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THE WILDE MOMENT

By Richard A. Kaye

IS THERE A VICTORIAN WRITER who has won as much attention in the last few years, critical or popular, as Oscar Wilde? One or two decades ago, Hardy, Dickens, and the Brontës were the Victorians that large numbers of people wanted to read, discuss, and see on film and stage. It seems like another era that saw *Nicholas Nickelby* ruling on the Great White Way. The decline of Dickens's mass appeal was probably signaled some time ago with an episode of the TV series *Law and Order* in which a murder case resulted from a business feud over a disastrous Broadway production of *Bleak House*. The Brontës have fared no better; the musical *Jane Eyre,* after some of the worst reviews ever to have greeted a musical, recently closed on Broadway, its producers in its last weeks having resorted to advertising on milk cartons. Although Hardy reportedly continues to top the sales of nineteenth-century British classics, Michael Winterbottom's 2001 film adaptation of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, set during the California Gold Rush, played to mixed reviews and nearly empty theaters, its gloomy fealty to the spirit of Hardy's fiction, not unlike Winterbottom's brooding version of *Jude the Obscure*, an evident obstacle for most audiences.

Wilde, however, has broken down all barriers — generational, cultural, sexual — ruling everywhere and with everyone in new biographies, scholarly editions, collections of essays, updated editions of his letters, film adaptations, plays, and exhibitions marking his centenary, most recently, at New York's Pierpont Morgan Library, which has imported an exhibit from London that opened last September. This past year alone brought two new biographies of the playwright, a complete edition of his letters, a biographical study of Robbie Ross, a major revisionist biography of Alfred Douglas, a biography of Wilde's niece, Dolly, and scores of scholarly book-length works. In addition to the 1997 film *Wilde*, a screen adaptation of *An Ideal Husband* starring Rupert Everett has appeared, and a new movie version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is now in production. A tavern on New York City's Upper West Side, "The Dead Poet," offers a drink called The Oscar Wilde; its ingredients (Ketel One Vodka, sour apple, and Midori Liqueur) are served in a sugar-coated glass. Wilde has managed to generate the kind of vogue that, twenty years ago, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury set inspired, in another literary craze in which no figure, no matter how subsidiary, escaped his or her fifteen minutes of attention.

Wilde's ascendancy has not gone without a fight. In the post-trial years, it was customary to belittle the playwright as, at worse, a dangerous influence and, at best, a

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trifling poseur. "Wilde's plays, with the exception of "The Importance of Being Earnest," wrote Ashley Dukes in *The Youngest Drama: Studies in Fifty Dramatists* (1923), "show lamentable signs of wear" (55). Mary McCarthy, writing in the *Partisan Review* in 1947, began by insisting there was "something *outré* in all of Wilde's work that makes one sympathize to a degree with the Marquess of Queensberry." *The Importance of Being Earnest* — a "ferocious idyll" — was spoilt, McCarthy claimed, by a second of "exhausting triviality" (106–07). More recently, Wilde skeptics have been troubled by the appeal of late-Victorian aestheticism and decadence to what remains of the counterculture. Writing in 1995 in *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, Gertrude Himmelfarb insisted that "Late-Victorian England, in spite of the new men and women of the time, perhaps in reaction against them, remained invincibly Victorian," and gloated that "the movement" known as the "fin de siècle" was "well named; it did not survive the siècle" (232, 213). Reviewing Barbara Belford's biography of Wilde's niece, a reviewer in *New York* Magazine peevishly asked, "Isn't it time for a saint who was martyred for substance rather than style?" (24–25). (One might have thought Wilde had been imprisoned for donning that green carnation.) Today, Himmelfarb's analysis looks like a desperate neo-conservative wish to eradicate a social pollutant, while Wilde, the ultimate *fin-de-siècle* culture hero, has not only outlasted the nineteenth-century, he seems to have defined the twentieth. The promotion for the movie *Wilde* went so far as to declare itself "The Story of the First Modern Man."

Why is Oscar Wilde so irresistible right now? As with Bloomsbury's allure throughout the 1970s and 80s, Wilde's popularity today would seem to be related to what many people see as his gay liberationist stance, coupled with that irony that has come to be associated with both a strand of "homosexual style" and with postmodern culture. Beyond the homosexual and postmodernist ironizing, however, Wilde's travails prophecized a recent period in (American) culture given over to prosecutorial frenzy on the intimate life of public figures. Former President Clinton's tangle with a White House intern may seem like a far cry from Wilde's obsessive, treacherous love for Lord Alfred Douglas, but there are some affinities. Kenneth Starr had some of the loony obsessiveness of Queensberry as well as the Marquess's gift for exploiting legal technicalities, and just as Clinton was undone not only by Monica Lewinsky but by a long line of accusing ex-lovers, it was a group of "disreputable" young men whom the prosecution finally had to drag into court to undermine Wilde's coy self-confidence. Wilde's appeal, however, cannot be said to be wholly related to American scandals or to biographical matters. It is just as likely that *Salomé*, with a brilliantly adaptable opacity that generated productions as far away as Russia and Japan, helped Wilde win audiences outside the English-speaking world. Well before the recent Wilde craze, W. H. Auden observed that Wilde was one of only three English writers who had attracted a wide following outside of England, the others being Shakespeare and Byron.

Appropriately enough for the man who changed the face of the British stage, although arguably more with the symbolist *Salomé* than with formally tame comedies such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is the theater that has offered the liveliest versions of the playwright's life. Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, although largely about the poet and Latinist A. H. Housman, presents the most original, powerful, and the least sentimentally self-indulgent version of Wilde's life and his relation to Victorian culture. Stoppard's work comes in the wake of other plays and films sympathetically taking up Wilde's story, a

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trend that began with Terry Eagleton's 1993 *Saint Oscar* and continues with Moises Kaufman's 1997 *Gross Indecency*, David Hare's 1998 *The Judas Kiss,* and the 1998 movie *Wilde*, directed by Brian Gilbert and starring Stephen Fry. Like Stoppard's play, these earlier works demonstrate an almost total absorption with Wilde in decline, as if the only dramatic interest in the writer's life lay in his catastrophic fall. This has always been the case in versions of Wilde's life — from Ken Hughes's 1963 *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* starring Peter Finch to Adrian Hall and Richard Cumming's 1973 play *Feasting with Panthers*, where the action was set entirely in Reading Gaol. Hare's *The Judas Kiss* covers the period of Wilde's 1895 trials and then jumps forward to the year 1897, when Wilde and Bosie are sojourning in Italy. Of all the new explorations of Wilde's life, it seems the blandest. Hare's Wilde (played in both London and New York by Liam Neeson) is devoid of life or artifice, although he does reach a clear-eyed composure in his last years that differs from the portrait one takes away from Ellmann's celebrated biography, in which Wilde dies impoverished and (one of Ellman's more debatable claims) syphilitic. Hare's Wilde has been converted into socialist belief, as he looks back philosophically on his fall as a political routing of his liberationist program. Only the film *Wilde* allows us to witness Wilde exulting in his public and private triumphs. *Lady Windemere's Fan* opens to exuberant audiences and as Wilde, his boldness fortified by his success on the stage, continues to bed the poet John Gray, cultivates the life-long devotion of Robbie Ross, and garners the silkily opportunistic admiration of Lord Alfred Douglas (played with demonic suavity by Jude Law).

It has become *de rigueur* for playwrights to take a stand on the myth of Oscar and to see him as a martyr for heroically impossible causes. Eagleton sought to introduce an issue that usually gets short shrift in treatments of the playwright's life: his Irishness. *Saint Oscar* begins with Wilde's mother upbraiding her son for failing to follow his Irish heritage and the rest of the play is a variation on this *idée fixe*. Eagleton makes limp attempts at reproducing a Wildean epigrammatic wit, but every line sounds slightly off, as if Wilde's idiom were being translated into the language of an Oxford student's imitation. "Nature lacks the knack of improvising; it just keeps doing the same dreary thing. Whereas I never do the same thing twice, which is what makes me so fascinating" (9). Kaufman's play can scarcely be described as a creative endeavor at all, drawn as it is almost completely from historical documents. *Gross Indecency* focuses on the trials that ensnared Wilde after his brilliant success on the London stage, relying on a high-pitched pastiche of trial transcripts and providing a veneer of post-modern irresolution and self-consciousness. Yet Kaufman holds no original perspective on the playwright's life, work, or era. (The technique of cobbling together trial transcripts is itself hardly original; the 1960 *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* also had drawn heavily on court transcripts as they had been reproduced at length in H. Montgomery Hyde's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*.) Kaufman's Oscar is a martyr for Gay Lib, punished for his daring, and the audience is asked to look back in consternation at the priggishness of Victorian society, its venal exorcism of the genius in its midst. One would have thought that a contemporary playwright would have a field day with one of the richest ironies of Wilde's story — namely, that Wilde confidently initiated legal action, taking a cagey route in his own defense, and then denying that he was in fact a "sodomite" until the prosecution plucked from the underground the working-class young men with whom Wilde spent his time.

This is not to say that Wilde masochistically willed his own public defeat, the problematic premise of Melissa Knox's *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* (1994), which

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billed itself as the "first psychoanalytic biography" of the playwright. A similar axiom animated the journalist Adam Gopnik's 1998 article in the *New Yorker,* which rather preposterously claimed there was nothing especially transgressive about Wilde's sexuality. What an emphasis on Wilde's cagey dissembling might have suggested is that the writer was less an heroic icon than a man caught in the spokes of history, which he naively underestimated or did not see. The Labouchère Amendment, which for the first time criminalized acts of "gross indecency" (the ingeniously ambiguous phrase that gives Kaufman his title), was not a fantasy concocted by Wilde, although his closeness to the upper classes may have convinced him that he would escape the Amendment's wide net. That is one of the salient points of the film *Wilde*, which stresses Wilde's refusal, as the hounds were at the door, to follow the advice of friends like Ross and flee. For all of his interest in the historical record, Kaufman's view of history is Manichean melodrama, and so, tiresomely, we watch as Wilde the panther paces his cage and then collapses before the prosecution's whip. As Shelton Waldrep has written of *Gross Indecency*, "What is lost, in fact, is almost a sense of Wilde as anything but the representation of an ideological struggle between the forces of repression and rebellion" (52). The play gives off an air of intellectual smugness. There are easy potshots at an overly confident gender-studies academic, "Marvin Taylor," who drones on to a character named "Moises" about "gender, class, and sexuality." Actually, the play might have benefited from exactly the ideas circulating in Gender Studies over the last few years. But it becomes clear that Kaufman is not really interested in ideas. Despite its Off-Broadway address and its postmodern affectations, *Gross Indecency* falls back on old-time Broadway sentiment. Kaufman again and again hugs his martyr, before finally releasing him into the jaws of history.

The movie *Wilde*, meanwhile, is a splendid vehicle for Stephen Fry, as compelling an Oscar Wilde as one could want. What the movie provides, and what so many of the recent efforts at capturing the playwright miss, is a sense of Wilde as an irreducibly social creature. The man whom Kaufman wants to see as a rebel outsider was too much in love with social approval to fit the role of complete outcast, in contrast to another erotic trouble-maker, Byron, who was largely contemptuous of the upper-class cenacles into which he was born. When Wilde's mother (played feelingly by Vanessa Redgrave, in Pre-Raphaelite garb) tells his wife, Constance, that Oscar was "made for the stage," it is a comment that cuts two ways, since it is both London's West End and the grim historical stage that will become Oscar's arena. Wilde glows before his double success as a triumphant playwright and the brash lover of young men, never quite sure, in Fry's performance, which of the two roles suits him best. Still, if *Gross Indecency* liked its Oscar as martyr, the movie insists on a cuddly Wilde, and so we are shown Oscar reading his tale "The Selfish Giant" to his adoring children. It is, of course, Wilde who is the Selfish Giant, leaving Constance for extended trysts with Bosie and oblivious to the Permanent Relationship that the kindly Robbie Ross seems to be offering. The film strongly intimates that Wilde, deluded romantic, should have chosen the gentle-hearted Ross instead of the perfidious Bosie. Although the movie offers scenes of Wilde picking up young men in the wake of the success of *Lady Windemere's Fan* (and, later, shots of sexual threesomes in which Wilde eyes Bosie carousing in bed with working-class ruffians), *Wilde* comes very close to giving us a Disney Oscar, as cuddly as a big stuffed giant, and as querulous as a big, paralyzed giant before his mounting troubles with the public and the law.

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In the wake of all of this calculated cuddlesomeness and polemical martyr-making, Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* offers up an alternative Wilde. The play is full of bracing ironies that Wilde himself would have appreciated. A sense of history as treacherous territory, a tangle of personal choices and inescapable obstacles, is precisely what makes Stoppard's play a forcefully original contribution to the recent understanding of Wilde, although, paradoxically, it is the least dramatic of all the new theatrical ventures tackling the playwright's life. Alone among the recent playwrights and filmmakers attending to Wilde, Stoppard transcends the traps of biography (I almost wrote the "biodegradable"), preferring, instead, to parse history. As with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Arcadia*, Stoppard is fascinated by how characters, even commanding figures such as Wilde, are powerless to affect history even as they are aware of their historical roles. It takes time for Stoppard's view to come through, however, since a good deal of *The Invention of Love* (all of Act I, in fact) is saturated in a fast-paced classical allusiveness. Stoppard wears his erudition heavily. Almost embarrassingly eager to let us know how much research he has done, he is the theater's ultimate teacher's pet, forever volunteering details. (The program from the Broadway production, which includes background on the era as well as a mini-booklet of Housman's love poems, might serve as a packet for a Gay Studies course.) With the exception of some serenely pretty bicycling by Oxfordians, the New York production felt physically sluggish. I am told that the Philadelphia version was far more inventive, with, for example, Charon's boat on the River Styx exiting over the audience, as if into the heavens.

But the recondite repartee of the Oxford set and the knotty questions of textual scholarship among classicists have a purpose here, and ultimately Stoppard's imagination manages to transcend the heavy-handed learnedness. In its last scenes especially, *The Invention of Love* offers a striking view of the nineteenth-century culture of male friendship as a range of possibilities, the poles of which are represented by Housman's knowing — and at times quite creative — repressiveness and Wilde's scandal-courting flamboyance. Which was the higher life, Stoppard asks, Housman's brilliant, cloistered life as a scholar or Wilde's very public artistic and social success? Housman's unrequited love for his fellow Oxfordian, the athlete Moses Jackson, or Wilde's conquest of London's social potentates and catastrophic devotion to Bosie? The set-piece of the play — the conversation between Housman (played by Richard Eastman) and Wilde (Daniel Davis) in the afterlife at the end of the play's second act — dramatizes this conflict, although in actuality Housman and Wilde never seem to have met.[1] In *The Invention of Love*'s last, thrillingly conceived act, Wilde interrogates Housman: "Did you come to any of my parties in London? No? But we must have had friends in common. Bernard Shaw? Frank Harris? Beardsley? Labouchère? Whistler? W. T. Stead? Did you know Henry Irving? Lily Langtry? No? The Prince of Wales? You did *have* friends?" To which Housman replies, with pithy dignity, "I had colleagues." Just when he might seem to have the upper-hand as the Man Who Lived, Stoppard's Oscar falls into mournful recollection. "Once, I bought a huge armful of lilies in Covent Garden to give to Miss Langtry," he tells Housman, "and I waited to put them in a cab, a small boy said to me, 'Oh, how rich you are!'" Wilde begins to weep, sobbing that he has to go back to Bosie. "Bosie is my creation, my poem. In the mirror of invention, love discovered itself" (94). It is a shattering moment. *The Invention of Love* presents us with a post-liberationist Wilde and demands that we view him skeptically. It is Housman who delivers the play's last lines, as he stands on the River Styx:

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"Oxford in the Golden Age! — the hairshirts versus the aesthetes: the Neo-Christians versus the neo-pagans: the study of the classics for advancement in the fair of the world versus the study of classics for the advancement of classical studies — what emotional storms, and oh what a tiny teacup." It is part of the magic of *The Invention of Love* that one ends up somewhere beyond sentiment or pity. One wants to have been there.

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NOTE

1. In fact, Wilde's *Complete Letters* reveals a single but suggestive reference to Housman when, in an August 9, 1896 letter to Housman's brother, Lawrence, Wilde closes by remarking that "I have lately been reading your brother's lovely lyrical poems, so you see you have both given me that rate thing happiness" (923). Lawrence had sent *A Shropshire Lad* to Wilde in prison when the volume was published in 1896; Robert Ross reported to a friend that, on visiting the playwright in Reading Goal, he observed Wilde reciting Housman's poem by heart.

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