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The Oppressive Institution of Victorian Sexual Morality as Represented By the Women of Wildean and Shauvian Drama

Emily Webb

Through their various portrayals of women in late nineteenth-century drama, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw demonstrate disparate approaches towards the dispute against Victorian sexual morality as informed by their respective views of contemporary social convention. In the wake of the social purity movement that strove to outlaw male lust, Wilde explores the sexual politics in the seduction of his female protagonists—specifically Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)—in such a way that suggests the futility of an ethical hierarchy that condones the sexual transgressions of men at the expense of feminine purity. Influenced by his advocacy of women's rights as a major proponent of the Fabian socialist movement, Shaw further denounces this degradation of women under corrupt patriarchal authority through the development of his authoritative female characters, such as Vivie Warren in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and Gloria Clandon in *You Never Can Tell* (1897), who claim dominance over men in both the domestic and public spheres. While Wilde merely exposes the double standard of sexual morality as his female protagonists risk public shame for their susceptibility to male vice, Shaw actively condemns oppressive notions of proper womanhood to promote sexual tolerance in Victorian society through various representations of the self-respecting woman.

Without compromising his reputation as a notoriously extravagant dandy whose penchant for hedonistic pleasures was tolerated in nineteenth-century high society, Wilde tested the hypocritical moral hierarchy that social purists strove to reform through his own transgressive behavior. Though Wilde refused to support this movement to outlaw the sexual crimes of men, British journalist and renowned social activist W. T. Stead observed how the criminal charges against the playwright for his acts of gross indecency

exposed the discriminatory moral values that are promoted in Victorian society (Foldy 129–130). When reflecting on the public conviction of Wilde in 1895 for his crimes of sodomy, Stead tries to rationalize Wilde's lewd homosexual exploits and argues that

> If the promptings of our animal nature are to be the only guide, the punishment of Oscar Wilde would savour of persecution, and he might fairly claim our sympathy as the champion of individualism against the tyranny of an intolerant majority…If Oscar Wilde, instead of indulging in dirty tricks of indecent familiarity with boys and men, had ruined the lives of half a dozen innocent simpletons of girls, or had broken up the home of his friend by corrupting his friend's wife, no one could have laid a finger upon him. The male is sacro-sanct: the female is fair game (Stead 491–2).

Although he regards Wilde's homosexual transgressions as abnormal conduct, Stead asserts that the social persecution of such deviant behavior ultimately sheds light on the accepted standards of Victorian morality that tolerate the equally lecherous crimes of heterosexual men. Indicating the oppressive demands for female purity within patriarchal society, Stead claims that the established hierarchy of sexual morality would typically overlook similar acts of sexual deviance that are committed by men and rather exploit women. As he inadvertently called into question this double standard of Victorian sexual morality through his criminal acts of homosexual lust, Wilde further evaluated the need for a universal code of ethics in contemporary society in the dramatic action of his societal comedies, which unfolds through the discourse of his morally dubious characters that upholds arbitrary decorum among the privileged class.

Translating this marginal evaluation of the hypocritical hierarchy of Victorian ethics into the sexual politics between the men and women of his modern plays, Wilde constructs brief moral conflicts for his female protagonists that merely assess the oppressive demands for female purity under depraved patriarchal authority. While examining the evolution of his righteous female characters, Gregory Mackie claims that Wilde portrays the dramatic action of his plays only to analyze the moral outlooks of these women and further states that, "The process of moral evaluation, however, is limited by its being confined to a field of binaries and dualistic terms, and character development in these comedies is ultimately subject to a relatively firm ethical (and verbal) typology" (Mackie 157). As the playwright assesses the moral position of his female protagonists, Mackie argues that Wilde limits the development of these characters

within a binary code of ethics in such a way that refrains from obstructing the hypocritical hierarchy of sexual morality. In exploring the perspective of a victim of male vice through the social struggles of the scorned Mrs. Arbuthnot in his play *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Wilde restricts her bout of moral enlightenment to the dualistic expectations of female purity and male depravity as she endures public condemnation for her weakness in the face of seduction. When she confronts her depraved seducer, Lord Illingsworth, after experiencing years of public shame, Arbuthnot pleads that he leave their love child in her custody and bemoans that, "I have had twenty years of sorrow, and I have only had one thing to love me, only one thing to love. You have had a life of joy, and pleasure, and success. You have been quite happy, you have never thought of us" (Wilde 139). As she tries to inform Illingsworth about the repercussions of his lecherous actions that defamed her reputation, Mrs. Arbuthnot notes how the depraved dandy continues to thrive in high society despite his similar sexual transgressions. Establishing her status as a tragic character, Mrs. Arbuthnot acknowledges the paradoxical hierarchy of moral values that denounces her submission to male vice while condoning such acts of impurity among men as she laments her ostracism from society. Though she first mourns her scorned existence outside of high society, Mrs. Arbuthnot refuses her son's plea to marry her vindictive seducer for the sake of salvaging her reputation and insists that, "I am disgraced; he is not. That is all. It is the usual history of a man and a woman as it usually happens, as it always happens. And the ending is the ordinary ending. The woman suffers. The man goes free" (Wilde 161). While providing keen insight into the discriminatory code of ethics imposed upon men and women, Mrs. Arbuthnot seems to come to terms with her status as a "fallen woman" who exists outside of this paradoxical moral hierarchy when she rejects social expectations of convenient marriage to reclaim her purity. Despite the fact that her enlightened character chooses to preserve her dignity over her social reputation, Mrs. Arbuthnot ultimately evades taking an active stance against the degradation of women at the hands of patriarchal sexuality and allows acts of male vice to persist through the social construct of sexual morality. Thus, Wilde refrains from disturbing the rigid social structure, which perpetuates these discriminatory standards of feminine purity, through the fleeting moral conflict of his female protagonists and, in turn, only exposes the sexual double standard in Victorian society.

In order to maintain this arbitrary decorum within high society, Wilde further evaluates the paradoxical nature of contemporary moral values through the witty discourse of his male and female characters that provokes the vexing moral dilemma of his female protagonists. Analyzing the stylistic function of the playwright's dramatic language, Mackie deconstructs the epigrammatic dialogue shared between his male and female characters and asserts that

> The structure of the epigrams that appear in both dramatic dialogue and lists of maxims is a matter of balance and hierarchy, of setting contrasting terms such as goodness and badness, virtue and vice, truth and lies, in opposition to one another, while maintaining the structure of an ethical hierarchy that gives such oppositions their meaning (Mackie 156).

While juxtaposing the notions of good and bad through the epigrammatic language of his morally dubious characters, Mackie claims that Wilde establishes equilibrium among such disparate concepts in this lexical opposition in an attempt to affirm the presence of a hypocritical moral hierarchy in Victorian society. In his first play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), Wilde exemplifies this balanced contrast through the clever exchange between the morally upright Lady Windermere and the seemingly nefarious dandy, Lord Darlington, which prompts the moral conflict of his female protagonist and tests the paradoxical expectations of sexual purity. When Lady Windermere expresses her belief in a universal standard of moral conduct for a presumably hypothetical case of male infidelity, Lord Darlington contests the absolute division between purity and depravity in society and jokes that, "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious" (Wilde 43). As he mocks the institution of Victorian morality through their witty discourse, Lord Darlington undermines contemporary moral values through the dual disparity between ethical behavior and social bearing that is posited in these epigrams and suggests the futile existence of this moral binary. Once she finds herself caught in this discrepancy of proper moral conduct when she must choose between the forbidden love of Lord Darlington and her duty to her allegedly adulterous husband, Lady Windermere soon begins to question social demands for female purity as she laments, "And yet which is the worst, I wonder, to be at the mercy of a man who loves one, or the wife of a man who in one's own house dishonours one? What woman knows? What woman in the whole world?" (Wilde 73) While her righteous character

struggles to commit her own sexual transgressions against her husband for fear of social condemnation, Lady Windermere internalizes this lexical opposition between the polarized concepts of virtue and etiquette and further perpetuates Darlington's notion of the worthless ethical hierarchy that condones male depravity. Even though she moves to disrupt this moral double standard that often admonishes the sexual deviance of women rather than men, Lady Windermere refrains from challenging its oppressive structure in patriarchal society by reassessing her personal code of ethics once the play's dramatic action reaches its abrupt resolution (Wilde 88). Through the marginal development of his female protagonists' moral conflict as represented in the epigrammatic dialogue of his male and female characters, Wilde preserves the arbitrary decorum within Victorian high society that upholds this hypocritical hierarchy of sexual morality.

While Wilde merely tested the paradoxical construct of nineteenth-century Victorian morality through his own criminal acts of sexual deviance, George Bernard Shaw worked to overturn oppressive demands of ideal womanhood that derived from this binary code of ethics as a result of his social activism. As a major proponent of the Fabian Socialist movement, Shaw expounded his belief that the element of humanity molds both men and women into functioning members of society who make equal contributions to its development. While the playwright believed in the human potential of both men and women in improving society, Sally Peters states that Shaw urged for the establishment of equal rights among the sexes and explains that, "[Shaw] asserted that 'the denial of any fundamental rights' to a woman is really 'a violation of the soul'…He saw his work as that of guiding the Fabians toward a new society to benefit both men and women" (Peters 19). In his public advocacy of such feminist principles, Shaw denounced the lack of female involvement in the public sphere at the expense of social reform and, in turn, worked to subvert patriarchal edicts of ideal domesticity and sexual purity that were inflicted upon women. Demonstrating his adherence to Fabian Socialist doctrine, Shaw promoted the gradual reform of social demands for proper womanhood through his many works of modern drama, which scrutinized such discriminatory standards of Victorian morality in support of his campaign for sexual equality.

In the development of his provocative "discussion plays," Shaw openly condemns social conventions of ideal womanliness through the final resolution of their dramatic

action that spawns from the moral conflict of his defiant, authoritative female characters. As expressed in his essay "The Womanly Woman," Shaw argues that patriarchal expectations of female responsibility within the domestic and public spheres deprive women of their individual rights as equal members of society and maintains that, "Therefore Woman has to repudiate duty altogether. In that repudiation lies her freedom; for it is false to say that Woman is now directly the slave of Man; she is the immediate slave of duty" (Shaw 44). By urging Victorian women to renounce their sense of noble, self-sacrificing duty and assert their own independence under patriarchal authority, Shaw fosters the concept of an empowered, self-reliant woman who thrives in contemporary society, which he further illustrates through strong-willed female characters in his plays who thwart standards of proper womanhood. In attributing typical masculine traits to the determined character of Vivie Warren in his play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), Shaw constructs the image of his autonomous female protagonist as she establishes her position within the patriarchal public sphere in such a way that undermines expectations of her rightful duty to the household. After the influential Sir George Crofts offers her financial stability and high social standing through marriage, Vivie declines his proposal along with the extravagant leisures of privileged high society when she states, "I am much obliged to you for being so definite and business-like. I quite appreciate the offer: the money, the position, Lady Crofts, and so on. But I think I will say no, if you don't mind. I'd rather not" (Shaw 74). Though the insincere gentleman tries to appeal to her pragmatic personality with his forthright terms of a marriage of convenience, Vivie rejects this call to her feminine duty of submissive domesticity so that she may focus on advancing within the working world and achieve her own economic means among her male counterparts. When she later faces much scrutiny from Praed and Frank Gardener for her austere, unromantic character, Vivie dismisses their insistence on her necessary sentimentality and domesticated nature as a woman and asserts that, "You are welcome to any illusions you may have left on these subjects: I have none. If we three are to remain friends, I must be treated as a woman of business, permanently single [*to Frank*] and permanently unromantic [*to Praed*]" (Shaw 86). Resisting the male influences that intrude upon her space within the public sphere, Vivie discredits their expectations of her responsibilities as a pious, delicate woman and a doting wife by upholding her proclivity

for self-reliance in such a way that contests Victorian standards of love and marriage. Although she may not seem to triumph over patriarchal authority as she continues to fulfill her noble duty as a businesswoman under the dominant males of the working world, Vivie still asserts her independence after enduring the oppressive demands for proper womanhood that drove her mother to engage in sordid business so that she may achieve her own respectable means for economic success. Rather than limit the development of his female protagonists to the binary of Victorian morality as illustrated in Wilde's plays, Shaw fully explores their moral conflict to the point where their characters subvert the social construct of ideal womanliness and claim dominance within patriarchal society.

Despite the fact that he portrays several of his female protagonists in a conventional domestic role as they fulfill their supposedly feminine duties of self-sacrificing love and sexual purity, Shaw manages to permutate his conception of the independent, authoritative women through the dramatic action that unfolds within the domestic sphere to closely scrutinize and subvert such patriarchal standards of ideal femininity. When he considers the helpless circumstances of ideal Victorian wives within the household, Shaw upholds that these women must assume a matriarchal position over their domestic domain in order to reclaim their dignity and reasons that, "The self-respect she has lost as a wife she regains as a mother; in which capacity her use and importance to the community compare favourably with those of most men of business" (Shaw 40). By attaining authority within a household that thrives on their self-sacrificing duty, Shaw argues that women can undermine the oppressive standards of ideal domesticity that demean their natural womanhood and regain a sense of autonomy and self-worth through her dominance. In the development of his female protagonist Gloria Clandon in his comedic play *You Never Can Tell* (1897), Shaw illustrates this notion of female empowerment through domestic duty while her strong-minded character works to elicit her command over the institution of Victorian marriage. As she struggles to protect her strong convictions against the affection of the lustful bachelor, Mr. Valentine, Gloria laments her lack of moral strength after she kisses him and admits that, "I am one of those weak creatures born to be mastered by the first man whose eye is caught by them; and I must fulfil my destiny, I suppose" (Shaw 86). By conceding to her presumably

natural sentimentality as a woman overcome by passion, Gloria appears to revoke her self-reliant feminine identity and succumb to patriarchal expectations of passive womanhood as she reluctantly pursues this love affair with her male counterpart. Once she learns that Valentine earns meager wages as a dentist, Gloria aggressively embraces her suitor and takes it upon herself to propose marriage when she declares, "Now let us have no false delicacy. Tell my mother that we have agreed to marry one another" (Shaw 122). Knowing that the irresistible bachelor actually holds weak economic standing, Gloria moves to acquire control over Valentine through marriage so that she may reclaim her self-respect as a morally upright, autonomous wife within their household. Although she seems to compromise her self-reliant character in assuming the oppressive domestic duty imposed upon women, Gloria ultimately redeems the weakness of her own principles as she gains dominance over this financially unstable patriarch and asserts her independence. Thus, Shaw resolves the moral struggles of his authoritative albeit conflicted female protagonists who face oppressive demands for ideal womanliness in such a way that suggests the rightful independence of women through their matriarchal authority acquired through domestic duty.

Though both playwrights illustrate patriarchal demands for proper womanhood that are upheld within Victorian society, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw convey their divergent perspectives on the social construct of sexual morality through the different magnitudes of dramatic action that develop the female protagonists in their respective works. Considering his own immoral behavior as a sexually deviant dandy within high society during the late nineteenth-century, Wilde restrains the moral conflict of the righteous women in his plays—specifically Mrs. Arbuthnot of *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)—to maintain arbitrary decorum in the paradoxical hierarchy of ethics that condones male depravity and merely expose the double standard of Victorian sexual morality. Conversely, Shaw fully explores the social struggles of his strong-willed, autonomous female characters, such as Vivie Warren in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and Gloria Clandon in *You Never Can Tell* (1897), to subvert discriminatory expectations of ideal womanliness and further encourage social reform for women's rights. While Wilde eludes a disruption of the established ethical hierarchy—which would overlook his

crimes of gross indecency in a heterosexual context—by confining the development of his female protagonists within the oppressive binary of sexual morality, Shaw actively thwarts patriarchal demands for feminine purity and noble domestic duty in developing various portrayals of authoritative women who gain dominance in the domestic and public spheres in order to promote equality among the sexes.

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