890s: “I am correcting the proofs of a play’, he said. ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’. He gave good Irish weight, without roll, to the syllable ‘port’, and I was amused, for I knew that he was throwing the play into the title” (MS 81670: 1898). This account of Wilde’s Irish intonation is important, as it would have provided the English society who surrounded him with a signifier of his Irishness. Wilde also adopted an English accent, according to a reporter from *The New York Herald* who interviewed him. His display of Irish and English accents indicated his ties to both countries: “He puffed a Russian cigarette while he talked, with an air of utter unconcern regarding what was written. His tone was affable, his manner entirely polite. His face, devoid of colour, did not flush nor blanch at any word he spoke, but all he said was said with an English accent, accentuated with due regard to rhythm” (“An American Interviewer and Mr. Oscar Wilde”: *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 18th January 1882 p. 11).

concept of 'Other', because identity is also the relationship between us and the other: 'only when there is an Other can you know who you are'" (Ozkirimli 197). But Wilde's identification with both English and Irish national identities displays an eagerness to embody his cultural ties to each of these countries as part of his identity. At a public lecture entitled "The Irish Poets of 1848 II", Wilde proposed that the Irish had successfully adopted, adapted and improved the English language, again evoking his affiliation with Irish culture and the colonization of Ireland: "I do not know anything more wonderful, or more characteristic of the Celtic genius, than the quick artistic spirit to which we adapted ourselves to the English tongue – the Saxon took our lands from us and left them desolate, we took their language and added new beauties to it" ("The Irish Poets of 1848 II": MS 81638/3019A). It is evident that Wilde cleverly drew on his Irish ties to a greater extent in America than when he was in England. Wilde's lecture "The Irish Poets of 1848 II" in San Francisco, publicly asserted an Irish identity and possible nationalist ties. Holland claimed that he was: "greeted enthusiastically as 'Speranza's Boy'" (*The Wilde Album* 17). His simultaneous interest in English culture illustrated his attraction to various cultures. Although Wilde was connected to Irish, English and French culture, Curtis Marez claims that: "While the unique position of the fin-de-siècle Anglo-Irish middle classes may have led a young Yeats, for example, to pursue an aesthetic vision of the Irish national spirit, these same conditions prompted Wilde to urgently claim England's Aesthetic Empire for his birthright" (Marez 260-1). Marez's attempted categorization of Wilde as English is too reductive; his complex identity is not so easily defined, and as an individual who rallied against categorizations, he would have abhorred this simplistic interpretation of his ties to England. Wilde's aesthetic calling in the 1880s, and later his performance of the dandy in the 1890s, reflected his attempt to create an alternative identity that was a recognition of his ties to Victorian society, but his ties to Ireland and France co-existed with this and should not be overlooked. Apart from overlooking Wilde's multiple links to Ireland, Marez fails to recognise Wilde's ties with French culture. Wilde's connections to Ireland and France refuted the definitive and reductive categorization of him as English. In a letter to J.S. Blackie Wilde

identified himself as a Celt: “[...] May I come and see you, when you have, if you ever have, an idle hour? My excuse must be that all Celts must gravitate towards each other” (Holland, *A Life in Letters* 85). In a similar way that Wilde claims his Irishness, according to Doody, the Irish people claim Wilde as Irish.

Dublin is a city that commends itself on its native wit and expressive use of the English language, and it considers Oscar Wilde as belonging within its community, as being ‘one of its own’ [...] Wilde’s reception in Ireland has been marked from the outset by familiarity and a partisan interest in the progress of his personal and professional life. Wilde figures strongly both in the popular imagination and in the creative imagination of Irish writers (51).

The association of Ireland and the Irish people with Wilde displays his cultural affinity with the country, and the pride they have of his ties to their country. Wilde’s ties to Ireland, England and France, challenged the unrealistic categorization of individuals in Victorian society. Stefano Evangelista captures Wilde’s multiple connections to various cultures, as well as his unwillingness to be defined in a reductive way.

A sharp observer of the literary culture of his time, Wilde understood the cultural dynamics of nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism and exploited this knowledge to forge an incredibly successful public image as iconoclastic critic of middle-class culture and society. The mixture of French-inflected cosmopolitanism, Englishness and Irishness expressed [...] made him then and still makes him now difficult to assimilate into a single national tradition (1).

Evangelista acknowledges the difficulty and uselessness of attempting to label Wilde exclusively as one national identity or another. Rather, Wilde’s connection to cultural identities should be celebrated as a cosmopolitan and modern assertion of a diverse identity.

Wilde composed *Salome* originally in French; a choice which depicted his lifelong connection to France and the French language. *Salome* was banned from the English stage

(written in 1892, published in 1893 in French, and 1894 in English, but not performed until 1896 due to censorship), for its explicit biblical references, so Wilde threatened to leave England and accentuated his interest in France and French culture: "If the censor refuses 'Salome' [...] I shall leave England and take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrow mindedness in its artistic judgements. [...] I am not English, I'm Irish, which is quite another thing" ("Salome": The *Pall Mall Gazette*: 29th June 1892, p. 2). Wilde never applied for French citizenship but his assertion that: "I am not English", depicted his ire at the decision Pigott made to ban his play from being produced in England. When he was released from prison in 1897 Wilde fled to France, and travelled around Europe staying with friends, returning to Paris for his final two years, where he died in November 1900. Ian MacDonald suggests that Wilde's life-long connection with French culture and the French literary scene was evident by his choice to write *Salome* in French. "With the writing of *Salome* in French Oscar Wilde made a gesture towards becoming a member of the French literary establishment of his day. The fact that Wilde died and was buried in Paris cemented his connection with the French literary and artistic culture of the fin de siècle" (17). He chose to spend his post-prison days in France and he also died there in 1900. Wilde's connections to these cultures and countries can be acknowledged as a mode of identity recognition. Like Butler's constructivist framework of gender, Caroline Evans' and Lorraine Gammon's thoughts on identity, provide a useful framework for the study of Wilde's identity and sexuality: "If one formulates identity as a more fluid category, one might then be able simultaneously talk of queer identifications and to acknowledge the complexity and variety of different subjectivities [...] identity itself is not fixed" (Burston 39). As Evans and Gammon claim "identity itself is not fixed", but develops over time. Similarly, as Butler notes, gender is not fixed but fluid. Wilde's refusal to be categorized by any one role in society or by his cultural ties to any one country, destabilize the dominance of any "normative" masculinity.

Wilde's Sexuality and the Trials.

In a similar way that Wilde had an invested interest in Irish, English and French cultural ties, he also had a complex sexual identity; he simultaneously engaged in marriage - a heterosexual identity, and sexual relations with Victorian men. Francesca Coppa argues that Wilde's public performance of identity took place in three disparate phases; personifying homosexuality, posing sodomite and performing effeminacy (Roden 79). However, Coppa's framework does not recognise the fourth stage of Wilde's identity; his heterosexuality as a husband and father. Wilde's heterosexual identity has been largely overlooked in Wildean scholarship.⁵⁰ His heterosexuality and his sexual relations with men existed in a society that criminalised expressions of alternative sexualities. It was this part of Wilde's sexuality that inevitably led to his controversial conviction for 'gross indecency' in 1895. Coppa's belief in Wilde's personification of homosexuality refers to the influence of Wilde and his trials in crystallising a homosexual identity.⁵¹ Coppa interprets Wilde's performance of the dandy as a personified rebellion against the Victorian heterosexual hegemony, which was perceived as a threat to social stability. Initially though, it is important to contextualise the history of the dandy. The dandy emerged originally in nineteenth century Paris and London. Sinfield notes that: "From Beau Brummell (1788-1840) through to Wilde, the dandy represents the over-refinement and laxness that middle-class hegemony ascribed as one way of stigmatizing upper-class pretensions [...] Like the rake, the dandy might debauch himself in any direction" (69). Wilde adopted the image of the dandy as a vital alternative to the middle-class and stringently heterosexual masculinity. Although the dandy was primarily recognised as heterosexual, Wilde's identity as a dandy and his relations with men challenged this Victorian assumption.

⁵⁰ Much contemporary Wildean scholarship concentrates on gay and queer readings of Wilde and his dramatic output, overlooking his heterosexual identity. It was this part of Wilde's sexuality which led to the trials in 1895. Wilde's marriage and heterosexuality will be examined, as well his sexual relations with men. Wilde's sexual relations continued with men while he was married, and Goffman's suggestion is interesting in consideration of his complex sexuality: "The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretences of being other things" (22).

⁵¹ Coppa argues that Wilde's conviction was a consequence of his sexual relations with men: "Wilde's crime was not the private act of sodomy, but his public performances, the complex acts of public signification that Queensberry called 'posing sodomite' [...] that included dress, speech, gesture, and... text production" (Roden 83).

Ellen Moers asserts that: "the effeminate dandy was a cross-sex philanderer", and Wilde's adoption and development of the dandy reflected his complex sexuality which could not be categorised or defined definitively (Sinfield 70). Wilde's surface identity (available visually through his fashion and style), at the opening night of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892, can be interpreted as a public acknowledgment of his association with the dandy. "The green flower had been looming on the horizon for some time past, and weeks ago it was worn on the Parisian boulevards, whence, no doubt, Mr. Wilde brought it over to us. By wearing it when he appeared before the curtain to thank the audience for the reception of 'Lady Windermere's Fan' Mr. Wilde only put his *cachet* on the new fashion" ("The Shops and The Fashions": *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 25th February 1892). The link between Wilde and "new fashion" in London depicts his dandyish interest in the latest fashion trends, as well as the acknowledgment of him as an influence on Victorian fashion. In contrast to traditional Victorian masculinity, many characteristics that the dandy exuded would have been considered typical feminine traits. Wilde used the image of the dandy as a vehicle to commute between, and to experiment with his sexuality and his identity. Rita Felski acknowledges that dandies and the perception of the feminised male:

Deconstructs conventional oppositions between the 'modern' bourgeois man and the 'natural' domestic woman, he is male, yet disassociated from masculine rationality, utility, and progress; feminine yet profoundly unnatural. The effect is double-edged however, because a division is assumed 'between the refined and the vulgar, a division that separates the self-conscious aesthete from the common and sentimental herd' – and the latter, often, includes women (Sinfield 74).

The dandy was characterised by effeminacy, but was not feminine, and was recognised as a male body, but in Wilde's case, due to his close association with Victorian women, it existed outside of the conventional framework of Victorian masculinity. Wilde's role as a dandy suggested that Victorian conceptions of gender and sexuality were reductive, and warranted investigation and reform. The potency and perceived threat of Wilde the aesthete and later the dandy, lay in the fact that he was indefinable; he could not be categorised, recognised, or

accepted as conventional in 1895, due to his sexual relations with men. Wilde's rejection of the Victorian model of masculinity meant that he would come under attack from the Victorian media. Wilde's experimentation with cultural and sexual identities suggested that he considered the self to be socially constructed. Neil Bartlett asserts that Wilde's identity contained various sub identities and roles in society:⁵²

Wilde [...] assiduously composed his public life as a father, husband, and moralist, and he created a career for himself as a playwright whose plays are littered with the wrecks of fathers, husbands and moralists [...] His 'private' homosexual life was an elaborate drama of deception, lies and, most of all, inspired invention. He could not, even in 1895, after concealment had failed, reveal his true nature (*A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* 163).

Bartlett evokes Wilde's sexuality; a sexuality that would be more suitably perceived as a spectrum, not confined by the structures of conventional heterosexuality in Victorian society. Wilde's heterosexuality is vital in contextualising his identity; his role as a father and husband would have been essential to him, and was defined by law through marriage. In a letter to Waldo Stokey, shortly after his marriage to Constance in 1884, Wilde described his joy and love for Constance: "We are of course desperately in love... We telegraph to each other twice a day... Dear Waldo, I am perfectly happy, and hope that you and Mrs. Waldo will be very fond of my wife... I cannot imagine any one seeing her and not loving her" (MS 88213). Wilde's love for Constance and his role as her husband provided an important insight into his genuine love of his wife, and his role as a husband. On the 3rd of May 1895 during the trials, *The Times Weekly Edition* recorded Wilde's public recognition of his heterosexuality, marriage and his role as a father: "[...] The prisoner Wilde was then called a witness, and, in reply to Sir Edward Clarke, he said he was married and had two sons" (MS 81757). Wilde's public identification with his wife and children on the stand exemplified the importance of his roles as a husband and father to him. It is interesting to note that marriage was one of the only acceptable forms of heterosexuality in

⁵² Neil Bartlett is a Wilde scholar, as well as being a playwright and a director in his own right. His most recent adaptation of Wilde's work was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* staged at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 2012, as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival.

Victorian society. Despite this reality, Wilde's love of Constance and his children claims suggests that his sexuality was a more complex issue; it evaded categorization. In 1895 the public's outrage on the discovery of Wilde's sexual relations with men would have been perceived as a threat to the family unit, by a man who was no longer (according to them), honouring his heterosexual commitment to his wife and society.

The Wilde trials in 1895 began while *Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* were running on the West End stages of London. It is important to note that the trials represented a semi-public display of Wilde's heterosexual identity which was challenged in the court on account of his sexual relations with men. As Wilde's heterosexual identity was presumed to be a sham, his relations with men and consequently his identity was undermined. However in Victorian times, as noted in the Introduction, Wilde's sexual relations with men were perceived as perverted and Wilde became identified with the accusation of 'gross indecency' according to Victorian legislation. The corruption behind the trials will be examined and proposed as a major factor in the conviction and sentencing of Wilde. The all-male environment at the courthouse signified a Victorian need to punish Wilde for his alternative identity which did not conform to hegemonic Victorian masculinity. The infamous Wilde trials began on the 3rd of April and ran until the 25th of May 1895. The trials unfolded when the Marquis of Queensberry: Alfred Douglas's father, left a calling card at the Albermale Club, which was Wilde's club with the word 'sodomite', but spelt as 'somdomite', scrawled on the reverse side of the card for Wilde's attention.⁵³ The porter dated the card and left it there for Wilde's attention. The Marquis's misspelt accusation was a deliberate avoidance of libel, but it was also a warning to Wilde that he disapproved of Wilde's

⁵³ The spelling of the Marquis or Marquess of Queensberry varies; some contemporary scholars such as Holland refer to him as the Marquess, but in a range of Victorian newspaper articles and primary sources he is referred to as the Marquis so I have adopted the second spelling. The 9th Marquis of Queensberry, John Douglas (1844-1900) is often associated with the Queensberry boxing rules that he and his college friend, John Graham Chambers devised. Trevor Fisher notes: "In both Britain and the USA fighting took place under the London Prize Rules of 1839, which did little more than regulate barroom brawling. Chambers and Queensberry formulated the basic rules of the belted glove and the three-minute round which still govern boxing today. Chambers did most of the work, but insisted that the rules be known as the Queensberry rules. He knew that a code defined by a commoner could wither on the vine but, with aristocratic patronage, the rules stood a good chance of being accepted" (8).

intimate relationship with his son.⁵⁴ Douglas always had a strained relationship with his father, and he saw this written accusation as an opportunity to damage his father's reputation so he encouraged Wilde to bring a libel suit against him.⁵⁵ With the encouragement of Douglas, Wilde decided to take the Marquis to court on a libel charge. In court the libel was overturned, but the only way for the Marquis to avoid conviction for libel was to prove that his accusation was true, so he began his campaign against Wilde. Wilde and his companion, Alfred Taylor, had been arrested after the first trial and after having been tried together with an unresolved verdict the men were tried separately in a retrial.⁵⁶ The law by which Wilde and Taylor were convicted was Henry Labouchere's Amendment (clause II) to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, and it stipulated that:

any male person who, in public or private, commits or is party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour (Brady 85).

⁵⁴ The Marquis's eldest son, Francis Archibald Douglas: Viscount Drumlanrig was suspected of having an affair with Arthur Rosebury, later the Prime Minister of England. In 1894 what was believed to be Drumlanrig's suicide was concealed as a hunting accident. It seems Drumlanrig had taken his own life, a decision which his father probably believed had been influenced by his relationship with Rosebury and fearing the worst for his younger son Alfred, the Marquis attempted to break up his and Wilde's relationship at whatever cost. Although there is no research to substantiate this claim definitively the Marquis believed that Drumlanrig and Rosebury had had an affair and he could have used that information about the high-ranking politician as a blackmailing tool to get Wilde tried and convicted in 1895. Fisher claimed that the Marquis associated Drumlanrig's suicide with his affair with Rosebury: "The previous day Francis Douglas, Viscount Drumlanrig, Bosie's eldest brother and heir to the family estate, had been found dead in a country ditch. He had been killed by a single cartridge, discharged by his own shotgun. The charge had entered the mouth, fracturing the lower jaw, and passed through the roof of the mouth into the brain. He had died instantly [...] The coroner concluded that the gun had gone off accidentally while Drumlanrig was climbing over the hedge, though how the gun could be fired accidentally in such a way as to fracture the lower right jaw and blast a cartridge through the mouth into the brain was not explained – the gun had to be pointing upward from below head height, a curious position in which to hold a gun while climbing a hedge. [...] Privately, tongues wagged – while Queensberry had no doubt that what had happened was connected with his long-held suspicions about the relationship of his son and Rosebury" (98 & 100).

⁵⁵ In an article in *Reynolds's Newspaper* the Marquis was portrayed as a father saving his son from Wilde's immoral influence. The following extract was part of the trial and influenced the conviction of Wilde: "Carson: It is a question of the privilege of a father in PROTECTING HIS OWN SON. Marquis: I wrote that card simply with the intentions of bringing matters to a head, having been unable to meet Mr. Wilde otherwise, and to save my son, and I abide by what I wrote" ("Queensberry Case"; *Reynolds's Newspaper* 10th March 1895).

⁵⁶ Taylor probably met Wilde through Robbie Ross and was also convicted for gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labour. When he was released from prison he migrated to America.

Since the Labouchere Act did not mention the act of sodomy, but ambiguously acts of 'gross indecency', then technically Wilde did not ultimately stand trial for sodomy (as the Marquis of Queensberry implied), but he was on trial as Roden noted "for violations against the male sex" (82). Wilde was convicted for acts of gross indecency against the male sex, not for specific sexual acts. This general accusation proposed that Wilde was a danger to the male sex and to masculinity. Both Taylor and Wilde were found guilty and sentenced to two years hard labour in prison. Wilde's crimes were perceived as crimes against masculinity, society and the English empire:"For Oscar Wilde posing as sodomite meaning thereby but not said Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde had committed and was in the habit of committing the abominable crime of buggery with mankind... an example of all others in the habit of offending against the purity of the Queen" (MS 81758, April 1895). The Labouchere Act incorporated two separate acts; the other unrelated act was in relation to child prostitution and connected this crime specifically with sexual relations between Victorian men.⁵⁷ This correlation of sexual relations between men with child prostitution, suggested that alternative sexualities were considered to be on the same aberrant level as paedophilia. By connecting paedophilia with sexual relations between men, the government hoped to demonise the perception of alternative sexual practices even further. Wilde's attempt to bring the Marquis to justice in court reflected a need to dispatch with the Victorian idealisation of men, particularly the patriarch.⁵⁸

The negative perception of sexual relations between men in Victorian society was mirrored by the connection between Wilde's conviction for 'gross indecency', and the accusation that he perverted younger members of the male sex.⁵⁹ An anonymous handwritten

⁵⁷ As Cook proposes: "The incorporation of Labouchere's Amendment into the Act connected homosexuality not only with child prostitution but once again with the city" of London (45).

⁵⁸ Kiberd agrees with this theory and suggests that "The artist's whole treatment of the Marquess seems an almost formulaic inversion of Anglo-Saxon racism. Whereas the British upper class had considered the Irish as reckless and criminal, Wilde now reversed the charges, seeking to subvert the father/son relation on which the aristocracy based its claims of lineage [...] Wilde did not go to jail for homosexuality [...] His real crime was, in the words of Mary McCarthy, 'making himself too much at home' in English society (*Irish Classics* 334).

⁵⁹ In the Wilde's "Bankruptcy and Marriage Settlement Papers" the following extract was part a letter from H. Martin Holeman addressed to More Adey dated May 1897. The negative perception of Wilde's relations with

note portrays the negative perception of Wilde and his sexual relations with men in Victorian society, and it makes up part of the Wilde archive and is entitled: “Evening News: May 27th 1895”. In it the author depicts Wilde as the antithesis of Victorian hegemonic masculinity.

England has [...] the man Wilde and others of his kind too long. Before he broke the law of his country and attempted human indecency he was a social poet, a centre of intellectual reception. He was one of the high-priests of a school which attacked all the wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life, and set up false gods of culture and intellectual debauchery [...] To him and such as him we owe the spread of moral degeneration amongst young men [...] At the feet of Wilde they have learned to gain notoriety by blatant conceit, and to pass as men of standing by the curtains of humanity and the achievements of wholesome talent (MS 81758, 1895).

This note was probably written by a journalist or a court witness. According to the author Wilde presented himself initially as a “social poet” and a leader of “intellectual reception”. The author’s suggestion that Wilde was responsible for “the spread of moral degeneration amongst young men”, portrayed the perception of him as a threat to Victorian masculinity and the male sex. It seems it was Wilde’s heterosexuality in marriage and sexual relations with men outraged society. According to the account Wilde: “attacked all the wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life”, and was consequently perceived as a deviant force in society. The reference to Wilde’s supposed corruption of specifically “young men”, reinforced the idea as did the 1885 Criminal Amendment Act, that sexual relations between men were associated with pedophilia.⁶⁰ In a selection of unpublished essays which were originally destined for publication in the French magazine *Mercure de France*, but were retracted in August 1895 (probably due to the

men was evident; Holeman’s perception of Wilde could be connected to the 1885 Labouchere Act and child prostitution. “Mr. Hope stated that he practically was now the sole advisor of Mrs. Wilde, both in her own interests and those of her children; that it was immaterial to him what kind of life Mr. Wilde led, provided he did not molest his wife or children, and provided he kept out of newspapers, but he also said that in the case of there being any public scandal in which Mr. Wilde was mixed up he would at once put the matter before Mr. Hansell, and ask for his authority to stop the allowance” (unpaginated, MS 81754).

⁶⁰ The emphasis on Wilde’s corruption of young men according to the article also implied that it was Wilde who had cajoled and corrupted Alfred Douglas (1870-1945) into a relationship with him, seeing as Wilde was fourteen years older than Douglas.

controversy which surrounded the Wilde trials), Alfred Douglas details the prejudice against Wilde in the Victorian media and the government.⁶¹

I asked Mr. Wilde's lawyers, before the second lawsuit, what would be the probable result. He answered: 'If it were any other man in England I believe he would be acquitted for in these cases it is customary to give the accused the benefit of the doubt, but as in the present case the accused is Mr. Oscar Wilde, I must say that I think it is very doubtful that he be acquitted for two reasons, firstly, the press has prejudiced him so terribly in the eyes of the public that it is almost a moral impossibility for him to obtain an equitable decision, secondly, the government appears determined to obtain a condemnation by all possible means, honest or not, which are in its powers' (MS 81654, August 1895).⁶²

Douglas claims that Wilde was "Butchered to make an English holiday"; a statement which mirrors the pressure the government felt from the public to punish Wilde, as an example to other men who engaged in sexual relations with men and thought they would escape unpunished (MS 81654, August 1895). The removal of Wilde from society was a warning to those men who continued to engage in intimate relations. The prejudice of the judge and the jurors is important to remember in relation to Wilde's trials and conviction. Douglas notes that the image of his father as hero and Wilde as villain was contrasted with the implication that the government bribed, threatened and coerced witnesses into providing evidence against Wilde in order to secure his conviction.

Oscar Wilde lost his suit and was put in prison. I was forced to leave the country, and Lord Queensberry became the popular idol of the English people. He was acclaimed in the streets, the newspapers wrote heading articles to praise him. Lord Queensberry had

⁶¹ Douglas claims that one of the jurors at the trial noted Wilde's attraction to male beauty, apparently a cause for his conviction: "What respectable man admires beauty except in the feminine sex? Who has ever heard of as monstrous a thing as a man saying to an individual of his own sex that his lips are like rose leaves? Naturally he must be guilty" (MS 81654, 12-13).

⁶² Ellmann notes the government's desire to convict Wilde: "According to Majoribanks, who must have got it from Carson, the introduction of the names Rosebury and Gladstone, which at once appeared in the continental press, made it inevitable that Wilde should be tried once the Queensberry case was over, in case it looked as if these men had favoured him out of a need to protect themselves" (423).

‘justified himself’, which means he had proved to the satisfaction of the court that what he had written on the card left at Mr. Wilde’s club was true [...] Every witness of any importance was either a blackmailer, professional pederast or hotel waiter. The blackmailers and the pederasts were approached by detectives who said to them: ‘If you will testify against this man you shall have such and such a sum of money and you will be guaranteed not to be prosecuted; if you do not you will probably be arrested yourselves’. This process was described to me personally by two of these men who were approached [...] (MS 81654, August 1895).

Wilde was criminalised by the Victorian government and English law. Various men were coerced and threatened into testifying against Wilde whether they had had relations with him or not.

Douglas described the government scandal in his account which according to him, would have been exposed had Wilde’s conviction not been the outcome of the trials.

The government was intimidated; the second trial was the result of a political intrigue [...] if he [Mr. Asquith, the Home Secretary] was not threatened by Lord Rosebury that if a second trial was not instituted and a verdict of guilty obtained against Mr. Wilde, the Liberal party would be removed from power. The maniacs of virtue threatened a series of legal actions which would have created an unprecedented scandal in Europe – a scandal in political circles (MS 81654, June 1896: p. 5).

By securing Wilde’s conviction the Liberal party remained in power and prevented an international scandal; a number of highly ranked government officials in the Liberal party were suspected of being involved in sexual relations with men, including Rosebury. The persecution of Wilde served as a warning to politicians without the trouble of dealing with a national scandal or a political fall from power. The government constructed a deviant perception of Wilde by bribing witnesses into taking a stand against him; this perception of Wilde was inaccurate. The prosecution also interpreted Wilde’s literary works as immoral and they

provided a convenient way for the Liberal government to secure his conviction.⁶³ The blurring of lines between what was perceived as a deviant sexuality and a deviant personality contributed to a negative perception of Wilde and his works.

The ambiguous language that surrounded the trials and conviction of Wilde meant that Wilde became the physical signifier of an unnameable crime. As a consequence of his highly publicised trials and conviction, Coppa suggests that Wilde emerged as the very image of homosexuality in Victorian society: "At the center, [of the trials] the man who had been a posing sodomite was now to personify homosexuality for his Victorian audience" (Roden 84). The trials can be interpreted as a crystallisation of the image of 'gross indecency' represented by Wilde during the trials and after his conviction. This signification was further emphasised by the fact that Wilde and Taylor were the only two men who were put on trial and convicted, despite the string of young men who gave evidence claiming that they had had sexual relations with the men. In a handwritten account for the *Evening News* on the 27th of May 1895, the author portrays Wilde's unnameable crime: "We hope that the conviction of Wilde for __ __ vices which were the natural outcome of his diseased intellectual condition, will be a salutary warning to the unhealthy boys who passed as sharers of his culture [...] it is time that public opinion should correct it" (MS 81758). By not naming Wilde's crime his person became the signifier of the crime against masculinity and men. This account reflects on the perceived responsibility of the government to convict Wilde, and depicts the homophobic nature of Victorian society. Wilde's arrest was noted in *Reynolds's Newspaper* on the 7th of April 1895 and the lack of detail is explicit: "Oscar Wilde was arrested shortly after seven o'clock on Friday evening, and taken to Scotland Yard. There he was formally charged with the commission of unnatural offences [...]" ("Marquis and Oscar Wilde": April 1895).⁶⁴ Wilde's name and physical body became

⁶³ *Dorian Gray* was considered immoral and Basil Hallward's admiration for Dorian Gray was interpreted as suspicious.

⁶⁴ The following description of Wilde's arrest appeared on the front page of *Reynolds's Newspaper*: "Oscar Wilde charged with infamous conduct [...] Yesterday Oscar Fingal Flaherty Wills Wilde, described as a gentleman, of 16, Tite Street, Chelsea, was charged on a warrant before Sir John Bridge, at Bow-street Police

synonymous with the crime itself: the personification of acts of 'gross indecency'. Douglas asserts that: "if he [Taylor] had consented to testify against Mr. Wilde he would not have been prosecuted" (MS 81654: August 1895). Douglas's claim implied that Taylor would have been awarded his freedom from prosecution, had he testified against Wilde. Douglas's account emphasised the government's priority to prosecute Wilde over all the other parties involved in the trial. The testimony of men with whom Wilde supposedly had sex contributed to his conviction in court. 'Gross indecency' remained an ambiguous crime in the Victorian media, and as the first man who was successfully convicted for violations against the male sex since the Boulton-Park case, Wilde was perceived as a deviant perpetrator of that crime.⁶⁵ The relationships between working-class men and Wilde would have been misinterpreted and many of the men that testified against Wilde were working-class men. Sir Travers Humphreys who had been involved and later witnessed Wilde's trial, provides an insight into the perception of his cross-class relations with men: "Carson came to the private life and habits of the witness, and the admissions, which Wilde was forced to make as to his association with boys and young men of a class far beneath him, left no doubt, I think, in the minds of those present that he was a homo-sexual" (MS 81758).⁶⁶ Carson's cross-examination depicts the reality that relations between upper-middle class men like Wilde and working class men were misperceived as sexual relations.⁶⁷ In the unpublished essays, Douglas notes the determination of the jury to

Court, with inciting others persons to commit crime, with committing offences against decency, and with offences under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 (clause II)" ("Oscar Wilde charged with infamous conduct"; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 7th April 1895). Ed Cohen reflects on Wilde's unnamed crime in Victorian newspaper reports: "*The Evening standard* reported that Queensberry had written Oscar Wilde posing as _____: the last word, 'sodomite', (Queensberry's mistake for 'sodomite'), was replaced by a blank. 'Oscar Wilde posing' stood for the whole idea. In other newspapers the entire phrasing of the libel was eliminated, leaving Wilde's person as the offence" (Sinfield 3).

⁶⁵ In 1871 Ernest Boulton and Frederick William-Park, two cross-dressing men, who were actors on the London stage were brought to trial. The two men had been suspected of having sexual relations but the case had been thrown out of court due to a lack of evidence. Their cross-dressing activities were regarded with suspicion but they cleverly argued that they were on their way to or from rehearsal and that their costumes were a part of the acting process, essentially method acting.

⁶⁶ Humphreys (1867-1956) was a well-known British barrister who became a judge later in his career. Wilde, Douglas and Ross approached Humphreys with the case for libel and Humphreys applied for a warrant for Queensberry's arrest. He appeared as junior counsel for the prosecution in the trial.

⁶⁷ Edward Carson (1854-1935) was an Irish unionist, barrister and judge and cross-examined Wilde during the trials. He had been a colleague of Wilde's at Trinity College Dublin, and during their respective childhoods both of their families holidayed in the same Irish south easterly seaside town of Tramore, Waterford.

convict Wilde despite the lack of evidence, as well as the juror's evocation of Wilde's cross-class relations with men.

It is true that there is no material proof that Oscar Wilde committed these acts [...] he is evidently a man completely lacking in moral principles and very capable of having committed these acts [...] what other purpose could he have had than an immoral one [...] why then should he associate with men who were not of his own class if not for immoral purposes? (MS 81654, August 1895).

Wilde's relations with these men were perceived as unnatural as they crossed the boundaries of the so-called "natural" Victorian moral order of class. As a member of the upper-middle class Wilde would have been expected to socialise almost exclusively with men and women of his own class.⁶⁸ The belief that Wilde was "capable of committing these acts", and therefore deserved to be convicted for these acts reflected the prejudice against him and the motivation the English government had to convict him. Douglas evokes the public celebration of his father's victory over Wilde; a victory that envisioned the protective Victorian father "who wished to save his son from the bad influence of an evil man" (MS 81654, August 1895). The image of the Marquis as the protective Victorian father portrayed the Victorian idealisation of the patriarch.

Following his conviction Wilde was perceived in opposition to hegemonic Victorian masculinity. The day after Wilde was convicted the *Chronicle* berated the lack of wholesome domestic influence on young men which was directly linked to sexual relations between men: referenced below as "perversion". Women were regarded as the moral guardians of their children and the domestic sphere, and were blamed for the perceived increase in sexual relations between men. As Cook asserts: "The herding of boys in great schools, their too early

⁶⁸ Carson's cross-examination of Wilde depicts the typical Victorian suspicion of cross-class relations and Wilde's rejection of this belief. Carson: "Did you know one was a gentleman's valet and one was a gentleman's groom?" Wilde: "I did not know nor should I have cared, Sir". Carson: "What pleasure had you in the company of men like them?" Wilde: "The pleasure of being with those who are YOUNG, BRIGHT, HAPPY, FAIR". [...] Carson: "What was there in common between you and Parker?" Wilde: "Well, I will tell you I delight in the society of those much younger than myself. [...] I recognise no social distinctions at all of any kind" ("Marquis and Oscar Wilde"; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 7th April 1895).

separation from their homes and association with their mothers [...] all these things coupled with the tasteless luxury that rich parents hold out as a poisonous lure to idle young men and women, afford a terrible wide margin for the gradual perversion of heart and intellect" (58-9). The image of the home and the mother as the dominant carer was idealised and reinforced in this wholesome domestic sphere. A premature separation from the home and the moral influence of the Victorian mother was believed to contribute to the "perversion" of young men.⁶⁹ Wilde's alternative identity was perceived in opposition to the sacred sanctity of the family unit and the domestic sphere. His complex identity avoided definition and pushed the boundaries of identification in every way. Wilde's identity as a presumed heterosexual husband and father was complicated by his sexual relations with men. His life reflected a deep-seated abhorrence for categorizing and restricting people according to social mores and expectations. The primary source material on the trials available in the British Library is invaluable and opens up an important and relatively new inquiry. Wilde's cross-class relations with men contested the extreme Victorian class system, and captured his need to challenge Victorian beliefs. The following anonymous reporter's opinion on the trials reflects the prejudice of the media which influenced the conviction of Wilde:

From beginning to end Lord Queensberry had been influenced in regard to Mr. Oscar Wilde by the one hope alone of saving his son. Mr. Wilde had been going about with young men who were not his equals either in position or education. He thought it would be proved that some of these men were known as some of THE MOST IMMORAL CHARACTERS IN LONDON, and he especially referred to Taylor, who was the right man to assist Wilde in all these orgies with artists and valets ("Marquis and Oscar Wilde"; *Reynolds's Newspaper* 7th April 1895).

The media's constructed image of Wilde as an immoral influence on young men identified him as a danger to society. Wilde's sexuality and his unwillingness to be restricted according to Victorian masculinity is important in consideration of the gender dynamics at play in his

⁶⁹ Cook also notes that The *Telegraph* editorial saw Wilde's "superfine art", and all it represented as the "enemy of the natural affections, the domestic joys, the sanctity and sweetness of the home" (58-9).

dramas. The characters in his plays often challenge the narrow gender framework of the time; this challenge began with Wilde's first two plays: *Vera or the Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*.

Chapter Two: Modern Modes of Femininity in *Vera or The Nihilists* (1880) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883).

This chapter will investigate the modern modes of femininity evident in *Vera* and *The Duchess*. Wilde's editorship of *The Woman's World* can be considered an example of public support in favour of a more modern mode of Victorian femininity. The magazine challenged the segregation of Victorian men and women by bringing male and female writers together in the same public, intellectual forum. The two previous chapters provided a necessary context for analysing Wilde's plays, the analysis will begin in this chapter. Wilde's two female protagonists from *Vera* and *The Duchess* will be considered as modern models of femininity or Wilde's "New Women", who contest the traditional perception of Victorian femininity and assert their own identities. Wilde's two earliest tragedies have received little critical attention in comparison to his later 1890s plays. Although Wilde wrote and published *Vera* in 1880, it was not produced until 1883 in New York. Similarly, Wilde wrote *The Duchess* in 1883, but it was not produced until 1891 in New York, where it ran anonymously under the title *Guido Ferranti*. The plays will be examined according to various gender frameworks. My analysis of these plays will build on existing scholarly research, in particular on the gender dynamics evident in the plays. The strong female protagonists in these plays portray a unique insight into Wilde's characterisation of modern female characters. Kerry Powell notes these unconventional female heroines:

Vera, with its revolutionary heroine, discloses some interest in social reform, and an enlarged conception of women's capabilities, yet its overriding and final impression is that of a woman who extravagantly sacrifices herself for her lover and her country. In this play, as in *The Duchess of Padua*, Wilde had drawn an assertive, unconventional woman without redeeming her from the melodramatic context in which he found her (10-11).

Indeed the characters are unconventional women, and *Vera* will be analysed initially and *The Duchess* will be interrogated in the second part of this chapter. A limited number of critical studies analyse *Vera* superficially; Alan Bird's general reflection on Wilde's plays: *The Plays of*

Oscar Wilde (1977), *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* by Rodney Shewan (1977), and Richard Ellmann's acclaimed biography: *Oscar Wilde* (1987).⁷⁰ Bird's book provides a helpful insight into the background of the early plays; detailing how they were received by the respective audiences, but it does not go beyond a superficial analysis of the plays, and overlooks characterisation, plot mechanics, etc. Shewan's monograph considers the plays in more depth, and argues for the artistic importance of these works, but fails to analyse the dramatic techniques or character development in any detail. Ellmann's biography provides an insight into the background to and inspiration for the plays, but focuses on Wilde's personal life rather than his artistic output. Sos Eltis's *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1996), dedicates a chapter to an analysis of *Vera*. Eltis accurately notes the overwhelmingly negative criticism of the play, and the categorization of it as one of Wilde's early dramatic failures. He warns other scholars that *Vera* is a more subtle and clever play than it first appears, and that it has value as a play:

It is a conventionally plotted play, generously larded with melodramatic moments, and spiced with occasional epigrams and witticisms, but, like Wilde's more respected dramatic works, *Vera* is also a more subtle and cleverly crafted work than it first appears. Wilde found the craft of playwriting more difficult than he first expected, not just because of his lack of experience, but because his dramatic aims were particularly ambitious (27-8).

Eltis is unique in his appreciation for the play, and he argues that the typical Wildean characteristics in this early play can be traced through to his later plays.⁷¹ Frances Miriam Reed's article "Oscar Wilde's *Vera*; or, The Nihilist: The History of a Failed Play", on the other hand provides a political background to the events featured in the play. Reed uses the international Victorian newspaper *The Era*, as a source to track the incidents which influenced

⁷⁰ Criticism of *Vera* tends to be very negative, and does not typically go into much detail or analysis of the play, other than defining it as an early failure in Wilde's dramatic career. Boris Brasol claims that: "today no one takes *Vera* seriously; the play rather should be regarded as a dramatic failure" (91). Peter Raby proposes that *Vera* is "somewhat superficial and excessively melodramatic" (*Oscar Wilde* 82).

⁷¹ Katharine Worth also admires *Vera* and recognises the play as: "an interesting stage piece in its own right" (38).

Wilde's play.⁷² This chapter proposes that *Vera* can afford scholars a unique insight into Wilde's dramatic development. Building on the work of Eltis and Reed, the first part of this chapter will examine the gender roles in *Vera*, and propose that the eponymous Vera transgressed the domestic sphere and dominated the public sphere.

Background, Production Details and Plot Summary.

Wilde composed this four act tragedy in 1880, published it at his own expense at age twenty-six later that year, and it was the first of his two early tragic plays.⁷³ Although *Vera* is set in Russia, many of the issues and themes in the play reflected Wilde's unique anthropological stance as an Irishman, who observed and engaged in the Victorian world. The fact that he was Irish, as discussed in Chapter One, meant that he maintained a certain distance from the society that he would parody in his plays. Chamberlin proposes the importance of art as a reflection of the personality and philosophy of the artist:

Art [...] is a means – and the only means – by which thoughts and feelings and beliefs can find expression, without ever having to 'pay the price' of that expression: it embodies the truth and avoids the consequences [...] art never expresses anything but itself [...] the subject of a work of art is first and foremost the artist's awareness of himself – his self-consciousness, just as the style of a work of art is the artist's expression of himself – his personality (206).

⁷² While Reed's article provides a detailed background of Russian politics, and the frequency of Russia and the Nihilist situation in Victorian news at the time Wilde wrote the play, it does not engage or reflect on the play *Vera*. Her analysis of the Nihilist activity in Russia only concentrates on articles from the Victorian newspaper *The Era*, and could be considered as limited or biased due to the use of only one primary source. Reed claims that "When *The Era*, a newspaper serving the theatrical world, ran an article on 14 December 1879 entitled 'Modern History and Tragedy,' Oscar Wilde – if he read it – might well have decided that a play with the Nihilists as subjects would be immensely popular. The column-long article called for new plays to deal with contemporary events rather than with history of a distant past" (168).

⁷³ It was quite common in Victorian society to have work published at an author's own expense; this expense would usually be reimbursed by the publishing house if the printed work was successful, and the profits exceeded the publishing costs.

Chamberlin's reflection on art proposes the invaluable role of a piece of art to the artist in question; an interesting theory in consideration of the play.⁷⁴ *Vera* was meant to be originally staged in London in 1881; on the morning of the 17th December at the Adelphi Theatre, with Mrs. Bernard Beere in the principal role. After the assassination of Czar Alexander the II the play was cancelled; this was probably due to political pressure.⁷⁵ Eltis claims that the cancellation of the production depicted the controversial subject matter which *Vera* examined: "The cancellation of the London performance attests to the delicacy and importance of Wilde's chosen topic, and a comparison between *Vera* and other contemporary plays on similar subjects demonstrates how far Wilde's treatment of his themes differed from the theatrical norm" (*Revising Wilde* 30).⁷⁶ In 1882 Wilde sold the rights of *Vera* to the American actress Marie Prescott, who produced the play in Union Square Theatre in August 1883, and played the lead role. This decision demonstrated Wilde's faith that his play would relate to audiences in America, and it reflected his belief in a woman's right to participate in the world of work and the arts. *Vera* received a plethora of negative reviews from the American press, and was pulled after only one weeks run.⁷⁷ Holland notes the controversial political nature of the play:

⁷⁴ In *In Carcere et Vinculis* Wilde notes his personal investment in his plays: "I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a form of expression as the lyric or sonnet" (*De Profundis* 57).

⁷⁵ Worth notes that "three weeks before the opening night the following notice appeared in *The World* (at that time edited by Wilde's brother, William): 'Considering the present state of political feeling in England, Mr Oscar Wilde has decided on postponing for a time the production of his drama, *Vera*'. The reason for the cancellation is not as clear as this notice might suggest. Wilde later told the American press, at the time when the play was about to open in New York, that he had not been able to find a suitable cast in London: perhaps unsatisfactory rehearsals were the real reason for the cancellation. But certainly the performance in London in 1881 of a play about the assassination of a Czar would have been rather risky" (24).

⁷⁶ Eltis also notes: "On 30th November 1881, however, three weeks before the planned opening, the *World* announced that 'considering the present state of political feeling in England, Mr. Oscar Wilde has decided on postponing, for a time, the production of his drama *Vera*'; the recent assassinations of Tsar Alexander II and of the American President Garfield had forced Wilde to cancel the production. Undeterred, Wilde focused his attention on America, and finally succeeded in persuading Marie Prescott to take on the play and take the title role" (*Revising Wilde* 28).

⁷⁷ The following review appeared in the *UTICA Daily Press*, New York, on August 22nd, 1883: "In many respects, 'Vera', the new play, may well be called by the author, 'a little thing of his own' [...] the great audience expected some further comic contribution. It came. They had it. But the laughter was at, not with the author [...] He [Wilde] popped in and out of the stage door at least a dozen times, attracting and receiving desired attention [...] It is impossible to treat seriously of the last act [...] it was a series of lectures on tyranny, the people and liberty [...] At last the audience was bored to the verge of distraction [...] Long drawn dramatic rot, a series of discontented essays – this, we fear, will be the general verdict of a play in which Mr Wilde has put so much of himself [...]" (MS 81774: 1883).

By March 1881 the play had taken on an unexpected topicality through the murder of Czar Alexander II [...] a second assassination, that of President Garfield in September, led to a change of public mood and Wilde felt it prudent to postpone the opening. It was a diplomatic move, considering the Prince of Wales was married to the new Czarina's sister (*The Wilde Album* 61).

This withdrawal from production mirrored Wilde's awareness of the controversial subject matter of his play. A production in New York distanced the play from the politics of English life. The title of the play and the name of the protagonist, Vera, derived from the Latin translated as true or authentic, and mirrored the need to construct a more realistic gender framework in Victorian life. In Italian the word vera related specifically to the female form of the verb, thus emphasising the particular importance of Vera as a woman. The use the phrase 'as a woman' as oppose to 'as woman' is more appropriate, as the use of the latter denotes the possibility of a universal woman of which there is not.⁷⁸ In an interview with the New York newspaper *The World*, in August 1883, Wilde depicts the importance of the theme liberty in *Vera*; which relates to Vera's quest for equality in the play: "Heretofore the passion portrayed in the drama has been altogether personal, like the love of a man for a woman, or a woman for a man. I have tried to show the passion for liberty. For this purpose I have chosen the extreme expression of liberty, the Nihilism of Russia... The prevailing idea is a conflict between liberty and love" (Eltis, *Revising Wilde* 50). Wilde prioritises the themes of liberty and love in *Vera* over politics, an assertion that will be examined in more detail later in the chapter.

Vera is set in Russia between the years 1795 in which the prologue is set, and 1800 in which the remaining four acts take place.⁷⁹ Vera leads the Nihilist movement who plot a coup as well as the assassination of the Czar. In the prologue Vera's father, Peter, and a local peasant,

⁷⁸ The idea of a universal woman was evident in Middle English Literature and Drama, and influenced the perception of women in history and in the Western canon of Literature and Drama. This perception was mainly constructed by male authors, and reinforced the idea of the traditional and ideal woman who was often submissive and confined to the domestic sphere.

⁷⁹ A detailed plot summary is provided at the beginning of each play analysis so that my argument is contextualised and coherent.

Michael, talk about Vera; Michael is in love with her. Vera returns home and rejects Michael's declaration of love, claiming that she has more important priorities in life. Vera's brother, Dmitri, who left the village to study law in Moscow, has not been in contact with his family for five or six months. Coincidentally, Dmitri is amongst a band of prisoners and soldiers who call to Peter's house for food on their way to Siberia. Vera returns from the fields, recognises her brother and promises that she will avenge his imprisonment. Peter, desperate to buy his son his freedom, throws money at the Colonel's feet but this offer is rejected. Dmitri is a Nihilist, and claims he fought for freedom from the Czar's tyrannical leadership, a cause which Vera fights for in the remainder of the play. In Act One there is a Nihilist meeting, and the male characters await Vera's arrival anxiously. We meet Alexis who is in disguise as he is the Czar's son and successor, but he hopes to usurp his father's power from inside the establishment. When Michael suspects that Alexis is a spy the Nihilists threaten his life, but Vera stands up for him; in turn he protects the Nihilists from the Czar's General and soldiers when they call during a political meeting. As the play progresses a romantic relationship develops between Vera and Alexis, but Michael remains lovesick over her. Act Two takes place in the palace where the Czar and his staff compare how many civilians they hung that day; their cruel leadership of Russia is contrasted with Vera's and Alexis's fight for liberty and the Russian people. The Czar goes onto the balcony of the palace and he is suddenly shot from the street below; although his son is by his side when he dies, he blames him for his death. Vera is absent from this act, her absence may imply that she murdered the Czar, but the details of the murder are not disclosed. In Act Three following his father's death, Alexis is the newly appointed Czar. Rather than rejecting this position as the Nihilists had hoped he would, Alexis accepts the position in the hope that he will improve his people's living conditions, and be a more just and empathetic Czar than his father was. The Nihilists decide that Alexis is a traitor to their cause for accepting the title of the Czar, and they plot his death. They draw lots to decide on who will commit his murder, and it is Vera who draws the shortest lot. It is agreed in advance that when Vera has stabbed Alexis she is to throw the bloody dagger out the window. The bloody dagger will signal to the Nihilists who wait

in the street below that she has murdered the Czar. The final act opens in the palace, and the new Czar banishes members of his father's staff from Russia into exile, much to their disgust. When Vera sneaks into Alexis's bedchamber that night he awakes and confronts her, telling her that he loves her and he wants her to rule Russia with liberty alongside him. She rejects his wish, and the proposal that they could rule Russia together. She warns him that the Nihilists want him dead and stabs herself instead of killing him.

Although it is difficult to be certain, some elements of the plot of *Vera* were most likely influenced by a popular Nihilist manifesto evidenced in a popular Russian novel, which was published in French in 1863 and available in England in 1880, but not published in English until 1973. Wilde's fluency in French meant that he would have had access to Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is To Be Done?*, and it was recognised in Russia and abroad as a handbook of Russian radicalism. Wilde's play demonstrates an interest in Russian political life, particularly Nihilism, so there is probable cause to believe that he read the novel before he wrote his play, and in *Revising Wilde* Eltis identifies this novel as an influence on Wilde's play.⁸⁰ Eltis proposes that:

Nikolai Chernyshevsky's renowned and influential novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, provides another possible source. Its heroine, Vera Pavlovna, is a strong-minded and visionary woman, who falls in love with a medical student and finds her passions temporarily in conflict with her revolutionary ideals. Wilde's Vera shares these women's strength, idealism, courage, and determination (*Revising Wilde* 33).

In *Vera* Wilde's female protagonist of the same name, influences the young Alexis: a medical student in the novel and in the play, to become involved in the revolutionary Nihilist cause. Wilde re-invents some of the plot details, so that in his play Vera replaces the male hero, and

⁸⁰ Although I have not found definitive research that can prove that Wilde read this novel it is important to recognise the similarities between his play and the novel, even if Wilde did not read it. Bird also emphasises the characteristics that the novel and Wilde's play shared: "[...] it was a sacred text which did more to mould the Nihilists' beliefs and influence their actions than any other piece of writing [...] Chernyshevsky created a heroine called Vera who is helped to escape from the middle-class society of St. Petersburg by a young medical student who introduces her to revolutionary ideas" (20).

plays the part of the heroine; it is her influence on the male characters that inspires the Russian revolution. Wilde's Vera can be interpreted as unconventional women, who contests the oppressive and restrictive role of women in Tsarist Russia, and reflects the oppressive perception of Victorian gender roles.

Vera's Quest and Gender Inversion.

The play pivots around Vera's heroic quest to seek revenge for her brother Dmitri's enforced exile to Siberia. In this alternative gender framework Wilde re-imagines the potential for Victorian women to contest their confinement to the domestic sphere, and to enter into public life. Wilde re-configures gender roles by confining the male patriarch Peter, to the domestic sphere; this assertion will be analysed in detail at a later stage. By evoking political events in Russian society, *Vera* was a radical play at the time as it promoted revolutionary sentiment. By sympathising with the Nihilist cause for freedom, Wilde's play pioneers a belief in alternative political factions. The name of his heroine connected his play to political events in Russia. In being Wilde's first attempt at a tragic melodrama *Vera* must be considered a seminal play in Wilde studies, and as his first female protagonist, the influence of Vera on Wilde's 1890s female characters is also important to consider. Wilde wrote about his ambitions for *Vera* in a letter to his literary executor and friend Robbie Ross:

It is a play not of politics but of passion. It deals with no theories of government but with men and women simply, and modern Nihilistic Russia, with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms, is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love. With this feeling was the play written, and with this aim should the play be acted (Bird 15).

Wilde's belief in the potential of his first play was an important indicator that *Vera* should be considered as part of his dramatic output. His declaration that *Vera* deals with "men and women simply", signifies his intention to prioritise human relations and experiences in this play over a political cause. Wilde calls *Vera* a "dream"; his language implies the need to re-imagine the

character's roles in the dreamscape of the imagination, and in the dreamscape of the future. Wilde believed that *Vera* was a play of passion; the passionate relationships between the characters in the play and their approach to Nihilism illustrate this belief. It is likely that this dream is only possible after Vera's choice to opt out of an oppressive reality for women, by embracing death through the medium of suicide. Vera's decision to confront death in suicide is ultimately a decision to elude life; to escape the patriarchal roles ascribed to women. Death for Vera meant that life was not worth living, and implies a belief in a better life, encapsulated by Wilde's concept of a dream. Vera's suicide and this need to annihilate the female body could be interpreted as: "a way of getting rid of the oppression connected with the feminine body" (Bronfen 142). Hope of an alternative life was only possible after Vera refused the traditional female roles offered to her in the play. Perhaps Vera's suicide is a necessary sacrifice, so that she would be immortalised as a heroine like Salome. This sacrifice could inspire change in the future.

Theories of Suicide and Agency.

The act of suicide that takes place in *Vera* and *The Duchess* by Wilde's female protagonists will be analysed and posited as a challenge to the oppressive gender roles in Victorian society. A number of theorists will be used in order to investigate female suicide in these plays, but initially it is important to consider the historical development and perception of the act.⁸¹ In ancient Greek society suicide was interpreted differently according to independent schools of thought. Some schools believed that ending one's own life was disrespectful to the Gods; others interpreted suicide in certain circumstances as a heroic act of self-sacrifice. The desire to exercise individual power in ending one's own life rather than awaiting fate, in some instances, was thought to be a noble decision. Minois indicates the main differences in classical and medieval perspectives on suicide: "The essential differences between classical and medieval attitudes towards voluntary death lies in the plurality of opinions in ancient times versus the

⁸¹ Georges Minois' *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (1995) is an interesting book, which details the history of suicide in the Western world.

monolithic stance of Christianity" (43). In the Middle Ages, suicide was predominantly associated with dishonour, and the family of the deceased were punished and humiliated in public: reinforcing the ignominy of the act.⁸² Minois reflects on the common belief regarding suicide in the Middle Ages, noting the emergence of Christianity and the influence that religion had over the perception of suicide: "If we exist it is because we exist in order to glorify God and to make ourselves useful in society. Anyone who rejects that rule deserves punishment, both of the dead body and in the afterlife. This attitude reigned supreme and uncontested in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. It began to change in the early Renaissance, toward the end of the Fifteenth century" (3). One of the exceptions to the negative perception of suicide was in a case of war; if a knight took action and committed suicide before he was killed on the battle field then his death was thought to be noble, but if a peasant took their own life then this was deemed cowardly, and they were punished accordingly.⁸³ In the Middle Ages in England and France if a coroner's investigation successfully proved suicide, then the woman's body would often be dragged through the town as a kind of public spectacle, and burnt at the stake in the town square. In the case of a man's body it would be disfigured, dragged through the town on the back of a cart, and hung from the main town square for a considerable period of time. Minois reflects on the punishment inflicted on the corpse of a suicide and the shame that their family would suffer: "In England the body of a suicide was buried under the high road, preferably at a busy crossroads, and it was pinned to the ground by driving a wooden stake through the chest. With the corpse immobilized and trodden upon in this manner, there was less chance that the spirit would emerge to haunt the living" (36). These disturbing rituals and punishments served as reminders to the community about the disgrace that suicide brought upon the deceased, and

⁸² In drama and literature The Middle Ages were divided into the following epochs: the early, the middle and the modern ages. The Early epoch was usually recognised as anywhere from the sixth or the eighth century to the eleventh century. The Middle time period was typically identified as between the eleventh and the fifteenth century. The beginning of the Modern era was marked by Shakespeare's contribution to drama in the sixteenth century.

⁸³ Minois notes the disparate perceptions of suicide according to social status in the Middle Ages: "Since noble suicide was a social act, it was to some extent honorable. The peasant's suicide, on the other hand, was an isolated act born of egotism and cowardice: when the countryman went off to hang himself in secret, he was fleeing his responsibilities; his motivation was despair, a fatal vice inspired in him by the devil. The noble face his responsibilities by going to a glorious death" (16).

the family of the deceased. With the development in many fields of thought including philosophy, and the emergence of sociological and psychological interpretations of suicide at the beginning of the Enlightenment, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suicide was perceived as a more complex issue that was studied and debated about in a new way. Suicide became a popular topic for discussion in society: "Never before had people talked so much about voluntary death, never before had so much been written about it: many thinkers hastened to take a stand on it, and entire treatises were written, pro or con. The question had become a social reality, and it finally had a name of its own, *suicide*" (Minois 210). Despite this public debate about suicide though, the growing influence of Christianity in the Western world posited the belief that suicide was a sin against God and the legislation of suicide as a crime in Catholic nations in particular, such as Ireland, reflected this belief.⁸⁴ It is important to be aware of the debate about suicide in order to contextualise the role of it in Wilde's plays.

Contemporary feminist scholarship on suicide suggests another perspective on suicide which provides an interesting framework to study Wilde's early plays. In her journal article "The Supple Suitor: Death, Women, Feminism, and (Assisted or Unassisted) Suicide" (2005), Sandra M. Gilbert argues that: "The very word 'choice' has, to be sure, positive meanings for us. We are, generally speaking, pro choice, so shouldn't we imagine death as a proper and reasonable choice [...] What of the much-discussed 'right to die'?" (253). Gilbert emphasizes the notion that people have the right to live or die, and to make that decision for themselves. The acclaimed sociologist Emile Durkheim refers to this right to die as revolutionary or rational suicide. In Wilde's plays *Vera* and *the Duchess* choose suicide in the hopes that the oppressive conditions of their lives, essentially what drives them to death, will be uncovered and challenged. In *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (1986) Margaret Higonnet, in her chapter "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide" claims that:

⁸⁴ Suicide was considered a crime in Ireland up until 1993 and in England until 1961.

To embrace death is at the same time to read one's own life [...] Some choose to die in order to shape their lives as a whole; others fragment life to generate the energy of fission or elision. In their deaths, many are obsessed with presenting an image, whether to permit aesthetic contemplation or to provoke a revolution in thought (Gilbert 69).

In order to embrace death, one has to have analysed one's own life and come to the conclusion that death is the preferred choice over life. Vera's and the Duchess's suicides represent an attempt to highlight the oppressive social and patriarchal regulations on their lives. Their choices to die also mirror their desperate need to escape and re-imagine gender roles. Higonnet evokes the history of female martyrs which could be connected to Vera's suicide, seeing as she references Charlotte Corday in the play:⁸⁵

Classical instances of women's suicides are perceived as masculine [...] Charlotte Corday, the self-appointed Girondiste martyr of the French Revolution, is one of the last in this tradition. She was immediately perceived as a man, a Cato, although her body was subjected posthumously to a degrading sexual examination sketched by one of David's pupils (Gilbert 70).

Wilde's protagonist calls on the female heroines of the past, and a female narrative history. Vera's suicide then can be read as an empowering move, which secured her place in the history of female suicide. In Wilde's plays the female protagonists use suicide as a form of authoring their own lives, and ultimately deciding their own fate rather than becoming submissive within a patriarchal society.⁸⁶

Margaret Higonnet's chapter on suicide in Susan Rubin Suleiman's book *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (1986), analyses women's suicide and issues of identity in the nineteenth century:

⁸⁵ Vera: "[...] Methinks the spirit of Charlotte Corday has entered my soul now. I shall carve my name on the world, and be ranked amongst the great heroines. Ay! The spirit of Charlotte Corday beats in each petty vein, and nerves my woman's hand to strike, as I have nerved my woman's heart to hate [...] (*Brandishing dagger*)... O crucified mother, O liberty, I swear that Russia shall be saved!" (*Collins Complete Works* 713-14).

⁸⁶ I do not use the phrase to 'commit suicide' as it implies that the choice to take one's own life is still an illegal offence or a criminal act which it is not; the word suicide is more appropriate.

[...] in the nineteenth century the theme of female identity comes to focus on the disparity between individual aspiration and social actuality. The death of the heroine may be attributed to the deficiencies of social institutions: she attacks her own body, having introjected society's hostility to her deviance. [...] Or her death may be referred to the dangers of individualism itself. Selfhood, with its reflexive doubling, constitutes fragmentation of the self (Suleiman 76).

In taking her own life Vera takes control of her own fate and exercises her independent female agency, while also forcing the audience to analyse her life.⁸⁷ Rather than continuing to exist in a traditional and patriarchal world, Vera claims the authorship of her own life through suicide. Vera's and the Duchess's death signify a disillusion with the reality of their female roles; these "New Women" will contest traditional roles and reinvent new female roles. These suicides are transgressive acts; they kill off their existing roles in a patriarchal male world in the hopes of re-configuring unconventional roles for women. Wilde undermines the patriarchal male lineage in the plays and empowers an alternative matriarchal history, which inspires the choices that the female characters made. Albert Camus proposes that a fundamental problem in philosophy is suicide, and this is a decision that the two female protagonists of *Vera* and *The Duchess* make in the plays (1-2).⁸⁸ Vera's choice to die forces the audience and scholars to analyse the social conditions of her life which influences this choice. Vera is a progressive female character who intentionally contests the Victorian patriarchy, and challenges the male systems of power. Durkheim's sociological study of suicide explores the relationship between the individual who has committed suicide and society. Durkheim's *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897), pioneers the argument that individual alienation from society is a motivating reason for suicide. Durkheim claims: "Originally society is everything, the individual nothing. Consequently, the strongest social feelings are those connecting the individual with the collectivity; society is its own aim. Man is considered only an instrument in its hands; he seems to draw all his rights from it and

⁸⁷ The study of suicide and Drama in this chapter only concentrates on suicides evident in drama and fiction, and does not attempt to examine the issues or contexts surrounding real-life suicide. The first ground-breaking analysis of real-life suicide is Emile Durkheim's monograph *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897).

⁸⁸ For further reading see Albert Camus's philosophical digression on suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

has no counter-prerogative, because nothing higher than it exists" (336). Perhaps Vera's suicide could be interpreted as a medium by which she challenges the assumption that the needs of society are prioritised above the needs of the individual. Although she erases herself through suicide, she empowers her cause by forcing us to examine the possible reasons for her death. Initially though, it is important to contextualise the gender dynamics of Vera's time so that she can be identified as an unconventional woman.

Laqueur notes the historical significance of how gender progressed from the eighteenth century, despite the ongoing perception of women as "the perennial other" (150). The development of gender at this time is important as the prologue of *Vera* is set in 1795. As it was mentioned in the Introduction, with a newly perceived dual gender model, women became a new medium to explore gender differentiation. Whereas women were perceived previously as a less perfect and inverted version of man, from the eighteenth century onwards women became a "legitimate" sex.⁸⁹ Despite this groundbreaking realisation there was still a need to overcome the prejudice of the past, and to re-think more equal gender roles. The overwhelmingly negative perception of the "New Woman" signified the need for the gender framework to progress further. The superficial idealisation of women as the moral barometer of society or as 'a species of angel' was also unrealistic, and confined women to the domestic world. These expectations on women, including the disapproval of female participation in the public sphere, regulated women's place in the home so that they were forced to play the roles of wife and mother. The societal construction of oppositional gender roles, functioned as a medium to regulate the segregation of gender in society. Laqueur depicts the conventional perception of women in the nineteenth century, a perception that was most likely shared by Wilde's audiences:

John Millar argues for the crucial role of women and their virtues in the progress of civilization. Far from being lesser men, they are treated in his *Origins of the Distinctions of Ranks*, as both a moral barometer and an active agent in the improvement of society

⁸⁹ Thomas Laqueur's seminal monograph, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), provides an interesting insight into eighteenth and nineteenth century gender dynamics.

[...] In peaceful societies that had progressed in the arts, a woman's rank and station were dictated by her special talents for raising children and by her 'particular delicacy and sensibility' [...] civilization in Millar's account leads to an increasing differentiation of male and female social roles; conversely, a greater differentiation of roles and specifically greater female 'delicacy and sensibility' are signs of moral progress (Laqueur 200-1).

Vera's political independence and ambition marks her out as an alternative "New Woman", and these motivations take precedence over the nineteenth century expectations of her to marry and her "special talents for raising children" (Laqueur 200-1). By rallying against this narrow construction of the ideal woman, Vera presents a conception of women outside of this limited framework. Wilde was a witness to the increased differentiation between male and female social roles in Victorian society, and perhaps his unconventional characters in *Vera* were too progressive for nineteenth century audiences.

As a public figure Vera challenges the traditional gender framework for women who were expected to occupy the domestic sphere, and take responsibility for the duties associated with the roles of wife and mother. Paradoxically, the female body signifies the power of patriarchal relations, while also symbolising the potential to resist this exclusively male discourse. In the context of Victorian gender discourse, masculine identity and the masculine body existed in relation to the recognition of the female body as Other. However in *Vera*, Wilde re-imagines the potential of women in an alternative gender framework. The female body, represented by Vera, is idealised by the male characters, which contests the exclusivity of the male dominated public sphere in the play. The Victorian patriarch is undermined and replaced by an idealisation of the matriarch. Vera's willingness to sacrifice her personal life, in order to gain freedom for her brother, sets her up as the heroine of the play, and challenges the perception of her as a conventional "New Woman". Vera leads the Nihilist movement and challenges the oppressive system of the Czar.

VERA. (*who has remained motionless, picks up paper now from under her feet and reads*):
'99 Rue Tchernavaya, Moscow. To strangle whatever nature is in me; neither to love nor
to be loved; neither to pity nor to be pitied; neither to marry nor to be given in marriage,
till the end is come'. My brother, I shall keep the oath. (*Kisses the paper.*) You shall be
revenged! (*Collins Complete Works* 686).

Vera promises to avenge her brother's capture, and prioritises this oath to him over love or marriage; she adopts the traditionally masculine role as leader of the Nihilists, and proposes herself as the heroine in the play. The end of the play concludes with Vera's sacrifice of herself for her country; Wilde constructs her as an alternative female martyr. The death of Vera could also be interpreted as a negative and self-erasing image of woman, but the very nature of Vera's death forces us to consider her life. This empowers her and encourages an interrogation of the patriarchal system that she is a victim of. Rather than advocate a male political leader for the cause, Wilde nominates a female heroine to usurp the power of the Czar. The Nihilist plot to remove the Czar from power undermines the male patriarchal power, providing an opportunity to contest patriarchal structures in Russia.

VERA. The hour is now come to annihilate and to revenge... how easy it is for a king to
kill his people by the thousands [...] Oh, to think what stands between us and freedom in
Europe [...] the brood of men is dead and the dull earth grown sick of child-bearing, else
would no crowned dog pollute God's air by living (*Collins Complete Works* 689-90).

According to Vera the Czar pollutes the air of liberty for which she is fighting. The contrast between the tyrannical Czar and Vera's passionate cause for liberty, challenges the authority of the Czar's leadership. Perhaps Vera's reference to "the dull earth which has grown sick of child-bearing", reflects an anxiety about the traditional role of women as mothers. Wilde juxtaposes the Czar's cruel nature with Vera's empathy for the prisoners; in the prologue she claims: "they have been unjustly condemned" (*Collins Complete Works* 684). In contrast the Czar's cruelty is explicit. Czar: "I would to God that this people had but one neck that I might strangle them with one noose [...] They don't die fast enough, then. You should put more of them into one cell at

once" (*The Collins Complete Works* 700). Vera's alternative female leadership is more desirable than the Czar's patriarchal male leadership. As a progressive female character Vera's education, essentially her ability to read and write is perceived as a threat to the patriarchy in the play. This anxiety over female power mirrors the perceived threat of highly educated women in Victorian society, and also indicates the fear of the "New Woman". Ledger claims: "It was new practices in the education of women which were blamed by many enemies of the New Woman for her supposed masculinisation. Hugh Strutfield claimed that 'the New Woman, or the "desexualised half-man"... is a victim of the universal passion for learning'" (17). This negative perception of the "New Woman" was implemented as a mode of discouraging women's plight for the right to be educated. Education equipped women with the opportunity and skills to participate in public life.⁹⁰ Vera's education also allows her to contest class boundaries; in the beginning of the play she is a peasant, and by the end of the play she has become an idealised martyr.

COLONEL. Can she read and write?

PETER. Ay, that she can, sir.

COLONEL. Then she is a dangerous woman [...] Till your fields, store your harvests, pay your taxes, and obey your masters – that is your duty.

VERA. Who are our masters?

COLONEL. Young woman, these men are going to the mines for life for asking the same foolish question.

VERA. Then they have been unjustly condemned (*Collins Complete Works* 684).

The Colonel prioritises his identification of Vera as a woman over his identification of her as a peasant. The threat posed by her gender is more dangerous than that posed by her class. As a member of a lower class family she contests the class hierarchy by questioning the Colonel's

⁹⁰ In Wilde's letters to his female contemporaries regarding the content of *The Woman's World*, he emphasizes the need for women to receive education, and he encourages the contributors to write articles on the subject of women, university and politics; a subject he believes is neglected in the Victorian media. "The lines I propose to follow are literary, artistic, and social in dealing with the practical work now being done by women in England [...] Mrs. Charles Maclaren on Women in Politics [...] Wemyrs Reid on Journalism as a profession for Woman [...]" (MS 81699: July/August 1887).

leadership. Vera challenges the patriarchal Colonel in the beginning of the play; he attempts to threaten her into silence, but she stands up to him by claiming that the imprisoned soldiers have been wrongly incarcerated. Vera's revenge oath implies that there is a need to question, and if necessary to sacrifice constructed expectations and assumed roles like marriage, in order to achieve liberty and equality. The expectations of the past must be dispensed with in order to reinvent a more liberal framework for gender. In order to invent a more liberal framework for gender in the play Vera denies the oppressive identification of her as a woman in the context of the time. The ambiguous gender identity of Vera characterizes many of Wilde's characters, and challenges oppositional Victorian gender roles. In declaring that: "I am no woman now", Vera denies a categorization as a woman in the traditional and oppressive eighteenth and nineteenth century framework of the play (*Collins Complete Works* 712). In denying this repressive identification definitively as a woman in this framework, Vera becomes more of a gender liberated force. Sue Ellen Case proposes that: "The feminist in nature can create the laboratory in which the single most effective mode of repression – gender – can be exposed, dismantled, and removed" (131-2). Vera's unconventional gender identity, which incorporates typically female and male characteristics, pervades the play.

The male idealisation of Vera throughout the play, empowers her and allows her to become the Nihilist leader and hero of the play. The President of the Nihilists exemplifies the male idealisation of Vera on her arrival to a political meeting: "Welcome, Vera, welcome! We have been sick at heart till we saw you; but now methinks the star of freedom has come to wake us from the night" (*Collins Complete Works* 688). Vera's leadership and commitment to the Nihilist cause undermines the narrow conception of women in Victorian society, whose sense of self was supposed to be circumscribed by the roles of wife and mother. Eltis notes that Wilde's female choice of heroine was unusual for a Victorian play about Nihilism:

Wilde not only presented his nihilists as idealistic and courageous people but, even more unusually, made their leader a woman. Great emphasis is laid on the heroism of

Vera [...] All the nihilists describe Vera as the guiding light of their movement, and she delivers some of the most stirring speeches on liberty and justice. No other 'Russian' play even includes a woman among its conspirators (*Revising Wilde* 43).⁹¹

The idealisation of Vera as a heroine proposes alternative roles for women in the play. Rather than acquire a higher social class through the medium of marriage, Vera's ambition, education and public activity allow her to ascend the social ladder independently. Her progression from a peasant to a leader and finally a martyr, captures the ability of women to progress in the public sphere. The absence of any other female characters, who adopt the more conventional roles of wife and mother in *Vera*, emphasizes both the strength of Wilde's female protagonist and the absence of progressive female characters on the stage. Vera asserts the importance of an inclusive framework in considering gender, and calls for more complex female characters on the stage. Vera's speech can be connected with Lady Macbeth's wish to suppress her motherly instincts in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and in linking the two plays Wilde evokes the history of female characters on the stage.⁹² Vera declares: "My blood seems turned to gall; my heart is as cold as steel is, my hand shall be more deadly. From the desert and the tomb the voice of my prisoned brother cries aloud, and bids me strike one blow for liberty" (*Collins Complete Works* 712-13). Vera's passionate quest for liberty could be considered a metaphor for the emerging feminist movement in the nineteenth century. In connecting Vera to Lady Macbeth, (an equally ambitious and unconventional female character), Wilde implies that there is a need to challenge the theatrical representation of women.

Vera inspires the male characters throughout the play to fight for the Nihilist cause. Her influence over the male characters dictates their decisions, as well as the Nihilist rebellion

⁹¹ The other Russian plays that Eltis acknowledges were Victorian plays which examined the popular subject of Russian politics and Nihilism. For more information on these plays, see chapter one in *Revising Wilde* (pages 40-45), these plays included: *The Russian Bride* (1874), *Russia* (1877), *The Red Lamp* (1887), *Vera* (1890) and *The Nihilist* (1897).

⁹² Lady Macbeth: "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here; / And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty [...] Come to my woman's Breasts, And take my milk for gall [...]" (Shakespeare 926).

against the Czar. Alexis, who is in love with Vera, is the Czar's son and successor, but supports the Nihilist cause. Although Alexis and Michael are in love with Vera, she refuses to be subservient within the patriarchal framework of marriage. Vera develops a close relationship with Alexis, who idealises her as the nation's hope for the future, and he acknowledges her as the rightful leader of the Nihilist cause: "Why doesn't she come? The whole fire of revolution seems fallen into dull ashes when she is not here" (*Collins Complete Works* 688). The male idealisation of Vera's leadership reflects a male patriarchal acceptance of her as their leader. Vera's willingness to defy the Sergeant in the Prologue, signifies her role as the head of the household, and as the fearless leader of the Nihilist movement. In the opening scene Vera's compassion for the soldiers and her determination to speak to them, indicate her leadership qualities.

SERGEANT. Come now, young woman, no talking to my prisoners.

VERA. I shall speak to them. How much do you want?

SERGEANT. How much have you?

VERA. Will you let these men sit down if I give you this? (*Takes off her peasant necklace.*)

It is all I have; it was my mother's (*Collins Complete Works* 684).

Vera's refusal to obey the Sergeant, and her insistence on bartering jewellery in order to speak to the prisoners, indicates her ability to survive in a traditionally male sphere. She has acquired unconventional skills for a woman of her time, and she is willing to use these skills to further the Nihilist cause. It is significant that it is Vera's mother's jewellery that she exchanges; she has financial wealth and independence, and her father does not seem to have any financial capital. In bartering her mother's jewellery she also abandons her matriarchal link to her; it is necessary for Vera to cut ties with past gender roles in order to establish new roles for women. Vera is acknowledged as a pioneer of liberty and freedom in Russian public life. She contests the power of the male patriarchy in the public sphere. Alexis: "Oh, think how without you the sun goes from our life, how the people will lose their leader and liberty her priestess [...] When you die then Russia is smitten indeed; when you die then I shall lose all hope" (*Collins Complete Works*

691). Alexis claims that he will lose all hope when Vera dies, but when Vera speaks passionately it is about her country; she prioritises her love of liberty and Russia over her personal ambitions. Although Alexis proclaims his love of liberty and Russia his cause can be exposed as superficial; he accepts the crown despite his Nihilist beliefs. His love of Vera, however, is prioritised over his dedication to the Nihilist cause. As Eltis notes:

Alexis's revolutionary convictions are thus revealed to be little more than skin-deep; he accepts his place in the dynastic line and offers to crown Vera as empress 'in that great cathedral which my father's built'. Vera, however, shows that her beliefs and principles are more profoundly held, for, in spite of the fact that this is the first time Alexis has openly confessed his love for her, she 'loosens her hands violently from him, and starts up', declaring that, 'I am a Nihilist! I cannot wear a crown!' [...] Alexis's enthusiasm for liberty is only an offshoot of his love for Vera (*Revising Wilde* 51).

While Vera's dedication to the cause of liberty is passionate and palpable, Alexis's loyalties fluctuate; his acceptance of the crown, and then his rejection of it due to Vera's influence, display his superficial motives and his love for Vera over the Nihilist cause. Vera's education and dedication to her cause of liberty, as well as the male acceptance of her as their leader, enable her to dominate the public sphere. Her desire to remain independent and not marry Alexis, suggests that she is the author of her own life, despite opposing social conventions. Rather than becoming Alexis's wife or undertaking the Nihilist order for her to murder Alexis, Vera becomes the author of her own life and death; her decision to end her own life displays a rebellion against this patriarchal system. In killing herself she is in control of her own destiny and her own death. She chooses her own fate rather than becoming submissive within a patriarchal framework. It is important to recognise that the first literary or dramatic suicide occurred in Greek tragedy; in Sophocles' *Antigone*.⁹³ Antigone's death reflected the desire in Greek society to

⁹³ Sophocles was the most acclaimed ancient Greek tragedian playwright; he is known to have won at least twenty-four dramatic competitions in the city-state of Athens around 441 BC. Most of his plays have been lost or destroyed, but the eighteen plays which have survived have influenced modern drama profoundly. Sophocles' other plays include *Oedipus the King* and *Electra*. He was one of the first playwrights to enhance plot development and to concentrate on further character development, which reduced the role of the Greek chorus in

live and die nobly. As previously stated at the beginning of this chapter, (depending on the context), in Greek society suicide was sometimes thought of as a noble act. Gail Holst-Warhaft asserts that suicide brought Antigone control over her own life: "Antigone is determined to claim the glory of what she has done for herself alone" (280). Literary and dramatic suicides of the past are a narrative which began with the female suicide of Antigone, and in *Vera*, Wilde's resurrection of Charlotte Corday denotes his wish to empower a historical female narrative.⁹⁴ Elizabeth Bronfen interprets the suicides of Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina, (among others in the history of literature and drama), as a positive act of agency.⁹⁵ These female characters and these acts can be considered as: "a woman using death as a conscious act of setting a mark, as a form of writing with her body, a materialisation of the sign" (141). Vera's suicide can similarly be read as a positive act of agency, an act that challenges the roles ascribed to women in a patriarchal society. Jaworski notes that in the past suicide has been interpreted as a male and masculine act; men are seen as completers of the act and women are seen as attempters of the act. Despite this historical perception of suicide, in *Vera* Wilde's female protagonist completes the act of suicide. Her completed suicide contests the historical gender assumptions related to suicide. The play comes to a close with Vera's suicide; Vera's need to opt out of life is indicative of the unequal position of women in a patriarchal world. If Vera had chosen to live, she would most likely have either been sentenced to death by the Nihilists for not killing Alexis when she was ordered to, been forced to kill him by them, or she would have become Alexis's wife. If the play concluded with Vera's death by the Nihilists, then they would have controlled her fate by

Greek drama. Following Antigone's imprisonment and isolation she takes control over her own life by hanging herself.

⁹⁴ Charlotte Corday was a prominent female figure during the eighteenth century French revolution. She was born into an aristocratic family in Normandy, and although she believed in the revolution she opposed the radical Jacobin approach, which advocated widespread executions of oppositional parties and citizens. Corday murdered the Parisian and Jacobin journalist Jean-Paul Marat in 1793; she believed his death would prevent a civil war and the deaths of more French citizens. Marat was an influential man whose newspaper *L'ami du Peuple*: The Friend of the People, sympathised with the Jacobin cause. Corday was executed for his murder; afterwards her corpse was subjected to an invasive autopsy by Jacobin leaders who believed that she was not a virgin and shared her bed with a man, a man who influenced her plot to assassinate Marat. It was discovered that Corday was a virgin; she had always accepted full responsibility for Marat's death, believing that it was a necessary sacrifice for her country.

⁹⁵ *Madame Bovary* (1856) was written by Gustave Flaubert; in it the protagonist Emma Bovary poisons herself. Leo Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina*, which was originally published in serial form from 1873-77; at the end of the novel Anna Karenina throws herself in front of a train.

ending her life. If she had been forced to murder Alexis, then she would be an instrument of the political cause. If she had survived and married him, then Vera would have participated in the patriarchal exchange of women in marriage, and been powerless within that framework. Vera decides to take her own life rather than murder Alexis. Before she does this Vera claims to have broken her oath to the Nihilist cause: "Oh, I am a woman! God help me, I am a woman! O Alexis! I too have broken my oath; I am a traitor. I love" (*Collins Complete Works* 719-20). Although she confesses her love of Alexis by taking her own life, Vera ultimately prioritises her love of Russia over Alexis, and dies with her country's name not her lover's lingering on her lips.

Vera exercises her independent will throughout the play which culminates in her choice to end her own life. After she stabs herself Vera exclaims: "I have saved Russia" before the curtain falls (*Collins Complete Works* 720). In the history of suicide women have tended to take their own lives in a non-violent way; preferring methods such as drug overdoses or poisoning, but the pattern of male suicide showed a preference for violent suicide, such as stabbing. In her article "The Gender-ing of Suicide" Katrina Jaworski asserts that: "Female modes of engaging with suicide [...] are less visually and physically violent and lethal as well as more feminine, reactive and *passive*" (48). Vera's violent stage death contests the perception that women often fail to complete the act, and also that they favour passive methods of suicide. The fact that Vera's suicide would take place onstage in front of the audience, forces the audience to face up to her choice to die.⁹⁶ Vera: "(*breaks from him and rushes across the stage*): The wedding guests are here already! Ay! You shall have your sign! (*Stabs herself.*)" (*Collins Complete Works* 720). Before she takes her own life, Vera's reflection on the possibility of marrying Alexis implies that she actively chooses death, as an alternative to the patriarchal roles that she would have been forced to play in society. The metaphorical killing off of traditional female roles with Vera's death, liberates the framework for women in the future by breaking them from their past. Vera

⁹⁶ If a suicide takes place offstage in a theatrical production it typically creates a sense of distance from the audience, the issue of suicide and the death of the character. Instead, Wilde confronts his audience with the issue and impact of witnessing a suicide onstage.

aligns herself with the eighteenth century French revolutionary figure Corday, who inspires her to challenge these unrealistic female roles.

VERA. [...] Methinks the spirit of Charlotte Corday has entered my soul now. I shall carve my name on the world, and be ranked amongst the great heroines. Ay! The spirit of Charlotte Corday beats in each petty vein, and nerves my woman's hand to strike, as I have nerved my woman's heart to hate [...] (*Brandishing dagger*)... O crucified mother, O liberty, I swear that Russia shall be saved! (*Collins Complete Works* 713-14).

By evoking a female narrative through the medium of Corday, Vera hopes to be remembered alongside the great female heroines of the past. The language of Vera's final outcry empowers the female voice of the past.

In order to contest unequal gender roles, conventional perceptions of gender, marriage and their associated roles for women are undermined in *Vera*. The absence of any other female or conventional female characters in the play emphasises the absurdity of restrictive gender roles. The concluding lines of the prologue demonstrate Vera's defiance of the traditional roles as wife and mother. Vera: "To strangle whatever nature is in me; neither to love nor to be loved; neither to pity or to be pitied; neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come" (*Collins Complete Works* 686). This declaration of independence portrays her unwillingness to be an object of exchange in a marital framework; her modern political ambitions are prioritised over her duty to the domestic sphere. Despite her refusal to marry, Vera's love for Alexis depicts the possibility of love outside of marriage. Vera's unconventional status as a female leader imbues her with the potential to challenge patriarchal structures. Her refusal to participate in the framework of marriage mirrors the need for women to be re-configured outside of the roles of wife and mother. In *Gender through the Prism of Difference* Zinn, Sotelo and Messner refer to the "*patriarchal bargain*" of marriage; a useful term that describes the exchange of women between men in marriage (26). Wilde's consistent refusal to stage this all-male bargaining of women in *Vera* and in his other plays, portrays a disapproval of this traditional exchange of

women. The absence of a married couple in *Vera* undermines the importance of marriage as a sacred unit in Victorian legislation. Instead of a traditional family unit characterised by the male patriarch who is the head of this unit, and who occupies the public sphere, Wilde creates an alternative family unit in *Vera*, with a female character as the head of household. Vera's dominance in the male public sphere, her role as the main breadwinner, and the recognition of her as the character in charge of the family's finances, confirms her role as the family leader. Peter acknowledges that Vera is in control of the household finances: "I gave Dmitri half his mother's fortune to bring with him to pay the lawyer folk at Moscow. [...] He got it, not at my wish, but at hers (*pointing to Vera*), and now for five months, close on six almost, we have heard nothing from him" (*Collins Complete Works* 683). Peter recognises Vera's dominance in the domestic sphere.

Despite the promise of marriage in many of Wilde's plays such as *Earnest*, the act of marriage does not take place onstage in any of the plays. Wilde's plays often end with the promised union and the physical proximity of heterosexual couples onstage, but marriage does not take place. These scenes are often presided over by a matriarch; such as Lady Bracknell in *Earnest*. The persistent presence of these heterosexual unions signify the compulsory and presumed heterosexuality in Victorian society. Perhaps this refusal to conclude the plays with marriage or in a post-marital scene, mirror Wilde's disapproval of the exclusive idealisation of marriage. Such a narrow framework empowers oppositional gender roles and excludes any alternative sexuality, including Wilde's sexual relations with men. By resisting the conventional female roles of wife and mother Vera re-invents the possibilities and roles for women. Raby notes that in Victorian society: "The very idea of a woman's having a free and flexible selfhood [...] contradicted Victorian thought about the self in general and women's self in particular [...]" The character of women in particular was supposed to be unmysterious and knowable, circumscribed by the functions of wifeness and motherhood" (*The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* 188). Vera's ambition, education and self-belief allow her to dispute these

traditional roles. Michael tells Vera's father how he feels about Vera in the prologue. Two patriarchal figures occupy the stage space in this scene; it is vital that Vera's arrival occurs after this exchange, wherein a plan for an all-male exchange of Vera has the opportunity to take place. Vera enters the scene from the public sphere and explicitly rejects Michael's proposal before it can develop further.

PETER. [...] (*Enter VERA in peasant's dress.*) Well, my girl, you've been long enough away - where is the letter?

VERA. There is none to-day, Father. [...] Some evil has come on him; he must be dead! Oh! Michael, I am so wretched about Dmitri.

MICHAEL. Will you never love any one but him, Vera?

VERA. (*smiling*): I don't know; there is so much else to do in the world but love (*Collins Complete Works* 682-3).

By refusing to submit to Michael's advances Vera defies the expectations of her as a woman; typically she would have been expected to prioritise her roles as a wife-to-be and a potential mother. Her commitment is to her brother and the Nihilist cause, her dedication is to the public sphere and Nihilism, not the domestic world. It is Vera who idealises Alexis's beauty, and her physical objectification of Alexis maintains his submissive position and allows her to become an active public leader. Kiberd proposes that in *Earnest*: "Far from the men engaging in the traditional discussion of the finer points of the female form, it is the women who discuss the physical appeal of the men" (*Inventing Ireland* 39). Similarly in *Vera*, Vera's physical idealisation of Alexis's beauty is constructed through the privileged female gaze. In this re-imagining of male and female roles Vera assumes the protective role over Alexis. Vera: "Foolish boy, have I not prayed you to stay away. [...] you, with your bright boyish face, you are too young to die yet. [...] his bright young face, his heart aflame for liberty, his pure white soul [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 690-91). By admiring Alexis's physical form through the female gaze, Vera contests the normative role of women in the private sphere in Victorian society. Vera accuses Alexis of being a "foolish boy", and her multiple references to his youth and his innocence: "his pure white

soul", denotes her belief in her own confidence and independence from him (*Collins Complete Works* 690-91). In becoming an object of the female gaze Alexis, [now the Czar], depicts the absurdity of oppositional gender roles and expectations in society. He desperately seeks Vera's approval, love and leadership.

CZAR. [...] Why have you left me three days alone, when I most needed you [...] I would lay at your feet this mighty Russia... The people will love us. We will rule them by love [...] To-morrow, I will lead you forth to the whole people [...] will crown you with my own hands as Empress in that great cathedral which my fathers built.

VERA. (*loosens her hands violently from him, and starts up*): I am a Nihilist! I cannot wear a crown!

CZAR. (*falls at her feet*): I am no king now. I am only a boy who has loved you better than his honour, better than his oath [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 718-19).

Alexis evokes his patriarchal lineage and his intention to pass on the traditions of the patriarchy through this lineage. It is Alexis who is dependent on Vera; he who has "most needed" and loved her (*Collins Complete Works* 718-19). In contrast to Vera who sacrifices everything for the cause of liberty and her country, Alexis prioritises Vera over everything else. Alexis is willing to change who he is in order to be with Vera, so long as he is desired by Vera, in his desperation he will even be: "traitor or liar or king" (*Collins Complete Works* 718-19). In Act Three Vera worries about Alexis's safety, but her suicide concludes her role as Alexis's protector: "Vera (*pacing up and down behind*). Oh, will he never come? Will he never come... Alexis! Alexis! Why are you not here?" (*Collins Complete Works* 708). Alexis and Vera's romantic relationship develops quickly in the play, but by taking her own life Vera refuses to commit to this relationship through the patriarchal medium of marriage.

CZAR. This is our wedding night.

VERA. Our wedding night [...] O love, the past seems but some dull grey dream from which our souls have wakened. This is life at last [...] (*Stabs herself*.) You shall have your sign! (*Rushes to the window.*) [...]

CZAR. (*holding dagger out of her reach*): Death is in my heart too; we shall die together [...]

VERA. You must live for liberty, for Russia, for me... (*Loud shout in the street, "Vera! Vera! To the rescue! To the rescue!"*) [...]

CZAR. What have you done?

VERA. I have saved Russia (*Dies.*) (*Collins Complete Works* 688).

Vera rejects the submissive role that being Alexis' wife would bring her, in order to discover a noble path to self-discovery and freedom for Russia. Her exclamation that "this is life at last" before she stabs herself suggests that death will provide an alternative liberty and life for her (*Collins Complete Works* 688). Although her position as an Empress would afford Vera influence, she would become an instrument of the male patriarchal powers in society, inevitably reinforcing their power.

In order to investigate the gender power dynamic in *Vera* it is important to consider the gendered spaces on the stage. The movements and restrictions of certain characters in the public and private spheres, can signify the oppressive or liberating gender landscapes of the play. The opening scene of the play can be identified as an exclusively private male space according to the presence of male bodies, which Wilde describes in his stage directions: "[...] *Some masked men* [...] *A man in a scarlet mask* [...] *Man in yellow with drawn sword at it* [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 686). Although this space is secretive it is a private space within a public male world. The men are masked in the beginning of the scene which conceals their identities from each other, but then their identities are revealed once they clarify that they are all Nihilists; they use Latin passwords to gain entry into the meeting room. Vera permeates this male space, challenging the exclusivity of it according to gender. Before Vera arrives the male characters evoke her importance at the meeting.

PRESIDENT: 'Tis after the hour, Michael, and she is not yet here.

MICHAEL. Would that she were! We can do little without her. (*Collins Complete Works* 687).

Although this landscape is male, the male characters' hope for Vera's arrival depicts their discomfort in this space without their leader. Hanna Scolnicov analyses gendered spaces in relation to traditional gender roles in her seminal monograph *Woman's Theatrical Space* (1994): "Gender roles are spatially defined in relation to the inside and outside of the house. Traditionally it is the woman who makes the house into a home, while the world of commerce, war, travel, the world outside, is a man's world" (Scolnicov 6).⁹⁷ Wilde challenges the traditional association of women with the domestic sphere, and men with the public sphere in *Vera*. Jurgen Habermas' seminal study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), is an invaluable text on the historical development of the public sphere. Habermas reflects on the Greek city-state: "In the fully developed Greek city-state the sphere of the polis, which was common (koine) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the oikos, in the sphere of the oikos, each individual is in his own realm (idia). The public life, bios politikos, went on in the market place (agora) [...]" (3). The citizens that were granted freedom and that Habermas refers to are male, and occupy the public sphere, most commonly recognised as the market place, while women are confined to the private domestic sphere. Wilde challenges typical gendered spaces and their associated roles, evident in the prologue of *Vera*. The prologue opens with the image of Michael, a local peasant, and Peter, Vera's father, confined to the domestic sphere, while Vera participates in the public sphere:

PETER. (*Warming his hands at a stove*): Has Vera not come back yet, Michael?

MICHAEL. No, Father Peter, not yet; 'tis a good three miles to the post office, and she has to milk the cows besides, and that dun one is a rare plaguey creature for a wench to handle (*Collins Complete Works* 681).

Vera's position outside of the private sphere also suggests that women did not have a particular sphere that they could recognise as their own. Peter, who warms his hands at the stove: a traditional emblem of domesticity and homeliness, positions himself at the centre of the private sphere. His position as patriarch at the fulcrum of the domestic sphere represents his ties to the

⁹⁷ Hanna Scolnicov's book *Woman's Theatrical Space* (1994) is an interesting insight into the history of gender on the stage.

domestic sphere for the duration of the play. Peter's position can be contrasted with Vera's movement and participation in the public sphere and employment. This re-configuring of gender roles between Peter and Vera undermines the traditional idea of masculinity, which is associated with male participation in the public sphere. Michael also remains in the domestic sphere in this scene. As Connell notes:

A familiar theme in patriarchal ideology is that men are rational while women are emotional. This is a deep-seated assumption in European philosophy. [...] Science and technology, seen by the dominant ideology as the motors of progress, are culturally defined as a masculine realm. Hegemonic masculinity defines its hegemony partly by its claim to embody the power of reason, and thus represent the interests of the whole society (*Masculinities* 164).

The image of Vera in the public world participating in farm work suggests that she is the breadwinner and matriarch of this household; she replaces the role of the patriarch.⁹⁸ Vera's father's inability to separate himself from the domestic sphere in the play indicates his dependence and reliance on his daughter. Peter is a traditional emblem of the patriarchy and is displaced from the remaining play. The absence of Peter provides the characters with more freedom to construct more modern gender roles. Habermas proposes that the male patriarch's status in the public sphere is dependent on his dominance as master in the private sphere.

[...] Status in the *polis* was therefore based upon status as the unlimited master of an *oikos*. The reproduction of life, the labor of the slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master's domination; birth and death took place in its shadow; and the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere. In contrast to it stood, in Greek self-interpretation, the public sphere as a realm of freedom and permanence (3-4).

⁹⁸ As I previously mentioned working-class women worked in England during the Industrial Revolution, and the poverty of Vera's family suggests that her work is necessary in order to survive and earn an income for her family.

In *Vera* it is Vera not the patriarch Peter who has power, which implies that Peter has no power in the public sphere. Instead Vera's dominance in the domestic sphere and as the head of the household establishes her status in the public sphere.

Vera's movement between public and private spaces indicates that she is a more liberated gender being than Peter. Vera occupies and moves easily between various gendered spaces; the fields, the house, the Nihilist's meeting place in Moscow, the Czar's Palace, etc. Peter's exclusive occupation of the domestic sphere, as well as his absence from the public sphere, displaces his authority as a patriarch. Wilde posits the peasant, Michael, as an irrational individual who is lovesick over Vera. In contrast to Michael, Vera assumes unconventional attributes for a woman; characterised by her independent and rational nature. Michael laments his love of Vera to Peter: "She says I bother her too much already, Father Peter, and I fear she'll never love me after all" (*Collins Complete Works* 681). Peter re-invents the gender paradigm between Vera and her brother Dmitri in the opening lines of the play: "he was a merry lad... It is the girl that has the seriousness" (*Collins Complete Works* 682). Michael asked Vera about her brother:

MICHAEL. Will you never love anyone but him, Vera?

VERA. (*smiling*): I don't know; there is so much else in the world to do but love.

MICHAEL. Nothing else worth doing, Vera (*Collins Complete Works* 683).

Vera's priorities are liberty and equality, while Michael struggles with the realisation that she does not love him. The female character is empowered and active while Michael remains lovesick over her. In choosing her leadership and loyalty to her country, and finally death, over the roles of wife and mother, Vera is an unconventional unmarried and childless woman. In asserting her independence and taking control of her fate Vera is a modern woman. Wilde's various relationships with modern women indicate his belief in a modern mode of femininity, and his editorship and letters to the contributors of *The Woman's World* reflect his belief in the right of women to engage in public activity. Wilde's female characters, such as Vera and the

Duchess in *The Duchess of Padua*, who are granted a public voice, mirror Wilde's real-life ambition to support the plight of women from the home into the public sphere.⁹⁹ Vera and the Duchess's choices to kill themselves signify the unjust reality of gender segregation, and the possibility that the future will provide women with alternative roles. Shanley admires the activist and political work of Victorian feminists, but asserts that: "Although they procured many of the changes that they sought in marriage law, no piece of legislation ever fully reflected the principle that the only proper basis for marriage law was full legal equality between husband and wife" (4). *Vera* is a rejection of this unequal partnership in marriage. This destruction of female life by a female hand, in killing off her conventional roles, usurps the power of the male patriarch. In presenting these controversial social issues to his audience, Wilde notes their importance on the world stage. With *Vera*, Wilde had only just embarked on his dramatic career, and it would take time for him to develop the style which is characteristic of his later plays. *The Duchess* will be analysed next as it is Wilde's other early play, in which his strong female protagonist commits murder and finally suicide.

The Duchess of Padua: An Introduction.

Wilde's strong female protagonist in *The Duchess* will be examined according to feminist theories of suicide. The Duchess's unconventional characteristics, like Vera's, identify her as a modern mode of femininity who claims her independence and leadership in society through murder, usurping the patriarchal male powers at play in Padua. Wilde wrote *The Duchess* in 1883 in Paris, but it was not staged until 1891 in New York, where it ran anonymously under the title of *Guido Ferranti*. *The Duchess* was written in blank verse which makes the play more linguistically inaccessible than Wilde's 1890s plays. It is set in Padua in the latter half of the

⁹⁹ In a letter from Wilde to Merrill, Wilde outlines his objectives for the magazine and his admiration of Merrill's writing: "I hope you will allow me to count you among the contributors to the *Woman's World* [...] When you have chosen what you would like to write on – pray let me know, so that your article may not clash with any others. I hope to make the magazine the organ through which women of culture and position will express their views [...]" (MS 81699, September 1887). Wilde's letter denotes his trust in his writers to choose a subject of their own preference. Rather than mirroring the issues and topics that the male editor wished, the magazine interrogates the real issues and topics that the female writers felt were important.

sixteenth century; the segregation of gender is even more pronounced in the context of this play. Wilde dedicates *The Duchess* to the actress Mary Anderson: "A Tragedy in five acts written for Mary Anderson by Oscar Wilde" (Mackie 227). Wilde met Mary Anderson in New York when he was on his lecture tour in 1882, and he hoped she would play the title role. After receiving the final play manuscript she refused, and the production he had hoped would be staged in September 1883 was cancelled, and the play was not staged until 1891.¹⁰⁰ *The Duchess* was the second play that Wilde wrote; there is less scholarly research on the play than on *Vera*. Much of the criticism on *The Duchess* remains negative, and many scholars categorize *The Duchess* and *Vera* as unworthy of any detailed analysis. My analysis of *The Duchess* will build on existing research, and particularly examine the gender dynamics in the play. Powell proposes that in *The Duchess*, Wilde had not yet developed his dramatic skills that would eventually make him an acclaimed playwright: "What is missing in this play is the author's own voice – the 'personal' mode of expression which, in Wilde's view, was his distinctive gift as a playwright" (10).¹⁰¹ Powell also criticizes *Vera* and *The Duchess* for external influences, which she believes are too obvious in the plays:

Like his poems, Wilde's early and virtually ignored plays, dating from the early 1880s, are too much the passive receptors of influence. With its story of a noblewoman, her treacherous husband and forbidden love, *The Duchess of Padua* contains little not attempted earlier and with more success by John Webster and Robert Browning (9).

Richard Ellmann's biography *Oscar Wilde* (1987), dedicates two pages to "The Fate of The Duchess", but most of this relays the plot and the production details (210-12). Gregory Mackie's article entitled "'The Modern Ideal Under an Antique Form': Aestheticism and Theatrical Archaeology in Oscar Wilde's *Duchess of Padua*", concentrates on an interesting reading of *The*

¹⁰⁰ In a letter to an unknown correspondent (dated December 1891), Wilde evokes his hopes for *The Duchess*: "I have to acknowledge the receipt of two drafts, for £20 each, for eight performances of *The Duchess of Padua* [...] My play should be the opening production in such an important act. To keep it for the last night is to show a want of recognition of the value and importance of the play" (MS 81699: Nov/Dec 1888).

¹⁰¹ An original review of *The Duchess* in *The Pall Mall Gazette* describe it in a positive and intriguing light; "The plot is striking. It is a story of vengeance overcome by love" (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, 6th February 1891, p. 6).

Duchess as an expression of Wilde's aestheticism, but does not analyse the play in detail.¹⁰² In *The Duchess* Wilde's characters contest the male patriarchal powers in the play, the Duchess who is trapped in an oppressive marriage, murders her husband in order to gain freedom, independence and power in Padua. Adopting Butler's reflection on marriage and identity as a theoretical framework, the Duchess's murder of her husband will be considered as an attempt to assert her own independent identity.

The play opens with Guido Ferranti's arrival in Padua, a city in northern Italy. Guido is the male protagonist in the play and his friend, Ascanio Cristofano, has accompanied him to Padua. Guido, who has no knowledge of his father or his patriarchal lineage, received a letter from his father's friend, Count Moranzone, who instructed him to come to Padua and meet with him. Guido travels to Padua and has no memory of his father, so he is reliant on Moranzone to inform him of who he is. Moranzone meets Guido in Padua and informs him that his father was betrayed by a trusted friend, sold into slavery and finally killed. Guido is determined to find the man responsible for his father's death, and Moranzone tells him that although the man who killed his father is dead, the man who sold him into slavery is alive and he will introduce Guido to him. Moranzone instructs Guido to order Ascanio out of Padua and Ascanio reluctantly leaves Padua at the end of Act One, and does not return. Moranzone tells Guido that it was the Duke of Padua who sold his father into slavery, and he encourages Guido to get his revenge on the Duke by stabbing him in his sleep; this plan is orchestrated by Moranzone. Moranzone presents Guido to the Duke in disguise as his nephew, who he tells the Duke has just come of age and is at court for the season, and he is soon welcomed into the Duke's household. Like Vera, Guido swears that he will not fall in love and he prioritises his revenge on the Duke, but at the end of the act he becomes distracted when he spots the beautiful Duchess. In Act Two the citizens of Padua beg

¹⁰² This article was published in 2012 and rather than analysing the play *The Duchess*, Mackie interrogates the influences of aestheticism, Shakespeare and the acclaimed American-born Broadway actress Mary Anderson on Wilde. Mackie proposes that: "The Duchess can thus be regarded as Wilde's attempt to use the theatre to express the aesthetic movement's principles and priorities as he saw them" (220-21). Katharine Worth also notes the influence of Shakespeare on Wilde's *The Duchess* in *Oscar Wilde* (1983): "Shakespearian echo is taken to the point of ludicrous" (Worth 39).

the Duke and Duchess for cleaner water and edible bread; the Duchess gives them her own money as the Duke refuses to improve their living conditions. Guido pledges his loyalty and love to the Duchess when he gets her alone, and after initially denying that she loves him, she suddenly changes her mind and declares her love for him. Guido realises that he has mistakenly prioritised his love of the Duchess over his revenge quest; he tells her that there are insurmountable barriers between them, and he exits the scene. The Duchess decides to take action and she plans to murder her husband while he sleeps, believing that the Duke is the barrier between her and Guido. At the beginning of Act Three Guido has a change of heart and explains to Moranzone that he will not murder the Duke. Much to Moranzone's disgust Guido is determined to break his oath of revenge. Guido plans to leave a letter and a dagger by the Duke's bedside explaining that he spared the Duke's life, valuing life and love over bitter revenge, and hoping that the Duke will be inspired to rule his people with love. After the Duchess murders her husband in his sleep, she stumbles upon Guido whom she tells about the murder. Horrified by what she has done, Guido believes that the murder she has committed is now a barrier between them, and he rejects her. In revenge the Duchess tells the soldiers that it is Guido who murdered the Duke. In Act Four Guido faces trial in the Court of Justice for the Duke's murder, and the Duchess has acquired the powerful position of the leader of Padua. Guido takes responsibility for the Duke's murder and he is sentenced to death by the Lord Justice. Moranzone vouches for Guido publicly; he realises that the Duchess committed her husband's murder and he tries to convince Guido to deny the crime, but he will not. At the closing of the act the Duchess faints when she realises that Guido will take responsibility for her crime and will be sentenced to death. The Fifth and final act takes place in a dungeon in the prison. The prison guards are drinking, playing dice and chatting to each other about the Duke's murder. We learn from their discussion that the Duchess attempted to have Guido pardoned, but the Lord Justice opposed this decision. Moranzone informed the court that Guido's father was of noble birth, and because of that Guido has the right to take poison in prison before he is beheaded. The Duchess comes to the prison in disguise and bribes the guards to visit Guido. With the plan to replace

Guido in prison so he can escape unharmed and dressed in her disguise, the Duchess drinks the poison before Guido awakes and realises what she has done. Guido pledges his love for her once again, but the Duchess cannot accept that Guido loves her. She believes that because she has murdered the Duke that she does not deserve Guido's love, and must pledge her own life to replace the life she has taken by unnatural means. Just before a guard enters the dungeon Guido discovers that the Duchess has drunk the poison he was intending to take. He wishes to die alongside the Duchess, so he stabs himself to death with her dagger just as she dies. When the soldiers and the Lord Justice come to collect Guido they discover two bodies and the curtain falls.

Challenging Marriage and Becoming a Public Figure.

The Duchess's refusal to be dominated by her husband in marriage is exemplified by her murder of him. The list of Wilde's characters denotes the oppressive gender framework in sixteenth century society. In contrast to many of Wilde's other plays in which the female character titles are listed independently alongside their names, for example as Lady Bracknell's title was listed in *Earnest* (Collins Complete Works 357), the Duchess was listed in this play after: "Simone Gesso, Duke of Padua", as merely "Beatrice, his wife" (Collins Complete Works 606). The Duchess's role and identity is defined in relation to him, and she is perceived exclusively as his wife in this patriarchal framework. By murdering her husband the Duchess shatters her submissive position in marriage, and re-imagines her role in an alternative and independent framework. Before she murders him, the Duchess reflects on the isolation of women in society and the perception of women as merchandise. Duchess: "[...] The Duke said rightly that I was alone [...] We are their chattels, and their common slaves, / Less dear than the poor hound that licks their hand... Our very bodies being merchandise [...] I know it is the general lot of women, / Each miserably mated to some man / Wrecks her own life upon his selfishness" (Collins Complete Works 625-26). The Duke dominates his marriage and symbolises the oppressive power of the male patriarchy in the play. By continually denying the Duchess an individual

identity, the Duke maintains his powerful position while his wife remains isolated and powerless:

DUKE. [...] Being mine own, you shall do as I will, / And if it be my will you keep the house, / Why then, this palace shall your prison be [...]

DUCHESS. Sir, by what right - ?

DUKE. Madam, my second Duchess / Asked the same question once: her monument / Lies in the chapel of Bartholomew...

DUCHESS. [...] The Duke said rightly that I was alone... Bought rather, sold and bartered, / Our very bodies being merchandise [...]

Enter Guido behind unobserved; the Duchess flings herself down before a picture of the Madonna.

O, Mary mother... Mother of God, have you no help for me? (*Collins Complete Works* 625-26).

The Duke's expectation that his wife should be obedient and submissive in married life mirrors the gender inequality of women in the context of the play, and in nineteenth century marriage. This strong anti-marriage sentiment is denoted by the image of women as slaves, who are bought and sold by men. The Duke's denial of the Duchess's identity can be related to Butler's reflection on the absence of female identity, in a marital exchange between men:

The bride, the gift, the object of exchange constitutes 'a sign and a value' that opens a channel of exchange that not only serves the *functional* purpose of facilitating trade but performs the *symbolic* or *ritualistic* purpose of consolidating the internal bonds, the collective identity, of each clan differentiated through the act. In other words, the bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not *have* an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence (*Gender Trouble* 49-50).

According to Butler, in marriage women reflected the male identities of their father, the patriarch, and their husband, the newly appointed patriarch and head of the household. In

signifying male identity, the framework of marriage reflected the absence of female identity. In erasing the Duke from her life, the Duchess challenges this patriarchal framework and suggests a need to establish an independent female identity. The Duchess's declaration that: "To-night / Death will divorce the Duke", depicts the freedom and independence available to the Duchess after her husband's death (*Collins Complete Works* 636). Powell notes that the Duke fears his wife's influence, which implies the Paduan people's support of her: "The esthetic, ego-mad Duke of Padua in Wilde's play [...] resents his wife's generous good nature, her popularity with the people, her regard for others than himself" (9). The Duke fears the Duchess's influence over the people: "You spread rebellion 'midst our citizens / And by your doles and daily charities, / Have made the common people love you. Well, / I will not have you loved" (*Collins Complete Works* 624). His perceived anxiety that his wife has the potential to be influential in Padua is revealed; he reminds her that he has all the power in Padua, and that he can have her killed. In order to maintain his powerful status, the Duke continues to dominate the Duchess and he naively continues to believe that she will obey him. His confinement of her to the private sphere, indicates his fear that she may establish an independent identity and gain power and status in the public sphere.

In *The Duchess* Wilde deconstructs the unrealistic notion that women were the moral leaders in society, by having the Duchess commit the murder of her husband. By murdering the Duke the Duchess displaces the main patriarchal power from the play, and asserts her own identity in the process of erasing his. From the Duke's interactions with the Duchess it can be assumed that the Duke's ideal wife is patient, submissive and silent. The contrast between how he perceives the Duchess, and the power she ultimately achieves, disempowers his status as the leader of Padua. The Duke attempts to confine the Duchess to the domestic sphere, and he interprets the domestic chores such as spinning as her responsibility: "Well, Madam, you will sit at home and spin [...] the domestic virtues / Are often very beautiful in others" (*Collins Complete Works* 635). The Duke's dominance in the private sphere reinforces the reality that men are the

head of the household, and women do not dominate any sphere, but remain under the patriarchal power of their husbands. Duke: "[...] You will stay here, and like a faithful wife / Watch from the window for our coming back. / Were it not dreadful if some accident / By chance should happen to your loving Lord [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 635). As aforementioned, Caine acknowledges the role of men in the domestic sphere, and argues that it is not specifically a female space. Caine notes that the private sphere is not the equivalent female space as the public sphere is a male space, evoking the isolation of women in patriarchal society. In *The Duchess* the Duke's dominance in the domestic sphere ensures that the Duchess remains powerless, that is, until she decides to kill her husband. Despite the Duchess's feigned obedience, she plots the murder of her husband. The Duchess is successful in outwitting and manipulating her husband, and she takes control of her future, asserting her leadership in Padua by usurping his position. When the Duchess blames Guido for the murder of the Duke, he accepts the responsibility for the Duke's death without contesting her accusation. The fact that he does not contest this crime reinforces her dominance over him; she claims that she murdered her husband so that Guido will remain untarnished by this sin. Duchess: "(*In amazed wonder*): I did it all for you / I would not have you do it, had you willed it, / For I would keep you without blot or stain, / A thing unblemished, unassailed, untarnished. / Men do not know what women do for love [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 646). The Duchess emphasizes the sacrifices that women make for men; placing the spotlight on the position of women in marriage. Guido is perceived as the moral barometer in their relationship; his morality and his innocence are typical characteristics of the ideal Victorian woman according to Victorian society, while the Duchess is perceived as more masculine in her rationality and her actions. She adopts an active role by carrying out the Duke's murder herself, rather than asking Guido to do it for her. In Act Three the Duchess differentiates the love women have for men, as opposed to the love men have for women, and argues that it is a love that involves sacrifice. She portrays the gender segregation in society, and the ideal and expected role of women in marriage.

DUCHESS. [...] O God, / How differently do we love from men! / There is many a woman here in Padua, / [...] Whose husband spends the wages of the week / In a coarse revel, or a tavern brawl [...] Finds his wife sitting by a fireless hearth [...] And then sets to and beats his wife because / The child is hungry, and the fire black. / Yet the wife loves him [...] I see when men love women / They give them but a little of their lives, / But women when they love give everything [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 649-50).

The Duchess emphasizes the enforced dependency of women on men, according to Victorian expectations. By typically being confined to the domestic sphere in marriage women become isolated from public life; it is a sacrifice a woman is expected to make in marriage. By murdering her husband the Duchess kills off the subservient role that she is expected to play; she establishes an identity and a public role as the Paduan leader.

The Duchess sets herself up as an unconventional female public figure and leader from the beginning of the play, and this empowers her status and her position in the eyes of the Paduan citizens. While the Duchess creates the freedom to occupy both domestic and public spaces on the stage, (evident by her occupation of the private sphere and her dominance of the public square in the play), Guido, who is dominated by Moranzone and then the Duchess, is the more submissive character in the play. The Duchess's uninhibited movement between domestic and public spaces mirrors the disparate power dynamic in her relationships with her husband and her lover. The Duchess's popularity amongst the Paduan people and her personal involvement with the citizens establishes her as a public, political and unconventional leader. The Duchess stands out in the square between the Paduan people and the Duke's soldiers; her determination to protect the citizens reflects the people's recognition and admiration of her as their true leader. Guido: "(*Rushes to the window*) The Duchess has gone forth into the square, / And stands between the people and the guard, / And will not let them shoot [...] And followed by a dozen of the citizens / Has come into the Palace" (*Collins Complete Works* 620). The Duchess risks her own life for the Paduan people, and puts pressure on the Duke to supply the

people with edible bread and clean water. By challenging the Duke's leadership she undermines her husband's authority in front of the Paduan citizens. Although she is subservient to the Duke in marriage, this pivotal scene paves the way for the Duchess to ultimately usurp this system of male power, and claim her own identity. The following dialogue illustrates the Duchess's plight to claim her husband's position of power.

Enter the Duchess followed by a crowd of meanly dressed citizens...

DUCHESS. [...] They say the bread, the very bread they eat, / Is made of sorry chaff [...]

DUKE. And very good food too, / I give it to my horses.

DUCHESS. (*Restraining herself*): They say the water, / Set in the public cisterns for their use, / Has, through the breaking of the aqueduct, / To stagnant pools and muddy puddles turned.

DUKE. They should drink wine; water is quite unwholesome (*Collins Complete Works* 620).

The Duchess's rational and generous personality is contrasted with the Duke's absurd and tyrannical leadership. While the Duchess is informed about the poverty that the Paduan people are subjected to, the Duke's suggestion that they drink wine instead of water depicts his ignorance and unsympathetic response to their situation. The Duchess's involvement with the people and her concern for their welfare legitimizes her desire and her right to rule over them.

By choosing an end in death the Duchess decides her own fate, and by murdering her husband she also decides his. Her murdering of him takes place offstage and symbolizes her ultimate control over his fate. The Duchess's murder of the Duke symbolises her desire to remove him from power; he is the ultimate representative of patriarchal power in Padua, and with his death she gains freedom and power. Her murder of him challenges the framework, of marriage and contests traditional gender roles associated with this institution. In killing off the

Duke she assumes her independence and leadership of Padua.¹⁰³ Before her suicide a powerful image of the Duchess is projected; an image which evokes her suicide as transgressive. The stage directions that open Act Four denote the Duchess's newly acquired position of power after murdering her husband:

Scene: The Court of Justice [...] Enter the Duchess [...] with her is the Cardinal in scarlet, and the gentlemen of the Court in black; she takes her seat on the throne above the Judges, who rise and take their caps off as she enters; the Cardinal sits next to her a little lower; the Courtiers group themselves about the throne" (Collins Complete Works 652 & 655).

Wilde's stage directions physically elevate the Duchess above the judges, cardinal and courtiers; since the Duke's death the Duchess is recognised as the most powerful person in Padua. Her leadership of Padua will be a matriarchal leadership of power, and the Paduan citizens acknowledge her as their leader. First Citizen: "She is in the Duke's place now" establishes her identity as a public leader (*Collins Complete Works* 655). The Duchess's suicide reflects the inability of society to accept her female leadership of Padua. In usurping the power of the patriarchy the Duchess's murder of the Duke, and her suicide, could be considered a transgressive suicide. According to Rodney Shewan, the Duchess and Guido: "Rather than bear the ignominy of compromise – self-submission to outside authority – they choose Romantic death" (Shewan 133). Not only do the protagonists choose Romantic death over the Duchess's leadership of a patriarchal society, their choice to die reflects a more pro-active rebellion against the patriarchy. Rather than becoming an agent of patriarchy, which the Duchess's leadership in Padua would inevitably have involved, she chooses freedom in death, over her confining roles in life. "O Love, Love, Love, / I did not think that I would pledge thee thus! *Drinks poison [...] the DUCHESS leaps up in the dreadful spasm of death, tears in agony at her dress, and finally, with face twisted and distorted with pain, falls back dead in a chair*" (*Collins Complete*

¹⁰³ In contrast to my interpretation of the Duke's murder as the Duchess's challenge of patriarchal male power, Ellmann narrowly considers the murder of the Duke as a sacrifice for Guido: "The new turn in this play is that the hapless duchess, in love with Guido, imagines that he wishes the duke dead for the sake of their love. She therefore kills her husband, not from hatred of him but from love of Guido. The surprise is that Guido is shocked that by her having committed the crime which he had barely avoided. When he tells her he hates her, she betrays him to the gaurds as the murderer" (211).

Works 671 & 680). Higonnet proposes that: "in literature women perceive their own suicides in ways that could be described as visionary rather than violent [...]. The only way for a woman to attain a state of wholeness may be to move beyond the body" (Suleiman 78). The Duchess's movement beyond the body is a movement beyond life into death, which because of its unknown state, is perceived as providing an alternative landscape of freedom and hope. Having been dominated by the Duke in marriage, the Duchess's body exists as a signifier of the male patriarchal power; and by contributing to her own erasure the Duchess contests the power of men in Paduan society. A more gender equal landscape is not available to the characters in the play, so they choose to move beyond the living state into an unknown and possibly more liberating landscape. It is not only the Duchess's suicide that is visionary, but her murder of the Duke is also visionary, since she displaces him from the play in order to assert her independence outside of marriage. By killing her husband the Duchess destroys their marital union, allowing her to break from her oppressive role as his wife. The Duke's perception of the Duchess and the wider patriarchal perception of her is reflected in the listing of the Duchess after: "Simone Gesso, Duke of Padua", as merely "Beatrice, his wife" (*Collins Complete Works* 606). With the removal of the Duke from the play she becomes independent from the domestic sphere, her husband and her confining wifely duties.

The Duchess had believed that the Duke was the only object that stood between her ascension to power and her independence, so she took decisive action and murdered her husband. Guido rejects the Duchess's love on the basis of this murder, and in her bitterness she accuses Guido of the murder. In retrospect she regrets blaming Guido and attempts to have him pardoned, but he has already been sentenced to death, so she visits him in prison in disguise with the intention of taking his place there. However after her plan backfires, the Duchess drinks the poison in order to protect her lover, so that he will be forced to escape in disguise as the Duchess. The Duchess is Guido's more masculine protector, but she does not anticipate that he will kill himself using her dagger; his suicide proposes his unwillingness to live without her.

Despite her intentions to protect Guido by drinking the poison, the Duchess forces Guido to suffer a violent death; he refuses to leave her so his choices are either a public execution or to stab himself to death.¹⁰⁴ Guido stabs himself with the Duchess's dagger and then he falls across the Duchess; his submission to her culminates in an image of the pieta. This tragic scene is reminiscent of the final death scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.¹⁰⁵ Romeo enters the tomb of the church, sees his wife lying outstretched before him and kisses her, drinks the poison he bought from the apothecary and dies quickly, but she awakes just after he dies. Romeo: "Here's to my love! [*Drinks.*] – O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. – Thus with a kiss I die. [*Dies.*]" (Shakespeare 920). Much to Juliet's horror, she finds Romeo dead when she awakes, and finding his dagger she stabs herself to death.¹⁰⁶ The suicides of Shakespeare's protagonists, like Wilde's, indicate their choice to opt out of an oppressive system of power, in their case their families opposed their union on the basis of religious difference. Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers sacrifice their lives, believing that they will be united in an alternative afterlife. The sacrifice of the Duchess's life is not in vain as the concluding image of the play suggests that the natural order has been restored: "*The Lord Justice rushes forward and drags the cloak off the Duchess, whose face is now the marble image of peace, the sign of God's forgiveness*" (Collins Complete Works 680).¹⁰⁷ The final image Wilde evokes is one in which the dead Duchess is at peace; the implication is that the Duchess is now free from the constraints of life, and she has made the right decision in choosing the freedom of her own fate. The final image of peace implies that the Duchess is forgiven for her suicide; an act interpreted as a direct sin against God and the Church in Christianity. This image also contests the Church's perception of suicide. Before the Duchess achieves freedom from life in death, the death and funeral imagery associated with marriage in *The Duchess*,

¹⁰⁴ Gendered patterns of suicide are examined in more detail in the Introduction. Although poison is recognised as a typically female and more passive method of suicide, the violent death that the Duchess's dagger brings on Guido re-asserts her dominance and influence over him.

¹⁰⁵ Powell also notes the connection between *The Duchess* and *Romeo and Juliet*: "The double suicide at the end of the play evokes memories of Romeo and Juliet" (10).

¹⁰⁶ Juliet: "[...] Poison I see hath been his timeless end: – O churl! drink all and leave no friendly drop to help me after? [...] Yea, noise? – then I'll be brief. – O happy dagger! [*Snatching Romeo's dagger.*] This is thy sheath [*stabs herself*]; there rest, and let me die. [*Falls on Romeo's body and dies.*]" (Shakespeare 920).

¹⁰⁷ The Duchess believes that Guido is innocent and should not die: "Why should you die? / You have not spilt blood, and so need not die: / I have spilt blood, and therefore I must die" (Collins Complete Works 677).

denote Wilde's satirisation of marriage. The inextricable association between marriage and death also suggests that marriage is an oppressive framework for women. As Nina Auerbach notes: "In the ideology of Victorian womanhood, marriage signalled not maturity but death into a perpetual nursery..." (Suleiman 52-3). Guido and the Duchess delay their death with talk of marriage; a marriage that they realise will never take place. Duchess: "[...] this room / Is poorly furnished for a marriage chamber [...] That is our wedding-bell, is it not [...] Death, why do you tarry, get to the upper chamber; / The cold meats of my husband's funeral feast / Are set out for you; this is a wedding feast [...]" (Collins Complete Works 678-779). The bell that The Duchess and Guido interpret as a marriage bell is a funeral knell that summons them to death. Significantly and unconventionally it is the unmarried characters in the play that choose a romantic end in death:

They kiss each other now for the first time in this Act [...] the Duchess leaps up in the dreadful spasm of death and tears in agony at her dress, and finally [...] falls back dead in a chair. Guido, seizing her dagger from her belt, kills himself; and [...] falls across her knees [...] The Lord Justice rushes forward and drags the cloak off the Duchess, whose face is now the marble image of peace, the sign of God's forgiveness (Collins Complete Works 680).

Guido is draped across the Duchess's knees, a concluding image which implies his continuing subservience to her in the life beyond death.

Guido's Submission to Patriarchy and the Duchess.

Guido's submission to patriarchy and the Duchess maintains the Duchess's power throughout the play. Although the power of patriarchy is established by Moranzone, it is ultimately the influence of the Duchess on Guido which dictates Guido's decisions in the play. The power of patriarchy is represented by Moranzone's influence over Guido; he evokes the oppressive framework of the patriarchal structure on men. Although Guido's quest to avenge his father's death is presented to us as if it were an independent one, it is a quest which is orchestrated by Moranzone. It is Moranzone who writes to Guido telling him to come to Padua to meet him,

Moranzzone who introduces Guido to the Duke informing him that it was the Duke that sold his father, and he who encourages Guido to murder the Duke. Moranzzone's influence and plot to have the Duke killed implies that he stands to gain from the Duke's death.

GUIDO. (*Clutching his dagger*): Doth Malatesta live?

MORANZONE. No, he is dead [...] Thou canst do it! / The man who sold thy father is alive
[...] I will bring you to him (*Collins Complete Works* 609).

Moranzzone persuades Guido to kill the Duke when he orders him to; Guido is under Moranzzone's direction. Guido is under the influence of Moranzzone as he is Guido's only known connection to his father, and Moranzzone steps into a patriarchal role to Guido in the play. Moranzzone instructs Guido that he will send him a dagger when he wishes Guido to carry out the murder. Although Guido breaks his oath in the end and refuses to kill the Duke, it is Moranzzone who puts the idea to murder the Duke into Guido's head.

MORANZONE. [...] Swear to me / You will not kill him till I bid you do it, / Or else I go to mine own house, and leave / You ignorant, and your father unavenged [...]

GUIDO. [...] I swear / I will not lay my hand upon his life / Until you bid me, then – God help his soul, / For he shall die as never dog died yet [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 611).

By constantly evoking Guido's dead father, Moranzzone ensures his continuing influence over Guido. When Moranzzone introduces Guido to the Duke, Guido is expected to shake hands with him but hesitates; Guido eventually obeys the Count and shakes hands and kisses the hand of the man who sold his father into slavery. It is Moranzzone who convinces Guido to deceive the Duke. Duke: "[...] Well, sir, from now / We count you of our household. *He holds out his hand for Guido to kiss. Guido starts back in horror, but at a gesture from Count Moranzzone, kneels and kisses it*" (*Collins Complete Works* 615). Moranzzone also instructs Guido to banish his companion, Ascanio, from Padua and from his life.

MORANZONE. Here is your friend; see that you banish him / Both from your heart and Padua [...] Revenge shall be thy friend, / Thou need'st no other.

GUIDO. Well, then be it so (*Collins Complete Works* 616).

Perhaps this order mirrors the Count's fear that Guido will be distracted from his ambition to murder the Duke. Once again Guido accepts Moranzone's wish, and in doing so he reaffirms the oppressive power of the patriarchal system over men. By breaking his oath and refusing to kill the Duke, Guido undermines his promise to Moranzone and challenges the power of the patriarchal system: "Listen, Lord Moranzone, / I am resolved not to kill this man" (*Collins Complete Works* 639). Although Moranzone has a significant influence over Guido, Guido summons the courage to challenge him. Guido's actions imply that men must also contest the oppressive patriarchal system on them. Ellmann compares the conflicted Guido to Vera in *Vera*: "Guido is like Vera in oscillation between desire and revulsion: when the moment for assassination comes, he cannot bring himself to carry it out. Like most of Wilde's protagonists, he is ingenuous and merciful" (211). Although Guido challenges Moranzone he remains desperate for the Duchess's love; he implores her to love him and constantly seeks her approval. On the other hand, the Duchess is confident in her belief that Guido loves her, and she does not seek his reassurance. The Duchess's power over Guido establishes a challenge of typical gender roles. The following exchange between Guido and the Duchess depicts his unconventional dependence on her.

GUIDO. Tell me again you love me, Beatrice.

DUCHESS. (*Fingering his collar*): How well this collar lies about your throat [...]

GUIDO. Nay, tell me that you love me.

DUCHESS. I remember, / That when I was a child in my dear France [...]

GUIDO. Will you not say you love me?

DUCHESS. (*Smiling*): He was a very royal man, King Francis [...] Why need I tell you, Guido, that I love you?

Takes his head in her hands and turns his face up to her.

Do you not know that I am yours for ever, / Body and soul (*Collins Complete Works* 630).

It is Guido who needs to be reassured by the Duchess; she is more confident in their relationship and more independent by nature. The Duchess is more hesitant to return Guido's love; she

avoids telling him how she feels by constantly changing the subject, in the hope that she will distract him with childhood memories. The Duchess's hesitancy to return her love reflects an unwillingness to trust Guido, or perhaps she is only pretending that she loves him. The Duchess's concerns revolve around power; while Guido declares his love for her she compliments him on his collar and compares him to a royal King. Her connection between Guido and the King mirrors her desire for power and her ambition for him. Her priority is to remain in control in their relationship, and her willingness to suddenly love him mirrors her intention to manipulate him.

Although the Duchess declares her love for Guido her physical interactions with him reinforces his subservience to her. The Duchess: "*takes his head in her hands and turns his face up to her*" (Collins Complete Works 630). This interaction maintains the challenge of gender roles in the play, and places the Duchess in a more powerful role than Guido. In contrast to the Duchess's more sudden affection for Guido, his love for her seems to develop more gradually throughout the course of the play. His revenge oath is quickly cast aside when he catches sight of the Duchess for the first time at the closing of Act One.

GUIDO. [...] That from this hour, till my father's murder / In blood I have revenged [...] I do foreswear / All love of women [...]

[...] the Duchess Of Padua *comes down the steps; as she passes across their eyes meet for a moment [...] she looks back at Guido, and the dagger falls from his hand.*

Oh! Who is that?

A CITIZEN. The Duchess of Padua! (Collins Complete Works 618).

The Duchess is speechless when Guido initially confesses his love for her. She is uncertain of what she should say, and it is Guido who informs her that the appropriate response is for her to tell him that she loves him. Initially she denies her love but then, as if she suddenly realises the awkwardness of an unrequited declaration of love, she quickly rectifies the situation by telling him she loves him.

DUCHESS. I hardly know what I should say to you.

GUIDO. Will you not say you love me?

DUCHESS. Is that my lesson? / Must I say all at once? 'Twere a good lesson / If I did love you, sir; but, if I do not, / What shall I say then?

GUIDO. If you do not love me, / Say, none the less, you do [...]

DUCHESS. [...] I love you, Guido (*Collins Complete Works* 627-628).

The Duchess and Guido's relationship develops too quickly for it to seem sincere, and it is an empowering relationship for the Duchess. In this relationship she dominates Guido; her superior status as a Duchess affords her this power. Guido's tendency to address the Duchess as "Your Grace" despite their intimacy, also re-asserts her hierarchal power over him. Guido declares: "Your Grace, I lack no favours from the Duke [...] But come to proffer on my bended knees, / My loyal service to thee unto death" (*Collins Complete Works* 626). Guido proclaims his subservience to the Duchess, and the physical position of him a level below the Duchess signifies her power over him. Duchess: "Sit down here, / A little lower than me; yes, just so, sweet, / That I may run my fingers through your hair, / And see your face turn upwards like a flower / To meet my kiss" (*Collins Complete Works* 629). The Duchess objectifies Guido's physical beauty and undermines his masculinity by comparing him to a flower; typically a traditional emblem of femininity. It is she who instructs him to sit "a little lower than me"; she constructs an alternative structure which maintains her power over him. By ensuring that Guido begs the Duchess for her love, she assumes the authoritative role in their relationship. The Duchess claims ownership of Guido in an alternative relationship: "I will not give up the least part in you, / But like a miser keep you to myself, / And spoil you perhaps in keeping" (*Collins Complete Works* 632). The Duchess's empowering role in her affair with Guido, contrasts with the submissive role she plays in her marriage with the Duke before his murder. Wilde provides an alternative role for women by re-inventing the typical power dynamic between Guido and the Duchess. Guido plays the part of the Duchess's submissive partner (although they are not married), and she plays the part of the subservient wife to the Duke. The relationship denotes a

modern alternative to marriage. The pivotal difference, however, is that by ultimately removing her patriarchal oppressor the Duchess assumes power, and challenges the institutional powers in society and Guido did not. By not marrying Guido the Duchess maintains her independent female identity and avoids entering another patriarchal framework. The Duchess is the architect of her own and of Guido's fate in the play. By blaming him for the murder of the Duke she decides his fate.

The voice of the Duchess outside.

DUCHESS. This way went he, the man who slew my lord.

[...] Guido is not seen at first, till the Duchess surrounded by Servants carrying torches appears at the top of the staircase, and points to Guido, who is seized at once one of the soldiers dragging the knife from his hand and showing it to the Captain of the Guard in sight of the audience (Collins Complete Works 652).

The two lovers opt out of an oppressive framework by choosing death over life.

The absence of Guido's father from the play displaces the patriarchal voice from *The Duchess*. Instead of the typical idealisation of the patriarch as evidenced in Victorian society, Guido admires women as the heroines and the saviours of the world. Guido: "That it is woman's mission by their love / To save the souls of men: and loving her, / My Lady, my white Beatrice, I begin / To see a nobler and a holier vengeance / In letting this man live, than doth reside / In bloody deeds o' the night [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 641). Guido idealises a love which he believes "bloody murder" kills (*Collins Complete Works* 641). Guido's perception of women reflects the unrealistic Victorian perception of women as the foundation of morality in society. The Duchess's supposed innocence is evoked by Guido who dotes on her naively as his "white Beatrice" (*Collins Complete Works* 641). Wilde shatters the illusion of an ideal femininity through the medium of the Duchess who murders the Duke. Her act of murder contests the Duke's expectations of a subservient and passive wife. Jenni Calder notes that although

Victorian women were believed to be the moral guardians of society, they were also perceived as weak and subservient:

While Victorian society regarded women as its moral guardians [...] Women were simultaneously the supporting pillars and helpless parasites of society [...] Almost all the threats to marriage come from this area; at the same time, in the normal course of things, almost all upper-class marriages are made there [...] In the end only duty is a suitable antidote to weakness (Calder 13).

Duty was perceived as “a suitable antidote to weakness”; a belief that conveyed the disparate gender roles in the Victorian domestic and public sphere. These duties and roles which were circumscribed by heterosexual marriage and the roles of wife, husband, mother and father, operated as a medium to protect the conventional family unit. Unlike Vera who prioritises her Nihilist cause for liberty over love, Guido undermines his patriarchal lineage when he prioritises his love of the Duchess over his revenge quest. Although he decides not to murder the Duke, in breaking his oath Guido displaces the importance of his patriarchal lineage which motivated him to come to Padua. When Guido’s idealisation of his father and of his ideal masculinity is shattered by Moranzzone’s realistic account of his father’s death, the patriarch is undermined. This notion of masculinity, which in many ways reflects the idealisation of Victorian men, is challenged in the play.¹⁰⁸

GUIDO. [...] Now tell me of my father [...] Stood he tall? / I warrant he looked tall upon his horse. / His hair was black? [...] Was his voice low? / The very bravest men have voices sometimes [...] That brake with terror all his enemies [...] (*proudly*) Then when you saw my noble father last / He was set high above the heads of men?

MORANZONE. Ay, he was high above the heads of men, /
Walks over to Guido and puts his hand upon his shoulder.

On a red scaffold, with a butcher’s block / Set for his neck (*Collins Complete Works* 608).

¹⁰⁸ The Introduction analyses Victorian masculinity in further detail.

Guido associates masculinity with physical strength and presence; he constructs an image of his strong, tall and physically domineering father on horseback. He hopes that his father's voice is low so that he may "brake with terror all his enemies". His ability to ride, fight and intimidate his enemies are the measurements of masculinity that Guido sets up for the ideal patriarch (*Collins Complete Works* 608). Guido's impression of traditional masculinity is evoked through violence, and the willingness to fight other men. The reality of what actually transpired, however, challenges this idealised masculinity which is based on physical prowess.¹⁰⁹ According to Moranzzone, Guido's father was captured, sold into slavery and killed. It is significant that Wilde did not attribute any name to Guido's father throughout the play; in remaining nameless he is denied an identity and is displaced from the landscape of the play. As a child Guido was orphaned and raised by someone who he refers to as "my reputed uncle", and his identity is not confirmed (*Collins Complete Works* 611). Count Moranzzone tells Guido that his father, Duke Lorenzo, fought for Italy and was captured by Giovanni Malatesta, sold into slavery by the Duke, and died. Moranzzone informs Guido that his mother gave birth to him and died soon after. Guido's upbringing is an alternative framework to the Victorian hegemonic one. It emphasises the possibilities of alternative familial units, and the privileged importance of the family unit in Victorian society is challenged. In contrast to the normative Victorian idealisation of the patriarch the female characters, including Guido's mother, are idealised in the play:

MORANZONE. When your mother, / Than whom no saint in heaven was more pure, /
 Heard my black news, she fell into a swoon, / And being with untimely travail seized – /
 Indeed, she was but seven months a bride – / Bare thee into the world before thy time, /
 And then her soul went heavenward, to wait / Thy father, at the gates of Paradise
 (*Collins Complete Works* 612).

¹⁰⁹ Connell reflects on the dominant perception of masculinity: "With masculinity defined as a character structure marked by rationality, and Western civilisation defined as the bearer of reason to a benighted world, a cultural link between the legitimization of patriarchy and the legitimization of empire was forged. [...] The men who applied force at the colonial frontier, the 'conquistadors' as they were called in the Spanish case, were perhaps the first group to become defined as a masculine cultural type in the modern sense" (*Masculinities* 186-7).

Moranzone's association of Guido's mother with sainthood, rectitude and heaven, denotes a traditional conception of the ideal Victorian woman, an idealisation that the Duchess contests when she murders her own husband. The Duchess's murder of the Duke challenges the association of women with morality, and satirises the sanctity of marriage. Guido empowers women as the supreme artists of the world. His belief in this theory reflects the fact that it is women who give birth to people not men, and this suggestion evokes the empowering and exclusive female act of childbirth. Guido: "[...] I think / Women are the best artists of the world, / For they can take the common lives of men / Soiled with the money-getting of our age, / And with love make them beautiful" (*Collins Complete Works* 629-30). The exclusive nature of pregnancy empowers women significantly; as a biological act it cannot be challenged or assumed by men, and the dependency is on women to carry and give birth to their children. Guido's image of women and the association of them as mediums for life is ironic, given the Duchess's power in extinguishing the Duke's life.

Ascanio and Guido's Prohibited Relationship.

Another way Wilde contests Victorian masculinity is through the medium of Guido and Ascanio's close relationship; Ascanio travels to Padua to support Guido. In Act One the friendship between Guido and Ascanio suggests more of an intimate relationship, but this suggestion is only implied. Their interactions evoke a brotherly love, but their intimate friendship pushes this boundary even further. In the opening scene, Moranzone asks Guido for some privacy so he sends Ascanio away for an hour. It is significant that apart from the Duchess Ascanio is the only person with whom Guido visualises a future. Before his departure he tells Ascanio: "we will have long days of joy together" (*Collins Complete Works* 608). The language that the men use to address one another can be interpreted as the affectionate language of lovers.

GUIDO. This is my dearest friend, who out of love / Has followed me to Padua [...] He does not know that nothing in this world / Can dim the perfect mirror of our love [...]

ASCANIO. [...] then by this love / Which beats between us like a summer sea, / Whatever
lot has fallen to your hand / May I not share it [...]

What, shall we never more / Sit hand in hand, as we were wont to sit [...] (*Collins
Complete Works* 607-08 & 617).

As a partner would, Ascanio wishes to share the burden of Guido's troubles, his loyalty to Guido and his belief that they are destined to be together: "hand in hand", suggests that they might be in a relationship (*Collins Complete Works* 617). Guido's reference to: "this love / Which beats between us", implies that the men share a passionate history (*Collins Complete Works* 617). By idealising his love with Ascanio as the: "perfect mirror of our love" Guido evokes an unconventional relationship between men (*Collins Complete Works* 608). When Guido tries to send Ascanio away Ascanio offers to serve Guido and begs him to reconsider:

ASCANIO. [...] If you are nobly born, cannot I be / Your serving man? I will tend you with
more love / Than any hired servant.

GUIDO. (*clasping his hand*): Ascanio!

Sees MORANZONE looking at him and drops Ascanio's hand.

It cannot be (*Collins Complete Works* 616).

Guido's inclination to hold Ascanio's hand and then to pull away when Moranzone catches sight of them, suggests a patriarchal disapproval of their relationship. By not defining their relationship Wilde left it open to interpretation. It is important to recognise that Moranzone, who symbolises the traditional patriarch, orders Ascanio to leave Padua putting an end to the men's unconventional relationship.

The Duchess and *Vera* evoke an interest in the disparate gender roles and expectations in Victorian society. Wilde's progressive female characters contest the institutions and powers operating in society which suggests the need for change. In *The Duchess* the Paduan people struggle under the Duke's tyrannical leadership, which is eventually overthrown by the Duchess. The female protagonists in *The Duchess* and *Vera* rally against the narrow patriarchal

frameworks in which they live. It is the Duchess who instigates this change in leadership without the help of her people (unlike Vera's Nihilist support); and the Duchess's determination to challenge her husband's leadership and the framework of society empowers her. Vera and the Duchess exemplify unconventional and modern modes of femininity. Both characters establish their own identities as distinct from the patriarchal powers at play and claim or usurp the male leadership in society. The Duchess refuses to be oppressed in marriage and by killing her husband she severs their marital ties, and her expected subservience to him. The Duchess's suicide provides a more hopeful freedom than her continuing leadership of Padua, which would have meant that she would become an instrument of patriarchal power. Vera's education and her occupation of the public and private sphere allow her to become an unconventionally strong female character, and she becomes the Nihilist leader and hero in the play. By refusing to murder Alexis as the Nihilists ordered Vera to and by rejecting the possibility of marriage to Alexis, she claims her independence in an alternative gender framework. Vera's and the Duchess's suicides denote the oppressive options available to these women, and suggest the need to re-imagine their roles.

Chapter Three: The Satirisation of Gender Roles and Marriage in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

Following Wilde's early plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was the first of his popular 1890s plays to be produced. Seeing as it was staged in 1892 and *The Duchess* was staged in 1891, this play is the next to be analysed chronologically. *Lady Windermere's Fan* satirises Victorian marriage.¹¹⁰ Wilde's reference to "A Play about a Good Woman", in the title of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, evokes the Victorian belief in an ideal woman, which Wilde debunks in the course of the play (Raby, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* 2). In *Lady Windermere's Fan* Lord Windermere continues to deceive Lady Windermere, and to conceal the secret of who her biological mother is from her; a deception which questions the very sanctity of their marriage.¹¹¹ The depiction of the Windermere's marriage in *Lady Windermere's Fan* reflects Wilde's intention to contest the sanctity of marriage, and to present alternative frameworks for his Victorian audiences to consider. In order to do this, the gender roles and gendered spaces on the stage will be re-considered according to various theoretical frameworks. Butler's feminist framework from *Undoing Gender* can be applied to the female characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The female characters in Wilde's play challenge the traditional segregation of gender, by moving beyond the associated feminine spaces into new territory. Butler notes the need to transform gender relations, and the problems associated with measuring these social transformations. She acknowledges that feminist theory itself can be transformative and is evidenced in everyday life.

Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations [...] We may imagine social transformation differently [...] we must also have an idea of how theory relates to

¹¹⁰ Wilde also examines marriage in *Salome* (1891), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which are examined in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

¹¹¹ Originally Wilde wanted to reveal that Mrs. Erlynne was Lady Windermere's mother in Act Four, but after the first performance of the play, in keeping with Wilde's preferred style, George Alexander advised him to reveal this fact earlier to the audience; this was a more conventional style, and Wilde was persuaded. In a letter to Alexander Wilde reflects on this moment of disclosure: "With regard to your... suggestion about the disclosure of the secret of the play in the second act, had I intended to let out the secret, which is the element of suspense and curiosity, a quality so essentially dramatic, I would have written the play on entirely different lines. I would have made Mrs. Erlynne a vulgar, horrid woman, and struck out the incident with the fan. The audience must not know till the last act that the woman that Lady Windermere proposed to strike with her fan was her own mother. The note would be too harsh, too horrible" (Hart-Davis, *Letters* 308).

the process of transformation, whether theory is itself transformative work that has transformation as one of its effects [...] theory itself is transformative [...] Theory is an activity that does not remain restricted to the academy. It takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, a dispute over values, priorities, and language emerges (*Undoing Gender* 175-6 & 204).

Wilde's modern characters attempt to transform their social roles in the society in which they exist and in the landscape of the play. As Butler proposes, the possibilities that can be imagined can contribute to a transformation in gender roles. Wilde's gender framework in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and in many of his plays, reflects a need to re-imagine more equal roles in Victorian society. Despite the progress that many of his female characters make, the patriarchal male systems of power often re-emerge and reflect the oppressive reality of the Victorian context.

Production Details and Plot Summary.

Lady Windermere's Fan was staged at St. James's Theatre, London, on the 20th February 1892.

Wilde's subversion of traditional Victorian plot mechanics in the play indicate his desire to challenge Victorian beliefs onstage.¹¹² Act one opens with a traditional image of femininity; Lady Windermere arranges flowers in a blue bowl. The Butler, Parker, informs her that Lord Darlington has called on her and after some hesitation, she orders Parker to bring her guest

¹¹² In his article "What Did Lady Windermere Learn?" Morse Peckham claims that Wilde challenges typical Victorian dramatic techniques in three different stages; "The primary situation, the Long-Lost Child pattern, is one of the oldest in the world. But Wilde does several curious things with it. First, it is the parent who is lost, not the child [...] The usual emotional release of this plot is the recognition scene, or else the acquisition of a substitute parent or child. But Wilde neither permits a recognition nor supplies a parent [...] The second simple plot-pattern is the Meeting of the Rival Women. [...] When they meet, what happens? Lady Windermere 'bows coldly to Mrs Erlynne, who bows to her sweetly in turn, and sails into the room.' Again we have the non-fulfilment of a traditional plot- device. [...] I have pointed out that the encounter theme can depend on either a social rivalry or a sexual rivalry. Wilde completely disposes of the social rivalry, while by dramatic irony - by the end of Act II the audience knows that Mrs Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother - he completely disappoints the audience's anticipation of an encounter based on sexual rivalry. The third antiquated trick is the Discovery Scene. Like Sheridan, Wilde conceals two people, but he lets the important one escape; Lady Windermere would lose more by discovery than Mrs Erlynne. The latter might lose Lord Augustus, but she at least can take care of herself. Her daughter cannot. So the scene really revolves around whether Lady Windermere is to be caught, as the discovery of the fan makes very clear. Lord Windermere is heading straight towards his wife's place of concealment when Mrs. Erlynne appears, gets everyone's attention, and lets her daughter escape. And again we have the non-fulfilment of a traditional stage-device" (11-12).

through. Lord Darlington and Lady Windermere discuss her forthcoming birthday party, which is to take place that evening. Lord Darlington's use of amorous language reflects his admiration of Lady Windermere, and he tries desperately to charm her. The Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Lady Agatha, interrupt Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington's conversation, and the Duchess proceeds (following Darlington's departure), to inform Lady Windermere that her husband has been seen visiting and paying for another women's living expenses. The implication is that Windermere is having an affair with this woman. Lady Windermere confronts her husband after her guests have left; he admits to assisting Mrs Erlynne financially, and he encourages his wife to help Mrs Erlynne to re-enter society by inviting her to her birthday celebration that evening. When she refuses to do this, believing that he has been unfaithful to her, Windermere insists on writing her an invitation, and Lady Windermere threatens to insult Mrs Erlynne in public. Act Two takes place in the Windermeres' house; it is the evening of Lady Windermere's birthday, and her companions discuss the past season in London. Mrs Erlynne arrives much to Lady Windermere's disgust, and Lady Windermere and Darlington discuss the suspicious behaviour of her husband, in private on the balcony. Darlington tells her that she deserves to be treated better by her husband and he confesses his love for her. Darlington offers her his life and encourages her to leave her husband for him so they can go abroad together, but she is shocked by his confession and needs time to think. Meanwhile, the Duchess of Berwick arranges for her silent and submissive daughter, Lady Agatha, to be set up with Mr Hopper, and the Duchess orders him to come to lunch the next day. Lady Windermere watches her husband and Mrs Erlynne talk (unbeknownst to them), and she decides that she will leave her husband and elope with Darlington. She writes a note to Windermere explaining that she has left him, but Mrs Erlynne discovers the note and reads it, after Parker informs her that her ladyship has left the house. Mrs Erlynne reveals to the audience that she is Lady Windermere's biological mother, and ironically, that she wrote the same note to her husband when she left him and Lady Windermere as a child. Mrs Erlynne deceives Windermere by telling him that his wife has gone to bed with a headache, and she proceeds to Darlington's house to convince Lady Windermere

to return to her husband and child. Act Three is set in Darlington's rooms, and after some encouragement Mrs Erlynne convinces Lady Windermere to return home. She tells her that Windermere has only tried to save her from shame and disgrace, but she refuses to go into any details and Lady Windermere is left in the dark. Just as they are about to leave Darlington returns home with some acquaintances from the party, including Windermere. The men find Lady Windermere's fan in his rooms, and in order to save Lady Windermere from disgrace as she would have been suspected of having an affair with Darlington, Mrs Erlynne confronts the men and distracts them, sacrificing her own reputation so her daughter can slip out of the room unnoticed. The final act is set in the Windermere's home, and after realising that Mrs Erlynne has sacrificed her reputation for her sake Lady Windermere is grateful. However, now Windermere believes that Mrs Erlynne is having an affair with Darlington, after she was discovered unaccompanied in his rooms at a late hour. The opportunity arises for Mrs Erlynne to tell her daughter the truth, but Windermere encourages her not to, claiming that all it would do would cause her pain. Windermere notes his wife's idealisation of her deceased mother which she treasures, and Mrs Erlynne justifies her continuing deception by convincing herself that the truth would destroy Lady Windermere's ideals. The act concludes with Mrs Erlynne's departure and Lord Augustus' arrival, and Mrs Erlynne announces that she has finally accepted his marriage proposal. In the last line of the play Lady Windermere concludes that Lord Augustus is marrying a very good woman.

Lady Windermere's Questionable Morality.

Despite the traditional image of Victorian femininity associated with Lady Windermere in the opening scene, her morality is portrayed as superficial in the course of the play. Lady Windermere identifies herself as morally rigid, but her movement away from the home and her husband to Darlington's house in Act Four, signifies her desire to challenge the powerlessness of women in marriage and in Victorian society. When Lady Windermere suspects that her husband is having an affair with Mrs Erlynne she quickly decides to elope with Lord Darlington, another decision which undermines the Windermere's marriage. As Ian Small and Russell Jackson argue,

the Windermere's marriage is not a happy one: "The marriage is childless, which Chiltern considers a reason for his wife's being so 'pitiless in her perfection'. From a barren union and a profound lack of mutual communication with one another, they have a long way to go before they achieve a satisfying marriage" (xxxv). Indeed the Windermere's seem to be more loyal and honest with their friends than they are with each other; marriage operates as a mask of acceptance in society. An original review of the play depicts an idealisation of Lady Windermere and the actress who played her in the 1892 production; her beauty and innocence is admired and valued above her other characteristics.¹¹³ Lady Windermere passes judgement on the behaviour of other characters such as her husband, and yet she considers leaving him and their child. Although her beliefs in Victorian rectitude seem to be uncompromising, Lady Windermere sacrifices these values when she decides to go abroad with Darlington.

LADY WINDERMERE. [...] You think that I am a Puritan, I suppose? Well, I have something of the Puritan in me [...] My mother died when I was a mere child. I lived always with Lady Julia [...] she taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. *She* allowed of no compromise. *I* allow of none (Collins Complete Works 422).

Lady Windermere discards her own morals because she believes her husband has been unfaithful to her. Her objective in leaving her house and her husband and child, with the intention of eloping with Darlington suggests the superficial nature of their marriage. It also signifies a desire to exact revenge on her husband. Lady Windermere's and Darlington's unconventional relationship is another medium through which Wilde challenges the framework of marriage. Darlington is a bachelor dandy and Windermere's best friend, and Lady Windermere is a married woman; despite this their relationship can be characterised by an ambiguous and unspoken intimacy. In the opening scene of the play when Darlington calls on

¹¹³ "The morning-room, with its rich brown panels, was a triumph. It looked so like a room, and unlike a stage imitation of one. From that warm, dark background the white dress of Miss Hanbury stood out with a delicacy and a beauty of relief, and when she faced her audience there was no such beautiful woman in the house [...]" (The Pall Mall Gazette 22nd February 1892 p. 2). The innocence and morality of Lady Windermere is captured by her white, puritan costume.

Lady Windermere, their conversation and behaviour implies that there is something going on between them. When Parker informs Lady Windermere that her caller is Darlington, her hesitation before she replies to him, imbues their relationship with a suspicious ambiguity. Lady Windermere's reflection that she should see Darlington before tonight implies that they share an established personal history. Despite the familiarity between Lady Windermere and Darlington, Wilde leaves their relationship up to the imagination of his audience. Their relationship is another example of an alternative heterosexual relationship to Victorian marriage. Wilde presents his Victorian audience with alternative relationships to the exclusive framework of marriage. The gender roles are contested and Darlington's charms are undermined in the face of Lady Windermere's rational and pragmatic response.

LADY WINDERMERE. (*hesitates for a moment*): [...] Show him up – and I'm at home to any one who calls... It's best for me to see him before to-night...

LORD DARLINGTON. (*sitting down*): I wish I had known it was your birthday... I would have covered the whole street in front of your house with flowers for *you* to walk on...
(*Collins Complete Works* 420-22).

When Mrs Erlynne arrives at Lady Windermere's birthday, Lady Windermere and Darlington retire onto the terrace to discuss the behaviour of her husband. The terrace, being outside of the internal confining walls of the house and the immediate private sphere, can be seen as a less oppressive domestic space. "LADY WINDERMERE *bows coldly, and goes off with* LORD DARLINGTON. [...] LADY WINDERMERE *and* LORD DARLINGTON *enter from the terrace*" (*Collins Complete Works* 436 & 438). Just as Scolnicov reflects on the symbolism of doors and windows in the domestic sphere, perhaps her interpretation could also apply to the terrace. The doors and windows of a house when they are open, represent both the attachment to the domestic sphere, and the connection to public life and the greater external world. Similarly, in being a part of the domestic sphere a terrace maintains a connection to this space, but being an external space it is also a part of the public world.

The door becomes the symbol of either separation or communication (depending on whether it is opened or closed) between the circumscribed and secure space of the house and the hostile and alien world outside. [...] Traditionally, the house has been associated with woman's social place, but it can also be seen to stand for her body and her sexuality. [...] The virtue of chastity was assured by the woman being closed off, immured in her house, while the open door and the open mouth were taken to signify sexual incontinence (Scolnicov 7).

If an open door or window symbolises the sexual incontinence of women, then perhaps the movement of Lady Windermere with Darlington onto the terrace, suggests her movement away from her husband and her roles as wife and mother. The external space of the terrace indicates the possible freedom of the outside world. The scene on the terrace between Darlington and Lady Windermere is not documented in the play and is left up to the imagination of the audience. It is also important that when Darlington and Lady Windermere return to the house, Lady Windermere decides to leave her husband. Darlington's flattery of Lady Windermere from the opening scene of the play reflects his sly motive to charm her, before she discovers her husband's deception and considers leaving him. When Darlington confesses his admiration for Lady Windermere, her temptation to run away with him implies that they have an unconventional relationship. Darlington's priority is to enter into a relationship; this is evident by his willingness to disregard the scandal that would emerge if he and Lady Windermere united, as well as the close friendship he has with Windermere. Darlington's sudden affection for Lady Windermere suggests that the narrow framework in society is oppressive.

LORD DARLINGTON. [...] You are more to me than anything in the whole world. What does your husband give you... I offer you my life... I love you... there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely – or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 439).

Darlington's assertion that marriage is a "shallow, degrading existence", which the Victorian world "in its hypocrisy demands", and Lady Windermere's temptation to elope with him confirm that in some cases marriage provides a convenient escape from isolation in Victorian society. Darlington's confession and his proposal to run away together means that Lady Windermere is in a position of power to reject or accept him. In offering his life to her, he empowers her independence outside the domestic sphere and marriage. In being unable to remain in society as an independent woman Lady Windermere reflects the precarious position of women in a society in which they are forced to depend on men.

Mrs Erlynne: An Unconventional Matriarch and Transgressing Alternative Spaces.

Although Lady Windermere never knows it, Mrs Erlynne is her biological mother, and she is a woman who has challenged the forced dependency of Victorian women on men by leaving her partner and her child.¹¹⁴ Despite appearances Wilde's "Good Woman" is represented by Mrs Erlynne. She rejects the typical Victorian female roles of wife and mother, and empowers an alternative and more modern model for women; her unconventional stance marks her out as a possible "New Woman". Her modern quest for individualism and gender equality is displayed by leaving her husband and child.¹¹⁵ Although she does not assert her independence quite like Mrs Erlynne, Lady Windermere does display her independence by travelling unaccompanied to Darlington's home, and in being tempted to leave her husband for him.

MRS ERLYNNE. [...] The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! and

how bitterly I have been punished for it [...] I may have wrecked my own life, but I will

¹¹⁴ In the first manuscript version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* Mrs Erlynne is a much more conventional character than Wilde's final version of her. The Duchess of Berwick comments that the earlier Mrs Erlynne is "really quite wicked", and Lady Windermere's description of her suggests that Wilde created her originally as a more conventionally recognizable harlot: "That vile painted woman whose very sight a degradation, whose touch an infamy" (MS 37943 Act I: 10-12 and II: 47). In the final version Wilde's introduction of Mrs Erlynne as "very beautifully dressed and very dignified" constructs her as unrecognizable character that prioritises individualism over motherhood, and would not be punished for this decision (*The Collins Complete Works* 436). Eltis notes that: "The first Mrs. Erlynne is an altogether weaker and more conventional character" (*Revising Wilde* 76).

¹¹⁵ Wilde notes: "If there is one particular doctrine contained in [*Lady Windermere's Fan*] it is that of sheer individualism" (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 347-8).

not let you wreck yours [...] Go back, Lady Windermere, to the husband who loves you, whom you love. You have a child, Lady Windermere. Go back to that child [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 443 & 448).

According to Scolnicov's division of gendered spaces, Mrs Erlynne chose to occupy a male public space by leaving her husband and child, but she does not wish her daughter to do the same. The choice Mrs Erlynne made challenges the depiction of the selfless Victorian mother who prioritises her child over her own welfare and individual needs examined in the Introduction. By contrast, in *A Woman of No Importance*, as a single mother to Gerald, Mrs Arbuthnot challenges society's treatment of her for looking after her child, but choosing to remain unmarried. Unlike Lady Windermere, whose marriage to Windermere in the end restricts her to the domestic sphere, Mrs Erlynne's freedom in being unmarried means that she is less confined to any particular gendered landscape. Her uninhibited movement between scenes in the play reflects her abandonment of responsibility to her child and partner and her new found freedom.¹¹⁶ Mrs Erlynne's past choices reflect the Victorian anxiety regarding the "New Woman", who supposedly abandoned all desire and responsibility in order to pursue her own individuality. However, Wilde creates a character in Mrs Erlynne that challenges the Victorian construct of the "New Woman" by empowering her with intellect, reason and beauty. Wilde reinforces Mrs Erlynne with a superior intellect, wit and awareness. Typically the fallen woman or "New Woman" should be appropriately punished at the end of the play, but Mrs Erlynne is not.¹¹⁷ Cave notes:

¹¹⁶ Mrs Erlynne pervades the Windermere's home without shame despite Lady Windermere's cold reception of her: "Lady Windermere bows coldly, and goes off with Lord Darlington" (*Collins Complete Works* 436). Mrs. Erlynne subsequently follows Lady Windermere to Lord Darlington's rooms and finally returns to the Windermere's house.

¹¹⁷ Powell also notes that despite the conventional dramatic decision to punish the mother, who abandoned her child, Mrs Erlynne is not punished by Wilde and she does not regret her decision to move on. "The stirrings of latent maternal feeling which the women in these plays experience are not enough to redeem their error. They may succeed in getting a glimpse of the abandoned child, may even make their motherhood known, but cannot elude the severe punishment – often death or banishment – which suits their crime [...] To these scourged women, however, Mrs. Erlynne at the end of *Lady Windermere's Fan* bears little resemblance, she too has known belated maternal feeling, but unlike the others she scorns remorse, telling Windermere that 'repentance is quite out of date'. It costs her some anguish to part with her daughter for the second time, but she does so to spare Lady Windermere's motherly ideal and to spare herself the performance of an awkward and painful role" (20).

Wilde's dramatic technique has invested her as outsider with far greater depth, moral stature, presence, intelligence and personal dignity than any other character on stage. He manipulates theatrical styles and dramatic conventions with considerable expertise to represent how she assumes at will her range of personae. Within the format of contemporary Victorian drama Wilde has found the means of showing how outdated its devices of representation are where the staging of modern life is concerned (Raby 228).¹¹⁸

Mrs Erlynne's self-awareness and acceptance of reality portrays her as a stable and rational character, almost justifying her quest for freedom from the responsibilities of motherhood.¹¹⁹

Mrs Erlynne's individual needs are shown to be disregarded by a society that proves outdated for such modern individuals. Powell claims that the theme of estranged mothers was a popular one in Victorian plays.

In some plays the estranged mother and daughter were about equally prominent, as in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and two French plays of the 1880s which Wilde probably knew – Victorien Sardou's *Odette*, adapted into English at the Haymarket in 1882 and again at the Princess's in 1894, and Jules Lemaitre's *Revoltee* [...] A usual wrinkle in these dramas, long before *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was for the daughter to desert her own family as her mother had abandoned hers. Such assaults upon the most fundamental ideals of family and social order are shown in nearly all these plays to be a tragic mistake (18).

¹¹⁸ Eltis also notes Wilde's unusual characterisation of Mrs. Erlynne: "Mrs. Erlynne is the only character with complete knowledge, and, beyond that, complete understanding. The fallen woman has a wit and a wisdom which surpass that of the protective male and innocent female. Lord Windermere must not know of his wife's weakness, or his love for her may die. Lady Windermere must not know of her mother's true identity, or her belief in truth and virtue may die. Mrs. Erlynne alone has the breadth and strength of mind to know and accept all. Wilde thus reverses the traditional hierarchy of the fallen-woman play, challenging the moral values and social conventions on which it is based" (*Revising Wilde* 58).

¹¹⁹ Eltis notes that Wilde contested the extreme idealisation of motherhood in Victorian society, which implies a belief in alternative roles for women: "when the poised, generous, and self-possessed Mrs. Erlynne of the final version rejects the role of mother, however, her actions question the traditional estimation of motherhood as the highest condition that woman could inspire to" (*Revising Wilde* 77).

Powell notes that the decision to abandon the family in these plays was typically marked out as a tragic decision by the characters involved, however in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs Erlynne's decision to get married signifies a willingness to move forward, rather than dwell on the present. In contrast to Mrs Erlynne, the Windermere's ignorance and hypocrisy, which are based on superficial idealisations of wives and mothers, evoke the absurdity of such morals which undermine truth and freedom. Wilde emphasizes the absurd conception of the "New Woman" in Victorian society by creating a more reasonable, rational perception of Mrs Erlynne. The Windermere's marriage survives on the basis of maintaining unrealistic ideals, and Lady Windermere unknowingly sacrifices a potentially life-changing relationship with her mother in order to protect her ideals.

When Wilde was sick during the rehearsal process of *Lady Windermere's Fan* he was confined to bed for two days, and in a letter to George Alexander, he expressed the pivotal position of Mrs Erlynne in the play.¹²⁰ His insistence that she was to be positioned centre stage implies her dominance of the stage space; an unconventional dominance for a female character: "[...] Lady Windermere *may* be in her drawing-room in the fourth act. *She should not be in her husband's library*. This is a very important point. [...] The use of the second act, instead of the first, enables us to give Mrs Erlynne a very much better position on the stage. [...] Mrs Erlynne should hold the centre of the stage, and be its central figure" (Holland, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 146-7). Mrs Erlynne's physical dominance onstage reflects her role as a modern woman, having moved beyond the private sphere and having left her husband and child. Wilde's specification that Lady Windermere "*should not be in her husband's library*" in Act Four also portrays the playwright's awareness of the signification of gender spaces on the stage. Having transgressed the private sphere, Wilde's reference to a good woman is ironic in the context of the play, and emphasizes the absurdity of unrealistic and idealised modes of femininity. Mrs

¹²⁰ Raby asserts that: "Wilde's comments revealed a sharp understanding of stage dynamics in creative tension with his social awareness. He demanded a central position for Mrs Erlynne in the last act" (145).

Erlynne left Lady Windermere as a baby, but she sacrifices her reputation and her relationship with her daughter to preserve her daughters' ideals. The play concludes with the following scene in which Mrs Erlynne is referred to as "a good woman":

LORD AUGUSTUS. [...] Mrs. Erlynne has done me the honour of accepting my hand.

LORD WINDERMERE. Well, you are certainly marrying a very clever woman!

LADY WINDERMERE. [...] you're marrying a very good woman! (*Collins Complete Works* 464).

After Mrs Erlynne abandoned Lady Windermere as a child, her unexpected sacrifice for her daughter depicts a more complex female character, suggesting that the "New Woman" was an unrealistic depiction of women. Although Mrs Erlynne's role as Lady Windermere's mother is concealed from her daughter, Mrs Erlynne's sacrifice in the play is juxtaposed with Lady Windermere's absent father. The patriarch is displaced from the play; a method which contests the Victorian idealisation of the father figure. The absence of the patriarch is evident in many of Wilde's plays; for example Lord Bracknell never appears in *Earnest*, and Lord Illingworth refuses to take responsibility of his role as Gerald Illingworth's father in *A Woman*. Wilde's male characters challenge the idealisation of Victorian men and instead empower alternative female characters. According to Habermas's assertion which was previously mentioned, in leaving her husband and abandoning the private sphere, Mrs Erlynne and Lady Windermere undermine their partner's status in the public sphere. The female voice of the matriarch is prioritised over the patriarchal voice in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Mrs Erlynne's sacrifice for Lady Windermere implies a desire to be there for her daughter. Mrs Erlynne claims her daughter as her own, and empowers a female matriarchal lineage: "For my daughter's ball – yes... my daughter, you mean" (*Collins Complete Works* 458). Lady Windermere also claims a matriarchal lineage over a patriarchal lineage.

MRS ERLYNNE. [...] And so that is your little boy! What is he called?

LADY WINDERMERE. Gerard, after my dear father... If it had been a girl, I would have called it after my mother. My mother had the same name as myself, Margaret.

MRS ERLYNNE. My name is Margaret too (*Collins Complete Works* 461).

The name Margaret evokes the historical lineage of Mrs Erlynne's and Lady Windermere's family in an exclusively female framework. Wilde's introduction of an exclusively female framework suggests a need to contest the English law which favoured male inheritance until 1925.¹²¹

Mrs Erlynne sacrifices her reputation and a relationship with her daughter to save her daughter's reputation and preserve her ideals. She refuses to play the role of mother to Lady Windermere. In the past Mrs Erlynne prioritised herself and her lover over her husband and her daughter. As Eltis notes *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a play which challenges the status quo, and asserts a belief in individualism. This individualism is reflected by the modern decisions that some of the characters in the play make:

Individualism is the true doctrine of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a doctrine subtly disguised by the surface melodrama of this work. Thus, Mrs. Erlynne rejects the maternal role, preferring her freedom to the restrictive duties of a mother. She is not expelled at the end of the play as a dangerously corrupting influence, but turns her back on the narrow-minded and hypocritical confines of society, having won for herself a potentially happy marriage – the one prize conventionally denied to the fallen woman (*Revising Wilde* 58).

Mrs Erlynne: "turns her back on the narrow-minded and hypocritical confines of society", but despite her controversial rejection of motherhood for freedom, her forthcoming marriage suggests a desire to be re-accepted into this society. Her rejection of her expected roles and her wish to marry Lord Augustus, portray the paradoxical and complicated nature of life. By not revealing the truth to Lady Windermere, Mrs Erlynne continues to refuse to play the role of mother. Windermere idealises the role of the mother according to the male patriarchal expectations of women in Victorian society. His expectations mirror the construction of ideal female characteristics:

¹²¹ The Women's Property Act is detailed in Chapter One.

LORD WINDERMERE. [...] You left her, abandoned her when she was but a child in the cradle, abandoned her for your lover, who abandoned you in turn...

MRS ERLYNNE. [...] I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother's feelings. That was last night. They were terrible – they made me suffer... For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless – I want to live childless still... No, as far as I am concerned, let your wife cherish the memories of this dead, stainless mother [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 458-60).

Wilde's stage directions indicate that Mrs Erlynne's accents emit: "*a deep note of tragedy*", and that she "*reveals herself*" momentarily (*Collins Complete Works* 459). This insight into the more sensitive side of her personality adds another dimension to her character, which suggests that she is more complex than she first appeared. This is an indication that the concept of the "New Woman" cannot be relied upon as a framework for women in Victorian society. Wilde's stage directions also imply the possibility that Mrs Erlynne may regret the fact that she has no relationship with her daughter, but her statement that she has "no ambition to play the part of a mother" questions her assumed maternal instincts. The mention of her mother as "stainless" evokes the construction of women as moral leaders in society, an idea which can be connected to the portrayal of ideal characteristics of femininity in *The Routledge Manual of Etiquette* (1875). Having sacrificed her reputation to save Lady Windermere's honour and marriage at Darlington's house, Mrs Erlynne demonstrates her love of Lady Windermere according to Windermere's belief that a mother's love: "means devotion, unselfishness, sacrifice [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 460). Gender roles and expectations must change before Mrs Erlynne will play the part of the devoted mother. The following extract depicts Mrs Erlynne's humiliation to save her daughter.

CECIL GRAHAM. Darlington has got a woman here in his rooms. Here is her fan.

Amusing, isn't it? (*A pause*).

LORD WINDERMERE. What is my wife's fan doing here in your rooms... I demand an explanation [...] What moves behind that curtain? (*Rushes forward towards the curtain C*).

MRS ERLYNNE. (*enters behind R*): Lord Windermere...

Every one starts and turns around. Lady Windermere slips out from behind the curtain and glides from the room L (Collins Complete Works 453-4).

If Mrs Erlynne had not concocted this plan then Lady Windermere's husband would have believed that she was having an affair with Darlington, and this scandal would have been exposed to society. In saving Lady Windermere from humiliation and possible isolation from society, Mrs Erlynne displays a maternal desire to protect her daughter's honour. Powell notes Mrs Erlynne's sacrifice for her daughter, one which her son-in-law is unaware of: "There is a measure of self-sacrifice in her behavior, of which the son-in-law is unaware, and her plans to walk out on her daughter's life a second time are motivated by a concern for Lady Windermere as well as for herself" (25). In protecting Lady Windermere's honour, Mrs Erlynne adopts the male role of protecting her daughter. In taking the letter that Lady Windermere sent Darlington Mrs Erlynne goes to further lengths to reunite her daughter with Windermere. The pressure of unrealistic Victorian expectations and ideals prevents Mrs Erlynne from revealing herself to her daughter. She sacrifices a relationship with her daughter for an ideal, an ideal which she cannot possibly live up to. Lady Windermere honours a miniature portrait of her deceased mother. Wilde exposed the absurdity of such Victorian conventions by sacrificing Lady Windermere and Mrs Erlynne's mother-daughter relationship in the play. Far from being a social comedy as many contemporary Wildean scholars argue it is, there are many tragic elements evident in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. All of Wilde's characters struggle to survive in an oppressive patriarchal society which demands certain roles and expectations from them. In an alternative society Lady Windermere would have had a relationship with her mother, but society's rigid values prevent the possibility of a relationship without public shame.

MRS ERLYNNE. [...] You are devoted to your mother's memory, Lady Windermere...

LADY WINDERMERE. We all have ideals in life... Mine is my mother.

MRS ERLYNNE. Ideals are dangerous things. Realities are better...

LADY WINDERMERE. (*shaking her head*): If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything
(*Collins Complete Works* 459 & 461).

Perhaps the sacrifice of this relationship represents the significant cost of living up to the narrow expectations of Victoria society. Peckham claims that Lady Windermere's determination to maintain an ideal, rather than to face a reality, depicts her unwillingness to change: "Lady Windermere is not permitted to learn the truth because she hasn't earned the right to the truth. Her ideals are still the same. [...] She has learned nothing. Freedom is not for her. [...] Through his ironic and subtle analysis of a particular kind of personality Wilde attacks the inadequacy of the traditional categories of good and evil" (13). Mrs Erlynne's preservation of her daughter's ideals; a decision which ensures that Lady Windermere avoids shame at the cost of a relationship with her, is the real sacrifice she makes for her daughter.¹²²

Mrs Erlynne's decision not to tell her daughter the truth portrays her as a hero and an anti-hero; she simultaneously protects her daughter from shame, but gives up a relationship with her. The conclusion of the play is characterised by Lady Windermere's return to her husband and the private sphere, a move which is primarily motivated by Mrs Erlynne. Mrs Erlynne and Lady Windermere move beyond the domestic world and enter into public life. Their journey (which is unaccompanied and separate) to Darlington's house, indicates this move outside the private sphere. It is the outsider Mrs Erlynne who is the hero of the play, and she restores order by saving the Windermeres' marriage. By reinstating the power of the marital institution, Mrs Erlynne also becomes a kind of anti-hero to the cause for female equality. Although the events in her past indicate her enthusiasm for women's rights and independence, her flippant decision to marry at the end of the play signifies a desire to be re-

¹²² Peckham reflects on Mrs Erlynne's character: "She is good not because she saves her daughter from making her own mistakes but rather because she spares her daughter from facing the realities which would destroy her" (13).

accepted into the society she once rejected and that rejected her. Marriage could be perceived as the only way to re-gain wealth and status, and as a “New Woman” perhaps Wilde wished to depict the absurdity of the belief that they posed a threat to marriage. Ledger claims that: “[...] one of the defining features of the dominant discourse on the New Woman at the *fin de siècle* was the supposition that the New Woman posed a threat to the institution of marriage” (11). If this is the case then Mrs Erlynne’s need to re-marry so that she does not threaten marriage is denoted as ridiculous. As noted the perception of the “New Woman” varied hugely, but was often thought of as sexually liberal or loose. Wilde’s decision to have Mrs Erlynne marry undermines this belief, but also re-inscribes the narrow framework of marriage in Victorian society.¹²³ Mrs Erlynne’s role in saving the Windermere’s marriage makes her an invaluable character in the play. She pleads desperately with Lady Windermere to return to family life.

Mrs Erlynne: [...] What object do you think I have in coming here, except to save you from utter ruin, to save you from the consequence of a hideous mistake? That letter that was burnt now was your letter. I swear it to you... Think as you like about me – say what you choose against me, but go back, go back to the husband you love (*Collins Complete Works* 446).

Unbeknownst to Windermere, Lady Windermere decides to return to her husband on the basis of Mrs Erlynne’s advice. The particularly female influence over Lady Windermere implies the power that women could potentially have in the public sphere. Mrs Erlynne’s request also signifies the oppression of Victorian women by other women who opposed the quest for equality. After much procrastination Mrs Erlynne decides not to destroy Lady Windermere’s idealisation of her mother, and she conceals her identity about who she is. Rather than contesting these unrealistic ideals the characters reinforce them. Despite their best intentions they remain locked into a world of double standards. The physical activity and independence of the female characters in the play can be juxtaposed with the passivity of the male characters. It

¹²³ Ledger suggests the view of the “New Woman” as sexually promiscuous: “It was the putative association between the New Woman and ‘free love’ that led to the labelling of her as a sexual decadent” (12).

is Mrs Erlynne who takes action to save the Windermere's marriage; many of the significant decisions in the play are implemented by Wilde's female characters. Lady Bracknell's pivotal role in match-making the characters in *Earnest* also supports this proposition, as well as Mrs Arbuthnot's invaluable influence over her son Gerald Arbuthnot in *A Woman*.

Wilde's emphasis on mother-daughter relationships is evident in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Salome* and *Earnest*. The Duchess of Berwick and her daughter, Lady Agatha, can be compared to Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen, in *Earnest*. Unlike Gwendolen who is assertive, Lady Agatha's silent and submissive role suggests that she exemplifies the ideal subservient Victorian woman. Lady Agatha's only words throughout the play are: "yes, mamma" (*Collins Complete Works* 426). Her passivity and her obedience to her mother alienate her from the progressive female characters in the play. Instead of being submissive to a male patriarchal power though, Agatha is dominated by her mother; an alternative matriarchal power. The Duchess represents a more outspoken and modern form of femininity, and Lady Agatha captures the more traditional conception of Victorian femininity. Lady Agatha is constructed through her mother's matriarchal gaze. Like Lady Bracknell's affinity for matchmaking in *Earnest*, the Duchess ensures her daughter's match with Mr Hopper. The Duchess's dominant tone is evident in Act Two of the play when she does not invite, but orders Mr Hopper to come to lunch the following day. Duchess of Berwick: "[...] James, you can take Agatha down. You'll come to lunch of course, James. At half-past one, instead of two" (*Collins Complete Works* 441). The Duchess manipulates men for social status and financial gain in the play; an alternative to the manipulation and exchange of women in marriage. Mrs Erlynne also manipulates men for money in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. She takes advantage of Windermere's financial support, he helps her pay for a house in Mayfair and she expects him to provide her with a generous dowry, so that she can marry Lord Augustus. Although it is Windermere who can provide her with financial support, it is Lady Windermere's decision whether or not to accept Mrs Erlynne into

society. Mrs Erlynne continues to manipulate Windermere's finances and she utilizes her influence over Lord Augustus, who patiently awaits her response to his marriage proposals:

MRS ERLYNNE. [...] To-morrow I am going to accept him... what shall I say? - £2000 a year left to me by a third cousin [...]

LORD AUGUSTUS. [...] Dear Lady, I am in such suspense! May I not have an answer to my request?

MRS ERLYNNE. Lord Augustus, listen to me. You are to take Lord Windermere down to your club at once, and keep him there as long as possible (*Collins Complete Works* 442-444).

Mrs Erlynne indicates her power over Windermere by suggesting a specific figure for her dowry. By not answering Lord Augustus's marital proposal Mrs Erlynne contests the power of patriarchy. She will dictate the time and terms of her marriage to Lord Augustus and he accepts this without question. Mrs Erlynne's quest for power over Lord Augustus suggests that she will contest the traditional gender framework of marriage. Her departure from the stage, with the promised hope of wealth and status, complicates the morality in Wilde's play. Powell observes that:

Mrs. Erlynne thus passes from the stage with wealth and a title before her instead of seeking out a convent or house of refuge. Her career has so disturbed the familiar balance of right and wrong that the last line of the play pronounces her 'a good woman'. But it is spoken by Lady Windermere, whose estimate of Mrs. Erlynne as 'good' is only marginally more informed than her earlier opinion that she was 'bad'. Actually Mrs. Erlynne is worse than she imagines now, just as she was better than she imagined then (26).

Lady Windermere's false judgments about Mrs Erlynne reflect Wilde's need to contest moral assumptions and idealisations of people in society. Wilde's modern female characters dispute the more common idealisation of the Victorian patriarch. Windermere's unconventional relationship with Mrs Erlynne and his idealisation of her makes their relationship seem

suspicious. Lord Windermere: “[...] Mrs Erlynne was once honoured, loved, respected. She was well born, she had position – she lost everything – threw it away, if you like... But to suffer for one’s own faults – ah! There is the sting of life... She was little more than a girl then. She had been a wife for even less time than you have” (*Collins Complete Works* 429). Windermere’s reflection on Mrs Erlynne’s unfortunate past challenges the rigid social structures in Victorian society. Windermere’s notion of an ideal woman is exemplified by Mrs Erlynne: “She was well born, she had position” (*Collins Complete Works* 429). The reference Windermere makes to Lady Windermere’s being a “good woman” ties her to her mother (*Collins Complete Works* 429-30). In connecting Lady Windermere to her mother Wilde complicated the temptation to label these characters as definitively good or bad; suggesting that people were too complex to be categorised. The opening image of an ideal Victorian woman can be juxtaposed with Lady Windermere’s movement away from the private sphere. This image of Lady Windermere in the domestic sphere is indicative of her traditional female role in marriage. The rose, a signifier of tradition, love and passion, and a patriotic symbol of the English nation, highlights her development in the play; from the ideal Victorian wife to a more independent woman who in Act Three, is on the brink of leaving her husband and child.

When Lady Windermere is on the brink of leaving her husband and child, she temporarily rejects the traditional roles and responsibilities of being a wife and mother. Lady Windermere’s movement beyond the domestic sphere suggests that she will relish the freedom from domestic constraint. This is a quest that is ultimately abandoned, so that she can return to her family and the private sphere at the end of the play. In Scolnicov’s gender framework she proposes that the position of the ideal woman in the domestic sphere symbolises her heterosexual commitment to her husband. If the house represents a woman’s body and her sexuality, then the exclusively male ownership and inheritance of property, dictate that men are the owners of the female body in the domestic sphere. Scolnicov identifies the public sphere as the external male world, whereas the domestic or the internal sphere is typically recognised as

the female world.¹²⁴ The progression of Wilde's female characters beyond the domestic world and into the male public world challenges the gender structure of Victorian society. Lady Windermere's intention to leave her husband, although she does not follow through permanently with this decision, portrays her ambition to fight for gender equality in marriage. With the supposed death of her mother Lady Windermere's aunt, Lady Julia, plays the role of the female matriarchal figure in the play, replacing the absent patriarch as head of the household. In this framework it is the matriarch who is empowered as the head of the family unit, seeing as a partner or husband of Lady Julia's is not mentioned. As the play develops, Wilde's characters gradually step out of their traditionally ascribed gender spaces, many of whom eventually return to their traditional roles at the end of the play. The settings of each act capture the powerlessness of women according to Victorian law and marriage. Act One and the final act of the play portray the male inheritance and ownership of property; although they are married the Windermere's property is recognised as Lord Windermere's: "Scene: *Morning-room of Lord Windermere's house in Carlton House Terrace, London*" (Collins Complete Works 420). The play opens and concludes with this setting into which Lady Windermere returns, emphasizing the dominance and control that men have over women in the domestic space as well as the public sphere, as Caine notes. However, in proposing to run away with Darlington Lady Windermere disputes the assumed gender roles and gender spaces in society.

LADY WINDERMERE. [...] To-night a man who loves me offered me his whole life. I refused it. It was foolish of me. I will offer him mine now... I will go to him [...] Arthur has never understood me [...] It is he who has broken the bond of marriage – not I. I only break its bondage [...]

PARKER. Her ladyship has just gone out.

MRS ERLYNNE. Gone out? She's not on the terrace?

¹²⁴ A historical analysis of the segregation of the public and the private sphere according to gender roles is examined in the Introduction. Although Scolnicov argues that the private sphere could traditionally be recognised as a female space I would argue, as Barbara Caine claims, that the private sphere was a male and female space as it was the sphere for reproduction, etc. As Habermas also notes, a man's status in the public sphere was dependent upon their dominance in the private sphere.

PARKER. No madam. Her ladyship has just gone out of the house (*Collins Complete Works* 442-3).

The movement of Lady Windermere from inside the home to the external world or the world “out[side] of the house”, symbolizes the alternative opportunities available to upper class Victorian women; possibilities that are not solely based on their domestic roles as wife and mother (*Collins Complete Works* 443). Scolnicov visualizes the private and the public sphere according to gender: “Gender roles are spatially defined in relation to the inside and outside of the house. Traditionally it is the woman who makes the house into a home, while the world of commerce, war, travel, the world outside, is a man’s world” (6). According to this framework, Lady Windermere’s decision to leave the domestic sphere and her married life signifies a challenge to the accepted gender norms and roles in society. Lady Windermere’s flippant decision to leave Windermere without communicating with him, or demanding an explanation from him, portrays their marriage as superficial. In claiming that “Arthur has never understood me”, Lady Windermere proposes (despite the fact that they are married), that she and Windermere do not know each other well (*Collins Complete Works* 442). This assertion undermines the framework of marriage, as it implies that heterosexual couples such as the Windermers sometimes enter into marriage as a transaction of convenience and acceptance into Victorian society. The emphasis of the language in this scene is on internal and external physical spaces: “the ballroom”, “the terrace” and the “out[side] of the house”, characterize the territorial gender struggle associated with various gendered roles and spaces in the play and in Victorian society (*Collins Complete Works* 442-3). Lady Windermere’s decision to leave Windermere mirrors her belief in a woman’s right to leave her husband if he does not remain faithful to her. When Lady Windermere leaves him, Windermere’s position in the domestic sphere and Lady Windermere’s movement into the public world usurps Scolnicov’s claim that the public sphere is traditionally recognised as the man’s world, and the private sphere is typically the female world. Wilde’s dramatic world can often be characterized by the easy and adept movement of female characters between the private and public spheres. Despite this

unconventional freedom the male characters maintain ownership of property, and therefore their financial security and independence is sustained, reflecting the reality of the Victorian world. Lady Bracknell also displays this kind of freedom in *Earnest*; she travels between various houses and public spaces, while her husband remains in the private sphere.

Lady Windermere's willingness to elope with Darlington even though she does not love him, (and she says she married her husband for love), reflects the oppressive patriarchal framework for Victorian women. She never considers a life on her own, but realises that she must use men as a medium to enter (or re-enter in her case if she divorced Windermere) respectable society. Lady Windermere: "Arthur must have read my letter by this time. If he cared for me he would have come after me, would have taken me back by force [...] We make gods of men and they leave us [...] Lord Darlington leaves England tomorrow. I will go with him – I have no choice" (*Collins Complete Works* 444-45). The Windermere's relationship functions as a signifier that the idealisation of one conventional framework is unrealistic. Lady Windermere's expectation that her husband would have taken her back to the domestic sphere by force if he cared for her, indicates the power of men in marriage. It also conveys the responsibility that Victorian women had to face in challenging this inequality between men and women. Lady Windermere's premature judgment of Mrs Erlynne reveals that people are too complex to be categorized as definitively good or bad, and her outlook becomes more realistic when she realizes Mrs Erlynne's sacrifice for her. Perhaps the movement of Lady Windermere into the public sphere, and then back into the private sphere, mirrors Caine's proposal that the domestic sphere is not exclusively a female space but a male and female space. Windermere's dominance in the private sphere is displayed by his inviting Mrs Erlynne to attend Lady Windermere's birthday. If the domestic sphere is not recognized as an exclusively female space, then Lady Windermere can be considered as a character that is alienated from both the public and private spheres. Her isolation from both spheres mirrors the precarious position of many Victorian women. Despite this isolation, her movement from the domestic to the public sphere

indicates her adaptability and independence, while also suggesting a need to re-negotiate gender roles. By re-inventing his character's typical association with gender many of Wilde's characters challenge the Victorian conception of gender by exploring new territory.

In a letter to George Alexander, the director of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in February 1892, Wilde expressed his concern over some changes to the play. This letter depicted his intense involvement in the rehearsal process, and his awareness of the gender spaces on the Victorian stage:

Dear Aleck, I heard by chance in the theatre today – after you had left the stage – that you intended using the first scene a second time – in the last act. [...] My object, however, in writing is not to reproach you in any way – reproaches being useless things – but to point this out. If through pressure of time, or for reasons of economy, you are unable to give the play its full scenic mounting, the scene that has to be repeated should be *the second, not the first*. Lady Windermere *may* be in her drawing-room in the fourth act. *She should not be in her husband's library*. This is a very important point. [...] The use of the second act, instead of the first, enables us to give Mrs Erlynne a very much better position on the stage. [...] (Holland, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 146-7).

The request that Lady Windermere remain in her drawing-room, but not in her husband's library, dictates the segregation of gender spaces on the stage and in society. Wilde's input into the rehearsal process of *Lady Windermere's Fan* influenced the shape that the final play would take in performance. *Lady Windermere's Fan* characterizes a territorial struggle of gendered spaces, in which the female characters dislocate the male characters and assume the powerful roles in society. Lady Windermere's decision to leave Windermere and later to return to him, are decisions she makes without consulting him. Mrs Erlynne decides Lord Augustus' future when she finally accepts his marriage proposal. Her relationship with Lord Augustus can be considered an example of this gender reconstruction, as well as the Duchess of Berwick's dominance over her absent husband, Berwick. The Duchess's references to her husband as

Berwick, undermines his title as Duke. There is only one reference to the Duke in the play in comparison to the numerous references to Berwick which are sanctioned by the Duchess. By frequently denying the Duke his title the Duchess insinuates that he married up into her social class. The female characters often influence the physical movement of the male characters onstage in *Lady Windermere's Fan*; the stage space becomes a kind of matriarchal landscape.¹²⁵ Mrs Erlynne's treatment of Lord Augustus can be considered an indicator that when they do marry, she will maintain the power in their marriage. She is condescending and patronising, but he accepts her as the dominating party in their relationship.

MRS ERLYNNE. Lord Augustus, listen to me. You are to take Lord Windermere down to your club at once, and keep him there as long as possible. You understand?

LORD AUGUSTUS. But you said you wished me to keep early hours!

MRS ERLYNNE. (*nervously*) Do what I tell you [...] Your reward? Oh, ask me that tomorrow [...]

LORD AUGUSTUS. Well, really, I might be her husband already. Positively I might.

(*Follows her in a bewildered manner.*) (*Collins Complete Works 444*).

Mrs Erlynne threatens that she will sever all ties with Lord Augustus if he does not obey her orders. His humorous reflection that he may as well already be her husband captures the power of Wilde's female characters in this marriage. The final image of Lord Augustus following Mrs Erlynne exemplifies his subservience to her, as well as depicting the new position of women as leaders in Wilde's alternative gender framework. Within the framework of Victorian marriage women are typically perceived as an object of exchange between men. Wilde's female characters contest this patriarchal bargain of women. As Butler proposes, being essentially an object of exchange, the bride does not have an identity, but in the Victorian context she signifies the importance and dominance of masculine identities, as distinct from female identities. By allowing his female characters to dominate his male characters evidenced by Mrs Erlynne and Lord Augustus's relationship, Wilde's framework refuted this male dominance in marriage.

¹²⁵ This depends on a director and creative team's approach to the staging of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

When Lady Windermere decides to leave her husband for Darlington in Act Two she evokes the restrictive role of the Victorian wife in marriage. Lady Windermere was expected to remain in the domestic sphere and prepare for her husband's return from public life. The *Routledge Manual of Etiquette* (1875) notes how wives are expected to remain in the private sphere, and to dote upon their husbands when they return from the harsh external world. As a man Windermere was granted more freedom to participate in the public sphere, whereas if Lady Windermere had left her husband she would have been ostracized from society. Despite this reality in the Victorian world Wilde provides an alternative opportunity for the movement of his female characters beyond the domestic sphere. In moving beyond the domestic sphere, however temporarily, Lady Windermere challenges the female confinement to the home, and the responsibility to create a calm and loving atmosphere in the home: "He may do as he chooses now with his life. I have done with mine as I think best, as I think right. It is he who has broken the bond of marriage – not I! I only break its bondage" (*Collins Complete Works* 443). In noting the bondage of marriage Lady Windermere evokes the gender inequality in Victorian marriage. Habermas notes how the law favoured male inheritance and male control over the family unit in marriage.

At any rate, the independence of the property owner in the market and in his own business was complemented by the dependence of the wife and children on the male head of the family; private autonomy in the former realm was transformed into authority in the latter and made any pretended freedom of individuals illusory. Even the contractual form of marriage, imputing the autonomous declaration of will on behalf of both partners, was largely a fiction, especially since a marriage, to the extent that the family owned capital, could not remain unaffected by considerations regarding the latter's preservation and augmentation. [...] the conflict between marriage for love and marriage for reason, that is, for economic and social considerations (47).

Habermas denotes the compulsory dependence of women on men. When Mrs Erlynne discovers Lady Windermere's letter to her husband, which explains her departure from the house, Mrs

Erlynnne admits that she left her husband and Lady Windermere twenty years ago. According to the *Routledge Manual of Etiquette* (1875), Mrs Erlynnne also challenges the expectation that she should remain at home and prioritize her husband's needs over her own. Mrs Erlynnne's language depicts the movement of her daughter beyond the private sphere. Mrs Erlynnne: "Gone out? She's not on the terrace? [...] Out of the house? [...] Gone out of her house! A letter addressed to her husband [...] No, no! It would be impossible [...] The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! and how bitterly I have been punished for it!" (*Collins Complete Works* 443). Mrs Erlynnne transgresses the confinements of the domestic world in search of an alternative life, and her daughter seeks the same autonomy. By asserting herself independently outside of the roles of wife and mother and outside of the home, Mrs Erlynnne is empowered. Like Berwick, Mrs Erlynnne's unnamed husband is disempowered in the play. By leaving her husband she enters the public domain, and rejects the conventional notion of the Victorian wife. By referring to her husband as "father" his identity becomes circumscribed by the role of fatherhood; this challenges the expected role of women as the primary carer or mother. The fact that Mrs Erlynnne has not returned to her husband implies that she does not regret her decision to leave him. Rather, Mrs Erlynnne seems to regret her isolation from society, and the fact that she has no relationship with her daughter. By marrying Lord Augustus Mrs Erlynnne can be re-accepted into society. In conventional Victorian plays the fallen women would not have had the opportunity to re-enter society. Eltis claims that: "For a fallen woman to marry and thereby re-enter society was unthinkable" (*Revising Wilde* 79). Mrs Erlynnne's decision to continue deceiving her daughter also denotes a belief that the shame and scandal which would emerge, after being exposed as Lady Windermere's mother, would not be worth a relationship with her daughter.

The Duke and Duchess of Berwick's marriage is satirized in the play, and the Duchess provides some unconventional views on marriage. The Duchess of Berwick is an unconventionally strong and independent female character who permeates the private and the

public spheres in the play. The Duchess casually evokes the infidelity of her husband, subverting the normative idealisation of the Victorian patriarch. Her more practical and realistic attitude to marriage, diminishes the elevated importance of marriage and the family unit in Victorian England. Duchess of Berwick: “[...] before the year was out, he was running after all kinds of petticoats, every colour, every shape, every material. In fact, before the honeymoon was over, I caught him winking at my maid, a most pretty, respectable girl... Now I know that all men are monsters” (*Collins Complete Works* 427). The Duchess portrays men as silly, flirtatious and desperate in the play. She dominates her daughter, Lady Agatha and arranges her match in marriage. The Duchess’s dominance onstage and her power over her husband reflect her unusual female character, while her husband’s absence onstage and weak mental state, undermine traditionally masculine attributes. In a letter to George Alexander in February 1892, Wilde noted the dominance of the Duchess in the play: “Every word of a comedy dialogue should reach the ears of the audience. This applies specially to the Duchess, who should be larger in assertion” (Holland, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 148). The Duchess represents a satirization of the ideal Victorian man onstage, and her husband, who does not appear, represents the ideal Victorian woman. The Duchess informs Lady Windermere about her husband’s behaviour, and her references to money denote the influence of wealth on social status and marriage. She disapproves of Windermere’s relationship with Mrs Erlynne, and her loyalty to Lady Windermere implies a belief that she should be treated fairly by her husband.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK. [...] I have been told that this woman has got a great deal of money out of somebody, for it seems she came to London six months ago without anything at all to speak of, and now she has this charming house in Mayfair [...] and all – well, all – since she had known poor dear Windermere... That is why I felt it better to come and talk to you, and advise you to take Windermere away [...] where he’ll have something to amuse him, and where you can watch him all day long (*Collins Complete Works* 427).

The Duchess advises Lady Windermere to take control of the situation, and to remove her husband from London, as she once did with Berwick. The Duchess's language constructs a childlike image of "poor dear Windermere", who needs to be distracted from this woman by being taken abroad by his wife. The patriarch is perceived as passive, incompetent and subservient in this context. The female character takes on the more traditional male role of the protector in watching over her husband in the male public space. The female characters portray a need to occupy this male sphere. Lord Augustus and Cecil Graham's satirization of Victorian marriage in Act One undermines the sanctity of marriage. Far from recognising marriage as a sacred entity, marriage is portrayed as a farcical medium.

CECIL GRAHAM. [...] Hear you're going to be married again; thought you were tired of that game... By the way, Tuppy, which is it? Have you been twice married and once divorced, or twice divorced and once married...

LORD AUGUSTUS. I have a very bad memory, I really don't remember which (*Collins Complete Works* 435).

Cecil Graham's belief in Lord Augustus's two divorces and one marriage highlights the problematic nature of a social structure which proposes marriage as the only acceptable framework for individuals. Rather than present his audience with a traditional Victorian marriage, which would typically have been characterized by the segregation of gender roles and expectations, Wilde re-imagines the Berwick's marriage in order to challenge this framework. The Duchess of Berwick's husband exemplifies a satirisation of the silent and submissive Victorian wife. The Duchess constructs her husband through the female gaze and her representation of him is negative; she describes him as desperate, insecure and disloyal. In constructing the image of Berwick through the medium of the Duchess Wilde empowers an alternative female gaze. The Duchess of Berwick's account is assumed to be the truth, seeing as her husband does not appear in the play to dispute her claims. Wilde denies Berwick the opportunity to assert his identity onstage in this play. If Berwick had appeared in the play then his presence onstage might have challenged the female construction of him. The peripheral

female characters in the play also dominate the male characters; for example Lady Plymdale informs Dumby that he is to lunch at Mrs Erlynne's on Friday, so that she can conveniently get rid of her husband. Lady Plymdale: "[...] You are to lunch there on Friday... I want you to take my husband with you... he has become a perfect nuisance. Now, this woman's just the thing for him. He'll dance attendance upon her as long as she lets him, and won't bother me [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 438). Lady Plymdale's proposal that her husband needs a female distraction challenges the sacred status of marriage in Victorian society.

Lord Windermere's Deception.

Windermere's devotion to Lady Windermere and to marriage is undermined by his willingness to deceive his wife. His compassion for his wife's mother (unbeknownst to Lady Windermere), and his deception to his wife challenges the Victorian idealisation of marriage. Although Mrs Erlynne is divorced and therefore considered an outsider in society, Windermere invites her into their home on his wife's birthday. Windermere's motives also portray a need to challenge the Victorian system; he chooses to help Mrs Erlynne even though she is ostracized by society, but he makes it clear that it is his wife that has the power to influence the wider society into accepting her. Lord Windermere is merely her financial benefactor.

LORD WINDERMERE. [...] I won't argue with you, but I insist upon your asking Mrs Erlynne to-night... Sit down and write the card.

LADY WINDERMERE. Nothing in the whole world would induce me. [...]

LORD WINDERMERE. Margaret, you could save this woman. She wants to get back into society... if she comes here once she will have a chance of a happier, a surer life... (*Collins Complete Works* 429-31).

Windermere's decision to invite Mrs Erlynne to his wife's birthday celebrations and his ongoing deception about Mrs Erlynne's identity disempowers his status as a husband and patriarch. Windermere continues to lie to Lady Windermere, while he keeps his word to Mrs Erlynne. Rather than prioritizing his loyalty to his wife and informing her of who her mother is,

ultimately Windermere's loyalty lies with Mrs Erlynne. If Windermere had shown some remorse for his deception and explained his reasons for supporting Mrs Erlynne to Lady Windermere, then perhaps they could have rectified the situation. Instead he continues to keep her in the dark despite the fact that it is a personal matter which affects her more than him. This decision which he makes without consulting her reflects the powerless position of women in marriage. Windermere assumes that he knows what is best for his wife. He expects his wife to be submissive and obedient. Before Mrs Erlynne arrives at her party, Lord and Lady Windermere articulate their very different views on marriage.

LORD WINDERMERE. [...] Ah, Margaret, only trust me! A wife should trust her husband!

LADY WINDERMERE. (C.) London is full of women who trust their husbands. One can always recognise them. They look so thoroughly unhappy. I am not going to be one of them [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 435).

Windermere continues with the charade which probably costs Lady Windermere a relationship with her mother. In maintaining this secret, the idea of Windermere as the dominant husband and his wife as the submissive Victorian woman is maintained. While Lady Windermere learns from Mrs Erlynne that the categorization of people into good or bad is unrealistic, Windermere's stance at the end of the play mirrors his regimented view of gender.

LORD WINDERMERE. (*smiling as he strokes her hair*): Child, you and she belong to different worlds. Into your world evil has never entered.

LADY WINDERMERE. Don't say that, Arthur. There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, and sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand (*Collins Complete Works* 463).

Eltis notes that while the other characters may progress in some way in the play: "Lord Windermere actually suffers a regression. He ends the play regretting the second chance he gave to Mrs. Erlynne, and believing in the hard and fast rules that Lady Windermere has learnt to reject. He divides women clearly into good and bad, assuming that Mrs. Erlynne and his wife belong to entirely different worlds" (*Revising Wilde* 85). By remaining unrealistic in his outlook,

Wilde's patriarch is disempowered in the play. Although Lady Windermere is disempowered by returning to him, she reinforces the reality of the power of patriarchy. Her decision to return to the domestic sphere reflects the reality of gender inequality in Victorian society, particularly in marriage, and implies the need to contest this structure. In preserving the Windermere's marriage, Wilde avoids alienating his Victorian audience; if Lady Windermere had walked out with Darlington then the success of the play would have most likely been sacrificed. If the Windermere's marriage had not been salvaged then Wilde's first popular play would probably not have been so successful. Victorian audiences would have been horrified by Lady Windermere's assertion of independence, which would have come at a cost to the Victorian family unit. Despite the Windermere's reconciliation, Mrs Erlynne's choice to walk out on her marriage and her child challenges the framework that Lady Windermere ultimately accepts. In the end Mrs Erlynne consents to marrying Lord Augustus, but the implication is (after taking advantage of the Windermere's finances), that she would avail of the financial opportunities that marriage provides. When Lady Windermere threatens to leave her husband she is also willing to sacrifice a relationship with her child in order to gain freedom from her husband: "[...] We are only married two years. Our child is but six months old" (*Collins Complete Works* 427). When she leaves Windermere and her home to go to Darlington's house she does not consider her child. In doing so she temporarily rejects her role as a mother, and by leaving her husband, she also overlooks her role as a wife, a decision which can be connected to Nora's decision to leave her husband and child in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879).¹²⁶ Peter Raby notes the link between the two plays as well as Wilde's awareness of Ibsen's controversial plays: "Lady Windermere prepares to leave her child, like Nora, even if she changes her mind as she waits in

¹²⁶ Nora also rejects these roles. Eltis notes the influence of Ibsen's play on Victorian melodrama: "In the 1890s the lingering influence of melodrama had been met by the unsettling impact of Henrik Ibsen's plays. The first professional production of one of Ibsen's dramas to catch widespread notice was *A Doll's House* (1879), which opened at the Novelty Theatre on 7 July 1889 [...] The damage inflicted by false roles, social expectation and constrictive morality on women such as Nora Helmer [...] is clear, but no 'true self' is unveiled beneath these roles; the individual, baffled and thwarted by social morality, is necessarily a complex compound of instinct, education and circumstance, and can never free of social pressures to conform" (Killeen 142-3). In the original ending that Ibsen wrote Nora walks out on her husband and children, revolting against her confinement to the domestic sphere. Due to the controversial ending Ibsen was forced to write an alternative conclusion for the more conservative German theatres. Ibsen's constructed ending is characterised by Nora's confinement to the domestic sphere by her husband, which reinstates the gender inequality in society.

Lord Darlington's rooms. [...] in April, Wilde returned a second time to see Elizabeth Robbins as Hedda Gabler. He was well aware both of the revolutionary kind of dramatic writing that Ibsen was practising, and the different kind of acting that Ibsen's roles demanded, especially those of the women" (144). Raby's point is that although Lady Windermere returns to her husband, she does consider leaving him and her child. Her willingness to even consider abandoning her domestic life and family portrays the oppressive gender dynamic of the time for women. Wilde contests the segregation of gender roles, but Lady Windermere returns to her husband as her marriage is based on love: "Windermere and I married for love" (*Collins Complete Works* 427). The decision that Lady Windermere reunite with her husband may have been a conservative construction for Wilde's Victorian audience, but we can only speculate on this dramatic decision. When Windermere addresses his wife at the end of the play the language and tone of this address is patronising. His tone signifies Lady Windermere's mistake in returning and maintaining this absurd and unequal gender structure which she could have ultimately challenged, as Mrs Erlynne did. As their relationship develops Windermere seems to take on a more paternal role in their marriage. Perhaps Windermere's act in calling his wife a child reflects his need to assert dominance over his wife. Despite her probable subservience in the domestic sphere, Lady Windermere's progression and moral growth is prioritized over her husband's in the play. Eltis claims that: "The emphasis on Lady Windermere's moral growth and independence from her husband's narrower system of values inverts the more traditional endings of plays" (*Revising Wilde* 88). It is Lady Windermere and not her husband who has learnt not to categorize people definitively as good or bad. Before the curtain falls Lady Windermere declares that she and her husband can never be separated again; she exposes the lack of choice for women in the nineteenth century. Her marriage continues to be based on deception. Windermere consents to keeping the identity of his wife's mother from Lady Windermere, and she conceals the temptation she had to elope with Darlington from her husband. Perhaps the possibility of eloping with Darlington would be an option in the future for

Lady Windermere, should she discover her husband's deception. The satirisation of marriage is also evident in Wilde's *Salome*.

Chapter Four: Queer Characters and Contesting Gender and Sexuality in *Salome* (1891).

The characters in *Salome* often refute definitive gender and sexual identities, which reflects the need to contest rigid Victorian gender roles. The biblical figure of Salome fascinated Wilde, and featured in two of Gustave Moreau's paintings: "Salome Dancing" and "The Apparition". Joris-Karl Huysmans provides detailed descriptions of these paintings in his controversial book *A Rebours*, a book Wilde probably read soon after its publication (1884). Wilde composed *Salome* originally in French, although it is analysed in English it is important to remember that this play embodies his connection with French culture.¹²⁷ Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations that accompanied the printed text will be analysed in terms of how they contest Victorian gender roles and sexuality.¹²⁸ The banning of *Salome* in London in 1892 due to the depiction of biblical characters meant that Wilde never had the opportunity to see *Salome* performed. These illustrations provide an insight into his vision of the play. This vision would have been more clear had he had an extensive rehearsal process and production of the play. Wilde and Beardsley's play on gender and sexuality in *Salome* will be examined according to a queer studies framework.¹²⁹

Production Details and Plot Summary.

Wilde wrote *Salome* in Paris in 1891. The Lord Chamberlain banned the play in 1892, and it was subsequently published in French (1893) and English (1894). The play is set in Herod's Palace

¹²⁷ Wilde reflects on his original composition of *Salome* in French, in an article for *The Pall Mall Gazette*: "My idea of writing the play was simply this: I have one instrument that I know I can command and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it. The play was written in Paris some six months ago, where I read it to some young poets, who admired it immensely. Of course there are modes of expression that a French man of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play" (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, 29th June 1892 p. 2).

¹²⁸ Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) was an illustrator and became a huge influence on Victorian art and the Decadent Movement. Many of his designs featured in popular periodicals such as *The Savoy* and *The Yellow Book*. Beardsley's drawings were published alongside *Salome* in the English publication in 1894. The illustrations are unconventional and controversial, as they satirise many of the idealised Victorian values such as marriage and compulsory heterosexuality. Beardsley was most likely introduced to Wilde by their mutual friend, Robbie Ross, in 1893, and he later became his illustrator for *Salome*, but he died tragically from tuberculosis in 1898 aged twenty-six.

¹²⁹ Queer theory is introduced in the Introduction.

wherein The Young Syrian, The Page of Herodias and some soldiers discuss the beauty of the Princess Salome. The Page of Herodias's ominous comparison of the moon to a dead woman signifies the destruction that will unfold in the play. The Page warns The Young Syrian that he admires and stares at Salome too much, and that something terrible may happen if he continues to do so. The soldiers and The Cappadocian discuss religion and the voice of the prophet, Iokanaan, who is being held prisoner by Herod and is heard preaching from the dungeon below.¹³⁰ Salome leaves Herod's feast and enters this scene where she admires the moon as the supreme Goddess. She overhears Iokanaan preaching and claims that he has said terrible things about her mother. A Slave enters and informs Salome that it is Herod's wish that she return to the feast, but she refuses to do so. She is intrigued by Iokanaan and wishes to see him, but a soldier tells her that Herod has even forbidden the high priest to see the prophet as he is afraid of him. The soldiers do not wish to disobey Herod and beg Salome not to ask to see him again, however she appeals to The Young Syrian who she has an influence over. Salome tells the Syrian that if he obeys her she will let fall a little green flower the next day. Salome flatters The Young Syrian, and finally he concedes and orders that the prophet be brought to Salome. When Iokanaan appears Salome's desire for him becomes apparent; she admires his voice, his skin and she wishes to touch him and ultimately to kiss his mouth. The Young Syrian becomes afraid of this desired intimacy and begs Salome to keep her distance. As she steps closer to try and touch Iokanaan, fearing for Salome's safety, the Syrian slays himself and falls between the two of them. The Page of Herodias grieves for his friend and reminds Salome of his sacrifice. She is so consumed with the desire to kiss Iokanaan that she does not notice. Iokanaan evokes the destruction of the palace by constantly mentioning the angel of death to Salome who is not afraid. Herod enters the scene searching for Salome, along with Herodias, Salome's mother and some of their remaining guests. He stumbles upon the body of the Syrian and he curses the bad luck that this incident will bring him. Herod lusts after his step-daughter and he attempts to

¹³⁰ Wilde refers to the prophet as Iokanaan, so I will adopt this spelling of his name in analysis. However in *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* the character's name is spelt Jokanaan; this spelling is used in the extracts from this play text which is used throughout. The Cappadocian can be linked with Cappadocia which was an ancient region in central Asia that was strongly associated with Christianity.

charm her by requesting wine for Salome to drink and fruit for her to eat; she refuses these things. His desire for her is so great that when he tells her to come and sit next to him and eventually to dance for him, he even offers Salome her mother's throne. Herodias mocks Herod and challenges his patriarchal leadership by claiming that he fears Iokanaan. Herod commands Salome to dance and initially she disobeys this request. Herod accuses Herodias of being barren, despite the fact that she has a daughter and she quickly turns these false accusations on him. Herod tells Salome that he will give her whatever she wants if she will just dance for him, and she eventually agrees, recognising that she has the opportunity to gain from this exchange. After she has fulfilled his wish to dance, Salome asks that the head of Iokanaan be brought to her on a silver charger. Herod is appalled at this request; he offers her anything in his kingdom, and after begging her to change her mind he finally submits to Salome's request. Iokanaan is beheaded by the executioner and his head is brought to Salome who seizes it and addresses the dead prophet, and the audience at length. She emphasises the power that she has now gained over Iokanaan who she ordered to be killed. She claims that she loved him and admires his passive beauty. Herod is frightened by her and seeks the protective shelter of his palace, but Herodias is proud of her daughter and abandons Herod to remain with Salome. Herod climbs the staircase to his palace and orders Herodias to come too, but Wilde's stage directions only detail his movements up, implying that she remains with her daughter. Herod fears that Salome's request will bring darkness upon him so he orders the killing of Salome, perhaps in the hope that her death will compensate for the death of the prophet. The play closes with Herod's soldiers surrounding Salome and it is presumed (but not confirmed), that she is crushed under the weight of their shields.

Salome was banned from the English stage in 1892 for its explicit biblical references by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, E. F. S. Pigott, who believed it to be "half biblical, half

pornographic" (Stephens 112).¹³¹ In an article Wilde wrote for the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the 29th June 1892, Wilde portrays his disgust that *Salome* was banned and his intention to publish the play: "I shall publish 'Salome'. No one has the right to interfere with me, and no one shall interfere with me. The people who are injured are the actors; the art that is vilified is the art of acting. [...] The action of the Censorship in England is odious and ridiculous" ("*Salome*"; *Pall Mall Gazette*: 29th June 1892 p. 2). Wilde's letter denotes his passion for art and for an artist's freedom of expression. As Powell notes Wilde's negative attitude to the Examiner probably alienated Pigott from any possible negotiations regarding a production of *Salome* in England: "Instead of negotiating, Wilde publicly denounced the Examiner as an inept and 'commonplace' official, thus destroying, in all probability, any chance of producing the play in England" (34-5). *Salome* was initially staged in French at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre, Paris on the 11th February 1896, at which time Wilde was in prison.¹³² *Salome* premiered in English at the Bijou Theatre, London, on the 10th May 1905, five years after Wilde's death.¹³³ According to Wilde, when he met Sarah Bernhardt at Henry Irving's in 1892 she expressed a desire to play the part Salome.¹³⁴ *Salome* was already three weeks into rehearsals when it was banned by Pigott, and Wilde's ire is reflected in his threat that he would renounce his English ties:

¹³¹ The original report by Pigott which would have detailed the reasons why *Salome* was banned from production in England has, unfortunately, been lost or destroyed. Helen Melody, a curator at The British Library informed me that: "I have looked through the correspondence files that I mentioned to you in my email but I am afraid that they do not include Pigott's original report. One of the files (LCP COR 1931/10553) does include a short set of correspondence between the Lord Chamberlain's Office and the publisher, Rupert Hart-Davis dating from 1957. Hart-Davis was also trying to track down a copy of Pigott's report. Unfortunately it appears that the search was unsuccessful. In a copy letter T.E.G. Nugent explains that 'We have had no luck over *Salome* – the Annual Reports for 1895 and 1896 do not include it amongst plays banned in that year ... Any reference to the play would certainly be found in our correspondence for that year'" (Melody and Kerr: email correspondence June 2013).

¹³² This was the first stage production of *Salome*. According to Ellmann: "Ernest Dowson and Aubrey Beardsley attended, and Dowson wrote a long letter to Constance describing the enthusiasm of the audience for this 'triumphant performance'" (466).

¹³³ Wilde died on the 30th November 1900 in the Hotel d'Alsace, Paris.

¹³⁴ Powell reflects on two possible reasons why Wilde did not write *Salome* in English: "[...] there were better reasons – at least more urgently practical ones – for not writing *Salome* in English. Wilde, like everyone else in the theatre of the 1890s, knew that the Examiner of Plays permitted works in French to get away with more – much more – than plays written in English. There was the added, and by no means trivial, consideration that Sarah Bernhardt did not speak English" (35). Pigott noted the double standard of censorship in 1892: "With regard to French plays, my principle has always been to extend to them an extra-territorial privilege. People who go to see French plays, played by French companies and written for French purposes, know what they are going to see" (Powell 37).

I met Mdme Sarah Bernhardt at Mr. Henry Irving's. She had heard of my play and asked me to read it to her. I did so, and she at once expressed the wish to play the title-role. [...] We have been rehearsing for three weeks, the costumes, scenery, and everything has been prepared, and we are naturally disappointed. Still all are looking forward now to producing it for the first time in Paris, where the actor is appreciated and the stage is regarded as an artistic medium ("Salome"; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29th June 1892 p. 2).

Wilde wrote the play originally in French and his lover Lord Alfred Douglas translated it into English.¹³⁵ The play interrogates a territorial gender struggle and examines forbidden desire, lust and power. Wilde considers the play to be: "A Tragedy in one Act" (*Collins Complete Works* 583). Wilde dedicates it: "*To my friend Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas: the translator of my play*", the dedication is evident in the Oxford collection of Wilde's plays (Raby, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* 63). Although Douglas is the translator of the play, Wilde re-worked the translation significantly so that it accurately reflects the essence of his play. Wilde felt this was compromised in Douglas's version, and Douglas is not named as the translator on the title-page. In referencing Douglas in his dedication the play emerges as a public performance of an alternative masculinity; it is a signifier of their close relationship. In a letter dated February 1893 from Wilde to Campbell Dodgson, (Dodgson was a classical scholar with Douglas at Oxford), Wilde compares the aesthetics of the published text with his lover: "Bosie is very gilt-haired and I have bound *Salome* in purple to suit him" (Holland, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 163). The title of the play emphasizes the importance of Wilde's female protagonist, and the empowerment of female characters in the play. Salome was supposed to be originally played by Sarah Bernhardt and in a letter to the editor of *The Times* dated March 1893; Wilde expresses his delight at having secured Bernhardt before the play is banned.

The fact that the greatest tragic actress of any stage now living saw in my play such beauty that she was anxious to produce it, to take herself the part of the heroine [...] the music of her flute-like voice – this was naturally, and always will be, a source of pride

¹³⁵ Wilde was not happy with Douglas's translation of *Salome*, and when he told Douglas this a fight ensued and Douglas refused to put his name on the translation of the play. Instead Wilde dedicated the play to Douglas.

and pleasure to me, and I look forward with delight at seeing Mme Bernhardt present my play in Paris [...] (Holland, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 164).

Wilde's admiration of Bernhardt is apparent, and he evokes the sensuous voice of Bernhardt as Salome. Wilde recognizes that Salome's mesmerising voice would have had an almost hypnotic effect on the characters in the play and the audience members in the theatre.¹³⁶

The Female Life Cycle Empowered and Omens of Death.

The omens of destruction which pervade *Salome* from the opening scene foreshadow the tragic nature of the play, Salome's dark desire for Iokanaan and the unhappy fate that will befall Herod. The Page of Herodias compares the moon to a dead woman, evoking an image that symbolizes the submissive position and negative perception of women in biblical times and in Victorian society: "She is like a dead woman [...] She is like a woman who is dead" (*Collins Complete Works* 583). On the other hand, the comparison of the moon to a woman exemplifies the power of the female characters in the play, and the moon acquires a god-like female status.¹³⁷ Salome recognizes the female power of the moon which represents the female life cycle and empowers women as immortal. Wilde's evocation of this Triple White Goddess from historical literature is empowering for the female characters in the play. Joan Navarre conveys the essential connection between woman and moon:

Woman as symbol is central to literature. With *Salome*, Wilde draws upon this symbol, to recover enhancing characterization, enlarging the artistic horizon of the stage, and evoking strong emotional responses. One means of appreciating such literary power is to recover the historical myth of the Triple White Goddess. By understanding this myth, it is possible to understand that the purest poetic theme is the fertility rite and that women – and their insatiable sexual powers – inspire (72).

¹³⁶ The power of this hypnotic effect obviously depends on the actor who plays Salome. Powell asserts that Bernhardt's voice was famous for its mesmerising qualities: "By the 1890s Bernhardt's voice had taken on an artificial, musical quality, an eerie intonation upon which everyone commented" (47).

¹³⁷ The position of the moon, which in most productions would ideally look down on the action of the play, represents the importance and influence of female power which was accumulating in late Victorian society. The Victorian suffragist movement is detailed in Chapter One.

But Wilde's Salome is a re-imagining of woman in this context; she contests the narrow patriarchal association of her gender with powerlessness by asserting herself in this society; the power of the moon symbolizes Salome's power in the play. Salome's admiration for the moon empowers the role of women in the play: "How good to see the moon. She is like a little piece of money, you would think she was a little silver flower [...] I am sure she is a virgin, she has a virgin's beauty [...] She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses" (*Collins Complete Works* 586). Salome idealises the specifically feminine strength of the moon referring to her in feminine terms, and admiring her as a goddess who has not "defiled herself" to men. Rather than acknowledging male patriarchal powers, Salome recognizes the moon as the ultimate female God. She evokes traditional signifiers of femininity including virginity and beauty, but her admiration of the moon is exemplified by the moon's status as a Goddess. As the play develops, Salome's unconventional femininity satirizes this traditional and unrealistic femininity. Herod evokes the image of the moon as a crazed woman, a depiction which mirrors his fear of female power, and his attempt to undermine it. Herod: "The moon has a strange look to-night [...] She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers [...] She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman" [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 592). Herod demonizes female power in order to disempower it. He portrays the moon as a desperate woman of the night who attempts to ensnare men and who reels with drunkenness. Herod's depiction of women captures the male fear of female power. He chastises Herodias for her supposed evil influence on her daughter; he also fears his wife's power. His fear of Salome is compounded by her power over him and the other male characters in the play. Herod's perception of Herodias supports his negative view of women. Richmond-Garza astutely notes Herod's suspicion of female power and his reluctance to refer to Salome as a woman until her death: "Between the opening of the play and its closing, the word "woman" is only used either to refer to Herodias, to express Herod's or Iokanaan's mistrust of all women, or to comment on the "strange" woman in the moon. It is never used to refer to Salome, for whom (when it is used) it proves fatal" (34). Herod's categorization of

Herodias and finally Salome as simply women depicts his wish to categorize them and undermine their power according to the gender dynamic at the time. Herod's view of women is overtly negative and is evident by the advice he gives Salome: "Do not listen to your mother's voice. She is ever giving you evil counsel. Do not heed her" (*Collins Complete Works* 600). Salome wishes to dominate and undermine patriarchal power, ultimately replacing it with matriarchal power. According to Salome, Iokanaan often insults her mother and her order to have him killed forecasts the matriarchal rise to power. Salome: "It is of my mother that he speaks [...] Yes, it is of my mother that he speaks" (*Collins Complete Works* 588). Perhaps Salome's desire to possess the head of Iokanaan is partly inspired by revenge; she chastises the prophet for insulting her mother. If this revenge act dictates Salome's actions in the play then it is the influence of her mother that inspires her to challenge Herod's leadership.¹³⁸ The Page of Herodias forecasts the despair and destruction which add to the atmosphere of death and darkness in the play. The blood of the Young Syrian which Herod slips on is an omen of horror. These unnatural and dark omens reflect a kingdom ill at ease with Herod's leadership. Although Herod is the leader of the kingdom, the ignorance and unwillingness he displays in dealing with the death of the Young Syrian undermines his leadership as the Tetrarch. Herod: "[...] Ah! I have slipped! I have slipped in blood [...] It is a very evil omen. Wherefore is there blood here...? And this body, what does this body here [...] Whose is it? I will not look on it" (*Collins Complete Works* 592). Herod's inability to recognise the body of the Young Syrian signifies his distance from the people in his kingdom. The Young Syrian prioritizes Salome's life over his own, and his suicide empowers her.

Salome's Agency.

Salome exudes many unconventional female traits in the play, for example, her agency and influence in the play. Salome's power and influence is juxtaposed with Herod's powerlessness in the play. Her refusal to obey Herod's orders in the beginning of the play signifies her

¹³⁸ Despite Herodias's influence on Salome she displays an independent mind and agency. When she finally agrees to dance for Herod Salome does not consult her mother about what she could choose to take from Herod, but decides independently that she desires Iokanaan's head.

independence and agency. Salome refuses to be objectified by Herod's male gaze and leaves the banquet: "I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking lids?" (*Collins Complete Works* 586). When Salome refuses to return to the banquet Herod does not demand that she return, but accepts her disobedience of a direct order. If Herod had punished Salome for this he would have asserted his power over her. Salome's status as a queer figure affords her the ability to defy convention. Hall proposes that to be Queer: "is to abrade the classifications, to sit athwart conventional categories or traverse several. It is to be at once a girl and an athlete [...]" (13). Hall's interpretation of queer reflects the reality that it is in the nature of queer analysis to contest traditional or conservative perceptions of established 'norms', such as the traditional perception of gender roles in Victorian society. By exuding power and agency in the play Salome's queer identity grants her further freedom to challenge the traditional perception of women. Salome's education and intelligence means that she is the only character who can decipher Iokanaan's reflections.

SALOME. He says terrible things about my mother, does he not!

SECOND SOLDIER. We never understand what he says, Princess.

SALOME. Yes; he says terrible things about her. (*Collins Complete Works* 586).

While the male characters are unable to understand the Prophet, Salome's education and intellectual superiority means she can understand him. Davies recognizes Salome's agency as male in the play: "Salome is the only character in the play that is able to make sense of Iokanaan's prophecies [...] The princess therefore performs the role of translating Priest to Iokanaan's position as cryptic speaker, appropriating a position of masculine agency that resists her ostensible objectification by the men of the play. [...]" (Bennett 62). By understanding and by translating the prophet's words, Salome ensures that she does not become a silent and submissive object of the male gaze, instead she becomes an active translator of the Prophet's words. If Herod had taken action and killed Salome himself at the end of the play, he would have been empowered in claiming ownership of her life, but instead he orders his soldiers to do it on

his behalf. Herod's final order depicts his inaction in the play, rendering him a passive character, while the final image depicts Salome as a female martyr.

A moonbeam falls on SALOME, covering her with light.

HEROD. (*turning round and seeing SALOME*): Kill that woman!

The soldiers rush forward and crush beneath their shields SALOME, daughter of

HERODIAS, Princess of Judea. (*Collins Complete Works 605*).

Salome's alternative sexuality and her influence over the male characters depict her unconventional female power in the play. Before The Young Syrian commits suicide, Salome offers him "a little green flower", possibly a reference to the green carnation that Wilde sometimes wore (*Collins Complete Works 588*). Salome: "You will do this thing for me, Narraboth, and to-morrow when I pass in my litter beneath the gateway of the idol-sellers I will let fall for you a little flower, a little green flower" (*Collins Complete Works 588*). Salome's self-confidence and her independent nature portrays typically masculine attributes, suggesting that she is a queer character in the play, as she cannot be defined simply as a conventional woman. The green carnation is possibly an emblem of sexual relations between men, and by offering to present it to The Young Syrian Wilde identifies Salome's sexuality as male. Queer theory challenges a belief in authentic, essentialist or "natural" gender or sexual identifications. In Victorian society a woman's sexuality was typically characterized by her devotion to her husband and her role as a mother to her children, but Salome's experimentation of female sexuality rejects this conservative depiction, re-imagining a more liberal sexuality for women. As Hall suggests: "Patriarchal belief systems, serving the interests of men and male-dominated institutions such as the church, expressly denied women the capacity or right to feel sexual desires except as channelled into the structure of marriage and reproduction" (35). Her body is also a signifier of female sexuality, and an inscribed signifier of the patriarchal oppression of women by men. Salome uses it as an instrument to challenge Herod, the ultimate patriarch, and in order to acknowledge female desire. By breaking from the tradition of heterosexuality, the characters in *Salome* provide an opportunity to re-invent and transform more modern gender

roles for men and women. Butler notes that the heterosexual framework in society constructed ideal models of masculinity and femininity which people struggle to live up to, especially those whose sexualities do not conform to the heterosexual hegemony:

Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman'. These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate [...] (*Bodies that Matter* 237).

If heterosexuality constructs unrealistic and conventional versions of men and women, then alternative sexualities must produce something that is outside of this oppressive framework. As will be analysed later in the chapter, Beardsley's illustrations certainly challenge sexuality by denoting all female and all male relationships. Perhaps The Young Syrian kills himself out of desperate jealousy; in the scene which precedes his death Salome desires Iokanaan and tries to kiss him. By embodying male and female attributes Salome contests oppositional gender characteristics. Salome has a female body that exudes and performs both masculine and feminine traits, thus becoming a queer force in the play. Helen Davies proposes that gender is constructed in *Salome* and this can be linked with Butler's constructivist view of gender. Davies asserts: "I posit that the 'truth' of the trouble with gender in *Salome* is that there is no 'truth', only discursive constructions that have the potential to signify gender in a variety of ways, all of which can be interpreted as both challenging and reconsolidating the patriarchal script of gender" (Bennett 57). In *Salome* the various versions of gender are proposed not in order to search for a truth, but in order to experiment with the fluid and performative nature of gender. This fluidity of gender is reflected in Beardsley's illustrations; costume or the absence of it confuses the immediate signification of gender and suggests a queer identification. Like many of Wilde's plays *Salome* investigates the possibility of alternative sexualities, and in doing so the play provides alternative frameworks to heterosexual marriage. In a letter to Campbell Dodgson in February 1893 Wilde reflects on his protagonist Salome: "That tragic daughter of passion appeared on Thursday last, and is now dancing for the head of the English public [...] Should you

come across her, tell me how you like her. I want you to like her” (Holland, *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 163). Wilde’s reference to Salome as his “daughter of passion” conveys the desire and sexual intrigue that the play examines.

Salome embodies an unconventional and queer gender identity and she is arguably one of Wilde’s most powerful characters. Her strong influence over the male characters is evident from the beginning of the play. Although the male characters are aware of their vulnerability to Salome they remain under her influence. In many ways Salome replaces Herod as their leader once they begin to obey her orders instead of Herod’s. When Salome demands to see Iokanaan The Young Syrian refuses this request at first as it is against Herod’s wishes. Despite Herod’s orders, The Young Syrian finally gives in to Salome; he becomes submissive to her rather than obeying his master. Having discarded Herod’s orders The Young Syrian replaces Salome as his leader.

SALOME. (*smiling*): [...] You know that you will do what I ask of you. You know it well.... I know that you will do this thing.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. (*signing to the third soldier*): Let the prophet come forth.... The Princess Salome desires to see him (*Collins Complete Works* 588).

Salome manipulates her influence over The Young Syrian and The Page of Herodias, and they fear her more than they fear Herod. Salome’s desire for Iokanaan ends his life as well as encouraging Herod to try and end hers. What makes desire so destructive in the play is the willingness of the characters to sacrifice people for the cause of sexual fulfilment. Iokanaan is sacrificed to quench Salome’s desire and The Young Syrian commits suicide. Unconventional sexualities and heterosexuality are explored in *Salome*, and this experimentation with sexuality contests the categorization of characters according to an oppressive compulsory sexuality. The suicide of The Young Syrian also depicts an idealisation of Salome. In choosing death in order for Salome to live, The Young Syrian values Salome’s life over his own life. This idealisation and prioritization of female life contests the gender inequality that characterizes the context of the

play. The Young Syrian's choice to die reflects his view that Salome is the leader of the kingdom, implying her masculine dominance over Herod.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. [...] look not at this man [...] Princess, Princess, do not speak these things.

SALOME. I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. Ah!

He kills himself and falls between Salome and Jokanaan.

(Collins Complete Works 590).

Salome's order to be presented with the head of Iokanaan depicts the flippancy with which she regarded his life. The value of male life is undermined, while female life is empowered and prioritised, however she is annihilated at the end of the play. In the end Salome succeeds in dominating Iokanaan. She holds his beheaded head in her hands: a symbol of her defeat over the patriarchal leader of the Christian Church, an institution which maintains the belief that men are superior to women. Showalter asserts that Salome's actions in the play challenge male patriarchy:

For this critic the rebellious princess represents an emancipated spirit akin to her real-life contemporaries, launching an attack on the male-dominated patriarchal society surrounding her, in which Herod ostensibly exercises arbitrary political sway, while Iokanaan delivers dogmatic pronouncements on issues of ethical substance, and jealously preserves his male inviolability. Salome may therefore be seen as challenging received patriarchal values as in much the same way as did her actual late-Victorian and Edwardian counterparts (Tydeman and Price 176).

Showalter proposes that Salome can be considered a rebel, and she connects her to the Victorian suffragists who contested gender inequality in society. By identifying Salome as a free spirit and with the suffragists, Salome becomes more of a modern woman who is willing to contest patriarchy by disobeying and undermining Herod's power. Ian Small even identifies Salome with contemporary gender politics, a connection which depicts her modern nature:

“Salome is coming to be seen as a document which allows contemporary issues in the politics of gender to be glimpsed” (197). This proposal affirms the view that Salome can be associated with a more modern view of gender and sexuality.

Many of the characters in Beardsley’s illustrations could be considered queer characters. In order to explore how *Salome* can fit into a Queer studies framework it is important to contextualize the history of the term. The word ‘queer’ which was used in the past as a derogatory term in homophobic discourse, was re-claimed in the 1980s as a positive term which celebrated difference and recognized identities as fluid, ever-changing and often conflicting or paradoxical in nature.¹³⁹ According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive - recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*. Which also yields the German *quer* (traverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*.... Keenly, it is relational and strange” (*Tendencies* xii). The recognition of queer as something that is fluid, continually developing and that traverses boundaries, captures the context of the application of Queer theory to *Salome*. Queer theory emphasizes the need to contest categorizations including those relating to gender and sexuality. Salome is recognised as a female character, but her tendency to exude an unconventional agency and Beardsley’s ambiguously gendered illustrations of her blur her gender and sexual identities. Hall notes the performative nature of Queer theory which is evident in Wilde’s assertion of gender and sexuality in *Salome*: “In its emphasis upon the disruptive, the constructed, the tactical, and performative, queer analysis reveals some of the ways in which many late-modern individuals experience the fractured and contingent nature of human existence” (5). The collision between heterosexual desire and same-sex passion is

¹³⁹ Hall notes the interesting etymology of the word ‘Queer’: “‘Queer,’ a term commonly used to deride and vilify same-sex desiring people, was reclaimed by Queer Nation and others as an umbrella term to celebrate, rather than castigate, difference from the ‘norm’ at a time when the oppressiveness and implicit violence of that norm was clear and undeniable [...] political action groups responding angrily to governmentally sanctioned homophobia took back a term that immediately drew attention to itself as a (now positive) marker of difference, and that more broadly drew attention to the way language has long been used to categorize and devalue human lives and lifestyles” (54).

evident in *Salome*. In *Salome* heterosexual desire is exemplified by Herod's lust for Salome which is presented as perverted, and Herod and Herodias' problematic marriage. The controversial themes that pervade *Salome* make this play unique: desire, power, sexuality and greed are explored more explicitly here than in Wilde's remaining plays. *Salome* consists of only one act, is significantly shorter than Wilde's three or four-act plays, and does not incorporate a complex scene change. It is important to note that Wilde only had the benefit of working on *Salome* for two to three weeks in rehearsal, and the rehearsal process was essential for him to re-write lines, to make costume changes and to adapt stage directions. It was during this process that he also expanded on his stage directions; this is why his stage directions are short in *Salome*. Some of Wilde's letters which expand in great detail on the stage productions of his plays suggested scene changes and revised passages as well as costume changes that he made during the rehearsal processes of many of his plays.¹⁴⁰ If Wilde had undergone this invaluable process with *Salome* then the play would be quite a different play today.

Salome and Herodias: A Matriarchal Union.

In the course of the play Herodias and Salome unite and represent a matriarchal union that contests Herod's patriarchal leadership. Herod's inability to dominate Herodias and Salome in the domestic sphere undermines his status in the public sphere according to Habermas' framework. Salome and Herodias's refusal to be confined to the domestic sphere in *Salome*, and their dominance of the public stage space, can be juxtaposed with Herod's return to the domestic sphere at the end of the play. Habermas claims that: "The private status of the master of the household, upon which depended his political status as citizen, rested on domination without any illusion of freedom evoked by human intimacy" (52). Herodias and Salome reject and disobey Herod's orders throughout the play, contesting his status and leadership in the public world. Herod begs Salome to dance for him and in exchange he promises to award her whatever she desired. Her initial refusals to eat, drink or dance for Herod symbolize her power

¹⁴⁰ A letter from Wilde to George Alexander in 1892 regarding *Lady Windermere's Fan* in Chapter Three details Wilde's intense involvement in the rehearsal process of his plays.

over him. It is only when she realises how much she can gain by manipulating Herod that she agrees to dance for him.

HEROD. Dance for me, Salome, I beseech you. If you dance for me you may ask of me what you will, and I will give it you, even unto the half of my kingdom.

SALOME. (*rising*): Will you indeed give me whatsoever I shall ask, Tetrarch [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 598).

Salome's influence and control over Herod undermines his public status. By agreeing to dance for Herod Salome assumes a position of power, and he is forced to follow through on her orders. She assumes his power and by ordering Herod to obey her: a power no other character has in the play, Salome replaces him as the leader of the kingdom and she acquires his public status. Although Herod and Herodias are married, which implies Herod's dominance in the public and private sphere, Herodias dominates her husband. The rational and practical tone and language Herodias adopts in the play, depicts a strong female character. Herod's fear and irrational language portrays a more feminine character. Helen Davies notes the power of Herodias and the powerlessness of her husband in *Salome*: "She exhibits a control and agency that her husband fails to exercise; fulfilling a traditionally masculine role to Herod's feminized panic" (65). Herod's nervous temperament is mirrored in nature, while Herodias's quiet confidence can also be seen in her perception of the environment around her.

HEROD. The moon has a strange look to-night. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. [...]

HERODIAS. No; the moon is like the moon, that is all. Let us go within.... You have nothing to do here. [...]

HEROD. I tell you there is a wind that blows.... And I hear it in the air something that is like the beating of wings, like the beating of vast wings. Do you hear it?

HERODIAS. I hear nothing.

HEROD. I hear it no longer. [...] But no, I hear it again. Do you not hear it? It is just like the beating of wings.

HERODIAS. I tell you there is nothing. You are ill. Let us go within. (*Collins Complete Works* 592-93).

Herodias tries to convince her husband to return to the private sphere twice, but to no avail. Herodias informs Herod that he has nothing to do in the public sphere which questions his public status in front of the subjects he supposedly rules over. Herodias's more relaxed demeanor suggests that she is more comfortable than her husband in the public sphere. This challenge of gender roles and her encouragement of Herod to retire to the private sphere denote her desire for her husband's power. The final image of Herod ascending the steps to the palace implies that Herodias has successfully displaced her husband from the public sphere. By abandoning her husband for her daughter at the end of the play, Herodias contests the patriarchal system which bartered her as an object of exchange between men. Salome's dance for Herod is not expanded on in any detail in Wilde's stage directions, he only informs us that: "(*Salome dances the dance of the seven veils.*)" (*Collins Complete Works* 600). Before Salome is convinced to dance for Herod, Herodias mocks her husband and his leadership, challenging his status in the public sphere.

HEROD. I command thee to dance, Salome.

SALOME. I will not dance, Tetrarch.

HERODIAS. (*laughing*): You see how she obeys you (*Collins Complete Works* 597).

Herodias mocks Salome's disobedience which implies her approval of her daughter's actions. Herodias did not raise her daughter to be submissive to male power, and she encourages Salome to challenge Herod's public status. Herodias prioritizes her relationship with Salome over her marriage to Herod. The sanctity of marriage is undermined by the suggestion that Herod's marriage is a marriage of convenience. Herodias claims that Herod took her by force when she was in a relationship with his brother.

HEROD. Of a truth, dear and noble Herodias, you are my wife, and before that you were the wife of my brother.

HERODIAS. It was you who tore me from his arms (*Collins Complete Works* 596).

Herodias was powerless in marriage, but being a younger and more modern character, her daughter has more of an opportunity to challenge Herod's leadership. In being unmarried and without the restraint of a patriarchal father figure, Salome is more free than her mother to contest Herod's power. Herodias questions her husband's power and paves the way for Salome to usurp patriarchal power. The final image in the play which will be analysed at the end of the chapter denotes her progressive movement away from her husband.

Herod's unnatural desire for his step-daughter makes him an undesirable and unnatural ruler of the kingdom. His inclination to leer perversely at Salome emphasizes the fact that Herod is essentially childless. Salome's biological father was Herod's brother who died, and Herodias implies that Herod was involved in his death.

HERODIAS. It was you who tore me from his arms.

HEROD. Of a truth I was stronger.... (*Collins Complete Works* 596).

Herodias emphasises the unnatural method by which Herod acquires Herodias as his wife.

Herod's inability to provide a male heir undermines his status as the head of the household, and challenges the exclusively male right to inherit property. Herodias chastises Herod for staring at her daughter: "You must not look at her! You are always looking at her!" (*Collins Complete Works* 592). Herod's desire for Salome represents an ambition to possess her as his own seeing as she is fatherless in this patriarchal world. Herod longs to establish Salome's male patriarchal lineage in the play; if she has a father figure or husband then she would be expected to be subservient to those male figures. Much of Salome's freedom to be unconventional is due to the fact that she is not constrained by any of the male figures in her life. As Herod is not her biological father Salome refuses to allow him to claim ownership or control over her. She adopts the medium of dance to exercise her influence over Herod. Due to the short stage directions Salome's dance can only be imagined in performance. Wilde's stage directions for Salome's dance are allusive: "(Slaves bring perfumes and the seven veils, and take off the sandals of SALOME.) [...] (SALOME dances the dance of the seven veils.)" (*Collins Complete Works* 599-600). Salome's sexuality is

empowered, and the influence of her dance over Herod signifies the importance of female sexual liberation. It is important to remember the potential for this dance to exist in the imagination, and in performance the potential for the creative team to experiment with it.¹⁴¹ Salome's uses her body as an instrument of patriarchy, but she usurps the power of the patriarchy with this body. Showalter argues that Salome's dance: "is the dance of gender, the delicacy and permeability of the veil separating masculine from feminine, licit from illicit desire" (152). By simultaneously performing typically feminine and masculine traits through one physical form onstage, Salome becomes a queer character. Davies notes the subversive nature of the dance and Wilde's limited stage directions:

The subversive potential of the dance resides, of course, in its performance, and, as Wilde is silent as to how this stage direction should be enacted, Salome's celebrated 'dance of the seven veils' exists in the text as a perpetual absence. I suggest this offers a paradoxical insight into the inadequacy of a masculine economy of representation to provide a satisfactory depiction of women's desires (Bennett 65).

Davies proposes that Wilde's absence of stage directions could be interpreted as his unwillingness as a male playwright to attempt to document Salome's female desire in the play. This proposition reflects the inadequacy of the patriarchal representation of women. Instead, the reading audience were asked to imagine Salome in dance, and perhaps in imagining her dance each member imagined their own desires. Tony W. Garland believes the dance to be an assertion of Salome's control and "deviant" sexuality in the play: "the dance of the seven veils is a pivotal display of deviant desire that exemplifies Salome's sexual power and control, prioritizes the aberrant interests of Herod, highlights the inevitability of tragic consequences and engages the audience in a celebration of deviant sexuality" (125). By making her the object of Herod's and the audience's gaze, Salome exercises her influence and sexual power. In

¹⁴¹ Richmond-Garza reflects on the details of Salome's costume during the dance: "While at least seven veils are removed, Salome probably retains something of her costume. More importantly, at that point, she still retains her secret, the nature of her desire which has yet to be transformed from desire into "monstrous" reward" (35).

performance the dance would be choreographed by the director and performed by an actor.

Salome dances centre stage, pushing the remaining characters to the periphery of the stage and emphasizing the importance of her position in the play. As Powell writes:

In his play Wilde moves Salome to the foreground and makes her passionate recoil from thwarted desire the center of interest, causing both Herode and Herodias to recede in importance by comparison with their precursors. In *Salome* the blood lust is the dancer's, not her mother's; the murder of the prophet is her own idea [...] Wilde knew what he was doing when he named his drama *Salome*, for in his heroine the vital forces of the narrative unite (46).

The physicality and sensuousness of the dance sequence is an act that depicts the desire and power that permeate the play and which Salome exudes. According to Butler: “performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power [...]” (*Bodies that Matter* 225). Salome's dance onstage represents her unconventional female influence and agency in the play. Despite Butler's suggestion that performative acts also create a binding power, Salome utilizes this power to mesmerise her audience and claim ownership of the stage and the public sphere in this scene. Salome's dance and her demand to be presented with Iokanaan's head challenges Herod's power, allowing her to claim this power for herself. Salome's desire for power is illustrated by her request to dominate Iokanaan. Showalter's suggestion that Salome's dance is a dance of gender portrays the inherently performative nature of gender and its operations of power in society. Like Salome's physical movement through dance, gender is presented as an ongoing and fluid spectrum. Eltis notes that: “In *Salome* (1894) each character is actor and spectator in their own private play, projecting their own desires onto others, and using language not to describe or express but to create and transform” (Killeen 155). Despite the fact that in being a dancing female body she is an object of the male gaze, I would argue that her demand for Iokanaan's head and her agency usurps Herod's leadership and overshadows this brief objectification of her. Through the medium of dance, Salome acquires the power over

Herod that will inevitably lead to his downfall. His downfall comes about as a consequence of ordering the prophet's execution: an order which originally came from Salome. Herod is delighted after Salome's exhibition of sensuous talent: "Ah! Wonderful [...] I will give thee whatsoever thy soul desireth. What wouldst thou have? Speak" (*Collins Complete Works* 600).

Salome's power in the play is captured by the male characters submission to her requests. She realises her power over them and dominates them; in fear of her influence and power Herod orders her death. By refusing to return to the banquet as Herod orders her to in the beginning of the play, Salome indicates her intention to undermine his power as the patriarchal leader.

THE SLAVE. Princess, the Tetrarch prays you to return to the feast.

SALOME. I will not go back [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 586).

Salome refuses to be subservient in the patriarchal system and she indicates her intention to subvert this social structure. She exercises her power over Herod when she demands that the head of Jokanaan be brought to her on a silver charger, despite his desperate protests. It is significant that Jokanaan is a male prophet; in ordering his beheading Salome removes the male leader of a traditional and patriarchal institution.

HEROD. [...] I will give thee whatsoever thy soul desireth. What wouldst thou have [...]

SALOME. (*rising*): The head of Jokanaan.

HERODIAS. Ah! That is well said, my daughter.

HEROD. [...] No, no, Salome. You do not ask me that. Do not listen to your mother's voice [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 600-01).

In having remained independent from the influence of Herod and her mother Salome can be identified as a progressive female character. Salome's "*kneeling*" position in the early part of this dialogue symbolizes her more subservient position to Herod in the beginning of the play. The image of her "*rising*" up reflects her matriarchal ascension to power and her challenge of the patriarchy. Salome does not repent or hesitate in what she asks of Herod: "Give me the head of

Jokanaan" (*Collins Complete Works* 603). Wilde re-configures the idealisation of the Victorian patriarchy; the female characters in this play triumph, and the male characters such as Jokanaan are removed from positions of power. Various religious affiliations and morality are satirised throughout the play, undermining male patriarchal institutions and empowering Salome. Morality and religion are closely associated with the Victorian perception of women and this idealised and unrealistic link with women is challenged.¹⁴² Religion, and in this context, Christianity, which advocates the subservience of women to men is a cause which Wilde challenges in *Salome*. Salome's defiance of Herod and her order to have Jokanaan killed despite the fact that he is believed to be a prophet mirror this satirisation. In the opening scene the First Soldier and The Cappadocian mock the absurdity of religion.

FIRST SOLDIER. The Jews worship a God that you cannot see [...] In fact, they only believe in things that you cannot see.

THE CAPPADOCIAN. That seems to be altogether ridiculous (*Collins Complete Works* 584).

In being physically objectified by Salome and finally killed, Jokanaan's power as head of the Church is removed. Jokanaan becomes an object of desire and is perceived through Salome's female gaze; empowering a female perception of men. Salome: "[...] His flesh must be cool like ivory. I would look closer at him [...] Speak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me [...] who is he, the Son of Man? Is he beautiful as thou art [...]" (*Collins Complete Works* 589). Salome's admiration of Jokanaan's physical characteristics contests the importance of Jokanaan as a prophet, and transforms him into a sexualised symbol of Salome's desire. Salome idealises his virginity and believes "he is chaste as the moon is", and that "his body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed" (*Collins Complete Works* 589). This feminine construction of Jokanaan disempowers him as a patriarchal representative and affords Salome the former male patriarchal gaze. Salome does not recognise his power as an influential

¹⁴² The influence of the Church on the conception of the ideal Victorian woman is examined in the Introduction.

religious leader, reducing him to a physical object of desire. The play closes with the following scene which portrays Herod's fear of female power:

HEROD. (*rising*): [...] Let us hide ourselves in our palace, Herodias. I begin to be afraid [...]

THE VOICE OF SALOME. Ah! I have kissed your mouth, Jokanaan [...]

HEROD. (*Turning round and seeing Salome*): Kill that woman! [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 604-05).¹⁴³

The final image of Salome shrouded in light constructs her as a kind of matriarchal martyr in the play. The light that surrounds her is in contrast to the surrounding darkness which creates a halo-like image of her: "*A moonbeam falls on Salome, covering her with light*" (*Collins Complete Works* 605). Her triumphant assertion that she has kissed Jokanaan's mouth signifies her power over him. She has defeated him and at least partially fulfilled her desire. Joseph Donohue notes Salome's triumph over patriarchal powers in the play:

Salome has acted with such single-mindedness of purpose and has remained so implacable in her desire that she has overmastered the weaker will of the patriarch [...] Far from having been defeated, is she who has defeated the patriarch; it is she who will live in myth and legend, and in the imaginations of all who have seen her dance (Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* 133-4).

The final image of Wilde's heroine is one that must have pervaded the imagination of the theatre audience; it is the legend of Salome's prowess and queer identity that will be remembered and that replaces the power of Herod. Herod will live in terror because Salome's order to have the prophet beheaded will bring darkness and destruction upon him and his kingdom.

¹⁴³ This gruesome death could also be interpreted as the re-establishment of patriarchal power in the play, despite Herod's forthcoming downfall. Fernbach notes: "The threat of castration to phallic supremacy, represented to Salome herself, is warded off by the death of this castrating woman. When Herod commands that Salome be killed, the multiple erotic possibilities generated by the imagery and discourse are 'cut off' and reduced to a single ultimate signified. In *Salome* the phallogocentric order is threatened only so that it may ultimately be reinstated; this is the conservative dynamic of the play" (197).

Beardsley's Queer Illustrations.

Aubrey Beardsley was commissioned for the text illustrations of the English publication of *Salome* in 1894. Despite Beardsley's early tragic death from tuberculosis, his art was hugely influential on the Art Nouveau and Decadent Movement. Beardsley began his illustrations on *Salome* in 1893 after reading Wilde's play; Wilde's play influenced Beardsley's artistic creations. Beardsley's drawings can be considered as an insight into Wilde's vision for his characters and for the performance of the play. Beardsley published his first illustration of *Salome* in the popular Victorian magazine *The Studio* in April 1893, after reading Wilde's play. He published it in the hopes that it would convince the publisher John Lane to commission him for the illustrations of *Salome*. Beardsley and Wilde's similar vision of Wilde's characters, particularly of Salome, was evident by Wilde's claim in a personal dedication to Beardsley, noted by William Tydeman and Steven Price: "In an inscribed copy of *Salome* Wilde was to claim that only Beardsley apart from himself knew the true nature of the Dance of the Seven Veils and can see that invisible dance" (118). Beardsley's work on *Salome* included the cover design, title-page, contents page, tailpiece, and a signature for the back cover, as well as eleven full-page black and white illustrations. Beardsley's illustrations of *Salome* will be analysed according to queer theory. Butler's constructivist view of gender will be considered, and also her belief that costume is an essential signifier of gender. Costume is a signifier which Beardsley manipulates and blurs in order to confuse the gender identification of Wilde's characters. Sedgwick proposes the performative nature of gender and sexual identities in relation to queer theory, a framework which can be applied to Beardsley's illustrations:

[...] one of the things 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically [...] 'Queer' seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a

person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation (*Tendencies* 70).

Sedgwick's reflection on queer theory and the potential to open up more possibilities of identification reflects the interpretation of *Salome* as a play which celebrates difference. Beardsley's illustrations blur the gender identities and the sexual preferences of many of Wilde's characters, suggesting the fluid and constructive nature of gender and sexuality; making the performances essentially queer performances of identity.¹⁴⁴ As Amanda Fernbach notes:

Wilde's *Salome* is in a sense a postmodern play. In the many distorting mirrors of the text's metaphoric displacements, identities are not fixed by gender or sexuality but are instead depicted as doubled, multiple, and shifting. This complexity generates various trajectories of desire, which are repeated and accentuated by Aubrey Beardsley in his illustrations for Wilde's play (196).

Salome celebrates the fluidity of gender performance, and Beardsley's obscure demarcations between both genders capture Wilde's desire to experiment with gender. The use of costume in Beardsley's collection denotes the performed nature of gender in Victorian society, a concept also noted by Butler:

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the 'reality' of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks 'reality', and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance... But what is the sense of 'gender reality' that founds this perception in this way? Perhaps we think we know what the autonomy of the person is (sometimes we do not, and we certainly have not appreciated the variation that exists at

¹⁴⁴ In *Salome* Wilde's play with dual gender identities and Beardsley's experimentation with costume in the illustrations, contest the presumed biological determinism of sex according to the Victorian binary gender dynamic. Butler claims that in doing so gender becomes an independent and free floating artifice: "The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in the mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (*Gender Trouble* 10).

the level of anatomical description). Or we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn (*Gender Trouble* xxii).

Butler notes how costume is perceived as a signifier of gender and can be used as a queer performance of identity, blurring the gender identification of the subject. Costume is the external mode of gender identification and gender judgments are constantly made based on an individual's costume and the style in which they wear it.

The full page drawings are all in black and white and these oppositional colours depict the reality of gender segregation and inequality in the Victorian world. Rather than allowing the readers of the play text to definitively categorize the figures in the drawings as one gender or another, Beardsley either strips away costume to obscure gender signifiers, or he presents figures in gender neutral costume. The title-page of *Salome* (Figure 4) lists the publication details, and features a hermaphrodite figure on the left, which portrays the queer play with gender that is to come. The title-page and the illustrations discussed appear in chronological order as they are analysed below. In "The Woman in the Moon" (Figure 5), the figure on the right hand side of the page cannot be identified as a man or a woman and wears a long cloak. Costume is minimal and gender neutral to allow for experimentation with gender. The other figure's male genitals are on display, but the face seems more feminine. Costume is minimised in this illustration, perhaps conveying a need to challenge the restrictive costume of Victorian men and women. The female figure of the moon captures the powerful depiction of female characters in *Salome*, the influence of which terrifies Herod. The refusal to identify some of the figures captured Wilde's desire to contest the oppositional gender structure in society. Elizabeth Richmond-Garza notes that Wilde's cultural connections and complex sexuality is at the centre of the play: "One of the starkest images in the series, the first plate entitled 'The Woman in the Moon', reveals the double life at the center of the play, one which combines all the double lives which Wilde sought to perform as his translated self, writing in French as an Irish author about same-sex love" (30). Many of these figures can be identified as queer seeing as they are not

defined according to their gender. Similarly in "The Toilette of Salome" (Figure 6 number one), the costume and mask of the figure on the right hand side (presumably one of Salome's servants) concealed their gender, multiplying the possibilities of gender and suggesting a queer identity. In "The Toilette of Salome" (Figure 7 number two) which is a more controversial illustration, female sexuality is emphasized. Salome is characterised as female as her breasts are on display, but her servants' gender identities are more obscure. In many of Beardsley's illustrations such as this one, Salome's genitals are concealed; this denies her a definitive gendered identity and grants her the freedom of a queer identity. As Zatlin asserts "[...] when Beardsley drew men, he unclothed their lust for power over women. When he drew women, he portrayed their intelligence and their sexuality, in bold defiance of Victorian convention" (8). This illustration concentrates on sexuality; the placing of Salome's hand between her legs, and her closed eyes and partially open mouth suggests sexual desire. Her unwillingness to engage in sexual acts which could be defined as heterosexual or alternative reflects the need to contest these oppressive labels. Hall notes that: "Foucault explores at length how certain sexual categories, especially 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual,' were ones that not only were oppressive towards nonconformists but also became new and *empowering* ways by which individuals identified themselves" (66). Salome's servant in the left foreground gazes at her with pleasure; her hands are also between her legs, suggesting some erotic pleasure and the need to defy categorization. This servant's costume has been stripped away and gender identification is impossible as the servant sits hunched over and turned slightly away from the reading audience. The servant that stands over Salome wears a mask and a cloak; their gender identity is also concealed. The other servant in the left middle ground of the drawing is dressed in a cloak or dress which does not signify a particular gender. The servant opposite in the right middle ground has male genitals exposed, but the possible outline of breasts and long feminine hair confuse the gender reality of the subject. In the printed play text these illustrations blur the gender identity of many of the characters in the play, encouraging the audience that are familiar with the play to question their perceived gender reality onstage in performance. Beardsley

expands the perception of gender as a spectrum by creating queer characters that have no specific gender identity.

In “The Peacock Skirt” (Figure 8) the gender identities of the two figures are not clear. We can assume due to the elaborate nature of the peacock headdress and skirt that Salome is on the left, and it is probably the Young Syrian on the right. The blurring of their gender identities challenges the Victorian gender dynamic, and Salome’s dominant stance and overwhelming physicality over the Young Syrian also challenges typical gender roles. Salome’s peacock headdress and dominant stance associates her with masculinity; it is only a male peacock’s inclination to display the various colours in their tails as a mode of masculine dominance. This connection to a male peacock identifies Salome as male, blurring the gender boundaries even further. Her queer gender challenges the oppositional nature of Victorian gender roles. “The Black Cape” (Figure 9) is the only illustration that features Salome alone and captures her unconventional power and influence in the play. Her costume, a Japanese-style black cape, and her dominance of the illustration imply that she can be considered an alternative to the notion of the ideal Victorian woman. Salome is a more modern and complex character. The cape conceals any categorization of her according to gender, so she remains a queer subject. The object in her hand, which could be a weapon of some sort or a supernatural device, suggests that Salome will exercise her agency and not be a passive object of the male gaze. A gender power struggle is evident in many of the illustrations and in “The Climax” (Figure 10), we can identify Salome as she holds the head of Iokanaan in her hands. He is the object of her female desire, but his death was necessary in order to fulfil her desire to kiss him and to disempower him. This drawing, also known as “J’ai Baise ta Bouche, Iokanaan, J’ai Baise ta Bouche” and was the first of the illustrations to be printed in the magazine *The Studio*, in April 1893. Salome is elevated mid-air in a position which signifies her rise to power, and the bleak landscape which surrounds her forecasts Herod’s order to have her killed. Salome’s status as a queer subject is maintained by her gender neutral costume, and Iokanaan’s long hair and feminised lips also confuse any

gender categorization of him. The flowering lotus and the flaccid weed at the right foreground represent the gender power relations in Victorian society. In "Enter Herodias" (Figure 11), while the figures are connected to particular gender identities these are confused and could be interpreted as a queer display of gender. The figure on the right could be the Young Syrian or a servant whose male genitals can be seen, but who appears to be wearing make-up and a feminine wig. Herodias is beside the Young Syrian, and while her breasts are exposed she is masculine in appearance and more physically dominant than the other figures. She is also elevated above the other figures implying her power and influence in the play. The servant who holds her cloak is a gender neutral and devilish character, suggested by the hoof peeking below the cloak.¹⁴⁵ The gender identity of the servant remains unknown, and the evidence that the audience are provided with, such as breasts and male genitalia, is juxtaposed with gender signifiers which traverse gender identifications making them queer subjects. In "The Eyes of Herod" (Figure 12) Salome wears peacock feathers in her hair and looks down on Herod. Her elevation above him conveys her power over him and her challenge to the patriarchy. While Salome's dress or cloak is seductive and reveals one breast, her peacock feather headdress displays a masculine display of dominance, challenging a gender identification of her. Herod's costume is gender neutral, also portraying him as a queer character. Two male cherubs carry a fork with flames and capture the tension of this gender power struggle. In Beardsley's final illustration "Fin" (Figure 13) Salome is being lowered into a box, possibly signifying her death in the play, but despite this she looks as if she is merely sleeping. Furthermore, the box takes on the appearance of a makeup box not a coffin, implying her rejuvenation and play with gender. The box is decorated with flowers and depicts luxury and rest, not death. The unwillingness to define many of the characters' gender identities, and the exploration of gender as a fluid and experimental social process exemplify both Wilde's and Beardsley's intention to contest the Victorian gender dynamic. Beardsley's queered characters advocate a play with gender and an empowerment of female sexuality which is also evident in Wilde's *Salome*.

¹⁴⁵ The hoof could also be interpreted as a phallic signifier.

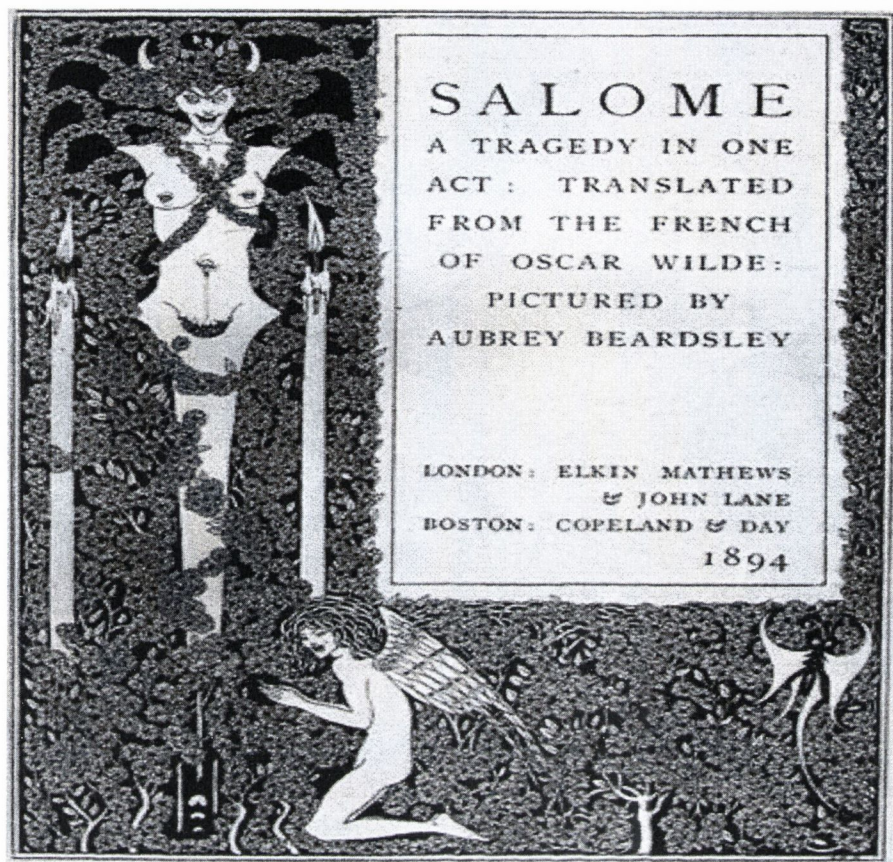


Fig. 1 Title-Page of *Salome*.



Fig. 2 "The Woman and the Moon".



Fig. 3 "Toilette" One.

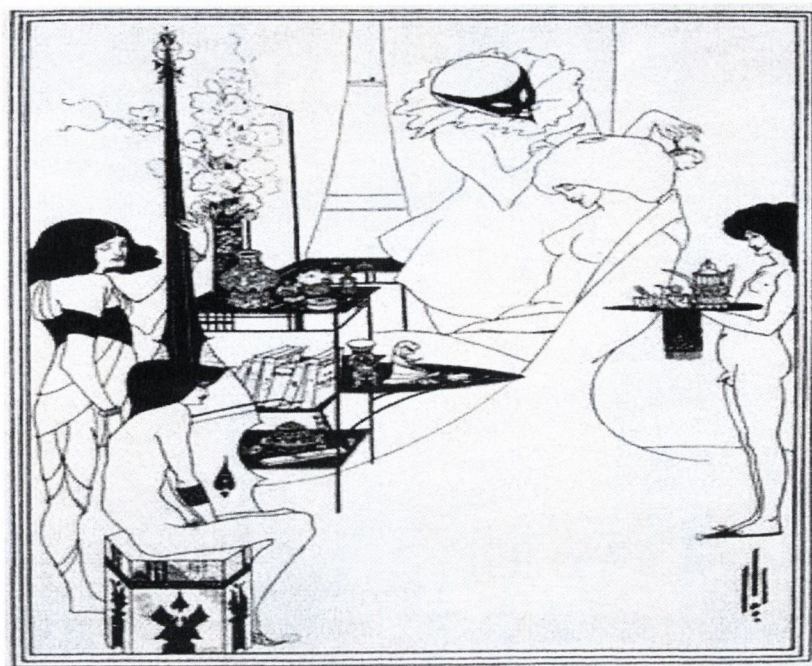


Fig. 4 "Toilette" Two.



Fig. 5 "The Peacock Skirt".



Fig. 6 "The Black Cape".



Fig. 7 "The Climax".

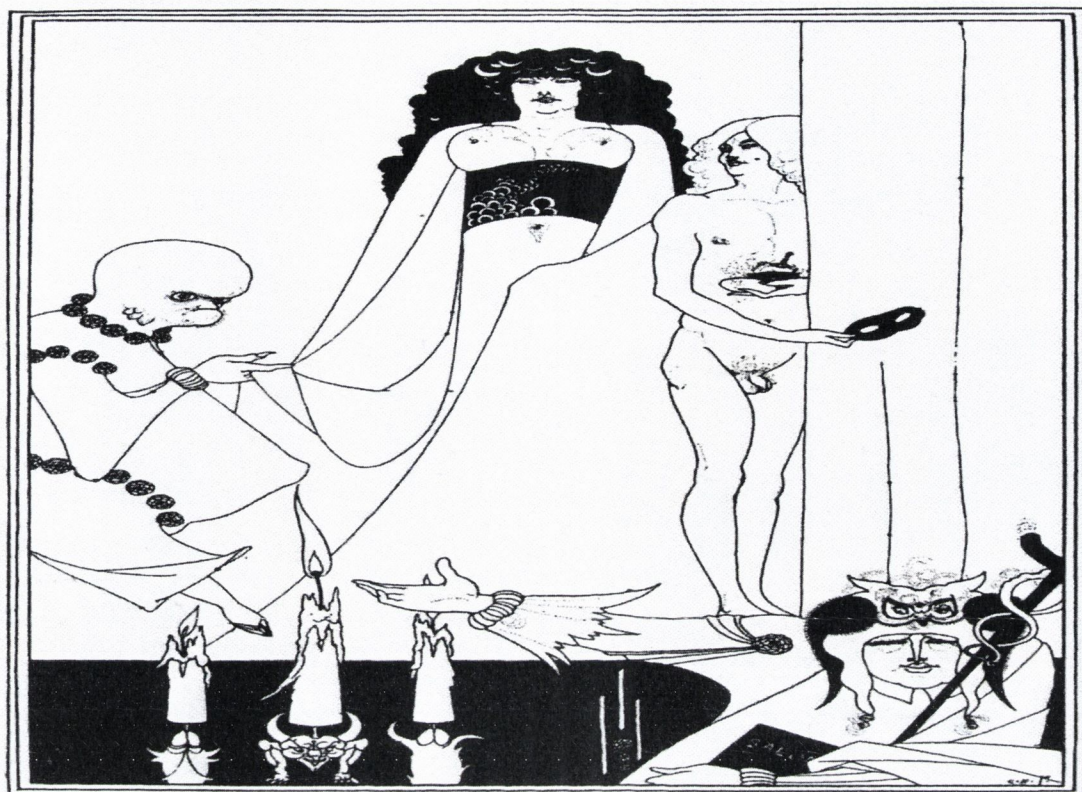


Fig. 8 "Enter Herodias".

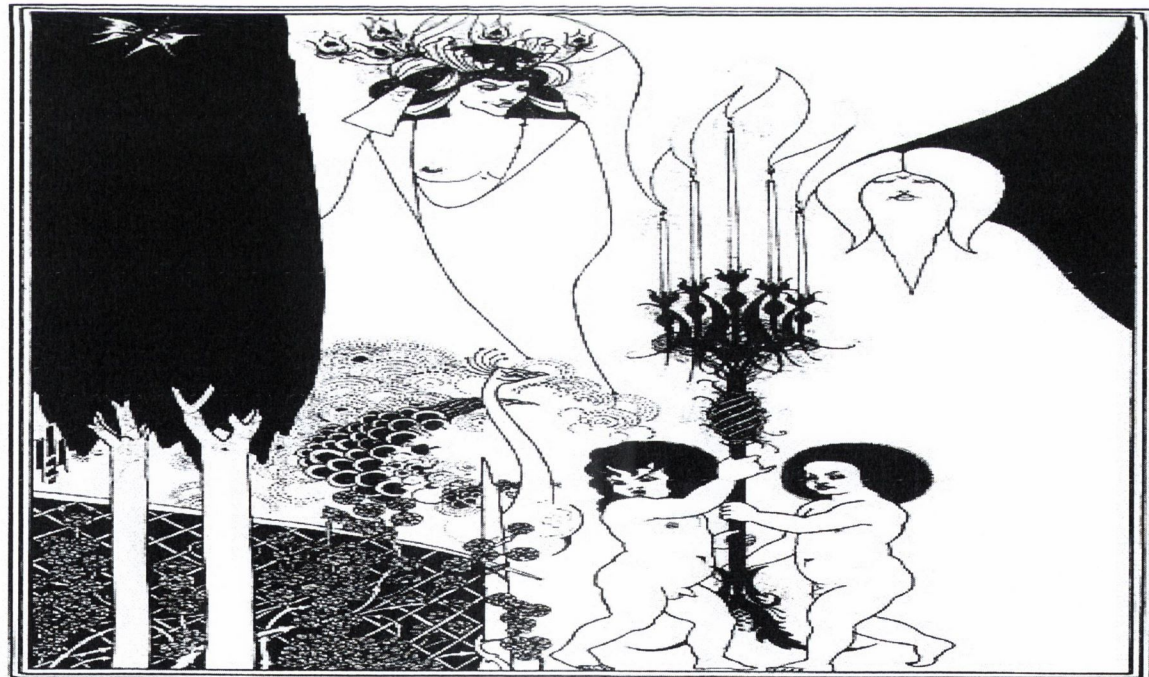


Fig. 9 "The Eyes of Herod".



Fig. 10 "Fin".

Salome is more vocally and physically dominant than any of the other characters in the play, including Herod. She is an icon of strength, sexuality and desire, and at the same time she is a victim of the patriarchal system; a system which put pressure on her to be subservient to men. Beardsley's illustrations convey the power of Salome, but they also emphasize the experimentation with gender that the play advocates. Doody notes the triumph of Wilde's female protagonist in *Salome*: "[...] the eponymous heroine of *Salome* (1894) defeats male power and overrides patriarchal values in wresting her desire from and imposing her will upon both the powerful Tetrarch and the saintly Jokanaan" (Killeen 34). Although Herod instructs his soldiers to kill Salome there is no confirmation that she is dead when the curtain falls. Herod's unwillingness to kill her himself out of fear also indicates her continuing power over him. Even if the audience is to surmise that she is dead from Wilde's stage directions, she escapes the inevitable suffering that her actions will bring on Herod. Wilde's final stage directions idealise Salome as: "*Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judea*", and in doing so her mother is empowered as her matriarchal line of lineage (*Collins Complete Works* 605). In the end Herodias stands alongside Salome and supports her daughter; the women in the play unite against the male patriarchal systems of power: "I approve of what my daughter has done. And I will stay here now" (*Collins Complete Works* 604). The patriarchal landscape which opens the play has been transformed temporarily into a matriarchal landscape, where the emphasis is on female power and queer identifications. Herod instructs his wife to: "Come... Come, I tell thee", and his repetition of this order implies that she does not immediately follow him offstage (*Collins Complete Works* 605). The stage directions only detail Herod's movements offstage; this is another indicator that Herodias remains beside her daughter: "*The stage becomes very dark. The Tetrarch begins to climb the staircase*" (*Collins Complete Works* 605). This final image in the play disempowers Herod as he steps, presumably alone, into the foreboding darkness that Salome has brought upon him. Herod's movement up the steps into the palace also signifies his regression into the private sphere, while Herodias remains outside. Zatlin proposes that Herod's

actions at the end of the play punish Salome for transgressing into the male public sphere and challenging male power:

[...] Like her mother Herodias, Salome uses the only power she has in male society, her body, to bargain with Herod for John's head. In arousing Herod through her dance, Salome succeeds in reconciling him to her ends, manipulating the patriarchal authority into achieving what she as a female could not. [...] He then orders Salome's death to punish her translation of female power into male power and to restore legitimacy to a masculine authority encroached upon by a woman. [...] (94).

Rather than becoming powerless in a male patriarchal framework Salome contests the oppressive gender dynamic. Although she is erased in death, she is remembered as a character who challenges the gender inequality of society.

Chapter Five: Contesting Marriage and the Traditional Family Unit in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895).

Similar to Salome's challenge to patriarchal power in *Salome*, in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895) Wilde's creation of alternative family units and partnerships satirise marriage and the traditional family unit. In these plays Wilde presents alternative and modern characters; powerful matriarchs such as Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman* dominate the stage space. The female characters are often more free to permeate the private and public sphere while the patriarchs remain dislocated. In *A Woman* and *An Ideal Husband* the idealisation of Victorian men is undermined, providing an opportunity for the matriarch to assert her independence and individuality. The superficial nature of marriage is emphasized by the Chiltern's marriage in *An Ideal Husband*, while Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring can be considered a more modern couple. Mrs Arbuthnot, arguably Wilde's most unconventional female character, chooses not to marry the biological father of her son, Lord Illingworth, and instead lives independently and cherishes her relationship with her son Gerald.¹⁴⁶ In rejecting the role of father to Gerald, Illingworth represents Wilde's need to challenge the idealisation of the Victorian patriarch. Instead the idealised relationship between father and son becomes ambiguous; Illingworth's sudden need to dote on his son is suspicious and suggests that something more is going on between these two characters. This play symbolizes Wilde's ability to re-conceptualize the structure of the ideal Victorian family unit. Instead *A Woman* features a strong single mother who raises her son independently and rejects marriage, and a father who refuses to play the part of a parent to his own son.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Mrs Arbuthnot's decision not to marry after she had her son Gerald marks her out as unconventional. Her rejection of Illingworth's marriage proposal in the final act mirrors her unwillingness to marry for the sake of social convention.

¹⁴⁷ In a letter to Oswald York Wilde describes *A Woman* as "a woman's play"; an explicit reference to the various female characters and relationships which dominate the play (Hart-Davis, *Letters* 335).

A Woman of No Importance: Plot Summary.

A Woman of No Importance was first staged on the 19th of April 1893, at London's Haymarket Theatre. Act One opens on the lawn at Lady Hunstanton's country house at Hunstanton Chase. Sir John, Lady Caroline Pontefract and Hester Worsley, a younger American guest, discuss the differences between American and English life. Lady Caroline criticizes America, and it is evident from her behaviour that she is an unconventionally dominant female character. Lady Hunstanton and Gerald Arbuthnot enter, and Gerald happily informs the party that Lord Illingworth has invited him to be his personal secretary. Lady Hunstanton insists on inviting Gerald's mother, Mrs Arbuthnot, to join them that evening for dinner so that they can celebrate the news together. Gerald asks Hester to accompany him for a private walk, and their sudden departure suggests that perhaps these two characters are courting each other. Mrs Allonby, Lady Stutfield, Sir John, Mr Kelvil and finally Lord Illingworth, re-join the party and they contribute to the discussion about society, and the various roles and responsibilities of men and women. Lady Stutfield claims that: "The world was made for men and not for women" (*Collins Complete Works* 468). Lord Alfred Rufford enters soon after and it is revealed that Sir John is Lady Caroline's fourth husband. Mrs Allonby believes that Hester is a Puritan so she challenges Lord Illingworth to kiss her in order to witness her reaction, and he accepts this challenge. Act Two takes place in the drawing-room; it is after dinner and the ladies recline without the men for a while. The differences between men and women are the first topic of conversation which the characters discuss, and it is evident that the opinions of the female characters in this play are foregrounded. Mrs Allonby notes: "All men are married women's property. That is the only true definition of what married women's property really is" (*Collins Complete Works* 478). The female characters survey the male characters, and investigate their opinions on ideal men and ideal husbands. Lady Caroline notes that the ideal man "is to do nothing but pay bills and compliments" (*Collins Complete Works* 481). Hester listens to this conversation and afterwards she proposes that English society is shallow, foolish and superficial. She claims that in England women are treated unfairly, and that there should be gender equality in society. Mrs Arbuthnot

arrives and the men come into the room wherein Gerald introduces his mother to Illingworth. Their reactions on seeing each other, which Wilde conveys in the stage directions, reveal that they are already acquaintances. The other characters exit into the music-room, while Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot remain behind. It becomes clear that Illingworth is Gerald's biological father, and that Mrs Arbuthnot left him with Gerald when she was pregnant as he refused to marry her. Mrs Arbuthnot does not want Gerald travelling abroad with his father as his secretary; she fears that he will have a negative influence on her son. Act Three is set in "The Picture Gallery at Hunstanton Chase" where Gerald and Illingworth discuss his mother, and Illingworth emphasizes the importance of having female support and opinion on his side, suggesting that women rule society (*Collins Complete Works* 492). Some of the other characters join them and they talk about various subjects including morality. Mrs Arbuthnot implores Gerald not to go away with Illingworth as his employee, and Gerald confesses his love of Hester to his mother. Mrs Arbuthnot divulges some of her past to Gerald, but maintains her anonymity for fear of his judgment, and she emphasizes Illingworth's immoral past in the hope that it will convince him to stay. Meanwhile Illingworth is on the terrace where he tries to kiss Hester, who then runs inside in fright and flings herself into Gerald's arms. Gerald is appalled by Illingworth's conduct and rushes over to fight him to protect Hester's honour, but in order to prevent him Mrs Arbuthnot reveals that Illingworth is Gerald's father. She collapses on the ground in shame and Gerald helps his mother up and leads her from the room. The final act of the play is set at Mrs Arbuthnot's house at Wrockley. Gerald is writing a letter to Illingworth and Lady Hunstanton, and Mrs Allonby call to enquire after Mrs Arbuthnot's health, but she has not yet come downstairs. Gerald informs them that he will no longer take up Illingworth's offer to be his secretary. Mrs Arbuthnot appears after they have left, and Gerald tells her that he has asked Illingworth to the house that afternoon, and that he insists upon Illingworth marrying his mother. Mrs Arbuthnot explains that she will never marry him as she does not love Illingworth, but that her sin and her shame were worth the love she has for her son. Hester arrives onstage and after she convinces him, Gerald finally accepts that his mother will not marry Illingworth.

Hester and Gerald will marry and exit into the garden just as Illingworth arrives. Illingworth now conveniently wishes to be a part of his son's life however; Mrs Arbuthnot and Gerald are not interested in him. He will leave his son some of his property to inherit. When he finds Gerald's letter which proposes that he marry Mrs Arbuthnot Illingworth agrees to this plan, but Mrs Arbuthnot refuses to marry him. Illingworth insults Mrs Arbuthnot and Gerald terribly, she strikes him across the face with his glove and he leaves after taking one last look at his son. When Gerald and Hester enter from the garden Gerald questions his mother about whose glove is lying on the floor, and her final line of the play exemplifies her dislike of Illingworth: "Oh, no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance" (*Collins Complete Works* 514).

The Matriarch in *A Woman*.

Wilde displaces the power of the patriarch in *A Woman* and empowers the matriarch in an alternative and more gender liberal landscape. Hesketh Pearson notes that in an interview in the early 1890s, Wilde reflects on the issues of gender inequality and morality in Victorian society: "Several plays have been written lately that deal with the monstrous injustice of the social code of morality at the present time. It is indeed a burning shame that there should be one law for men and another law for women. I think that there should be no law for anybody" (251). What is most unusual about this play is that it focuses specifically on the single and unmarried matriarch, Mrs Arbuthnot; an example of Wilde's alternative conception of the "New Woman". She courageously refuses to marry and is happy with this decision and her unconventional family unit at the end of the play. Raby recognizes Wilde's alternative family unit and the controversial situation that the play presents: "The falseness of this happy English home is then laid bare: an unmarried mother with an assumed name; a bastard son; and an unrepentant seducer, who offers marriage as the price for his son" (152). But Wilde challenges the Victorian conception of the family unit by presenting an alternative family unit whose members challenge the expectations that Victorian society have of them, and they are eventually happy. Wilde's specifically female settings in the play, (which will be examined at a later point in the chapter), dislocate the male characters, while the female characters unconventionally pervade both the

domestic and the public spheres in the play; for example Mrs Arbuthnot. As Wilde's "woman of no importance" Mrs Arbuthnot ironically links the characters in the play together, and her life choices mirror her need to contest the social norms in society. The title of the play also reinforces her precarious position in society. Despite their unconventional family unit, Mrs Arbuthnot's love for her son is idealised. Mrs Arbuthnot: "Gerald, when you were naked I clothed you, when you were hungry I gave you food. Night and day all that long winter I tended you... I have never repented of my sin. How could I repent of my sin when you, my love, were its fruit [...] I would rather be your mother – oh! much rather! – than have been always pure" (*Collins Complete Works* 508-9). Rather than regret her isolation from society and her actions which led to the birth of her son, Mrs Arbuthnot relishes her role as Gerald's mother. Eltis notes that Mrs Arbuthnot's character disputes the popular Victorian stereotype of the self-sacrificing mother: "Mrs Arbuthnot rejects the standard association of maternity and self-sacrifice. [...] Mrs Arbuthnot simply redefines the mother's role, demanding instead that the son sacrifice himself to her" (*Revising Wilde* 106). Mrs Arbuthnot's history exposes her as an unconventional woman, having left her home at a young age, unmarried, and with her lover.¹⁴⁸ Her background is an indicator that she could be identified as an embodiment of the "New Woman", but Wilde contests this framework by re-imagining Mrs Arbuthnot as a very different woman. Raby supports the claim that Mrs Arbuthnot is an unconventional "New Woman": "Challenging the stereotype, Rachel 'Arbuthnot', Wilde's woman of no importance is both a woman with a past, an innocent victim, and the centre of goodness and moral truth within the play; she is also extremely beautiful, appearing after dinner at Hunstanton Chase in her black velvet gown, whose colour was suitable for a penitent, but whose close-fitting bodice and low neckline conveyed a disturbingly ambivalent image" (151). Wilde's re-imagining of this complex, unconventional and likeable "New Woman" contests the narrow Victorian perception of women and the "New Woman" at that time.

¹⁴⁸ Eltis proposes that: "Mrs Arbuthnot is no quietly resigned magdalen but a passionate woman whose strict moral sense is constantly at war with her own deepest emotions. [...] Wilde breaks this mould by creating a woman who is no cardboard saint but all too palpably flesh and blood. As a young girl, Rachel Arbuthnot's passions overruled her strict moral upbringing and she left home with her lover" (*Revising Wilde* 107).

Gerald is expected to sacrifice his career with Illingworth and his freedom that would have come with his foreign employment. By focusing on an unmarried mother in the play, Wilde brings a person that would normally have been isolated from Victorian society and presents her to his audience. As Mrs Arbuthnot's lover, Illingworth's irresponsible behaviour in the play would have created empathy in audience members for Mrs Arbuthnot, creating a more complex character. In the beginning of the play Mrs Arbuthnot conceals Gerald from discovering that Illingworth is his biological father. Instead of an idealisation of the patriarch, Gerald's life is characterised by an absence of a father figure. In her devotion to Gerald, Mrs Arbuthnot is both a mother and a father to him. Gerald recognizes her love and sacrifice for him: "You are my mother and my father all in one. I need no second parent" (*Collins Complete Works* 509-10). Despite her alienation from society, Mrs Arbuthnot rejects Illingworth's proposal and refuses to marry Gerald's father; an unconventional and courageous decision that ensures her continued isolation from society. Mrs Arbuthnot believes that Illingworth never took responsibility for his role as Gerald's father, and that marriage is a sacrament for those who love each other. Mrs Arbuthnot: "How could I swear to love the man that I loathe, to honour him who wrought you dishonour, to obey him who, in his mastery, made me to sin? No: marriage is a sacrament for those who love each other. It is not for such as him, or such as me" (*Collins Complete Works* 507-08). Wilde evokes the presumed and compulsory nature of marriage in society. By remaining independent and unmarried, Wilde's matriarch, Mrs Arbuthnot, dispenses with the need for a male partner and pioneers an alternative family unit; initially comprising of her and her son, and then Hester following their engagement.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Mrs Arbuthnot's decision not to marry could be connected to the controversial issue of property in Victorian legislation. Before the amendment to The Women's Property Act of 1870 in 1882, a woman's property automatically became her husband's when she married. Only widowed and unmarried women had the right to inherit and buy and sell property independently.

Gerald Arbuthnot: An Object of Exchange.

Mrs Arbuthnot and Hester dominate Gerald and he becomes an object of exchange between his parents in *A Woman*. As his son Gerald is Illingworth's object of desire, but he remains under the influence of his mother, Mrs Arbuthnot. Gerald's surname, Arbuthnot, depicts the potential to perform an alternative identity in the play. Gerald can be interpreted as an object of exchange between his mother and his father; a framework which narrates an alternative to the marital exchange of women, seeing as his parents remain unmarried.¹⁵⁰ Gerald replaces the typical position of the bride and his mother triumphs in this parental battle. When he discovers the truth about Illingworth Gerald refuses the position of his secretary, and makes it clear that he wants nothing to do with his father. Butler notes the position of the bride in a marital framework, a position in this play which Gerald occupies:

The bride, the gift, the object of exchange constitutes 'a sign and a value' that opens a channel of exchange that not only serves the *functional* purpose of facilitating trade but performs the *symbolic* or *ritualistic* purpose of consolidating the internal bonds, the collective identity, of each clan differentiated through the act. In other words, the bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not *have* an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence (*Gender Trouble* 49-50).

Gerald's past is influenced and controlled by his mother, so Gerald reflects the feminine identity of his mother. His mother also controls his future by informing him about Illingworth's identity; she ensures that he will decline the post and remain with her and Hester. Gerald does not assert his own identity in the play; his past is defined by his mother, and his future temporarily by her but ultimately by Hester, the woman he will marry. Gerald functions as a relational term, as Butler's framework defines it, between his mother and Illingworth, and then ultimately between

¹⁵⁰ Eltis also proposes that Gerald is an object of exchange in the play: "Wilde deviated from the melodramatic tradition by disregarding the role of the illegitimate son himself, reducing Gerald to a passive trophy over which others fight. [...] Gerald Arbuthnot is [...] little more than a stage prop in the confrontation between his parents" (*Revising Wilde* 118).

his mother and Hester. Mrs Arbuthnot maintains the ultimate position of power and manipulates the narrative history of Gerald's past. Mrs Arbuthnot claims her son as her own:

MRS ARBUTHNOT. You have no right to claim him, or the smallest part of him. The boy is entirely mine and shall remain mine [...]

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You forget, Rachel, it was you who left me. It was not I who left you (*Collins Complete Works* 489).

Mrs Arbuthnot asserts her independence when she leaves Illingworth and walks out with their baby; in this instance she can be considered an example of the New Woman in Victorian society. Mrs Arbuthnot can be recognised as such in her decision to practice unconventional female independence. It is Illingworth who has been left by Mrs Arbuthnot, and in keeping him from playing the role of father to his son she undermines his masculinity. In not marrying her, he rejects the role of husband and she refuses to take on the role of wife. When Mrs Arbuthnot refuses Illingworth's proposal to marry her at the end of the play, this rejection challenges his masculinity once again. Mrs Arbuthnot contests male inheritance; instead her son will share the riches of his wife. It is Hester, another "New Woman", who contests the social stability of marriage according to the patriarchy, in the transaction over Gerald. Hester: "I hate my riches. They are a burden. Let him share it with me" (*Collins Complete Works* 510). Hester provides the financial independence, stability and status which Gerald and his mother could hope for, and it is only with Mrs Arbuthnot's approval that their marriage will occur. Gerald is prevented from exercising his masculinity and instead the female characters are empowered in deciding his future for him.

MRS ARBUTHNOT. My boy! My boy! My boy! (*Running her fingers through his hair.*)

HESTER. (*coming over*): But you have two children now. You'll let me be your daughter?

MRS ARBUTHNOT. (*looking up*): Would you choose me for a mother?

HESTER. You of all women I have ever known (*Collins Complete Works* 514).

In raising him alone Mrs Arbuthnot represents the single maternal unit; an invaluable and modern alternative to the marital unit.

The dominance of the female characters in *A Woman* is reflected in their uninhibited movement between public and private spheres in the play. The four acts in this play are grounded in female spaces, many of which are owned by female characters. The opening act of the play is described by Wilde as: “*Lawn in front of the terrace at Hunstanton Chase [...] SIR JOHN and LADY CAROLINE PONTEFRAC, MISS WORSELY, on chairs under large yew tree*”. (*Collins Complete Works* 465). Hunstanton Chase is Lady Hunstanton’s house, and although it is not confirmed definitively in the play it can be assumed that her husband is dead: “[...] poor dear Hunstanton was the most delightful of creatures, and as good as gold”, and that she has inherited the property through widowhood (*Collins Complete Works* 479). The house and the setting then are identified as Lady Hunstanton’s. Act Two is set in the: “*Drawing-room at Hunstanton Chase, after dinner, lamps lit [...] Ladies seated on sofa*” (*Collins Complete Works* 477). The beginning of this act is marked by the absence of male characters from the scene; in this exclusively female space the female characters are dominant, and they discuss the absurdity of ideal men and husbands. The male characters only move into this space towards the end of the act; this signifies the female dominance of this space. Act Three is set in a female sphere which is legally owned by Lady Hunstanton: “*The Picture Gallery at Hunstanton Chase [...]*”, and Illingworth and Gerald’s conversation and the possibility of their union is quickly undermined by the arrival of Lady Hunstanton and Mrs Arbuthnot (*Collins Complete Works* 492). The final act of the play reinforces the dominance of female settings in *A Woman*: “*Sitting-room at Mrs. Arbuthnot’s house at Wrockley. Large open French window at back, looking on to garden [...]*” (*Collins Complete Works* 503). Wilde’s choice to conclude the final act of the play from Mrs Arbuthnot’s house empowers her, and the alternative family unit that Mrs Arbuthnot, Gerald and Hester represent. Mrs Arbuthnot chooses not to marry and remains independent, rather than entering into the framework of marriage. Illingworth briefly pervades this space, but after being rejected on two counts: initially by his son and then by Mrs Arbuthnot in marriage, he departs the scene with nothing. In not establishing a distinctive male space Wilde challenges the gender segregation which permeated Victorian society. The male characters are also dislocated

as a result of this and move uneasily between female spaces. As well as occupying the stage spaces in *A Woman* the female characters also dominate marriage. Wilde presents the first married couple, Sir John Pontefract and Lady Caroline Pontefract, in the opening act of the play. Lady Caroline and Hester converse while her husband adopts a more silent role in this scene; he only speaks to correct her pronunciation, corrections which she ignores. Lady Caroline's perception of her husband can be connected to the typically traditional perception of Victorian women as irrational, delicate and submissive. She assumes that she is the best judge of him and the play is punctuated by her various orders to him and her dismissal of his opinions.

LADY CAROLINE. John, the grass is too damp for you. You had better go and put on your overshoes at once.

SIR JOHN. I am quite comfortable, Caroline, I assure you.

LADY CAROLINE. You must allow me to be the best judge of that, John. Pray do as I tell you.

SIR JOHN *gets up and goes off*. (*Collins Complete Works* 468).

Lady Caroline also prevents her husband from performing his masculinity by expecting him to be submissive to her demands. She dictates his movements onstage in the play, which suggests that he is controlled and confined to specific spaces by her. By insisting that he must sit beside his wife, Lady Caroline exercises ultimate control over her husband and his movement on the stage.

LADY CAROLINE. I think you had come over here, John. It is more sheltered.

SIR JOHN. I am quite comfortable, Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE. I think not, John. You had better sit beside me.

SIR JOHN *rises and goes across*. (*Collins Complete Works* 469).

Lady Caroline exudes unconventional female attributes and Mrs Allonby's reflection that: "Sir John is her fourth!" husband signifies her willingness to enter into marriage to maintain an acceptable status (*Collins Complete Works* 474). In Act Two of *A Woman* Wilde's female characters lead a discussion on marriage. Mrs Allonby unconventionally reflects on the all-

female environment with relief: "What a comfort it is to have gotten rid of the men for a little [...]" I don't think we should ever be spoken of as other people's property. All men are married women's property. That is the only true definition of what married women's property really is. But we don't belong to any one" (*Collins Complete Works* 477-78). Mrs Allonby proposes a liberating idea of marriage for women which advocates the treatment of men as the object of exchange, a theory which is also reflected by the treatment of Gerald in *A Woman*. Mrs Allonby's reflection challenges Butler's view of women as a powerless object of exchange in marriage. She cites men as "married women's property" and believes that women remain independent in marriage (*Collins Complete Works* 477-78). Perhaps this reference can also be connected to the emerging women's suffragist movement in Victorian society. Mrs Allonby's declaration on marriage: "the institution is wrong" is also an explicit attack on Victorian marriage, and the superficial reasoning behind marriage (*Collins Complete Works* 481). By claiming that marriage is wrong, Mrs Allonby encourages the audience to think about alternative frameworks outside of the married unit. *A Woman* contests the Victorian gender inequality and as Eltis claims "The true centre of *A Woman of No Importance* is this interaction between human nature and the laws which seek to confine it" (129). Wilde described Act Two of *A Woman* as a: "Fin de Siècle Conversation on Marriage" (MS 81622). Mrs Arbuthnot claims that she ran away from Illingworth as he refused to marry her. Instead of presenting his audience with an idealised marital unit Wilde presents the Pontefract's marriage and Mrs Arbuthnot; a character whose precarious position and difficult decisions portray her independence and strength, and who lives a more satisfying life on her own rather than marrying Illingworth. By the end of the play Illingworth has been rejected by his son and by Mrs Arbuthnot, and the alternative family unit is empowered; Gerald, Hester and Mrs Arbuthnot will live together happily. Wilde's privileging of female relations on the Victorian stage is unconventional and his female characters are the subjects in these plays not the objects. Despite this, the threat of marriage at the end of many of the plays reinforces the reality of the compulsory family unit in the Victorian world.

The male characters are also oppressed within the framework of marriage. Wilde satirises the idealisation of Victorian men, particularly the idealisation of the Victorian patriarch as the head of the family unit in *A Woman*. The alternative characters in this play, like those in *Earnest*, provide other modern modes of existence. In *A Woman* Lady Stutfield, Mrs Allonby and Lady Hunstanton challenge the idealisation of Victorian men and the idea of an ideal husband, ultimately questioning Victorian masculinity.

LADY STUTFIELD. Do tell me your conception of the Ideal Husband? I think it would be so very, very helpful.

MRS ALLONBY. The Ideal Husband? There couldn't be such a thing. The institution is wrong [...] The Ideal Man! Oh, the Ideal Man should talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children. [...] He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says [...]

LADY HUNTSTANTON. How clever you are, my dear! You never mean a single word you say (*Collins Complete Works* 481).

Mrs Allonby challenges the belief in an ideal husband by claiming that there is no such thing. By continuing to contradict each other and their thoughts on the ideal man, the female characters expose the ideal man as a fictional construct. As previously examined in the Introduction Victorian masculinity is closely associated with the roles of father and husband. By undermining these roles then the characters undermine masculinity. Caroline Pontefract's influence over her husband John also prevents him from performing a Victorian masculinity in marriage, as Mrs Arbuthnot and Illingworth's dominance of Gerald prevents him from performing Victorian masculinity. Illingworth's initial ignorance that Gerald is his son followed by Gerald's refusal to play the part of Illingworth's son undermines Illingworth's masculinity. Illingworth's attempt to marry Mrs Arbuthnot, although it is inspired by Gerald, reflects Illingworth's desire to perform Victorian masculinity in the form of marriage, but Mrs Arbuthnot rejects this conventional marriage of convenience. Perhaps Illingworth's masculinity is an alternative or modern masculinity that refutes the narrow association with fatherhood and marriage. Another

alternative to marriage is the relationship between Gerald Arbuthnot and Illingworth which can also be interpreted as a refutation of Victorian masculinity. Their relationship is characterized as that of father and son, but the language between the men in the beginning of the play suggests that their relationship, certainly on Illingworth's part, is characterised by desire. As Sinfield asserts: "the situation is strange and uneasy [...] Illingworth discovers paternal feelings he never even suspected he had" and he notes that Kerry Powell claims that: "the basis of this change of heart is never dramatized" (73). If Illingworth's paternal sentiment for Gerald is never dramatized onstage, then what can we surmise from Wilde's dramaturgical omission? This omission portrays Illingworth as a suspicious character, and most likely leaves the audience with the feeling that the author's intention is to have the audience question the sincerity of Illingworth's actions. The superficial paternal desire which Illingworth expresses provides him with a natural excuse to want to spend more time with Gerald. Lady Hunstanton and Lady Caroline constantly remind Gerald that he is lucky to have gained the opportunity to work for Illingworth, an implication which evokes the possibility that their relationship is a cross-class one.

GERALD. Lady Hunstanton, I have such good news to tell you. Lord Illingworth has just offered to make me his secretary.

LADY HUNSTANTON. His secretary? That is good news indeed, Gerald. It means a very brilliant future in store for you. [...]

LADY CAROLINE. That is a very wonderful opening for so young a man as you are, Mr. Arbuthnot. [...]

LADY HUNSTANTON. I am very much gratified at Gerald Arbuthnot's good fortune. He is quite a protégée of mine. And I am particularly pleased that Lord Illingworth should have made the offer of his own accord without my suggesting anything (*Collins Complete Works* 466-67).

Lady Hunstanton's intention to ask Illingworth to provide Gerald with employment as a favor to her, implies that perhaps he is not qualified enough to be offered this opportunity on his own

merits. Wilde deleted original dialogue from *A Woman*, a move which implied his awareness that his audience may have recognised the play's explicit sexual tones between these two male characters. In the second draft manuscript of the play the dialogue between Illingworth and Gerald, which Wilde later deleted, depicts a more intimate relationship between the two men. It could portray Illingworth's desire for an intimate relationship with Gerald.

MRS ALLONBY. How you delight in disciples! What is their charm?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is always pleasant to have a slave to whisper in one's ear that after all, one is immortal. But young Arbuthnot is not a disciple... as yet. He is simply one of the most delightful men I have ever met (MS 37944: p. 37 G).

This passage is deleted from the published play text.¹⁵¹ Illingworth's acknowledgment that he hopes Gerald will become a disciple and that he is a slave to him, suggests an unconventional relationship between the men. Wilde's creation of an exclusively male dialogue between Illingworth and Gerald provides a replacement to the idealised Victorian couple.

GERALD. Lord Illingworth, every one has been congratulating me, Lady Hunstanton, and Lady Caroline, and [...] every one. I hope I shall make a good secretary.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. You will be the pattern secretary, Gerald [...] My dear boy, if I didn't like you I wouldn't have made you the offer. It is because I like you so much that I want to have you with me (*Collins Complete Works* 475).

The possibility that there is an intimacy or a secrecy that characterises their relationship is conveyed by Illingworth's desire to have Gerald with him when he goes abroad. Illingworth's wish to have Gerald with him mirrors a desire to be close to him. Rather than admiring Gerald's professional abilities seeing as he was hiring him in a professional capacity, it is the personal attributes of his character that attracts Illingworth to him, and this questions the foundation of their relationship. As a dandy Illingworth's unconventional relations with Gerald challenge the Victorian assumption that the dandy has a secure cross-sex image. Illingworth declares: "A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the

¹⁵¹ Although it is deleted from the published play Wilde could have kept this scene in the original performance of the play.

dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule" (*The Collins Complete* 493). Despite his idealisation of the dandy Illingworth's cruel treatment of Mrs Arbuthnot, and later Gerald, undermines the Victorian tendency to idealise men. Ironically Gerald's idolisation of Illingworth collapses when he discovers the truth about his father; Illingworth's refusal to marry his mother when she was pregnant with their child was irresponsible, and his father was exposed as a scoundrel. Wilde also undermines Sir Robert Chiltern's masculinity in *An Ideal Husband*.

Background and Plot of *An Ideal Husband*.

In contrast to Mrs Arbuthnot's independent decision to remain single in *A Woman*, in *An Ideal Husband* the sanctity of marriage is questioned by the Chilterns' hypocrisy. In this play Wilde documents some of the deceptions in marriage. Lady Chiltern and Lord Chiltern's reliance on their close friend Lord Goring, instead of confiding in each other, portrays the absence of trust in their marriage. Mrs Cheveley is the unconventional and modern outsider in this play; her ambition and independence portray a need for individual freedom in Victorian society. In contrast to *A Woman*, the male settings of this play re-establish the power of patriarchy favoured by the 1870 Women's Property Act. Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring are Wilde's modern models of femininity and masculinity in the play, and the more natural development of their relationship means that they become a more authentic couple than the Chilterns. After writing *An Ideal Husband* Wilde declared: "The critics will say...Ah, here is Oscar unlike himself! Though in reality I became engrossed in writing it, and it contains a great deal of the real Oscar" (Ellmann 387). Despite the fact that the truth about Chiltern's past is revealed at the end of *An Ideal Husband* the characters are rewarded for their deception.¹⁵² Act One of the play is set in: "The octagon room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house in Grosvenor Square, London" and Lady Chiltern greets their guests as they arrive into the house (*Collins Complete Works* 515). Mrs Marchmont

¹⁵² As Eltis notes "Modern critics, less distracted by the surface of the play, have noted Wilde's critical attitude to the society he portrays: the richness of scenery, costume, and props demanded by the play visually emphasize the values which are paramount in this society" (*Revising Wilde* 132). Bird and Gagnier also note this; see Alan Bird's *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* 135-59, and Regenia Gagnier's *Idylls of the Marketplace* 117-29 for further insight.

and Lady Basildon discuss their current engagements in London society and their dissatisfaction with male company at the party. Goring's father, Lord Caversham, greets Lady Chiltern and Chiltern's sister, Mabel Chiltern, before he begins complaining about the idle behaviour of his son. Lady Markby arrives with Mrs Cheveley as her guest, and Lady Chiltern realises that she and Mrs Cheveley were in school together. Mrs Cheveley claims that she does not recall her schooldays however; Lady Chiltern remembers her dislike for Mrs Cheveley who according to Lady Chiltern's memory, had a penchant for thieving. Goring and Mabel Chiltern's candid style of conversation implies that they share a comfortable and common history. Lord Caversham criticizes London society and Lady Basildon and Mrs Marchmont satirise the idea of the ideal Victorian husband. It is revealed that Mrs Cheveley has travelled from Switzerland with the aim of blackmailing Chiltern into publicly supporting an Argentine canal company in which she has invested money. Chiltern is the under-secretary for foreign affairs and his successful career, status and wealth, are the result of his selling a cabinet secret to the stock exchange.¹⁵³ Mrs Cheveley is in possession of the letter that Chiltern wrote to Baron Arnheim which implicates him, and when she informs him of this and threatens to expose him, he consents to speak out in support of the scheme the following day. Before Mrs Cheveley leaves the Chiltern's house, in an effort to disrupt the sanctity of the Chiltern's married life, she informs Lady Chiltern that her husband will support the Argentinean canal company; a cause he had previously denounced as a swindle. Mrs Cheveley manipulates the male characters in the play, states that politics is her only pleasure, and it is revealed that she has been married twice. After most of the other guests have left, Goring discovers a distinctive bracelet at the Chiltern's which he recognises; he asks Mabel to keep this incident a secret and she agrees to do so. Following Mrs Cheveley's departure, Lady Chiltern questions her husband about his past political career and he promises that he has no secrets from her. Lady Chiltern idealises her husband and his

¹⁵³ The character Chiltern could be based on Sir Charles Dilke, an English politician with a promising career in 1886 who also held the position of under-secretary for foreign affairs, but when he was mentioned in a divorce suit (despite his name being cleared), he was dropped from Gladstone's liberal government and his political career quickly came to an end. Wilde's play displays this connection to current affairs which the audience probably would have recognised.

career; she believes Chiltern has contributed to a noble political atmosphere. She persuades him to write a letter to Mrs Cheveley informing her that he cannot support the scheme as he said he would. Act Two opens at the: "*Morning-room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house*", and Chiltern informs Goring about his past and asks for his advice (*Collins Complete Works* 535). Chiltern explains that his desire for wealth and power was so great that he does not regret his decision. By contrast, Goring asserts that wealth and power are superficial concerns. Lady Markby and Mrs Cheveley call on Lady Chiltern and when Lady Markby takes her leave to visit another acquaintance, Mrs Cheveley exposes Chiltern's past to Lady Chiltern, and threatens to expose them publicly unless they support the canal company. Lady Chiltern is disgusted to learn about her husband's past, and Chiltern enters onstage and hears Lady Chiltern order Mrs Cheveley out of their home. Chiltern and Lady Chiltern both speak to Goring privately which suggests that are more comfortable confiding in him than they are in each other. The Chiltern's fear public exposure and Chiltern chastises the unrealistic female idealisation of Victorian men; an idealisation which he claims is destructive. Act Three is set in Goring's house; his father calls on him and argues that as a young bachelor it is his duty to get married at once. In the meantime, Goring receives a note from Lady Chiltern who has discovered her husband's fraud, and claims that she needs him and is coming to him for advice. Goring's mission is to reunite his friends and he instructs his manservant to bring his female guest into the drawing-room when she arrives. Goring persuades Lord Caversham to retire to the smoking-room, meanwhile Mrs Cheveley arrives and tries to blackmail Goring. Chiltern calls on Goring for advice, and upon hearing noise in the drawing-room despite Goring's denial of it, he goes to inspect who is listening in on their conversation. Chiltern finds Mrs Cheveley and suspects that she and Goring are intimately involved, because of the late hour and because she is alone. Mrs Cheveley and Goring were once engaged to be married, and when Chiltern departs she announces that she will return Chiltern's letter to him if Goring agrees to marry her. When Mrs Cheveley randomly mentions that she has lost her brooch, Goring realises (seeing as he gave it as a gift to his cousin) that she stole it from Lady Berkshire. He produces the brooch which he knows is actually a bracelet and unexpectedly

places it on her wrist clasping it shut; she is unable to find the spring to re-open it. Goring threatens to phone the Berkshires and the police if she does not hand over Chiltern's letter, so fearing arrest and disgrace she acquiesces. Unfortunately Mrs Cheveley takes the opportunity to steal Lady Chiltern's note to Goring which could easily be misconstrued as an intimate note to him, and she intends on sending it to Chiltern so that he will suspect his wife of infidelity. The final act of the play is set in the Morning-room at Chiltern's house; the same setting as Act Two. Goring has called on the Chilterns and he awaits their arrival downstairs. Lord Caversham has also called to congratulate Chiltern on his speech the previous day which denounced the canal scheme. Caversham advises his son to get engaged as soon as possible, and he proposes Mabel Chiltern as a desirable candidate for marriage. Mabel comes in from riding and initially ignores Goring as they had an engagement to go riding that morning, and he did not show up. Caversham departs and Goring decides to take the opportunity to propose to Mabel. Mabel anticipates his motives and exclaims that it is the second proposal she has had that day; the first proposal was from Tommy Trafford and she did not accept him. Goring confesses his love for her and Mabel returns his love extravagantly, claiming that the whole of London is aware that she adores him. Lady Chiltern enters and Mabel exits, after agreeing to meet Goring in the conservatory later. Goring tells Lady Chiltern that he managed to get his letter back from Mrs Cheveley, that he burned it and that now they are safe. Goring tells Lady Chiltern about her letter being delivered to her husband, but he arrives onstage reading it and misinterprets the letter believing that Lady Chiltern wrote it to him. The Chilterns reunite and Lord Caversham returns with news from the Prime Minister that Chiltern is to have the vacant seat in the cabinet. Chiltern is delighted, but seeing his wife's reaction he decides to decline it, declaring his retirement from public life. He goes offstage to write to the Prime Minister declining the seat, but then Goring advises Lady Chiltern to encourage Chiltern to accept the seat claiming that he would resent his resignation and her influence on it in the future. Lady Chiltern changes her mind and persuades her husband to accept the seat and he does so. Goring asks for Chiltern's consent to marry Mabel since he is her guardian and Lady Chiltern is delighted, but Chiltern

refuses as he wrongly believes Goring is involved with Mrs Cheveley. Finally the truth emerges for the sake of Goring and Mabel's future happiness; Lady Chiltern explains that the letter was to Goring and that Mrs Cheveley was blackmailing him. All is forgiven and Mabel and Goring's engagement is approved by the Chilterns and Goring's father. Lord Caversham warns his son before the curtain drops: "if you don't make this young lady an ideal husband, I'll cut you off with a shilling" (*Collins Complete Works* 582). The reporter of an original review of the production published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* on the 4th January 1895, connects *An Ideal Husband* with Mrs. Allonby's reflection that there is no such thing as the ideal man in *A Woman*. "Mrs. Allonby, you will remember [...] And Mr. Oscar Wilde, having, we more than suspect, a lingering sympathy with Mrs. Allonby, has written a whole play to demonstrate this impossibility [...] beneath the attenuated veil of his wit, that he, too, has a heart" ("An Ideal Husband' at the Haymarket": *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4th January 1895 p. 3). Rather than merely praising Wilde's humour like in many of the other reviews of his original productions, this review astutely notes that the play is a satirisation of the impossibility of an ideal husband.¹⁵⁴ Despite this, Chiltern is idealised as a strong Victorian man.

[...] the good, pure, emotional man trying to forget his one secret sin, so good that even his wife does not suspect that he falls short of perfection – it would be impossible to imagine. [...] If anything we would object that he scarcely avails himself sufficiently of the hand clasped upon the forehead – always a beautiful expression of a strong man's despair ("An Ideal Husband' at the Haymarket": *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4th January 1895 p. 3).

Rather than contest the idealisation of the Victorian husband, Lady Chiltern's belief in Chiltern re-affirms the Victorian belief in such an ideal. Lady Chiltern's forgiving of Chiltern's "one secret

¹⁵⁴ A review of *Earnest* in 1895 concentrates on Wilde's humour, overlooking the darker themes in his play: "It is all very funny, and Mr. Oscar Wilde has decorated a humour that is Gilbertian with innumerable spangles of that wit that is all his own" ("The Importance of Being Earnest', at the St. James's": *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 15th February 1895 p.4).

sin" undermines the gravity of that sin which is the basis of the Chiltern's wealth and social status.¹⁵⁵

Lady Chiltern's Superficial Morality and Mrs Cheveley's Penchant for Blackmail.

Wilde challenges the perception of the ideal and morally rigid Victorian woman, evident in his characterization of Lady Chiltern. Lady Chiltern's morals are exposed as vacuous when she adjusts her ideals for the convenience of her husband's fraudulent past and her wealth and social status. Her adjustment of these ideals implies that there is no such thing as the ideal man. Raby notes that Wilde parodies the English in this play and exposes their ideals as ridiculous:

This imitation of Englishness is at once parodic and unnervingly accurate, a subtle form of insult. Wilde uncovers the relentless evasiveness of English speech, the attempts to make resounding definitions and statements of ideals within a world that is clearly no longer static and solid, attempts Wilde described as 'the vice of sincerity'. Morality, private and public, is brought into question in these plays, and found wanting quite as radically as in the 'stronger' dramas of Ibsen (158).

Raby identifies Wilde's more subtle criticisms of Victorian society in his plays and argues that these are as radical as Ibsen's controversial dramatic diatribes on society. Lady Chiltern's hypocrisy is emphasized when she disapproves of Mrs Cheveley because she married twice, and will not forgive her behaviour when they were in school together. Lady Chiltern's idealisation of her husband is undermined by his actions. Lady Chiltern: "All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To that world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! Be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away – that tower of ivory do not destroy (*Collins Complete Works* 533-34). Lady Chiltern's morality transforms into hypocrisy and she is exposed as a fraud, undermining the unrealistic perception of Victorian

¹⁵⁵ This review overlooks the fact that Chiltern is rewarded for his deception. Eltis asserts that "No contemporary reviewer expressed outrage or disbelief at such a conclusion [...] The very fact that the audience accepted the play's ending so easily demonstrates Wilde's success in portraying British politics as a scene of compromise and hypocrisy, where Sir Robert will be perfectly at home" (*Revising Wilde* 135).

women. Chiltern's plea warns against the dangers of adulation and mocks the idealisation of marriage; his marriage having been usurped by his deception.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. [...] Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals... Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely...Let women make no more ideals of men! Let them not put them on altars and bow before them or they may ruin other lives as completely as you – you whom I have so wildly loved – have ruined mine! (*Collins Complete Works* 552-3).

Chiltern addresses society's unrealistic idealisation of the patriarch, and he forecasts the consequences of concealing the truth behind a false identity which will inevitably be revealed. At the end of the play Lady Chiltern conveniently declares: "For both of us a new life is beginning" regardless of her husband's deception (*Collins Complete Works* 582). The idealisation of the Victorian husband indicates the oppressive patriarchal framework on men in society. Perhaps the Chiltern's "new life" will be free from such constraints. By adapting her morality and continuing to deceive the public, Lady Chiltern sustains her wealth and status in society. Her superficial performance of morality can be compared with Mrs Cheveley's wish to blackmail Chiltern in order to gain wealth and status. Her independence in travelling from Vienna, Switzerland, to London unaccompanied signifies her status as an unconventional Victorian woman. Mrs Cheveley is an outsider who pervades an unfamiliar society and will be punished for her unconventional individuality. She is an alternative modern character as opposed to the Victorian depiction of ideal femininity. Mrs Cheveley's unorthodox character and her status as a woman who has been married twice, is juxtaposed with the rectitude of Lady Chiltern. Initially Lady Chiltern is a proponent of traditional Victorian morality (until she is revealed to be a hypocrite), but Mrs Cheveley reveals the truth. Mrs Cheveley is identified as a threatening force that can expose the Chiltern's past. Lady Chiltern's desire for distance between her husband and Mrs Cheveley mirrors the fact that unmarried women were often perceived as a threat to society and the family unit: "I hardly think there will be much in common between you and my husband, Mrs Cheveley" (*Collins Complete Works* 518). Despite Lord Goring's out-witting Mrs

Cheveley in the final act, from the beginning of the play Mrs Cheveley manipulates the characters surrounding her, particularly the male characters. Mrs Cheveley hopes that Chiltern's hypocrisy will be exposed and that he will suffer for his past mistakes. She immediately ensures that she is in a position of power over Chiltern by casually mentioning her intimate acquaintance with the Baron Arnheim, and she relishes in Chiltern's discomfit. Whether Wilde staged the fan-dropping scenario as a flippant incident or not, it sets up the expectation that Mrs Cheveley will maintain power over Chiltern.¹⁵⁶

MRS CHEVELEY. [...] (*Drops her fan.*)

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. (*picks up fan*): Allow me!

MRS CHEVELEY. Thanks. (*Collins Complete Works* 520).

Not only does Mrs Cheveley expose the hypocrisy of the characters in *An Ideal Husband* she also undermines unrealistic Victorian idealisations. Mrs Cheveley shatters Lady Chiltern's unrealistic idealisation of her husband, informing her that:

MRS CHEVELEY. [...] It is because your husband is himself fraudulent and dishonest that we pair so well together [...] A house bought with the price of dishonour. A house, everything in which has been paid for by fraud. (*Turns around and sees Sir Robert Chiltern.*) Ask him what the origin of his fortune is! Get him to tell you how he sold to a stockbroker a Cabinet secret. Learn from him to what you owe your position (*Collins Complete Works* 551).

If Mrs Cheveley had not exposed Chiltern's scandal to Lady Chiltern then her idealisation of her husband would have remained intact. Mrs Cheveley's status as an unconventional Victorian woman affords her the freedom to disrupt the normative Victorian beliefs. Mrs Cheveley attempts to blackmail Lord Goring into marrying her in Act Three; this desperate move to enter into the framework of marriage conveys her desire to be accepted into the very society that she despises. Her plans reflect her wish to change the system from inside the institution of marriage.

¹⁵⁶ The importance of this scenario is only evidenced through performance. The physical staging of it captures the influence and power that Mrs Cheveley has over Chiltern's future; his immediate willingness to stoop down to pick up her fan and her unwillingness to do so, signifies her manipulation of him.

Her blackmail of the Chilterns would provide her with financial security, and Goring would provide her with status and social security. Mrs Cheveley's conflicted desires mirror the oppressive social and cultural dynamics at work in the play. Mrs Cheveley exemplifies the performative nature of identity and gender in Victorian society.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. You prefer to be natural?

MRS CHEVELEY. Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up (*Collins Complete Works* 519).

Mrs Cheveley's acknowledgement that being natural was a pose captures the superficiality proposed in the play. This assertion could be connected to Butler's need to challenge the absurd belief in authentic performances of femininity or masculinity in society.

Chiltern's Scandal.

Like Mrs Cheveley who uses blackmail as a tool to gain status and recognition, Chiltern's deception affords him a respectable political position and influence in society. Chiltern idealises a life lived by truth, but rather than convert his own life to this ideal, he continues to conceal the past for the protection of his career and his marriage. Chiltern declares: "I would to God that I had been able to tell the truth...to live the truth. Ah! that is the great thing in life, to live the truth" (*Collins Complete Works* 542). Despite this admirable reflection Chiltern's actions contradict this sentiment; rather than retiring from politics he accepts a seat in the Cabinet. By concealing a substantial secret from Lady Chiltern, Chiltern questions the importance of honesty in marriage. Chiltern exposes his superficial nature and shows no remorse for what he did to gain wealth and a successful career, his flippancy is contrasted with Goring's more modern stance.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Whom did I wrong by what I did? No one...

LORD GORING. (*looking at him steadily*) Except yourself, Robert.

[*A pause*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN. Of course I had private information about a certain transaction contemplated by the Government of the day, and I acted on it. Private information is practically the source of every large modern fortune.

LORD GORING. (*tapping his boot with his cane*) And public scandal invariably the result (*Collins Complete Works* 536).

Chiltern's failure to meet the societal expectations and presumption that he has had an honest and successful career, is a reflection on the dangers of idealisation. Lady Chiltern naively declares that her husband is: "as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing" (*Collins Complete Works* 543). Her traditional idealisation of her husband is debunked, because of her initial ignorance and subsequent acceptance of her husband's scandal. The secret that Chiltern conceals from his wife emphasizes the oppressive nature of idealised gender roles and expectations. Wilde's conclusion to the play creates an uneasy atmosphere. This world, within which deception is concealed and advocated, is a world which will participate in such deception again. The scandal that could have destroyed Chiltern is concealed; it seems there is a return to the beginning and the naive idealisation of marriage as well as the atmosphere of deception. The return to the setting of blackmail in Act Two for the final act of the play can be interpreted as a return to Chiltern's fraudulent past; to maintaining the deception which originally began onstage in this setting. Chiltern's absence of remorse and Lady Chiltern's acceptance of the scandal implies that they are both willing to sacrifice their morals for wealth and success. Chiltern's deception is rewarded by a cabinet seat; the implication is that in some cases deception is necessary for survival or acceptance in an oppressive society. When Lady Chiltern discovers Chiltern's fraud she accuses him of identity deception: "Oh! What a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible painted mask! You sold yourself for money!" (*Collins Complete Works* 552). Lady Chiltern's morality is mocked; initially she seemed rigid in her beliefs, but she conveniently adjusts them in order to forgive her husband. Chiltern's deception portrays the absurdity of idealised Victorian masculinity, which reinforces

oppositional gender roles and idealises the role of the Victorian husband and father. As a member of the Women's Liberal Association Lady Chiltern seems to champion reform, but this attempt collapses into hypocrisy when she repeats Goring's words to her husband. Lady Chiltern: "A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotion. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses" (*Collins Complete Works* 579). Lady Chiltern's words denote the unequal gender dynamic in the Victorian world. Her claim that it is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses may be a reference to her husband's political career, the foundation of which is based on fraud not intellect, ambition or talent. Raby affirms that this repetition on Lady Chiltern's part is to emphasize the absurdity of such a gender unequal claim: "Lady Chiltern [...] allows herself to be persuaded that the decent thing is for her husband to stay in office; and, if any doubt lingers for the audience, Wilde points up the absurdity by having Lady Chiltern repeat this specious argument word for word" (157). Wilde exposes the Chiltern's superficial words and marriage, so that the audience are encouraged to challenge what the character's say. Despite deception which is the foundation of the Chiltern's marriage, Mabel Chiltern and Goring's relationship is more modern and sincere.

A Modern Relationship.

Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring are two of Wilde's modern models of femininity and masculinity in *An Ideal Husband*. Their relationship with each other can be characterized as modern, and their affection for each other develops as the play progresses. In contrast to the Chilterns, Mabel and Goring are unconventionally forthcoming with each other, and their dialogue reflects their honest intentions. Mabel is a strong female character in the play and she dominates Goring. Eltis claims that "Old-fashioned though she is in her charms, in her independence of thought, her humorous worsting of her suitor, and her espousal of an individual set of values, Mabel is, as Lady Markby remarks, 'remarkably modern' [...] Mabel Chiltern conceals a strong will and determined purpose beneath a disarmingly light exterior" (*Revising Wilde* 143). Mabel

reprimands Goring for not spending more time by her side in the Chiltern's house in Act One when a colleague of Chiltern's, Vicomte De Nanjac, offers to accompany her into the music-room.

MABEL CHILTERN. (*looking very disappointed*): Delighted, Vicomte, quite delighted!

(*Turning to Lord Goring*): Aren't you coming to the music-room?

LORD GORING. Not if there is any music going on, Miss Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN. (*severely*): The music is in German. You would not understand it.

(*Collins Complete Works 522*).

Mabel's claim to understand German when Goring does not, suggests that she is more educated than him. When Mabel arrives onstage in Act Four she ignores Goring as a punishment for breaking his promise to go riding with her that morning. The trust established in Mabel and Goring's relationship accentuates the honesty which is lacking from the Chiltern's marriage. When Goring discovers the bracelet he gave his cousin, Lady Berkshire, which Mrs Cheveley stole at the end of Act One, he requests that Mabel keep this incident a secret. Although it may seem like a small request, Mabel's trust in Goring depicts the honesty in their relationship and leads to the successful blackmailing of Mrs Cheveley. Lord Goring: "Don't mention to anybody that I have taken charge of this brooch. Should any one write and claim it, let me know at once" (*Collins Complete Works 531*). When Goring proposes to Mabel she anticipates it and then undermines the proposal, claiming that his was the second proposal that day.

LORD GORING. [...] I have something very particular to say to you.

MABEL CHILTERN. (*rapturously*): Oh! Is it a proposal?

LORD GORING. (*somewhat taken aback*): Well, yes it is – I am bound to say it is.

MABEL CHILTERN. (*with a sigh of pleasure*): I am so glad. That makes the second to-day.

(*Collins Complete Works 572*).

Goring is taken aback by Mabel's response to his proposal, and the proposals signify the societal pressure to enter into marriage. Goring's reaction also implies that Mabel's behaviour does not reflect the typical behaviour of a Victorian woman.

As Wilde's dandy figure, Goring provides a modern mode of masculinity who contests Victorian masculinity. Wilde's idealisation of the bachelor dandies in his plays mirrors his own role as a dandy in 1890s society. Wilde's stage directions convey Goring's modern nature. In Act Two: "Lord Goring, *dressed in the height of fashion, is lounging in an arm-chair*" (*Collins Complete Works* 535). His father, Lord Caversham, complains about his son who according to him leads: "such an idle life" (*Collins Complete Works* 516). He describes his son's life as one of leisure and his continuing efforts to encourage him to marry have failed, up until his engagement to Mabel Chiltern at the end of the play. Lord Caversham emphasizes the importance of getting married: "You have got to get married, and at once [...] it is your duty to get married" (*Collins Complete Works* 555). Marriage is seen as the next step in the natural progression for a young man or woman, and Goring is expected to marry soon. Goring and Mabel's engagement mirrors their desire to be accepted into this oppressive world. Mabel acknowledges and admires Goring's honest nature, and despite appearances, Goring seems to be the least superficial or hypocritical character in the play. While their relationship develops, Mabel acknowledges Goring's modern nature and admits that she is still figuring him out. Goring exudes an alternative masculinity to the idealised masculinity that Chiltern simultaneously exemplifies and debunks. Mabel Chiltern: "(*gravely*) I have been obliged for the present to put Lord Goring into a class quite by himself. But he is developing charmingly!" (*Collins Complete Works* 517). Lord Goring challenges Lady Chiltern's idealisation of her husband when he declares that: "Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing" (*Collins Complete Works* 543). Goring's realistic reflection on the imperfect human nature calls for the invention of more realistic male models and values on the stage. The idealisation of Goring as a modern mode of masculinity is evident from the stage directions in the opening act of the play:

Enter LORD GORING. Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly

good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage. (Collins Complete Works 521).

Although Goring exclaims: "[...] The truth is a thing I get rid of as soon as possible! Bad habit, by the way", it is Chiltern who continues his career of deception (*Collins Complete Works* 542). Goring's insight regarding the truth implies an awareness of the hypocrisy of society. Goring opens the final three acts of *An Ideal Husband*, and as Wilde's main model of masculinity he sets the tone for most of the play. In Act Three Goring's dandyish exuberance is described in detail, and his appearance and costume onstage connect him with Wilde.

Enter Lord Goring with evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought (Collins Complete Works 553).

In a similar way that Wilde negotiates the territory between staged and real performance, he also commutes between various identities and sexualities. His identity challenges conventional masculinity. Wilde's explicit mention of the importance of the buttonhole throughout *An Ideal Husband* and in *Earnest* is inextricably linked to his speech after the opening night of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892. In *An Ideal Husband* Lord Goring claims: "I am the only person of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole" (*Collins Complete Works* 554). The fact that it is Goring who reunites the Chilterns undermines the perception of bachelors as a threat to the family unit. The Chiltern's marriage is characterised by hypocrisy, and the impending marriage of Goring and Mabel provides a medium to be accepted into this framework. Many of the female characters undermine marriage and the family unit in *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman*, questioning this structure. Lady Basildon and Mrs Marchmont satirise the idea of "perfect husbands", and claim that their husbands are extremely domestic, unexciting and unbearably predictable (*Collins Complete Works* 523). Mrs Cheveley evokes the nature of marriage in society: "Oh! I don't care about the London season! It is too matrimonial"

(*Collins Complete Works* 520). Her suggestion that “People are either hunting for husbands or hiding from them” mirrors the prioritized position of marriage in Victorian society (*Collins Complete Works* 520). Mrs Cheveley’s wit also undermines marriage; her implication is that in many cases marriage is not a desired state. In *A Woman*, Mrs Arbuthnot’s rejection of marriage presents an alternative framework for women. On a superficial level order is restored at the conclusion of *An Ideal Husband*. Lord Goring’s engagement to Mabel Chiltern and the reunification of Lord and Lady Chiltern provide an idyllic ending to the play; an ending which confirms the importance of marriage. Furthermore, Chiltern’s return to public life and his acceptance of a seat in the Cabinet indicates his willingness to engage in corruption for success.

Chapter Six: Gender Roles in *Earnest*: "Why should there be one law for men, and another for women?" (*Collins Complete Works* 415).

Similar to Chiltern's deception in *An Ideal Husband*, many of the characters in *Earnest* participate in alternative identities or play with the possibilities of double identities. In *Earnest* Jack Worthing questions Miss Prism as to: "Why should there be one law for men, and another for women?" (*Collins Complete Works* 415). Worthing's reflection on the gender inequality which characterizes Victorian society mirrors the character's need to challenge the oppressive patriarchal structure of society. Wilde modern characters experiment with the concepts of gender and sexuality, questioning the conventional structures in place. In Victorian society the public sphere is often recognised as a male realm, and the private sphere is more typically associated as a female world. Instead of adhering to this gender segregation, Wilde's male and female characters pervade alternative realms in search of more liberating gender roles. In *Earnest* Lady Bracknell's unsolicited movement between public and private spaces mirrors her modern character, while her husband's absence and confinement to the private sphere implies a need to re-imagine gender roles on the Victorian stage. Many of Wilde's characters unite typically male and female characteristics in the one physical form; a method which challenges the segregation of Victorian gender roles and characteristics. They challenge the Victorian stereotypes that they seem to propagate. As Jackson claims: "Wilde's characters both embody and mock dramatic stereotypes: his formidable dowager, sweet ingénue, fussy clergyman and scapegrace man about town lead double lives as parodies of themselves" (172). The doubleness that many of these characters embody suggests that these stereotypes are reductive and unrealistic.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Richard Allen Cave interprets Wilde's characters as ridiculous parodies of the English empire and colonisation: "What the comedies repeatedly show is that English imperialist claiming of the high moral ground on the basis of an absolute integrity is wholly fraudulent. The setting and policing of establishment standards are shown repeatedly to be ridiculous: sincerity in the Society of the plays is but affectation, a façade" (223).

Plot Summary and Background.

Earnest was first staged at St James's Theatre, London, on the 14th February: St. Valentine's Day, 1895. In a letter to George Alexander, Wilde explains the title of the play; an earlier title reflecting the importance of his female characters: "It is called 'Lady Lancing' on the cover but the real title is 'The Importance of Being Earnest' – when you read the play you will see the punning title's meaning" (MS 81627). The earlier title's reference to the ancient sport lancing, which requires two opposing parties to fight each other with jousts on horseback, denotes the notion of the dual performance of self and gender in *Earnest*. This theme is exemplified by Jack and Algernon's bunburying.¹⁵⁸ Wilde wrote the original version of *Earnest* in four acts and it is this plot summary that is detailed here.¹⁵⁹ The first act of the play is set in Algernon Moncrieff's Morning-room in his flat in Half-Moon Street, London.¹⁶⁰ The stage directions indicate that: "The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished" (*Collins Complete Works* 357). Algernon is playing the piano in the adjoining room, and upon his entering he and his manservant, Lane, discuss the imminent visit from his aunt, Lady Bracknell, and her daughter, Miss Gwendolen Fairfax. Lane and Algernon's flippant discussion about champagne and wine reflects an intention to subvert class expectations. Jack Worthing calls on Algernon, and despite the fact that the end of the play reveals that his name is actually Ernest, the play text identifies him as Jack Worthing, but he is announced by Lane as: "Mr. Ernest Worthing" (*Collins Complete Works* 358). Jack explains that he is in love with Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen, and that he has come expressly in order to

¹⁵⁸ Powell notes that the notion of double identities exemplified by the character's Bunburying in *Earnest* is a common trope in Victorian farce: "But bunburying, if not the name itself, is highly characteristic of late-century farce. Characters form imaginary identities or engage in fictitious activities which enable them to invigorate their respectable but humdrum lives" (127).

¹⁵⁹ I reference the original four-act version of *Earnest* in my thesis as it is the full play that Wilde originally wrote. This is also the version which is in *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2003). Wilde condensed the play to three acts following the advice of the theatre director, George Alexander, and this is the version that is most often produced. H. Montgomery Hyde suggests that: "to oblige him [Alexander] the author condensed Acts II and III to form a single act, and dropped the scene with the extra character [...]" (MS 81627). The act details Algernon's city expenses which include many hotel and dining bills, and imply a connection to Wilde's notorious spending in London. Wilde wrote four drafts of *Earnest* before it was produced on the stage, and Eltis notes the substantial work that he put into the play: "Through each successive draft he gradually transformed it from a highly plotted, frequently absurd, but essentially harmless and familiar comedy into an insidiously subversive, satirical, and undeniably unique drama, a psychological farce" (*Revising Wilde* 176).

¹⁶⁰ In the original play programme for *Earnest* Algernon Moncrieff's surname is spelt "Moncrieffe" (Wilde, MS 81771).

propose to her. The two men discuss marriage and divorce, and Algernon confronts Jack about the inscription from Cecily Cardew on the silver cigarette case which he left there on his last visit. Although Cecily is later revealed to be Jack's young and attractive female ward, Jack pretends that Cecily is his aunt. Jack and Algernon discover that they have both invented relations and friends in order to be able to escape the city or country respectively. Jack has invented a younger brother called Ernest who he claims he has to rescue from financial trouble on a regular basis, and Algernon has created a fictional friend, Bunbury, who is on his death bed and requires constant care and attention. They refer to their manipulations of identity as bunburying. When Algernon's aunt, Lady Bracknell, arrives with her daughter, Gwendolen, Algernon distracts his aunt and accompanies her into the music-room, so that Jack has the privacy to propose to Gwendolen. Despite his plan, Gwendolen confesses her romantic feelings for Jack before he has the opportunity to do so, or to propose to her. She instructs him to propose to her and she finally accepts his proposal, but when Gwendolen informs Lady Bracknell about their engagement she insists on questioning Jack in private about his family and his fortune, insisting that her daughter is not engaged. Algernon expresses interest in Jack's ward, Cecily, and when Gwendolen asks Jack for the address of his country manor where Cecily resides, Algernon copies down the address.

Act Two opens in the "Garden at the Manor House, Woolton" and Miss Prism tutors Cecily (*Collins Complete Works* 375). Cecily writes in her diary and does her best to avoid her German lesson, while Miss Prism attempts to encourage her to concentrate on her education. The local rector, Canon Chasuble, arrives onstage and Cecily convinces Miss Prism to go walking with him, so that she can be left to write in her diary. Merriman announces Algernon's arrival under the pretence of his being Jack's younger brother, Ernest, and he meets and charms Cecily. Jack comes onstage dressed in mourning attire, interrupts Canon Chasuble and Prism's flirtatious exchange, and announces that he is mourning the death of his brother, Ernest. Jack requests that the rector baptise him that afternoon; his intention is to be christened Ernest.

Cecily informs Jack that his brother has arrived and delighted to play the part as his fictional brother; Algernon apologises to Jack and asks him to shake his hand in forgiveness. Cecily plays the role of the negotiator and convinces Jack to forgive his brother. Mr Gribbsby arrives from London to collect payment from Algernon for his hotel bills, and when he is threatened with possible jail time Cecily offers to pay the bill, but Jack eventually does.¹⁶¹ Jack is anxious to get rid of Algernon before Cecily's and his relationship develops. Cecily encourages Algernon to interrupt her studies that afternoon, and they plot a plan which will distract Miss Prism and give them momentary privacy. Act Three is set in the drawing-room at the Manor House, and Cecily and Miss Prism are both writing when Algernon enters. In order to get Cecily alone Algernon instructs Miss Prism that Chasuble is waiting for her in the vestry, and unwilling to leave him waiting, she rushes offstage to meet him. Algernon immediately declares his love for Cecily, informing her that she is the: "visible personification of absolute perfection", and she insists on his repeating these lines and his marriage proposal, as she has blotted her diary entry (*Collins Complete Works* 392). When Algernon begs Cecily to marry him, she responds by telling him that they have been engaged for the last three months. Cecily tells Algernon that she has written letters to herself on his behalf and that when they fought months ago she brought herself presents from him. In his excitement to be accepted he rushes offstage and Merriman enters and announces the arrival of Miss Gwendolen Fairfax. Gwendolen introduces herself to Cecily and they come to believe that they are both engaged to Ernest. They continue to fight over Ernest who is portrayed as helpless in this situation. Jack and Algernon enter and their real identities are revealed to Gwendolen and Cecily who leave the scene in disgust and proceed to the garden. Gwendolen and Cecily re-enter the drawing-room and discuss what possible actions they will take against Jack and Algernon for their deception. After much ruminating they decide to forgive the men. Jack and Algernon reveal their intentions to be christened Ernest that afternoon and they are reunited with Cecily and Gwendolen. Just as they settle their engagements Lady Bracknell arrives and challenges her daughter's engagement to Jack. Algernon tells her that

¹⁶¹ This is the scene involving the character Mr. Gribbsby which was deleted from the three-act version of *Earnest*.

Bunbury finally died and that he is also engaged to Cecily. Being Cecily's ward Jack informs Lady Bracknell of her past and her large fortune which Lady Bracknell approves of, so she finally consents to their engagement. However Jack has other ideas and claims that Algernon is untruthful, and that he cannot allow the marriage of him and his ward go ahead, unless Lady Bracknell consents to his engagement with Gwendolen. Chasuble enters and mentions Miss Prism's name and Lady Bracknell realises that she and Miss Prism share a common history. According to Lady Bracknell Miss Prism left her house with a baby and a manuscript years ago, and Miss Prism reveals that "in a moment of mental abstraction", she placed the baby in the handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria station and put the manuscript in the basinette (*Collins Complete Works* 413). Jack recognises this story and disappears upstairs and returns with a leather handbag which Miss Prism identifies as her own, confirming for him that he was the baby in the basinette, so he mistakes her for his mother. Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he is Algernon's older brother, the son of her late sister. Jack is delighted by this news as he has required relations which Lady Bracknell requested before his marrying her daughter. Chasuble seems inspired by the engagements and proposes to Prism, who accepts. Ironically, it turns out that Jack's Christian name is Ernest after his father's name, and he and Gwendolen are engaged again. Wilde relished the opportunity to blur the boundaries between real life and the theatre. The influence of the London landscape on Wilde's dramatic imagination is evidenced from the various real-life addresses that feature in *Earnest*. Holland notes:

In 1894 Ives [George Ives who was a friend of Wilde's] took chambers at The Albany (Flat E4), off Piccadilly, an address used by Wilde for Jack Worthing in the original four-act version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Any mention of this real address was removed from the performed play, along with a comment from Miss Prism that the 'wicked' Ernest must be as bad as any young man who had chambers in The Albany, or indeed in the vicinity of Piccadilly can possibly be (*Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* 31).

Removing these references from the performed play eliminated this connection between Wilde's real life and his attraction to men; perhaps Wilde was protecting himself from

accusations of sexual relations with men. Even though Miss Prism's dialogue was deleted and the address is not referred to in production, the publication of the address in the play text depicts the influence of Wilde's personal life on his drama: "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany, W." (*Collins Complete Works* 361). In consideration of the play it is important to note the link between Wilde's life and his plays.

Modern Women: Cecily Cardew, Gwendolen Fairfax and Lady Bracknell.

Cecily's strong character contests the ideal perception of the conventional Victorian woman, and as the play progresses she becomes a more liberated and modern gendered being. Cecily's female body is recognised through the medium of traditionally feminine costume, but her character exudes masculine traits. Her education which is documented in the play and her independence, as well as her dominance over Algernon, typifies her as a modern woman. Act Two opens at the: "Garden at the Manor House, Woolton" where "a table covered with books" signifies the scene as a site for women's education in the play (*Collins Complete Works* 375). Being outside of the domestic area, this garden space is a more gender neutral sphere where Wilde's female characters can be educated. As a private governess, it is also important that Miss Prism is identified as a female educator in *Earnest*. Cecily's education is more likely to equip her with the skills necessary to pervade the public sphere. The education of Wilde's female characters also suggests the playwright's support for Victorian women's education; an extremely topical issue at that time.¹⁶² Algernon and Jack's ongoing debate over Cecily's identity conveys the experimentation with identity in *Earnest*.

ALGERNON. [...] you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily.

JACK. Cecily... What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name Cecily [...] as far as I remember [...]

ALGERNON. [...] This cigarette case is a present from some one of the name Cecily, and you said you didn't know any one of that name.

¹⁶² This is evidenced from the numerous articles in *The Woman's World* that concentrate on the topic of Women's Education, examined in Chapter One.

JACK. Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt (*Collins Complete Works* 359-60).

The unwillingness to identify Cecily definitively provides her with the opportunity to create a more modern identity in the play. Wilde reconfigures Victorian gender and challenges the oppressive framework of gender on Victorian men and women.

In assuming typically male characteristics such as independence and financial wealth, Wilde's female characters can move more easily between private and public spheres. In Act Three Cecily's offer to pay off Algernon's debt denotes her financial independence which will be of value to her when she comes of age. Cecily: "Uncle Jack! I think you have a little money of mine, haven't you? Let me pay this bill. I wouldn't like your own brother to be in prison" (*Collins Complete Works* 387). Despite Cecily's attempt to challenge patriarchy and pay Algernon's debt, Jack's guardianship of Cecily reinforces the reality of the gender inequality in society. While Miss Prism proposes herself as an ideal embodiment of traditional Victorian beliefs, Cecily challenges these antiquated systems of thought:

MISS PRISM. [...] I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap.

CECILY. But men don't sew, Miss Prism.... And if they did, I don't see why they should be punished for it [...]

MISS PRISM. [...] You must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

CECILY. I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them (*Collins Complete Works* 376).

Cecily's proposal that she must document the: "wonderful secrets of my life", signifies the possibility of a more exciting life for a woman that is lived outside of the private domestic sphere and the conventional framework for a Victorian woman (*Collins Complete Works* 376).

Cecily's need to document her own fictional life reflects her intention to author her own life, and

not be restrained by the traditional conceptions of Victorian femininity. The documentation of her fictional life can be considered as an act of female agency and reflects her desire to contest the reality of gender inequality. Gwendolen is another modern female character that disputes the normative framework for Victorian women.

Gwendolen's independence and assertiveness marks her out as a modern woman in *Earnest*. In Act One Lady Bracknell attempts to control her daughter, but Gwendolen asserts herself independently from her mother. After: "(Gwendolen *and* Jack sit down together in the corner)" Lady Bracknell requests that Gwendolen comes and sits beside her, but Gwendolen replies by stating that she is: "quite comfortable where I am" (*Collins Complete Works* 364). When Algernon persuades Lady Bracknell to accompany him into the music-room, although Lady Bracknell instructs Gwendolen to accompany them too (she is probably in fear of what could possibly happen if her daughter is left alone with Jack), she defiantly remains behind.

LADY BRACKNELL. [...] Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

GWENDOLEN. Certainly, Mamma.

LADY BRACKNELL *and* ALGERNON *go into the music-room*, GWENDOLEN *remains behind* (*Collins Complete Works* 365).

Gwendolen's behaviour identifies her as assertive and independent; rather than obeying her mother she exercises her own will. Moreover, her ability to lie to her mother indicates her willingness to deceive her for her own personal gain and freedom of independence. If Gwendolen obeys her mother her movement onstage may be restricted, however her refusal to be subservient from the beginning contests her mother's control over her. Gwendolen exercises her independence and free will when she travels alone to Hertfordshire to visit Jack in Act Four. Lady Bracknell: "Apprised, sir, of my daughter's sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin, I followed her at once by a luggage train" (*Collins Complete Works* 407). Gwendolen assumes the stronger role in her relationship with

Jack. When she arrives onstage Jack's attempt to charm Gwendolen is challenged by her pragmatic response.

JACK. You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions (*Collins Complete Works* 363-64).

Gwendolen's ambitious language portrays the fact that she will not be confined to the typical roles of a Victorian woman. Rather than Jack courting Gwendolen, it is she who boldly asserts her love for him. In doing so she obtains and sustains the power in their relationship:

GWENDOLEN. ...My ideal has always been to love someone of the name Ernest... The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

JACK. You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN. Passionately... I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage... And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you (*Collins Complete Works* 366).

Gwendolen's declaration of her love for Jack in such a matter of fact style suggests that this relationship will be on her terms, not his. In taking control and proposing to Jack before he has the opportunity to initiate a marriage proposal to her, Gwendolen usurps his power in the marital framework. Like Cecily, Gwendolen prevents Jack from performing his masculinity, so he adopts the more submissive role in their relationship. Gwendolen and Cecily remain powerful in these relationships and it is Jack and Algernon who are subject to their partner's decisions.¹⁶³ Gwendolen and Cecily's reactions to Algernon and Jack's wish to be christened Ernest provokes a satirical response.

¹⁶³ Powell identifies the typically masculine traits exemplified by Cecily and Gwendolen: "Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax become aggressors, capable of prodding an indecisive man through a marriage proposal or even writing his love letters for him. Cecily, indeed, goes so far as to fall in love and engage herself to a man she never met" (131-2).

GWENDOLEN. How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

CECILY. They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing (*Collins Complete Works* 407).

The male character's wish to be christened signifies their desire for the approval of their female partners; they will do anything for it, including changing their names. This satirisation of male courage mocks the idealised Victorian man and satirises the male patriarchal institution that is the Christian Church. In Victorian society marriage could provide social status, stability and wealth to varying degrees. Gwendolen and Cecily admit that they will not marry Algernon and Jack if they discover that they are named something other than Ernest, and this implies their superficial nature. Cecily repeats Gwendolen's lines: "There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest" (*Collins Complete Works* 395). Rather than becoming objects of exchange in marriage the female characters satirise marriage. In Act Four Gwendolen proposes that: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (*Collins Complete Works* 406). Jack or Ernest concludes the play: "It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth...I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (*Collins Complete Works* 418-19). Lady Bracknell is a character that has entered into marriage to gain status and wealth.

Lady Bracknell is an unconventional female character in *Earnest* as she assumes a traditionally male role in the play. By initially disapproving and then finally consenting to the matches in *Earnest*, she takes on the male role of matching her daughter and nephew in two proposed and advantageous marriages. In *Earnest* Lady Bracknell has the power to inform Jack of who he is. Lady Bracknell and Cecily construct the versions of a historical past that in time dictate the actions of the male characters, as well as the plot mechanisms in *Earnest*. The power and progression of the plot and the action of the drama are in the hands of Wilde's female characters. Lady Bracknell reveals that her marriage to Lord Bracknell provided her with a

unique opportunity to climb the social ladder in Victorian society: "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way" (*Collins Complete Works* 409). Lady Bracknell's ambition to climb the social ladder and her dominance of her husband challenges the position of women in marriage.

Lalonde reflects on Lady Bracknell's ambition:

More than any other character in *Earnest*, she manifests a preoccupation with social class and an awareness that middle-class subjects can enter into the aristocratic order if they are able to cultivate the right image [...] She polices the boundaries of sexual contact between the bourgeois and the aristocracy in the control that she exercises over proposed marriages (661 & 663).

While Lady Bracknell is reported as being comfortable in the public sphere her husband remains confined to the home. Lady Bracknell replaces the male patriarch in matching these marriages and occupying the public sphere; she will manipulate the marriages to the advantage of her own family. Her position as matchmaker displays her unconventional masculine matriarchal power in *Earnest* and yet, at the same time, it re-asserts her adherence to social conventions.¹⁶⁴ As Lalonde notes: "The implication is that the father is extraneous and replaceable; with the patriarch confined to his room, the ascendant matriarch is free to regulate the social occasion and pair off with a conversation partner of her own choosing" (668). Lady Bracknell's combined dominance of the public sphere, and her role as Gwendolen's mother, signifies her ability to balance and to move between these spheres successfully. When she questions Jack about his background, wealth and status Lady Bracknell's negative opinion of men is explicit. Eltis notes: "For all its apparent absurdity, there is a distinctly logical pattern to Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack [...] Jack sheepishly admits that he smokes – Lady Bracknell is delighted he has some occupation [...] Lady Bracknell regards men as essentially useless and ornamental creatures – a view more traditionally applied to the female sex"

¹⁶⁴ Lady Bracknell's role in matchmaking portrays her belief in marriage and consequently, in social convention. Powell proposes that: "The tyrannical matriarch in *Earnest* becomes the embodiment of a system, and the contest between her and the young people is really a conflict between Victorian earnestness and conscious revolt against it" (138).

(*Revising Wilde* 181). The absence of Lady Bracknell's husband from the play also means that Lady Bracknell can move freely between alternative spaces outside of the home. Perhaps this dislocation of Lord Bracknell symbolises the necessary disposal of traditional gender roles, in order to re-invent more inclusive and realistic roles. The portrayal of the morally rigid and ideal Victorian woman is undermined in *Earnest* and more modern depictions of women are prioritised. Miss Prism is initially portrayed as an ideal Victorian woman and she applies a rigid morality to others, however, she does not live up to these moral standards herself.

MISS PRISM. I highly disapprove of Mr. Ernest Worthing. He is a thoroughly bad young man.

CECILY. I fear he must be. It is the only explanation I can find of his strange attractiveness.

MISS PRISM. (*rising*): Cecily, let me entreat of you not to be led away by whatever superficial qualities this unfortunate young man may possess (*Collins Complete Works* 391).

Despite the fact that Miss Prism has never met Algernon who is posing as Ernest, she still passes stern judgement on his character. Lady Bracknell reveals that some of Miss Prism's own mistakes in the past are significant; Lady Bracknell's influence on the challenge to traditional Victorian femininity suggests the need for change. Miss Prism admits her bizarre actions; Miss Prism: "In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag [...] I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London" (*Collins Complete Works* 413). This incident is a satire on the Victorian anxiety about the "New Woman" and the fear that women who gain education and independence will abandon their duties in the home, particularly their roles as mothers. Miss Prism's manuscript represents women's education which is recognised as a necessary step towards female emancipation. Her literal abandonment of the baby mocks the ridiculous belief that if women participate in the public sphere of education or employment children will be neglected. In *The Saturday Review*, a popular weekly newspaper which was

established in the 1850s in London, the author of an article entitled "Queen Bees or Working Bees?" Miss Bessie Parkes depicts the fear that employment will corrupt women. Miss Prism's absurd mistake mocks this anxiety about the "New Woman" which was at play in Victorian society. Miss Prism's past haunts her in *Earnest* and the depiction of her as a moral force in the play is diminished. The assertion that Miss Prism mistook a baby for a manuscript undermines the idea that the moral responsibility of society lay with women. Laqueur evokes the moral role of women in Victorian society:

[...] Far from being lesser men, they are treated in his *Origins of the Distinctions of Ranks*, as both a moral barometer and an active agent in the improvement of society [...] a woman's rank and station were dictated by her special talents for raising children and by her "particular delicacy and sensibility", whether these derived from her "original constitution" or her role in life [...] Thus civilization in Millar's account leads to an increasing differentiation of male and female social roles [...] (200-1).

If much of the moral responsibility of society is believed to lie with women then the abandoned rectitude of many of Wilde's female characters, (such as Miss Prism in *Earnest* and Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*), undermines this unrealistic notion of the Victorian woman. Following the exposure of the ideal and moral Victorian woman as ridiculous, Wilde could emphasize his more modern female characters. The ability of Wilde's female characters to move between gendered stage spaces portrays their modern nature. The ability of his female characters to move between spaces also indicates the ridiculous Victorian anxiety about the "New Woman", and the supposed threat that she posed to men and masculinity. As Ledger claims: "It was the emergence of women in the modern city which threatened the patriarchal construction of the Victorian metropolis as masculine public space, and which problematises the idea of the (definitively male) Flaneur as a symbol of modernity" (152).

Female Spaces and Alternative Narratives.

Algernon's bachelor flat is an exclusively male space that is dominated by male characters until Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen pervade this sphere.¹⁶⁵ The ambiguous gendered landscape of the male domestic space implies that gender segregation is absurd. This play with gender also captures the potential and possible instances of gender. When Algernon and Cecily meet for the first time, it is revealed that Cecily has constructed their historical narrative, their past relationship, without consulting him. Algernon's acceptance of this narrative means that Cecily's female narrative is taken as the dominant one. Cecily's need to invent a history suggests a desire for female autonomy in the Victorian world. This act of female authorship contests the exclusivity of the male public sphere, and Cecily's dominance of Algernon refutes the dominance of men over women in Victorian marriage. The following exchange between Algernon and Cecily portrays her unwavering influence and power over him:

ALGERNON. (*raising his hat*): You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

CECILY. You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. (*ALGERNON is rather taken aback*) [...] I hope that you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked, and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy!

ALGERNON. (*looks at her in amazement*): Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless... I love you. Cecily! you will marry me, won't you?

CECILY. You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

ALGERNON. For the last three months?

CECILY. Three months all but a few days. (*Looks at diary, turns over page.*)...

ALGERNON. I didn't know (*Collins Complete Works 378 & 394*).

Algernon accepts the narrative that Cecily authors and he remains submissive in their relationship. Cecily's rejection of Algernon's patronising address to her as: "my little cousin

¹⁶⁵ Act One of *Ernest* is set in the: "Morning-room in Algernon's flat" (*Collins Complete Works 357*).

Cecily” empowers her from the beginning of this dialogue (*Collins Complete Works* 378). Algernon is denied the opportunity to assert himself and he is bewildered by Cecily’s unconventional independence, confidence and her social prowess. Her articulate and blunt personality is contrasted with Algernon’s surprise and subservience; he is “*rather taken aback*” and he “*looks at her in amazement*” (*Collins Complete Works* 378). His surprised reactions in response to her behaviour also suggest that she is an unconventional woman. Algernon’s initial denial that he behaves wickedly followed by his assertion that he has been “*rather reckless*”, mirrors his anxious attempt to impress Cecily (*Collins Complete Works* 378). Eltis claims that Cecily is an unconventional Victorian woman: “Without being cynical or worldly, she has sufficient self-assurance to make her intentions and desires quite clear; when Algy declares he loves her ‘wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly’, Cecily calmly replies: ‘Hopelessly doesn’t seem to make much sense, does it?’” (*Revising Wilde* 184). Cecily’s articulate manner and independent personality convey the need to re-imagine more equal gender roles. In Act Two Cecily’s desire to be alone with Algernon posit her as an assertive and unconventional woman: “I don’t think Miss Prism would like my being alone with him. So I had better send for him at once, before she comes in” (*Collins Complete Works* 378).

In their alternative relationship Cecily maintains power over Algernon. Algernon’s declaration of his love for Cecily indicates her power in their relationship. ALGERNON: “[...] ever since...when I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have not merely been your abject slave and servant but, soaring above the pinions of a possibly monstrous ambition, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly” (*Collins Complete Works* 393). Cecily insists that Algernon repeat himself twice so that she can copy his words meticulously into her journal, which is her fictionalised (but written and therefore immortalised) account of their relationship. Cecily’s insistence that he dictate these lines again undermines Algernon’s romantic declaration and reveals the absurdity of his proposal. Cecily

plays the more dominant role and Algernon adopts the submissive role. Cecily's response to Algernon's declaration of love inspires the following reaction:

CECILY. Oh, I don't think that makes any sense at all. The fact is that men should never try to dictate to women. They never know how to do it, and when they do do it, they always say something particularly foolish [...]

ALGERNON. I love you, I want you. I can't live without you, Cecily! You know I love you...
(*Rushes over to her and places his hand on hers.*)

CECILY. (*rising*) Oh, you have made me make a blot. And yours is the only real proposal I have ever had in all my life. I should like to have it entered neatly (*Collins Complete Works 393-94*).

Cecily informs Algernon that: "we have been engaged for the last three months" and that she has bought herself gifts from him and written many letters to herself on his behalf (*Collins Complete Works 394*). Cecily's assertive nature is contrasted with Algernon's acceptance that she will dominate their partnership. When Jack refuses to grant Cecily his permission to marry Algernon, according to her grandfather's will, she will have to wait to come of age before she can marry. Cecily's refusal to wait for Algernon until she comes of age undermines the perception of the Victorian woman as patient, desexualised and celibate.

JACK. [...] according to the terms of her grandfather's will, Miss Cardew does not come legally of age till she is thirty-five. [...]

CECILY. [...] Algy... could you wait for me till I was thirty-five? Don't speak hastily. [...]

ALGERNON. Of course I could, Cecily. How can you ask me such a question? I could wait for ever for you. You know I could.

CECILY. Yes, I felt it instinctively, but I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross [...] (*Collins Complete Works 411*).

Algernon's willingness to wait for Cecily is contrasted with Cecily's more rational stance. Eltis asserts that:

It is Cecily's frankly displayed sexual eagerness which separates her most clearly from the conventionally innocent heroine. Not only does she do more than offer Algy encouragement, being herself the active partner in their courtship, she even rejects the role of eternally faithful maiden who waits patiently to be untied with her beloved. She cannot countenance the possibility of enduring seventeen years of 'passionate celibacy' (*Revising Wilde* 187).

In *Earnest* Wilde empowers the female voice, and the male voice accepts this gender power reversal absolutely. The female characters exemplify a need to re-think gender roles. Wilde challenged the assumption that the Victorian woman should ideally be subservient to her husband by empowering the position of Cecily in her relationship with Algernon. Cecily observes Algernon's physical characteristics through a female lens; he became the object of her gaze while she became the active subject. Kiberd supports the theory that it is the women who observe the men in *Earnest*: "Far from the men engaging in the traditional discussion of the finer points of the female form, it is the women who discuss the physical appeal of the men: when Algernon proposes to Cecily, it is *she* who runs her fingers through his hair and asks sternly: "I hope your hair curls naturally. Does it?" (*Inventing Ireland* 39). Algernon responds: "Yes darling, with a little help from others" (*Collins Complete Works* 395). By allowing the male characters to exhibit less conventional male characteristics, the female characters have more of an opportunity to invent modern female roles. In objectifying Algernon Cecily does not allow him to perform his masculinity in the play.

With the creation of alternative modes of masculinity and femininity comes the desire for recognition and acceptance in society. In *Earnest* Wilde's characters advocate an experimental play with gender roles, often contesting the normative Victorian gender roles in search of unconventional modes of femininity and masculinity. The dual performances of identity, such as Jack and Algernon's penchant for bunburying, and the experimentation with gender interrogates the Victorian belief in ideal gender roles. In *Earnest* and many of his other

plays Wilde deconstructs the idealised forms of Victorian masculinity or femininity, a process which calls gender roles into question on the Victorian stage. This movement away from the typical Victorian perception portrays a tension with such ideals, one that was also visible in Wilde's personal life; his marriage and his sexual relationship with Alfred Douglas depict this tension. Despite this there is also a need to be recognised by society. Butler notes the individual's natural desire for recognition in society; a desire can establish, confirm or reject a person's identity. This desire for recognition is quite possibly reflected in Wilde's choice to marry despite his relationship with Douglas.

Our very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition, and that desire places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have [...] When we speak about sexual rights, we are not merely talking about rights that pertain to our individual desires but to the norms on which our very individuality depends. That means that the discourse of rights avows our dependency, the mode of our being in the hands of others, a mode of being with and for others without which we cannot be (*Undoing Gender* 33-34).

If a person's very individuality depends upon these norms and sexual rights then perhaps Wilde's various identities (in a society which removed him and placed him in prison because of his relations with men), reflected an anxiety of identity. The marriages in Wilde's plays are characterised by hypocrisy and deception; such as the Chiltern's marriage in *An Ideal Husband*, but the reality of marriage as the only acceptable state in society is reinforced in the end. By presenting characters that are complex Wilde portrays more modern interpretations of masculinity and femininity. In Act Three of *Earnest* Gwendolen compromises her morality when she forgives Jack's deception after declaring that: "There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender" but which she subsequently does with ease (*Collins Complete Works* 406). These decisions reflect the more complicated process of building a relationship with someone which includes necessary sacrifices and compromises. Similarly Jack and Algernon's perceived need to

deceive everyone by bunburying portrays a tension between society and individual freedom: "Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and that cigarette case was given to me in the country" (*Collins Complete Works* 361). Jack and Algernon's association with bunburying as Joel Fineman notes, connects the characters with the possibility that they had sexual relations with men: "Bunbury itself, which was not only British slang for a male brothel, but is also a collection of signifiers that straightforwardly express their desire to bury in the bun" (89). This penchant for bunburying contests the assumed heterosexuality of Victorian men and undermines Jack and Algernon's engagements to Gwendolen and Cecily. Patricia Behrendt looks for representations of a gay masculinity in Ernest (172-3). However, Behrendt overlooks the fact that a gay masculinity or identity had only begun to emerge following the Wilde trials.¹⁶⁶ The characters in *Ernest* challenge the lines of typical Victorian gender roles. Wilde celebrates alternative and modern gender identities. Bunburying provides the male characters with a temporary escape from a highly oppressive and regulated landscape, but their identity deception is realised at the end of the play. Unlike conventional Victorian plays, however, the characters are not punished for their double performances of identity; instead Wilde celebrates pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality. The blurring between chaos and order, fact and fiction appropriates the character's performances of various identities, and challenges the assumption that certain identities are more authentic than others. While the female characters seem to dominate various stage spaces in the play, Wilde's male characters are somewhat displaced. In many scenes the female characters seem more comfortable in their environments than their male counterparts; they move between spaces easily while the male characters struggle to keep up.

As well as challenging the gender dynamic in society Wilde's plays mirror an affinity for challenging the Victorian class system. In the opening scene of *Ernest* Jack pleads with

¹⁶⁶ As noted in the Introduction the term 'gay' did not emerge until after the Wilde trials in 1895. The term 'homosexual' did exist but had very different meanings attached to it; it was used in a medical context, usually in relation to what was perceived as deviant sexual behaviour between men.

Algernon to return his silver cigarette case to him. According to Holland, Wilde often lavished gifts upon Victorian rent boys and the gifts of inscribed cigarette cases were exchanged between male companions (Dublin lecture 2010). The multiple cross-class friendships that Wilde had with men were evident during the 1895 trials.¹⁶⁷ According to Holland's account, the implication of the silver cigarette case in *Ernest* implies that Wilde's two male protagonists Jack and Algernon, as well as Cecily, are connected to a group of Victorian men that were intimately involved with one another. The opening act of *Ernest* displays Wilde's conscious challenge of class expectations and behaviours; Algernon's manservant Lane admits to drinking his master's finest bottles of champagne.

ALGERNON. Eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed. LANE.

Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir [...]

(*Collins Complete Works* 357).

This unconventional dialogue between Algernon and Lane suggests that Wilde's characters defy the expectations of the predominantly middle-class audience.

Algernon's Hopes to Acquire Status and Ernest: An Object of Exchange. As an ambitious middle-class dandy, Algernon hopes to avail of marriage as a means of acquiring aristocratic wealth and a superior class status. Cecily's hopes to marry are not tainted with the kind of pressure that Algernon is under; Lady Bracknell's involvement in his relationship with Cecily emphasizes his need to get married. Under the tutelage of Lady Bracknell, who admits to having married into her current position, Algernon's superficial performance of wealth and his self-fashioned identity as a dandy conceal his precarious financial position.¹⁶⁸ The opening act of the play is set in the "*Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street, London [...]* The room is *luxuriously and artistically furnished*" (*Collins Complete Works* 357). The interior of his bachelor flat is decorated so that Algernon gives off the initial impression of wealth and social status to his guests. Despite this, Algernon's mounting debt is

¹⁶⁷ These cross-class friendships were interpreted as suspicious as analysed in the Introduction.

¹⁶⁸ Lady Bracknell: "When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way" (*Collins Complete Works* 409).

constantly evoked in *Earnest*, and suggests the pressure on him to marry into a more acceptable and superior position in society. When Algernon reveals to Jack that he has had his cigarette case since Jack dined with him two weeks previously, Jack claims that he almost wrote a letter to Scotland Yard offering a large reward for it. Algernon's response denotes his financial trouble: "Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up" (*Collins Complete Works* 360). Later, in the same act, Algernon chastises his relations for not lending him money: "Relations never lend one any money, and won't give one credit, even for genius" (*Collins Complete Works* 370). In the deleted scene, Mr Gribbsby arrives seeking payment for Algernon's bill at the Savoy Hotel amounting to £762. Before this Jack reveals that he has paid off Algernon's debt on a number of occasions.

JACK. I hope, Ernest, that I may rely on the statement you made to me last week when I finally settled all your bills for you. I hope you have no out-standing accounts of any kind.

ALGERNON. I haven't any debts at all, dear Jack. Thanks to your generosity I don't owe a penny, except for a few neckties, I believe. (*Collins Complete Works* 384-5). Algernon's request: "Jack, you really must settle this bill" denotes Algernon's economic insecurity and his willingness to rely on his friend financially (*Collins Complete Works* 385). Lalonde claims that: "Algernon has to marry into money; making a good marriage in turn demands that he embody an attractive, marketable masculinity" (663). Algernon's wish to be christened Ernest reflects his attempt to embody an attractive masculinity, according to Cecily's measures of masculinity. Algernon's role as a dandy in *Earnest* exemplifies the potential of identity and class in *Earnest*. This identity suits Algernon's ambition to rise through the social ranks and his marriage to Cecily is an ideal way to do this. Lalonde suggests that: "Wilde demonstrates how the effeminacy of the dandy signifies in a host of ways – how it is as much a performance of class as it is potentially a performance of sexuality" (660). Cecily's superior wealth and class status, that are finally approved by Lady Bracknell, can provide Algernon with

a more acceptable position in society. As Cecily's ward Jack informs Lady Bracknell of Cecily's relations and her fortune.

JACK. (*in a clear, cold voice*): Miss Cardew is the grand-daughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporrin, Fifeshire, N.B.

LADY BRACKNELL. That sounds not unsatisfactory. Three addresses always inspires confidence, even in tradesmen [...] I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

JACK. Oh! About a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all [...]

LADY BRACKNELL. [...] A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. [...] We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. [...] (*Collins Complete Works* 408-9).

Lady Bracknell's approval of her nephew's engagement reflects her awareness that Algernon will benefit considerably by his marriage to Cecily. Her admission that "We live [...] in an age of surfaces" exemplifies the importance of marriage in this society.

Aside from Algernon's desire to marry Cecily, the male characters in *Earnest* are often the desired objects of exchange. For example Cecily and Gwendolen assume the role of Ernest's protectors.

CECILY. [...] Mr Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN. (*quite politely, rising*) My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr Ernest Worthing is engaged to me... If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

CECILY. (*thoughtfully and sadly*) whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married (*Collins Complete Works* 399).

Gwendolen and Cecily's tones are patronising, and Algernon and Jack are disempowered by their depiction of Ernest as a "poor fellow" who is in need of their protection (*Collins Complete Works* 399). Cecily and Gwendolen argue over Ernest as if they own him; they swear to protect or "rescue him at once" from any "unfortunate entanglement" (*Collins Complete Works* 399). Although it is Algernon and Jack who deceive Cecily and Gwendolen into thinking they are named Ernest, on discovery of that deception it is Cecily and Gwendolen who maintain their positions of power. Ernest is the object of exchange between the empowered female characters; they challenge the conventional patriarchal bargain and construct a matriarchal bargain of Ernest. According to Butler's framework of exchange in marriage Ernest replaces the bride in a typical patriarchal framework, in this case becoming a signifier of Gwendolen's and Cecily's female identity. In posing as Ernest Jack and Algernon have not forged their own identities and they are powerless in the hopes of becoming the ideal man, Ernest. Algernon orchestrates the unusual gender paradigm from the beginning of the play when he forecasts the idealisation of female characters: "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his" (*Collins Complete Works* 371). The exchange of Wilde's male characters in his plays, such as Ernest and Gerald in *A Woman*, is a parody on the patriarchal exchange of women between men in Victorian marriage.

Ernest provides an alternative identity for Jack and Algernon in the play. The experimentation with gender and sexuality in *Earnest* contests the social norms and expectations of the time. Wilde's stage directions in the play often indicate his intention to challenge typical Victorian boundaries. Jack and Algernon's self-inventions dispense with the patriarchal lineage as a necessary role in Victorian society; one which privileges male over female birthright. Despite this displacement, in the final scene of the play Jack discovers that his father is called Ernest; a move which re-affirms the power of patriarchy and male lineage. Jack enters onstage as Jack, but he performs as Ernest. Algernon subsequently declares that he has

always known and introduced Jack as Ernest. The character's experimentation with identities challenge patriarchal lineage:

ALGERNON. [...] Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK. It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. (*Taking it from case.*) 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany, W' (*Collins Complete Works* 360-61).

In Act Three Algernon adopts the role of Ernest in order to form an acquaintance with Jack's cousin Cecily. Ernest provides an alternative identity for the male characters, and yet symbolizes the fictionalised ideal masculinity. By displacing Victorian masculinity this provides the opportunity to create a more modern mode of masculinity. The absence of the traditional patriarchal male voice from the dramatic landscape of *Ernest* allows Wilde to re-imagine more liberating masculinities. For example Gwendolen informs Cecily that her father, who does not appear in the play, is confined to the domestic sphere: "Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate [...] And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive" (*Collins Complete Works* 397). Gwendolen's association of her father with the domestic and with a more typically female space undermines the idealisation of the Victorian father and suggests that an alternative gender framework is available. When Algernon informs Lady Bracknell that he will have to cancel his plans to dine with them that evening she captures her husband's confinement in the domestic sphere. Lady Bracknell: "Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that" (*Collins Complete Works* 364). Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell dominate the public sphere while Bracknell remains in the private sphere, a move which challenges his masculinity and his status in the public sphere. As noted in the Introduction, Habermas

proposeds that the male patriarch's status in the public sphere is dependent on his dominance as master in the private sphere. Bracknell's inability to dominate the private and public sphere is mirrored by Lady Bracknell's visible status and movement in the public sphere throughout the play. Bracknell is predominantly referred to only through the recognition of his relationship with Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen, as a husband or father (for example "Papa"), and he is constructed offstage through the women's dialogue (*Collins Complete Works* 397). He is referred to only once as Lord Bracknell in the course of the play by Lady Bracknell, and his absence throughout the play means that he never claims his title or his identity for himself. Bracknell's very existence in *Earnest* is only available through the medium of the female characters in the play. Wilde's play challenges the Victorian assumption that certain instances of gender and sexuality are more legitimate and acceptable than others. Butler noted how so-called original constructions of "men and women within the heterosexual frame" are also constructions at work in society:

Categories like butch and femme were not copies of a more ordinary heterosexuality, but they showed how the so-called originals, men and women within the heterosexual frame, are similarly constructed, performatively established [...] the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy. Through performativity, dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized. (*Undoing Gender* 209).

Butler's reflection on gender roles can be linked to Wilde's deconstruction of the Victorian woman and her moral responsibility. By exposing the typical idealised gender models in society, (such as the submissive Victorian woman that is mainly confined to the private sphere and the patriarch that dominates the public sphere) as illusions in the play, Wilde contests the believed authenticity of these gender roles. Lady Bracknell's, Gwendolen's and Cecily's dominance and influence in shaping their own identities and lives as well as the lives of their male partners, reflect Wilde's quest for a more modern portrayal of women in his plays. Raby notes how Wilde's strong female characters rally against the ideal Victorian depiction of women. These female characters transgress the roles of wifehood and motherhood. Lady Bracknell combines

her dominance in the public sphere, and her education and independence with her role as a mother to Gwendolen, implying that these combined roles are more realistic for Victorian women. Many of Wilde's characters reject the exclusive roles of women as wife and mother; being either childless in marriage or choosing to remain unmarried, such as Lady Chiltern and Mrs Arbuthnot. Wilde's male characters also challenge masculinity and reveal the oppression of the patriarchy on men by performing as someone else, such as Ernest.

Although *Earnest* concludes with the promise of two marriages, the implication is that Jack and Algernon's play between disparate sexualities and gender roles portray a modern mode of masculinity. In Act Two Cecily says to Algernon, who is posing as Jack's fictional brother Ernest: "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy" (*Collins Complete Works* 378). Jack and Algernon emphasize the hypocrisy in Victorian society. Jack is disgusted by Algernon's performance as his brother Ernest while Jack simultaneously deceives Cecily, Miss Prism and Dr Chausable about the death of his invented brother. The invented brother and invalid provide the male characters with some freedom from oppressive Victorian life. Jack: "Bunbury! Well, I won't have him talk to you about Bunbury or about anything else. It is enough to drive one perfectly frantic" (*Collins Complete Works* 383). Although they delight in the freedom of this alternative life they are disgusted by each other's behaviour. The potential of and complexities of identity and gender in *Earnest* are emphasized by the male characters' superficial hopes of marriage which conclude the play, and represent a desire to be accepted. According to Sinfield although the dandy might "look and sound like the mid-twentieth century stereotype of a queer man", in *Earnest* Algernon and Jack wish to enter into the heterosexual framework of marriage (*Wilde Century* vi). Before she met Algernon, Cecily decides that their engagement has been arranged for three months. Their farcical relationship seems to be one of convenience and reveals that they are not in love, but relish the idea of being in love, seeing as they did not know each other before they got engaged. Gwendolen and Jack's union is also superficial and they cultivate a

similar style of hypocrisy. The hypocrisy of Wilde's characters suggests that they offer compulsory heterosexuality in a society which demands this as the only acceptable form of sexuality. The experimentation with gender and sexuality that is evident throughout *Earnest* provides the opportunity to invent an alternative and less oppressive dramatic landscape for the characters. Although the female characters dominate the public sphere, they do not have the freedom to bunbury in the play. Algernon notes his and Jack's freedom in moving between the city and country: "You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose" (*Collins Complete Works* 362). This provides the characters with legitimate excuses in order to avoid their obligations in society and to pursue their own individuality to a certain extent. Borrowing the mask of another identity can provide one with more freedom to explore other identities. As Eltis claims:

The double lives led by Algernon, Jack, Cecily (through her diary), and even Miss Prism (via her abandoned three-volume novel) are another means by which they liberate themselves from the formal strictures of society. [...] Cecily, Algy, and Jack become their own fantastic doubles, permanently granted the freedom which their fictions allowed them. Wilde, whose own sexuality was outlawed by the rigid and inhuman legislation of Victorian society, had created a fantasy world in which such laws had no power and double lives like his own no longer had to be kept secret (*Revising Wilde* 196).

The mask of the Irishman granted Wilde the opportunity and distance in which he could contest the social structures in Victorian society. In *Earnest* Jack is found as a baby in a handbag in Victoria railway station. Jack's ambiguous background means that he has to re-invent himself. Wilde's identities as a heterosexual man in marriage and as a man in a relationship with Douglas, can be connected to Jack and Algernon's constructed identity which grants them further freedom in society. In *The Critic as Artist* Wilde evokes his experimentation with

identity: “what people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (*Collins Complete Works* 758).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ *The Critic as Artist* is a long prose essay Wilde wrote which was published in 1890 in the magazine *The Nineteenth Century* under the title *The True Function and Value of Criticism*, and it reflects on many different themes such as the role of the critic and the artist in society. It was later published in *Intentions* in 1891.

Conclusion.

This thesis has considered Wilde's plays and his alternative identity as a celebration of the possibilities of gender and sexuality. Wilde's close association with Victorian women was unconventional during his lifetime; from the influence of Lady Wilde and the early tragic deaths of his sisters Isola and his half-sisters, to his creation of alternative matriarchs and family units in his plays. Wilde's letters provide an interesting insight into his admiration for many women including his mother, and Sarah Bernhardt, as well as reflecting his proposal that women should be accepted into the public sphere. Wilde's editorship of *The Woman's World* displays his desire to publish women's and men's articles in the same public intellectual forum, a move which directly contests the confinement of women to the domestic sphere, and the segregation of gender. His publication in this magazine of numerous pro-women's rights articles, and in some cases of anti-suffragist material, suggests a belief that disparate female opinions deserve to participate in this essential public debate. An important part of this thesis is the detailed analysis of Wilde's early plays; *Vera or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*. These two plays have an interesting history; most scholars dismiss them as unworthy of inclusion in the Wildean canon, and the analysis of them thus far reflects this reality. For the first time the suicides of Wilde's female protagonists in these plays are interpreted through a feminist lens. These early tragedies form a unique part of Wilde's dramatic canon, and unless they begin to be treated more seriously by scholars they will probably be forgotten in the future of theatre and Wildean scholarship. The plays provide my study with further insight into Wilde's dramatic development, and Chamberlin's reflection on art which was mentioned in Chapter Two comes to mind. Scholars have long considered Wilde's dramatic canon, which typically includes a focus on his popular 1890s plays as an insight into his artistic expression; a similar approach would be invaluable to the insertion of his early plays into his accepted and celebrated oeuvre. The characters Vera and The Duchess are Wilde's first creation of strong female characters; they go on to contest the male patriarchal powers in society, and they are key characters in Wilde's dramatic output. The plethora of characters from *Vera* to *Earnest* depicts Wilde's intention to re-

configure gender roles and sexuality, pushing the boundaries of accepted Victorian conceptions. His matriarch in *Earnest* and his alternative family unit in *A Woman of No Importance* portray a celebration of difference, which contests the stringent Victorian conceptions of gender and the typical family unit. By initially appearing as conventional Victorian men and women, the subversiveness of Wilde's characters can be underestimated, but his characters defy definition and categorization. Wilde's female characters, such as Lady Bracknell in *Earnest*, are often more free to pervade private and public spaces than his male characters. Wilde challenges the expected segregation of men and women in his plays, creating a more gender liberating dynamic where they can experiment with alternative gender and sexual identities.

Wilde's blurring of gender and sexual identities are exemplified by his and Beardsley's collaboration on *Salome*. Gender and sexuality act as blurred signifiers in many these illustrations, suggesting the possibility and potential of such concepts. In contrast to the potentially more liberating landscape in *Salome*, the Victorian frameworks of gender and sexuality are proven to be narrow and restrictive. Wilde's interrogation of the superficiality of Victorian marriage in *An Ideal Husband* satirises this idealised framework, and Mrs Arbuthnot's choice in rejecting marriage in *A Woman of No Importance* implies the possibility of alternative family units. Mrs Arbuthnot is Wilde's alternative invention of the "New Woman", and he invests intelligence, humour and rationality in this character, a technique which undermines the unrealistic portrayal of the "New Woman" in society. Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Erlynne are central characters in his plays, and the fact that they both escape unpunished for their unconventional decisions, whether that was Mrs Erlynne's decision to leave her family, or Mrs Arbuthnot's choice not to marry and raise her son alone, suggests that people should be allowed to follow their own path of individuality. Wilde's support of working women would have typified him as an unconventional Victorian man, and his close association with women would have contributed to the negative perception of him during the trials. During his lifetime he maintained profound cultural connections with Ireland, England and France, and these ties to

multiple cultures conveyed his modern, cosmopolitan identity. Wilde defied definition and categorization and his plays and his life mirrored the need for this discourse to be asserted in Victorian society. His identity which incorporated many different roles in society depicted the complex nature of individual identity, and suggested the tendency of Victorian society to categorize individuals too quickly and stringently. Wilde's roles as a father and a husband portray his essential heterosexual identity, and his close relations with men, particularly Douglas, again denote the complexities of modern sexuality. Wilde's identity and the recollections of his contemporaries can provide an intimate visual insight of Wilde. An interviewer from the *New York Herald* captures Wilde at the age of twenty-six: "His eyes are blue, his necktie bluer than his eyes. His shoes are patent-leather, and his coat of fashion far surpassing aught that aesthetic men can reach. There is no beard upon the face of Oscar Wilde, but short and shaven he faces criticism. A low-necked shirt displays his throat [...]" ("An American Interviewer and Mr. Oscar Wilde"; *Pall Mall Gazette*: 18th January 1882 p. 11). Described and pictured in the imagination, not defined or categorized as he would have hated, Wilde's identity continues to contest perceptions of gender and sexuality.

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PhD Thesis Title - The Drama of Oscar Wilde: Contesting Victorian Gender Dynamics.

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This thesis proposes that Oscar Wilde's plays and his invention of more modern characters in his plays challenged the Victorian gender dynamic. This assertion will be examined in light of his plays; from *Vera or The Nihilists* (1880) to *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Through the medium of the characters Wilde contests the essentialist perception of gender evident in Victorian society, and he re-imagines more equal gender roles on the stage. Judith Butler's constructivist view of gender provides an important framework for this analysis. The disparate instances of gender and to some extent sexuality are considered as a celebration of the possibilities of alternative and modern gender roles. Unconventionally strong female characters dominate the more passive male characters in many of the plays. In some cases characters such as Vera and the Duchess opt out of the oppressive female roles available to them in a patriarchal society, through the medium of suicide. Their suicides inevitably lead to an examination of the conditions of their lives and what brought them to this desperate decision. Wilde presents a different interpretation of the "New Woman" in Mrs Erlynne and Mrs Arbuthnot; these strong characters are imbued with intellect and attractive personalities, despite the unconventional decisions that they make. These alternative modes of individuality proposed, depict the unrealistic expectations of Victorian society. Female individuality and identity, as well as unusual family units are celebrated, but in some cases the patriarchal operations of gender at work re-assert control over the characters through mediums such as marriage. Other characters often undermine the idealisation of the Victorian patriarch and the traditional family unit, in some cases alternative family units are prioritised; such as the family unit in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893). The unusual gender dynamics that characterise Wilde's plays reflect the reality of and the limits to the patriarchal gender structure in Victorian society.

Wilde's gender and identity during his lifetime (16th October 1854 - 30th November 1900) is also briefly considered. Wilde's marriage to Constance Lloyd and his simultaneous relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas contested the assumed heterosexuality of Victorian men, and suggested the need for a more modern view of masculinity and sexuality. His unconventional closeness with Victorian working women is explored, as well as his complex sexuality and identity. Wilde rallied against the Victorian tendency to categorize people; his various cultural connections to Ireland, England and France, as well as his heterosexual identity as a husband and father, and his relationship with Bosie, depict a complex self and identity. Wilde's lifelong connections with various Victorian women, including the influence of his mother, Lady Jane Wilde, contributed to his lifelong affinity with the emerging Suffragist movement. Wilde's editorship of the Victorian magazine, *The Woman's World* (1887-89) is examined, as well as his public support of working women. Wilde re-named and re-designed the content of the magazine to focus on more important issues related to female education and identity; such as Women and Politics and Women's Education. *The Woman's World* advocated the publication of women's views in a public intellectual forum and included the publication of women's and men's articles alongside each other, challenging the segregation of gender and proposing the need for gender equality in the Victorian world.