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In ÉTUDES ANGLAISES 2015/1 Vol. 68 , PAGES 32 TO 39
PUBLISHER KLINCKSIECK

ISSN 0014-195X
ISBN 9782252039823
DOI 10.3917/etan.681.0032

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Complexity is the hallmark of Oscar Wilde's mature works. From "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*, there is an incredible amount of complexity wherever we look. When we reach *A Woman of No Importance,* however, the complexity apparently disappears, and the play is usually read as a conventional Victorian melodrama. A deeper look at the play reveals veiled references to Farquhar, Hawthorne, Arbuthnot and Baudelaire. The references point to a deep hidden meaning in the play. Traced carefully, they reveal Mrs. Arbuthnot as a deeply corrupt woman who is unaware of the dark recesses of evil within herself. Unfortunately, this suppressed undercurrent of meaning is too deeply buried and very difficult to detect, which has led people in general to accept the surface meaning as the true one. The play is thus a stylistic failure, although its veiled thematic content is quite profound.

La complexité caractérise les œuvres d'Oscar Wilde, de "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" jusqu'à The Picture of Dorian Gray *et* Salome*, alors que, dans* A Woman of No Importance*, celle-ci paraît moins évidente, la pièce étant le plus souvent lue comme un mélodrame victorien conventionnel. Cependant, si on analyse la pièce de plus près, on y décèle des références voilées à Farquhar, Hawthorne, Arbuthnot et Baudelaire. Celles-ci soulignent qu'il y a dans la pièce un sens caché, et une analyse détaillée révèle que Mrs Arbuthnot est en fait une femme corrompue et inconsciente du mal tapi en elle. Malheureusement, parce que celui-ci est profondément enfoui, on s'en est souvent tenu à une lecture superficielle de la pièce. Celle-ci est donc, en un sens, un échec stylistique en dépit de sa profondeur thématique.*

In all of his major works, Wilde strove to show the complexity of truth. After Jack admits to Gwendolen and Cecily that he has been lying to them all his life, for instance, and after he admits the "truth," which is that his name is not Ernest and that he has no brother, it turns out that his name is in fact Ernest and that he does have a younger brother, Algernon. What he thought to be the truth turns out to be a lie, while his lies turn out to be true. In *Intentions,* Wilde speaks of the "truth of masks" and ends his essay on the subject cryptically: "A Truth in art

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is that whose contradictory is also true." (CW 1173) The other essays of *Intentions* are equally complex. The longest of them, *The Critic as Artist,* turns Arnold's famous dictum upside down and argues that the function of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is not. But is this Wilde's final position, his opinion of the "truth" about criticism, or is he playfully positing a "contradictory" to Arnold's critical theory in order to initalize a search for a synthesis? And will the synthesis, if found, become itself a thesis that requires an antithesis and a new synthesis? Also, is he really arguing, in *The Decay of Lying,* that the artistic imagination creates the outside world, or is he encouraging us to seek a synthetic balance between scientific objectivity and artistic creativity? If so, where does the balance lie?

Even in the fairy tales, truth is not a simple matter. "The Fisherman and His Soul," for instance, ends in a puzzling manner. The priest, after recognizing God's truth, "blessed the sea, and all the wild things that are in it. The Fauns also he blessed, and the little things that dance in the woodland and the bright-eyed things that peer through the leaves. All the things in God's world he blessed, and the people were filled with joy and wonder." All opposites are reconciled in Christian love, but this is not how the tale ends. Things immediately fall apart: "Yet never again in the corner of the Fuller's Field grew flowers of any kind, but the field remained barren even as before. Nor came the Sea-folk into the bay as they had been wont to do, for they went to another part of the sea." (CW 258-59) Why? What has happened? The tale gives us two different and opposed endings. "The Star-Child" ends in a similar manner. After the star-child is purified of narcissism, he discovers that he is a king, is overwhelmed with joy, and rules with "much justice and mercy." But Wilde then undercuts the ending: "Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly." (CW 270) A happy ending? A tragic one? Or a self-contradictory Hegelian thesis-antithesis position? Even "The Young King" ends ambiguously, as Anne Markey has recently observed: "The ending is ambiguous because it does not show how social justice is to be achieved." (Markey 154)

As for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome,* both works are clearly complex. The former deals with a single personality that inhabits both a living body and a picture, and warns us in the Preface that "all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril." (CW 17) Many critics have tried to read the symbols in Wilde's novel, but there is much disagreement, which would have made Wilde very happy were he still around. The latter, a symbolist play, is full of intense religious confusion. As Salome and Iokanaan confront each other, the other characters are all immersed in religious controversy, and no two of them agree with each other. Which is the true position? What is Wilde's position? The answer is not easy to find. Nor have the

critics been able to agree on a specific interpretation. In fact, the critical debate is sometimes reminiscent of the wrangling Jews and Nazarenes in the play. A fairly recent essay by Bruce Bashford, "When Critics Disagree," is devoted entirely to the subject. Bashford rightly notes that Wilde's "purposes have proved so elusive that critics are still engaged in the basic task of elucidating them" (613), then goes on to explore different approaches to Wilde towards the turn of the century.

Lady Windermere's Fan, a social comedy, may appear less elusive and complex at first sight, but it is not. At the end of the play, both Lord and Lady Windermere believe that they have learned the truth about Mrs. Erlynne, but they are both wrong about her, as is her new husband, Lord Augustus. Nor is the audience in a much better position, for the play leaves us with the impression that mother and daughter are alike, which they are not. Lady Windermere chooses the moral life, but Mrs. Erlynne deliberately rejects her maternal feelings at the end of the play and makes a completely different choice. She explains to Windermere: "I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother's feelings. . . . They were terrible—they made me suffer—they made me suffer too much. For twenty years . . . I have lived childless—I want to live childless still." (IV) Nor can we be sure that Mrs. Erlynne knows herself fully: it is possible that she is self-deceived at this point, as she was at the beginning of the play. What appeared to be a simple play turns out to be a highly complicated, puzzling work wearing a deliberate mask of simplicity, perhaps for commercial reasons.

Wilde's favorite stylistic device, the paradox, also attests to the complexity of truth. By turning accepted platitudes upside down and standing them on their head, Wilde challenges conventional ideas and invites the reader or listener to consider their opposites. Truth may lie somewhere inbetween, it may be at one extreme or the other, or it may be totally absent or invisible. What is not acceptable is that the reader should have a closed mind. The paradox is a key that helps to unlock such minds and to open the door to Hegel's system of contraries, which Wilde cites approvingly at the end of *The Truth of Masks*. (CW 1173)

A Woman of No Importance was written soon after *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Salome*. In the light of Wilde's preceding literature, one would expect a degree of complexity, but critics and audiences alike have seen the play as a Victorian melodrama, weak and conventional but embellished with sparkling wit, some of it unfortunately recycled. This was the reaction in Wilde's own day. For instance, several newspapers saw it as a moral tale, a confrontation between good and bad characters, although one reviewer at least detected some ambiguity, noting that the best lines were given to the bad characters. More recent criticism has not diverged much from this point of view. Alan Bird and Norbert Kohl both criticize Wilde for writing a superficial play that caters to a superficial audience. Ian Small and Josephine Guy use

the play to underscore their argument that Wilde's talent was meager and his goals primarily commercial. Kerry Powell traces Wilde's play to Victorian melodramas like Henry Arthur Jones's *The Dancing Girl* and concludes—rightly but, in my opinion, for the wrong reasons—that it is a failure. Some critics have discerned a reasonable amount of depth in the play. Epifanio San Juan, for instance, has argued that the play creates a clash between male logic and female emotion. Rodney Shewan sees the clash as being between dandyism and Puritanism. Peter Raby has argued that the main split is between aristocrats and non-aristocrats. And Neil Sammells has found the play's true meaning in its style, which he contends celebrates the artificial and the superficial over the natural.

And yet Wilde in this play follows in the footsteps of Edgar Allan Poe stylistically and gives his play a hidden undercurrent of meaning, much as Poe did in *The Raven*. This is not to argue that Wilde was consciously imitating Poe—this cannot be proved—but he did know him well and he did visit his home when he was in America, while one of Wilde's best poems, *The Sphinx,* is hauntingly reminiscent of *The Raven*. In addition, *A Woman of No Importance* is Wilde's most American play, complete with an American Puritan girl who reflects the intolerant community of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Finally, the Decadents were attracted to Poe and saw him as their American precursor.

But if a hidden undercurrent of meaning exists, where is it? Is it gay or Irish, as new approaches to Wilde criticism would seek to argue? Or does it lie elsewhere? In Act III of the play, a butler appears briefly, delivers a single line, then disappears. Interestingly, the butler's name is Farquhar. Why? Is it accidental or a simple *jeu d'esprit* on Wilde's part, or is he deliberately pointing us to Farquhar's plays? Let us for a moment assume that the latter is the case and go to Farquhar's plays, especially his most famous one *The Constant Couple*, with its main character Wildair, to discover if there are any connections between it and *A Woman of No Importance*. In *The Constant Couple*, one of the leading characters is the man-hater Lady Lurewell, who attracts men in order to destroy them. Seduced and abandoned at the age of 15, her chief goal in life is revenge, as she clearly explains to her maid:

> LADY LUREWELL. Therefore I scorn him. I hate all that don't love me, and slight all that do. Would his whole deluding race admire me, thus would I slight them all! My virgin and unwary innocence was wronged by faithless man, and now glance eyes, plot brain, dissemble face, lie tongue, and be a second Eve to tempt, seduce and damn the treacherous kind. Let me survey my captives. (I.ii)

Mrs. Arbuthnot is similar to Lady Lurewell in that she was seduced at 18 by Lord Illingworth and had a child by him, but he then refused to marry her. When we first meet her, she is "in a cloak with a lace

veil over her head." (II) This is symbolic—the play, we should remember, was written immediately after *Salome*. Mrs. Arbuthnot is initially presented as a fallen woman but a good, church-going person who is totally devoted to her son and who keeps away from men. As the play progresses, her passions explode and the veils drop one after the other until she reveals herself to Lord Illingworth as a second Lady Lurewell:

> MRS. ARBUTHNOT. You are right. We women live by our emotions and for them. By our passions and for them, if you will. I have two passions, Lord Illingworth: my love of him, my hate of you. You cannot kill those. They feed each other.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH. What sort of love is that which needs to have hate as its brother? . . . So you really refuse to marry me?
> MRS. ARBUTHNOT. Yes.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH. Because you hate me?
> MRS. ARBUTHNOT. Yes. (IV)

Mrs. Arbuthnot's hatred of Lord Illingworth is really a generalized hatred of the dominant male—she avoids men altogether and loves only the submissive Gerald— and she seeks to hurt Illingworth much as Lady Lurewell sought to harm the men around her, simply for revenge.

Wilde also invites us to connect his play to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, especially through the American Puritan girl, whom he names Hester and whose father is a Boston worthy who made his money in American dry goods. When Lady Hunstanton asks what these are, Lord Illingworth replies amusingly: "American novels" (I), so that the allusion is quite specific. And indeed, there are clear parallels between Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester Prynne. She fights to keep her illegitimate child Gerald just like Hester fought to keep Pearl, arguing like Hester that God gave the child to her. The big difference is that Mrs. Arbuthnot, unlike Hester Prynne, never achieves penitence. Quite the contrary, she says to Gerald: "How could I repent of my sin when you, my love, were its fruit. Even now that you are bitter to me I cannot repent. I do not. You are more to me than innocence." (IV) Indeed, it is Hester Worsley, paradoxically, who repents in Wilde's play, rejecting her earlier Puritanism and embracing Mrs. Arbuthnot as her spiritual mother.

Lady Lurewell, moreover, remained constant to her childhood lover, and when she discovers that Colonel Standard, one of her admirers, is in fact that lover and that he had a perfectly valid reason for abandoning her, she transforms radically and marries him. Similarly, Mrs. Arbuthnot is constant to her lover, but in this case the lover is her son Gerald. She blocks all of Lord Illingworth's attempts to reconcile with his son and to offer him a secure future, for she wants Gerald for herself alone. One can say many different things about Illingworth, but one cannot deny his rationality. He is fundamentally correct when he observes of his former mistress: "You talk sentimentally, but you are thoroughly selfish the whole time." (II)

Here, Wilde is much deeper than Farquhar. He offers us a mother-son relationship that is heavily Freudian and that shows remarkable insight into human nature. Mrs. Arbuthnot's love for her weak and submissive son is possessive, passionate and extreme. More importantly, it is safe, for it will never result in sexual consummation. That part is left to Hester, who at the end of the play is solidly under Mrs. Arbuthnot's control. The play ends with the three, intertwined, withdrawing into a garden, which Wilde probably meant to evoke Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. Throughout the play, Wilde uses gardens and flowers to indicate lust and sin. For instance, Lord Illingworth begins an affair with Mrs. Allonby in Act I in a garden, saying that "the Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden," to which she replies that "it ends with Revelations." His affair with Mrs. Arbuthnot began in her father's garden, moreover. Mrs Allonby at one point speaks of an orchid "as beautiful as the seven deadly sins." (I) And so on.

This view of *A Woman of No Importance* has been explained in detail in my critical study, *Into the Demon Universe*, and in a more recent article (Nassaar 2001, 14). It has also been picked up and embellished by Sos Eltis in *Revising Wilde*. Eltis has written:

> *A Woman of No Importance* effectively argues against all sexual laws and restrictions, showing them to be both ineffectual against the power of passion and impulse, and a potent weapon in the hands of those who choose to exploit them. Mrs. Arbuthnot struggles with an absolute morality that denies all her true instincts as a woman, finding in the melodramatic role of injured innocent both a relief from her own guilt and a means of retaining possession of her son. . . . Wilde's sympathies do not obviously lie with either sex. The subtle and intricate pattern of power he reveals simply reflects the hypocrisy and manipulation that result from the imposition of any law upon human behavior. . . . The true centre of *A Woman of No Importance* is this interaction between human nature and the laws which seek to confine it. (Eltis 128)

Thus, *A Woman of No Importance* is no ordinary melodrama. More correctly, it is a radical exploration of the elemental corruption in human nature and looks forward to the writings of Sigmund Freud. This is further underlined when Lord Illingworth asks his former mistress: "Why Arbuthnot, Rachel?" (IV) She answers that one name is as good as another, and perhaps so. But she did not choose the name herself: it was Wilde who chose it for her and he is, at this point, inviting us to ask why. The name connects to John Arbuthnot, the eighteenth-century satirist who wrote *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* along with his friends Swift, Pope and Gay. Scriblerus is from beginning to end unconsciously self-satirical in his memoirs. Mrs. Arbuthnot regards herself as the typical wronged maiden of Victorian literature, seduced by a wicked aristocrat. Through the name Arbuthnot, Wilde is inviting us to read his character as an unconsciously self-satirical portrait of a woman who does not see the dark recesses of corruption in herself.

To see Mrs. Arbuthnot as a typical figure out of Victorian melodrama, and to read the play as a superficial conventional piece written for purely commercial reasons, is to miss Wilde's point. And yet people have missed this point consistently, and still do. The question is why. The answer, I believe, lies in the technique that Wilde used in his play. Any work of art that resorts to hidden meanings and tries to mask them has to be very careful not to mask them too well. A delicate balance needs to be maintained between the surface and concealed meanings. Poe does this rather well in *The Raven,* but even so, and despite the fact that he specifically tells us in his critical writings that a hidden undercurrent of meaning is included in his poem, critics have disagreed about what this undercurrent is and some have denied its existence. Wilde does *not* tell us anywhere that there are hidden meanings in *A Woman of No Importance*—he leaves it up to us to discover this fact. The clues he gives us—the names Farquhar and Arbuthnot, for instance, or the Hawthorne connection, or the garden imagery—can easily be missed, and Mrs. Arbuthnot's revelation of her true nature, as well as her Freudian relationship with her son, can evoke sympathy, as happens with the simple-minded Hester Worsley. The hidden undercurrent of meaning is simply too deeply buried, and the play as a result has to be considered an artistic failure.

Josephine Guy and Ian Small, in *Studying Oscar Wilde: History, Criticism, Myth*, have recently argued that "for Wilde writing was often and necessarily a commercial activity," which is true, but they continue that this must give the lie to the prevalent idea "that he wished to use his literary works to subvert bourgeois sexual morality."(Guy and Small 43) The two positions are of course not necessarily mutually exclusive. In my view, Wilde wanted to have his cake and eat it at the same time, which is why this particular play fails. He tried to be subversive and conventional at once, with the subversive element present as a concealed undercurrent of meaning, but the undercurrent runs too deeply below the surface.

It is thus quite correct to assert that *A Woman of No Importance* is Wilde's weakest social comedy, but its failure is not intellectual; it is artistic and stylistic. The intellectual content is profound, but as Wilde insisted and as Gwendolen asserts at the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." (IV)

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