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## **Art for Art's Sake: Art as Sexual Disease in the Trials of Oscar Wilde**

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“Inquire into cases of infraction of social laws: have those who infringe them been dealt with wisely? Are the laws they break (however foolishly and selfishly) unselfish, all-wise laws, particularly framed in view to their happiness? In a word, does society not produce its own degenerates and criminals, even as the body produces its own diseases, or at least fosters them?”<sup>1</sup>

- Vernon Lee



Figure 1. Oscar Wilde, 1894.<sup>2</sup>

April 3, 1895 was the first day of the libel trial brought by playwright Oscar Wilde against Lord Queensberry, the belligerent father of Lord Alfred

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dellamora, “Productive Decadence: “The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought””: Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde,” *New Literary History* 35, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 533. Quoted from “Deterioration of the Soul,” *Fortnightly Review* 59 (June 1896): 938.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 428-429.

Douglas, Wilde's close friend. After multiple skirmishes between father and son, Wilde became permanently entangled in the Douglas web after pursuing legal action against Lord Queensberry for leaving a card which, when finally deciphered, read, "To Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite" at the club of which both Wilde and Constance, his wife, were members.<sup>3</sup> That morning Wilde pulled up to the Old Bailey "stylishly dressed in a long, dark-blue Chesterfield overcoat trimmed with velvet and sporting a white buttonhole" confident and prepared to defend Art and Lord Alfred Douglas.<sup>4</sup> Although Wilde was not the defendant in this case, Queensberry's defense rested on proving that Wilde at least appeared to be a sodomite, therefore confirming Lord Queensberry's right to inform the public and not guilty of libel.

On April 5, after only two days of exciting trial, Wilde's council withdrew their case and within hours Wilde was arrested by the Crown on criminal charges of "gross indecency." Due to the under enforced article XI of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, commonly referred to as the Labouchere Amendment, passed only ten years earlier,

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 misdemeanor, 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.<sup>5</sup>

This was seemingly the end for Oscar Wilde, who had transgressed Victorian age, class, and moral lines, but more importantly it was the birth of a public perception which cemented new psychiatric views of sexuality. Recent forms of psychiatric evaluation had created sexuality, a component of a person's identity separate and independent from sexual anatomy. Wilde's case, which played out especially publicly, embodied these ideas in which sexual disease was rooted in the mind or personality and disconnected from the body. Wilde's involvement with the Aesthetic Movement, which put forward all consuming ideals of art and life, coupled with his continuously evolving attitudes on Art, which famously exclaimed that Art is neither moral nor immoral, was used against Wilde in court as the symptoms of his diseased personality leading to a positive identification of sexual disease.

In "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality" Arnold Davidson argues that "sexuality only became a possible subject of psychological investigation, theorizing, and speculation because of a distinctive form of reasoning that had a

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<sup>3</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 438.

<sup>4</sup> Merlin Holland, editor, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Beckson, *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1998), 170.

historically specific origin” located in the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> While previous gender identity questions had been settled based on the anatomy of the sexual organs, the end of the Victorian era was shifting towards sexuality based identity. In the past with cases of hermaphrodites, sex and gender were decided solely on the dominant sexual organ, not even the appearance of the face or inherent gender preferences in the persona.<sup>7</sup> Doctors had recently accepted the concept that sexual organs had little to no effect on sexual impulses as exemplified by J.M. Duncan’s *Diseases of Women* in 1879. After removing the ovaries of women, Duncan realized that a woman’s sexuality is not dependant on her possession of ovaries. This shifted the medical field’s focus from anatomy to psyche which led to the “historically specific” beginnings of sexuality as a way to discuss sexual desire independently from anatomy and gender, and, therefore, more firmly rooted in the mind.<sup>8</sup>

Davidson further argues that one repercussion of the creation of sexuality was the birth of the sexual pervert. Now that sexual desires were considered part of one’s personality, anyone who deviated from the norm was at his core a pervert rather than a person who participated in deviant acts.<sup>9</sup> A person’s sexuality, healthy or diseased in whatever fashion, was now viewed as part of who he was, part of his “true self” manifested in all aspects of his personality. The fact that Oscar Wilde went to trial over “*posing as a sodomite*” and almost all advice he received prior to trial advised him to not pursue Queensberry on such a matter implies that gender inversions synonymous with Wilde’s dandy persona would be enough to convict him simply on the “posing” stipulation. Was Wilde’s pose or personality what moved the Crown’s hand to pursue a criminal case when boring men in black jackets with just as much evidence against them went free? Gender inversions, while not directly tied up in sexuality, were indicative of deviant sexuality, and for Victorians who viewed gender roles as concrete and representative of ultimate Truth in sexual anatomy, it was an affront to God and nature. Article XI was “rarely and reluctantly” enforced, especially with well-known men, signaling some incriminating evidence unmistakable in Wilde’s case.<sup>10</sup>

In 1895, Victorian England had largely abandoned the idea of anatomy based sexual desire but had yet to conclusively adopt the new understanding of sexuality. The combination of sexual desire and psyche was an existent model

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold I. Davidson, “Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 2 (Autumn, 1987): 23.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson, “Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality,” 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, “Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality,” 23.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, “Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality,” 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ari Adut, “A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (July 2005): 214.

even if it was not completely accepted. Wilde embodied this enigma of gender and anatomy so well at a time of such concern and confusion that he was put “in the pillory for it.”<sup>11</sup> In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, David Haperlin describes how this shift would describe the questioning Wilde received on trial and the newly accepted conceptions that led to his prosecution,

The concrete perverse act, monstrous as it may be, is clinically not decisive. In order to differentiate between disease (perversion) and vice (perversity), one must investigate the whole personality of the individual and the original motive leading to the perverse act. Therein will be found the key to the diagnosis.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Wilde’s criminal case made it to not only one but two trials illustrates Victorians accepting the emerging model of sexuality, yet combining this with past gender deviance. Possibly Victorians worked out the issues of such a model by witnessing Wilde’s trials. The publicity these trials attracted broadcast Wilde’s case as the evidence and model of sexuality. Embodied in Wilde was the conflict between his tall and broad frame, proof of his physical masculinity, and his effeminate personality and style, initially influenced greatly by the Aesthetic Movement.

With the rallying cry of “*l’art pour l’art*,” or “art for art’s sake,” Aestheticism in both England and France was a response to the new industrial world with its emphasis on utility, conformity, and Capitalism. In its highest form Aestheticism was an artistic almost spiritual movement occupied with “achieving a heightened state of awareness and responsiveness to art and life” and epitomized by the works of Wilde’s mentor, Walter Pater, in the “Conclusion” of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.<sup>13</sup>

The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation... Not the fruit of experience, but the experience itself, is the end... To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world... While all melts under our feet we well may catch at any exquisite passion...that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands... Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love of art for art’s

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<sup>11</sup> “Testimony of Oscar Wilde” University of Missouri- Kansas City School of Law, accessed March 15, 2012, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/Crimwilde.html>.

<sup>12</sup> David Haperlin. *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 114.

<sup>13</sup> Allison Pease, “Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory,” in *Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 98.

sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.<sup>14</sup>

Although the Aesthetic Movement was partly a reaction against Industrialism, the movement had a very specific style which eventually was enveloped into consumer culture. This style blended together Art Nouveau, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and exotic, particularly Asian, with elaborately detailed and colored items ranging from china to clothing to wallpaper. Someone who subscribed to Pater's intense brand of Aestheticism would have had these items around to incite the senses with color, feel, and beauty. Although this style was distinctive it was the sensation incited by these items, and not the items themselves, which served the "higher" form of Aestheticism. On the other hand, the Aesthetic Movement's more popular form in consumer culture inspired customers to purchase elaborately detailed and colored items from wall paper to silverware with exotic themes. The focus was not any self actualization through art but rather decorating one's home in a way which had grown out of the styles imported from around the British Empire.

Wilde symbolized and combined both forms of Aestheticism. Many of his written works including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "De Profundis" openly explore or build upon Pater's ideas in the "Conclusion" and these ideas are echoed in his own ideals of art. Wilde himself stated, "that aestheticism was the real search of the soul for the true, or, to speak more exactly, the search for the secret of life."<sup>15</sup> Wilde had also built his own pop culture brand around the materialism of his Aesthetic pose. He continued with his anachronistic outfits into the early 1880s. Even after these were discontinued, Wilde still dressed in a wide range of colors unseen often in Victorian society, especially on men who wore not navy or brown but black.

On the morning of April 3, 1895 Oscar Wilde took the stand and after an examination by his lawyer Sir Edward Clarke, Edward Carson, Lord Queensberry's defense began his cross examination with the following exchange:

Carson: You stated at the commencement of your examination that you were thirty-nine years of age. I think you are over forty, isn't that so?

Wilde: I don't think so. I think I am either thirty-nine or forty- forty my next birthday. If you have my certificate here that settles the matter.

Carson: You were born, I believe, upon the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1854?

Wilde: Yes, I have no intention of posing for a younger man at all. I try to be correct in the date.

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Pater, "Conclusion" in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London, 1873).

<sup>15</sup> "Ten Minutes with a Poet: A Reporter Greets Oscar Wilde on his Arrival," *New York Times*, January 3, 1882.

Carson: It makes you somewhat over forty.

Wilde: Very well.

Carson: May I ask you, do you happen to know what age Lord Alfred was or is?<sup>16</sup>

This was Wilde's first display of his extremely limited fear of the legal proceedings. Adut speculates that Wilde assumed the case would "degenerate into a popularity contest between the beloved of London society and the black sheep of the English peerage, abhorred even by his own family."<sup>17</sup> Wilde was at the height of his career having just debuted *The Importance of Being Earnest* only two months previously, and Lord Queensberry had the reputation of an abusive atheist whose own sons had offered to compensate Wilde the costs of the trial simply to humiliate their father. However, Carson had already made it clear that he was taking the case very seriously by immediately exposing Wilde not only as a liar but also as an older man socializing with another man almost half his age. Carson's career was completely invested in this trial, and it has been said that what destroyed Wilde made Carson.

After a limited discussion regarding factual events, Carson quickly and successively questioned Wilde not only on his views of art but also the "sodomitical" aspects of his writings and the works of others.<sup>18</sup> Wilde hardly broke a sweat organizing quip after quip defending his theory of art while fending off accusations of support for the pederastic story "The Priest and the Acolyte" published in the same journal as one of his works.

Carson: I think you are of the opinion, Mr. Wilde, that there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book?

Wilde: Yes

Carson: Then, I suppose I may take it that in your opinion the piece was not immoral?

Wilde: Worse, it was badly written. (Laughter)<sup>19</sup>

As Carson continued to push Wilde incessantly to answer in a particular way, Clarke called on the judge to put an end to it, but the judge refused stating, "I think Mr. Carson is quite entitled to test the witness's view of a production of this kind. I think it is germane to the issues under the consideration of the jury."<sup>20</sup> Carson continued to pursue Wilde's paradoxical phrases in "Phrases and

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<sup>16</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Adut, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," 230.

<sup>18</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 71-72.

Philosophies for use of the Young” including “Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.”<sup>21</sup>

For the most part Carson attempted to paint a negative picture of Wilde using mainly art theory and literature, and as the judge allowed this, there must be some reason it was found acceptable. Wilde’s views on art, while deeply rooted in the Aesthetic Movement, would have been perceived as symptomatic of his overall sexual disease especially as they varied almost completely with the Industrial Victorian society. In addition, the dissemination of these tainted ideas especially to young men, the main audience of the journal in which “Phrases and Philosophies” was published, would enforce the need to expose Wilde. As the trial transcripts progress it becomes more and more obvious that Carson was very familiar with Wilde’s writings and was inducing Oscar to repeat his art philosophy found chiefly in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by far his most controversial work.

These artistic philosophies and tendencies began developing early in Wilde’s life. Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland to William and Jane Wilde. Both his parents had particularly distinguished careers. His father was a prominent aural surgeon and his mother was better known as Speranza the famous Irish nationalist poet.<sup>22</sup> Endowed with intelligence and artistic sensibilities in addition to his unique upbringing, Oscar began developing his own artistic tendencies by the age of fourteen. By the time he reached university, studying at both Trinity in Dublin and Oxford in London, he had studied with John Ruskin and Walter Pater, two of the founding fathers of the Aesthetic Movement. Letting his hair grow out into thick curls and adopting boldly colored, anachronistic clothing Wilde came to exemplify Aesthetic ideals in design and theory during his university career. In fact, Wilde’s first glimpse of fame came at Oxford after he sighed, “I find it harder and harder everyday to live up to my blue china,” an Aesthetic staple, and was scolded by a priest who was delivering a sermon.<sup>23</sup> Wilde also began to be caricatured in drawings on a regular basis by *Punch* magazine. His easily identifiable persona and eccentric wardrobe made him an easy target, and Wilde enjoyed the notoriety.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 6, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Kerry Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.





Figure 2. Oscar Wilde, 1882 in New York.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout his adult life, Wilde's clothing ran deeply counter to Victorian standards. It is important to note that although his clothing changed drastically from his college days, in Figure 2, to his attire while on trial, similar to Figure 1, both of these outfits were viewed as completely out of the norm by his contemporaries. In Victorian England, clothing was made to enforce gender roles, which were viewed as static and representative of natural roles. Men wore dark, traditional suits with little ornamentation to showcase their aggressive and serious nature. Women were adorned with lace, flowers, and a myriad of colors and corsets to highlight their frivolity, inactivity, and submissive role.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Holland, *The Wilde Album* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1977): 555.

Wilde completely disregarded these fashion constraints. As seen in Figure 2, Wilde's outfit has multiple ornaments, most notably the bows on his shoes and his velvet jacket, most likely purple, trimmed with silk. The excess of hair from his head and lack of any on his face drew comparisons to women. His contemporaries would have wondered at his use of both a collar and a cravat but would have been most thrown off by his knee breeches. The *New York Daily Tribune* reported, "His nether garments did not extend to his ankles, as those of modest men ought to do, but stopped at his knees."<sup>27</sup> The image of his knee breeches followed Wilde all the way to the Old Bailey.

Although Wilde's trial attire, similar to Figure 1, was not as sensational as his early Aesthetic attire it was still not considered conservative. Richard Ellmann suggests that Wilde "did not accept the suggestion that his present attire was more conventional- it was only more subtly unconventional."<sup>28</sup> When comparing Figure 1 to Figure 3, the unconventionality of Wilde's dress becomes apparent. While Arthur Conan Doyle's suit, pictured in Figure 3, consists of a single, rough fabric with no decoration beyond a white pocket square, Wilde's outfit consists of multiple fabrics, colors, and decorations. Notice first that Wilde's pants are made from a completely different, striped fabric and he is sporting a substantial buttonhole. The lapel of his suit is inlaid with silk fabric and his double breasted coat with covered buttons puts Doyle's to shame. Even Wilde's tie is more extravagant as it is wider with a large pattern and eye catching luster.

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<sup>27</sup> Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, 17. Quoted from *New York Daily Tribune*, January 10, 1882, p.2.

<sup>28</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 220.

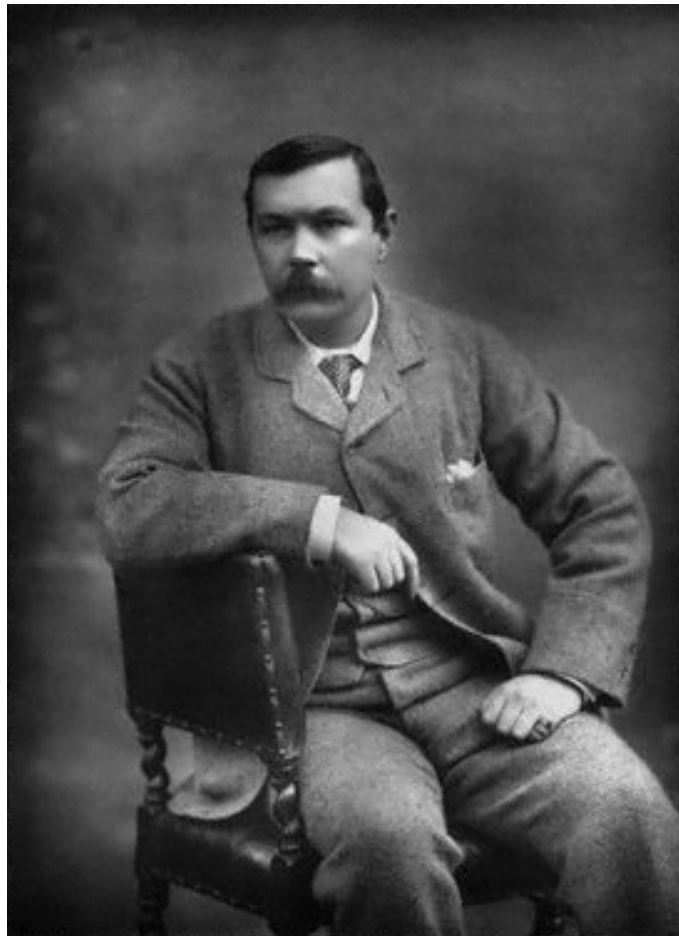


Figure 3. Arthur Conan Doyle, 1893.<sup>29</sup>

While Wilde's later attire was only "subtly unconventional," the outrageous dress of his youth was still present in the minds of his contemporaries during his trials. Perhaps Wilde's performance on the stand conjured memories of his early lecturing career, but whatever the case it was present. In Figure 4, this is clearly shown in the two ovals in the upper left. The left oval, captioned "Oscar Wilde as a lecturer, 1882, America," pictures Wilde in his knee breeches and bows. To the right Wilde is caricatured in a flippant, uninterested pose in the stand and captioned "Oscar Wilde as a prisoner, 1895, Bow Street."<sup>30</sup> This shows that his contemporaries not only remembered his past eccentricities but also connected them to his current personality and situation.

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<sup>29</sup> Herbert Rose Barraud, *Arthur Conan Doyle*, accessed April 26, 2012, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur\\_Conan\\_Doyle\\_by\\_Herbert\\_Rose\\_Barraud\\_1893.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur_Conan_Doyle_by_Herbert_Rose_Barraud_1893.jpg).

<sup>30</sup> Holland, *The Wilde Album*, 169.



Figure 4. Coverage of the Wilde scandal, May 4, 1895.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Holland, *The Wilde Album*, 169.

However through his college years, even with his Aesthetic dress and phrases, Oscar was able to maintain a fairly masculine, dominating presence. When American reporters got their first glimpse of him, they first noted that he stood “over six feet in height” with “broad shoulders.”<sup>32</sup> Standing at a massive 6’ 3” with a large Irish frame Oscar Wilde was not to be messed with. As evidenced in Figures 5 and 6, Wilde towered above his contemporaries. The width of his shoulders and torso are unmistakable in Figure 6. A fellow student attested that Wilde “was far from being a flabby Aesthete” and on one occasion Oscar single handedly kicked out four undergraduates who had broken into his rooms in an attempt to beat him and destroy his furniture.<sup>33</sup> In another instance, Wilde spent his entire summer volunteering as a road builder for his mentor John Ruskin.<sup>34</sup>

This duality of his masculine body and feminine persona would have been possible in the earlier half of his life since academic work on sexuality was only coming into its own at the end of the 1870s when Wilde matriculated from Oxford. In other words, while the Aesthetic aspects of his personality became dominant during Wilde’s university career, they were viewed as unusual and most likely annoying, but they were not linked to any disease, sexual or otherwise. It was the peculiar Aesthetic fashions coupled with Wilde’s own infectious phrases which made him a remembered character attracting the attention of the media and people around the world. This transformed Oscar Wilde into the poster boy for the Aesthetic Movement.

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<sup>32</sup> “Ten Minutes with a Poet: A Reporter Greets Oscar Wilde on his Arrival,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1882.

<sup>33</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 49-50.

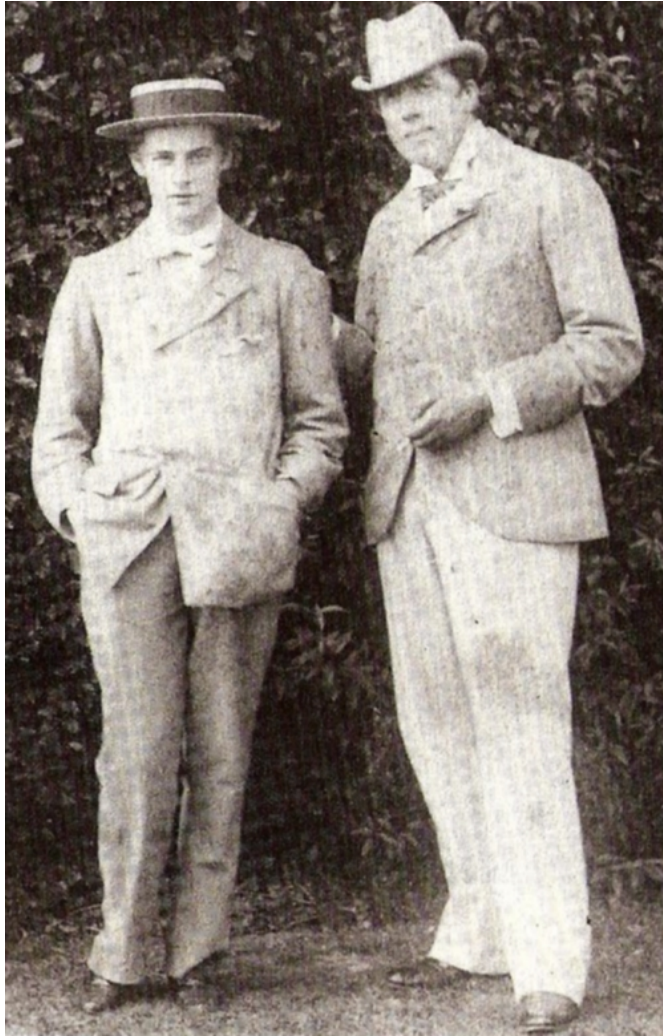


Figure 5. Oscar with Lord Alfred Douglas, 1892.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 428-429.



Figure 6. Oscar with Magdalen friends, 1876.<sup>36</sup>

As he had already fashioned himself into a pop culture icon with Aestheticism he continued to use the movement in a professional manner. In 1882, Wilde, funded by producer Richard D'Oyly Carte, left on a lecture tour to impart Aestheticism on America and in effect promote Gilbert and Sullivan's play, *Patience*, which satirized famous British aesthetes including Wilde.<sup>37</sup> While the lectures relied heavily on disseminating Wilde's own eccentric character, his most successful lectures focused on "The House Beautiful," a lecture in which he

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<sup>36</sup> Holland, *The Wilde Album*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 151-152.

gave advice on home decoration, dress of the inhabitants and extolled his early views of art similar to Pater's.

Beyond his lecture tours in America and Europe, Wilde had very limited success, critically and financially, before the production of his society dramas in the early 1890s. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was not a commercial success, it certainly created a stir first in 1890 when the original version was published in *Lippincott's Magazine* and then again in book form with which he added "The Preface" in 1891.<sup>38</sup> Critics attacked the story as dull and immoral with some newsstands pulling the copy of *Lippincott's Magazine* and the book version. Wilde wrote numerous letters to critics who had given *The Picture of Dorian Gray* unfair reviews deciding to label the book immoral rather than reviewing his work.<sup>39</sup> One of these reviews which openly attacked Wilde for penning such a work was the *Scots Observer*. Carson quoted this review in court as, "Mr. Wilde has brains and art and style; but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys the sooner he takes to tailoring, the better for his own reputation and the public morals."<sup>40</sup>

As a majority of Wilde's responses and open letters defended Art as well as himself they began to form the basis of the "Preface" to the book version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This was the art philosophy with which Carson was so familiar and leading Wilde towards.

Carson: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book"?

Wilde: Yes.

Carson: "Books are all well written or badly written"?

Wilde: I think "either well written-"

Carson: That expresses your view?

Wilde: My view of art, yes.<sup>41</sup>

Wilde's views on art, as he had already and would further explain, were tangled in life. So why would the Victorians have viewed his paradoxical and "immoral" works as separate from his personality? Even if he truly had been innocent, his views on art appeared to his contemporaries as a diseased mind. This would have been sufficient evidence of guilt for both posing as and being a sodomite since, as Haperlin argues, homosexuality is the disease not the vice.

Wilde edited *The Picture of Dorian Gray* before it was published again in book form the next year. However, Carson noticed the smallest changes had the biggest effects on the story. Wilde purposely never states Dorian Gray's sins throughout the novel and alleges that "he who has found the sin has brought it."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 314, 322.

<sup>39</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 320-321.

<sup>40</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 77. Quoted from the *Scots Observer*, July 5, 1890.

<sup>41</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 78.



But Carson disagreed pushing Wilde to disclose all “additions” that were made to the *Lippincott’s* version before the story was republished. Wilde denies making any serious changes that would have altered the character of the book in this way before admitting that Walter Pater had commented to him “that a certain passage was liable to misconstruction.”

Carson: In what respect?

Wilde: In every respect.

Carson: In what respect?

Wilde: In the respect that it would convey the impression that the sin of Dorian Gray was sodomy.

Carson: You altered it?

Wilde: I made one addition.<sup>43</sup>

Carson then attempted to invoke Wilde’s theory of life and art and ambiguous entities to convince the jury that Basil Hallward, the artist who had an atypical relationship with Dorian Gray, was in fact Wilde. When Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray confront one another about the magical portrait, Basil confesses to Dorian his “idolatry” of Dorian.<sup>44</sup> Line by line Carson quoted this encounter questioning Wilde repeatedly if he had ever shared the same feelings that Basil confesses to. At first Wilde is as flippant as ever.

Carson: I want an answer to this simple question. Have you ever felt that feeling of adoring madly a beautiful male person many years younger than yourself?

Wilde: I have never given adoration to anybody except myself. (Loud laughter.)<sup>45</sup>

But as the trial progressed Wilde began to spar with Carson over his attempts to make *The Picture of Dorian Gray* autobiographical. “You must remember that novels and life are different things.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Wilde’s approach would have been successful if he did not also cry Art when obvious love letters from him to Lord Alfred Douglas were produced.

While the second day of the trial proceeded with actual evidence from this world, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “The Priest and the Acolyte,” and “Phrases and Philosophies for Use of the Young” were still referenced heavily by Queensberry’s defense.<sup>47</sup> Although the evidence provided on the first day was more than enough evidence for Queensberry’s victory simply because of the “posing as” stipulation, Wilde did not withdraw his case until Carson set out to prove that Wilde was not only posing as but was in fact a sodomite. The morning

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<sup>43</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 78-79.

<sup>44</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 111.

<sup>45</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 253-261.

of April 5, 1895, Carson announced his many rent boy witnesses, tracked down by Queensberry's private detectives, who would testify that they had been propositioned by or had inappropriate relations with Oscar Wilde.<sup>48</sup> Richard Ellmann claims that many of these renters had Alfred Douglas as a client, not Wilde, but at this point in the libel trial and subsequent criminal proceedings this was a moot point. Clarke immediately withdrew Wilde's case against Queensberry in an attempt to spare Wilde a criminal trial. "I feel that he (Lord Queensberry) could not resist a verdict of 'not guilty' in this case- 'not guilty' having reference to the words 'posing as.'"<sup>49</sup>

While at this point it appeared almost inevitable that Wilde would be prosecuted by the Crown, when compared with other men in similar, albeit much less publicized situations, prosecution was not always certain. Nevertheless Wilde's popularity led to a highly publicized libel trial which was reported upon daily with Wilde's wittier quotes while on the stand being reprinted. In addition the names of prominent men, including the Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery, had been pulled into the trial by use of letters and additional evidence supposedly in an effort to make Wilde's case. While Rosebery's part in Wilde's criminal trials and convictions have been speculative, so far there is a fair amount of evidence to prove he had a vested interest in Wilde being found guilty. Victorians, although they clamored to get the details of Wilde's trial, did not discuss sex since it "debased the public sphere" and, as Wilde brought the case to court, seemed to harbor a complete disregard for societal proprieties which furthered the idea of illness in Wilde.<sup>50</sup> This perfect storm of social conditions, along with Queensberry's malicious intent, secured a criminal trial which within its historical context bridged the era of anatomical identification to sexual orientation.

Within minutes of Queensberry's acquittal, his detectives sent their additional evidence against Wilde to Scotland Yard in hopes of a criminal prosecution. Queensberry's detectives then followed Wilde as he went to lunch, met with lawyers, and most likely considered fleeing to the continent as his friends suggested. However, he remained, and at 5 o'clock that evening he received word that a warrant for his arrest had been issued only hours after the end of the libel trial. Oscar Wilde was arrested on criminal charges of "committing indecent acts" at ten past six the evening of April 5, 1895.<sup>51</sup>

The public acknowledgment of the Oscar Wilde scandal, which had become an enigma of Art, sexual disease, and societal deviance, was in line with wider European ideas of Societal Degeneration. While this subject deserves its own full length paper, it is fair to discuss Max Nordau's *Degeneration* or

<sup>48</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 273.

<sup>49</sup> Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 281.

<sup>50</sup> Adut, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," 222.

<sup>51</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 454-456.

*Entartung* since it began to be published widely in English during and immediately after Wilde's trials.<sup>52</sup> "Nordau reduces sexual and other behavioral pathologies to the single disease of degeneration of the central nervous system" and applied this same thinking to the artists' degeneration of society.<sup>53</sup> Nordau linked Decadent art, with which Wilde was associated, to this degeneration of society. He states very boldly that artists have "a predilection for suffering, disease, and crime."<sup>54</sup>

"Nordau on Ego-Mania," published in a British journal only days before Wilde's first criminal trial, was an excerpt from *Degeneration* discussing Oscar Wilde and his "anti-social ego-mania".<sup>55</sup> In this excerpt, Nordau separates "the normal man" from "the deranged egomaniacs" creating a more nuanced idea not of sexuality but of healthy or diseased individual. As evidence of Wilde's disease, Nordau discusses his "eccentricities" including his dress, paradoxical phrases, and aversion to nature.<sup>56</sup> Describing Wilde as frivolous and inactive, Nordau uses words usually designated for women in his portrayal of Wilde indicating the heavy role his clothing played in his public perception. Acknowledging gender inversions was common practice before the creation and acceptance of homosexuality, and this made it easy for Victorians to follow this thread into the modern psychology. Nordau's quotes, now placed on the backdrop of Wilde's trial, not only reiterated his earlier remarks of ego-mania but now his language of disease and map of degeneration could easily be applied by Victorians to the all consuming "disease" of homosexuality although as a mental, not physical, degeneration or disease.

As Oscar Wilde's first criminal trial commenced, Queensberry's previously undisclosed evidence came to light. Several rent boys and hotel employees were called to the witness box to testify against Wilde. Although not necessarily presented as prostitutes, their pimp Alfred Taylor was also brought to trial and tried with Wilde. The young men testified to either being propositioned by or made drunk and seduced by Wilde.<sup>57</sup> Prostitutes were usually considered unreliable witnesses and barred from providing testimony.<sup>58</sup> A hotel masseuse

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<sup>52</sup> Dellamora, "Productive Decadence: "The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought": Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde," 529-530.

<sup>53</sup> Dellamora, "Productive Decadence: "The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought": Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde," 533.

<sup>54</sup> Max Nordau, "Nordau on Ego-mania," *The Critic: a Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts* (1886-1898) (April 20, 1895): 23.

<sup>55</sup> Nordau, "Nordau on Ego-mania," 23.

<sup>56</sup> Nordau, "Nordau on Ego-mania," 23.

<sup>57</sup> "The Criminal Trials of Oscar Wilde: Transcript Excerpts The First Criminal Trial (April 26 to May 1, 1895)" University of Missouri- Kansas City School of Law, accessed April 3, 2012, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/Wildecriminaltranscript.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Adut, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," 226.

and maid also testified to seeing the aftermath of these encounters. Then, even with this cornucopia of evidence, the Crown resurrected the conversations on Art which played out in the libel trial. Wilde was again cross examined on works which were not his own but in fact were written by Lord Alfred Douglas, who was never prosecuted. One of these works was a poem titled “Two Loves” which discussed “the love that dare not speak its name.”

Gill: Was that poem explained to you?

Wilde: I think that is clear.

Gill: There is no question as to what it means?

Wilde: Most certainly not.

Gill: Is it not clear that the love described relates to natural love and unnatural love?

Wilde: No.

Gill: What is the "Love that dare not speak its name"?

Wilde: "The Love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name," and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (Loud applause, mingled with some hisses.)<sup>59</sup>

This, one of the most famous quotes of the trial and possibly of Wilde’s career, may have convinced many Victorians that Wilde was indeed not of an “ordinary balanced mind,” as it was described during the trial.<sup>60</sup> In their eyes, only a diseased mental state would be able to confuse so profoundly the difference between an immoral act and the familiar homosocial geography of Victorian England. While Wilde and his testimony played a part in buying some time due to a hung jury, a second trial quickly commenced and convicted Wilde within six days. May 26, 1895 the jury returned a verdict of “guilty” and Justice

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<sup>59</sup> “Testimony of Oscar Wilde.”

<sup>60</sup> “Testimony of Oscar Wilde.”

Wills acknowledged that such a case was a time when judges could show their prejudices.

I shall, under the circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for a case such as this. The sentence of the Court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labor for two years.<sup>61</sup>

Any person who knew exactly what the “hard labor” entailed understood that this was basically a death sentence for Wilde, whose upper class lifestyle left him unprepared for the physical trauma of jail.



Figure 7. Illustration of Wilde’s haircut by the prison barber, June 1895.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> “Sentencing Statement of Justice Wills” University of Missouri- Kansas City School of Law, accessed April 3, 2012, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/sentence.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, 161.

As seen in Figure 7, the public chose to focus on the amendatory aspects of Wilde's incarceration rather than the harsh penalties of prison life, which after Wilde's sentence were reformed. The image of Wilde's deviant hair being sheared off is the main focus of this edition, literally illustrating the moment that society uses its will to remedy diseased behavior. While all prisoners did have their hair cut, the fact that Wilde's haircut made the cover image of *The Illustrated Police Budget* shows its significance in his case. Keeping his grown out locks was as important to Wilde as it was for the prison to take away. After his transfer to Reading Gaol in November 1895, he was forced through another haircut although his hair was allowed to grow out in the previous prison. "Must it be cut?" asked Wilde, with tears in his eyes, 'you don't know how much it means to me.'"<sup>63</sup>

After Wilde's conviction, the artistic community was on the defensive. Art, in particular the Decadent and Aesthetic Movements, had played such a pivotal role in Wilde's trials that artists were called to write to defend themselves and their livelihoods. Some artists directly confronted and deconstructed Nordau's *Degeneration*. George Bernard Shaw, an Irish playwright, penned "A Degenerate's View of Nordau" which was published in July 1895, approximately two months after Wilde's conviction. He countered Nordau's claims that all artists were more likely to be diseased and criminally insane. Instead Shaw states they are no more perceptible than every other person and any personal disease or issues do not negate the artist's work. Artists are not the "cultural dissidents" Nordau paints them as but rather susceptible to human passions.<sup>64</sup> However, Shaw does not directly or indirectly conjure the image of Wilde in an attempt to distance himself from the other disgraced Irish playwright of whom he was friend since 1879.<sup>65</sup>

While Shaw defended art against biological degeneration, whether mental or physical, Vernon Lee published a review of *Degeneration* in 1896 in which she acknowledged the psychological climate of the Wildean trials and transposed this debate into the sociological rather than the biological arena.<sup>66</sup> Like many female aesthetes, Lee attempts to distance herself from Wilde in the beginning of her review although she obviously had him in mind as she wrote. Inevitably Lee defends Wilde by speaking out against Max Nordau and Article XI, under which he was convicted.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 496.

<sup>64</sup> Dellamora, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, 532.

<sup>65</sup> Beckson, *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia*, 338.

<sup>66</sup> Dellamora, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, 533.

<sup>67</sup> Dellamora, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, 532- 534.

Lee attempts to validate the idea of intellectual friendship, an intimate same sex but non sexual friendship, as essential for the intellectual and artistic individual. An intellectually or artistically talented individual needs a “friend to metaphorically feel his pulse or look at his tongue” and furthermore “a friend to whom either pulse or tongue, in the spiritual order, can reveal anything.”<sup>68</sup> The conversation between the two individuals is necessary for the advancement of their intellectual and artistic pursuits working as a brain storming and critiquing session. Wilde similarly defended his homosexual relationships as intellectual friendships, most notably at his criminal proceedings when interpreting “the love that dare not speak its name.” There is no evidence to counter that Wilde honestly viewed his relationships as intellectual friendships although there was a sexual component.

In 1896 after one year of incarceration, Wilde too wrote about Nordau’s *Degeneration*. While he surely must have known of *Degeneration* before his trials, as he was fluent in German, well read, and was discussed in the book, he is not known to have spoken of it until this time. After his release the next year, Wilde reportedly insulted Nordau saying, “I quite agree with Dr. Nordau’s assertion that all men of genius are insane, but Dr. Nordau forgets that all sane people are idiots.”<sup>69</sup> However in a letter to the Home Secretary from his cell in Reading Gaol, Wilde adopted Nordau’s vocabulary of degeneration to plea for early release. Wilde begins by stating,

[his] offences are forms of sexual madness and are recognized as such not merely by modern pathological science but by modern legislation... where laws affecting these misdemeanors have been repealed, on the ground that they are diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge.<sup>70</sup>

Wilde describes being “tortured by the fear of absolute and entire insanity” “an insanity that will not be confined to one portion of the nature merely, but will extend over all alike” due to his untreated “erotomania” spreading.<sup>71</sup> He highlights the connection between “the most brilliant years of his life,” when he produced his society dramas which brought him critical and commercial success, as being intricately tied to “suffering from the most horrible form of erotomania, which made him forget his wife and children, his high social position in London

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<sup>68</sup> Dellamora, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, 534. Quoted from “Deterioration of the Soul,” *Fortnightly Review* 59 (June 1896): 938.

<sup>69</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 550.

<sup>70</sup> Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, editors, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000): 656 and 657.

<sup>71</sup> Holland, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 658.

and Paris, his European distinction as an artist, the honour of name and family, [and] his very humanity itself.”<sup>72</sup>

Wilde’s letter does bring to light some of his fears while imprisoned, chiefly of which was his constantly declining health. He describes his lack of mental stimulation by reading, writing, and conversation as detrimental to a literary man, similarly to Vernon Lee, and that his suffering was multiplied by the recent passing of his mother. While the “hard labor” requirement of his sentence did create additional stress, the general prison conditions produced hunger, dysentery, and depression in almost all the prisoners, and inmates were not allowed to converse or interact with one another even when working. In fact, they wore masks during their exercise time so as not to be able to communicate even through facial expressions. Wilde’s progressive loss of hearing and vision, due to an untreated abscess in his ear drum, caused him distress as well for although Reading Gaol did not have the expertise and tools to help him, it could be treated by a specialist if Wilde were free to see one.<sup>73</sup> After a meeting with Constance, she wrote her brother, “They say he is quite well, but he is an absolute wreck compared with what he was.”<sup>74</sup>

It would be naïve to take Wilde’s adoption of degeneration at face value, even without his later comments. This letter illustrates how Wilde’s understanding of his situation is evolving in the larger concept of sexuality. Wilde most likely employed Nordau’s vocabulary in an attempt to secure early release and writing materials, but his understanding of the role of sexuality in his conviction is now evident as he now poses as sexually diseased to his advantage. As previously exemplified during his trials, Wilde defended his works and the works of others explaining away the sodomitical and immoral aspects of these works. Even when directly confronted with Lord Alfred Douglas’ description of “the love that dare not speak its name,” Wilde forfeited one of his last chances by not acknowledging and rejecting the subversive art. If Wilde was aware of emerging ideas of sexuality, they were obviously not seen as concrete or the weight placed on personality over deviant action may have been ambiguous. Wilde now appears to have recognized the role of sexuality and art at his trials and takes advantage of the inconsistencies in degeneration to his benefit. Although Wilde was denied early release after the prison surgeon attested Wilde was not exhibiting any additional signs of insanity, he did receive writing materials with which he wrote “De Profundis.”<sup>75</sup>

In 1897, the same year as Wilde’s release from Reading Gaol, the first English version of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* was published by prominent

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<sup>72</sup> Holland, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 657.

<sup>73</sup> Holland, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 659.

<sup>74</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 499.

<sup>75</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 503.



British sexologist, Havelock Ellis, who was only five years Wilde's junior.<sup>76</sup> This multivolume work included *Sexual Inversion*, the first serious study of homosexuality in Great Britain. Publishing his book, which did not outright condemn diseased sexualities, so close to Wilde's trial led to many publishing roadblocks. Ellis succeeded only to have the work labeled as "certain lewd, wicked, bawdy, scandalous libel."<sup>77</sup> However, Ellis continued his work in the field of sexuality publishing a total of six volumes to *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.

In 1903, James Shaw's *Physiognomy of Mental Diseases and Degeneracy* explored the connection between facial expressions and mental disease. Only one of the fifty-five cases Shaw explored discussed sexual perversion. This case involved a young man who objected to wearing "male attire except under compulsion."<sup>78</sup> While Shaw then suggests that the effeminacy in the appearance of his face is suggestive of the effeminacy in his personality, this is important because the effeminacy is no longer tied to sexual anatomy. Davidson writes that this is an obvious nod to sexuality rather than sex although the idea is still very body based. An individual can now have a masculine or feminine persona or sexuality regardless of their sexual anatomy.

By 1913, Ellis' publication of "Sexo Aesthetic Inversion" clearly described what we could today easily identify as homosexuality, cross dressing independent of sexuality, and Gender Identity Disorder.<sup>79</sup> Davidson argues that this illustrates a complete understanding of the separation of anatomy and sexuality or personality. That only seventeen years after Oscar Wilde's trials there emerged a very clear and detailed model of sexuality published by a man very aware of Wilde's proceedings, illustrates the effect Wilde unintentionally had on the dissemination of sexuality.

Beginning approximately the decade before Wilde's trials, the scientific community was already critiquing ideas of sexual desire and how personality played a role in these desires. Sexual organs were previously the sole identifier of identity, with hermaphrodites being declared man or woman based simply on the dominant sexual organ. However in 1879, J.M. Duncan had severed connections between a woman's sex drive from her anatomy. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) put forward his ideas of degeneration that stated internal physical degeneration was responsible for a spectrum of deviant behavior and was especially prevalent amongst artists.

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<sup>76</sup> Ellis, (Henry) Havelock (1859–1939)," J. Weeks in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, May 2006, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33009> (accessed March 20, 2012).

<sup>77</sup> Ellis, Havelock.

<sup>78</sup> Davidson, "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," 37.

<sup>79</sup> Davidson, "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," 21.

Nordau used Wilde as an example of the degenerate artist in this book. Wilde's eccentricities of dress, speech, and bohemian lifestyle, which Nordau cited against Wilde in *Degeneration*, came to be seen as the symptoms of sexual disease during his trials. Pulling from Wilde's fictional works, his dress especially on his American tour, and his Art philosophy, his foes in the courtroom were able to create an image of an individual with abnormal, unbalanced ideas and behavior in public which continued into his private sex life. Wilde was not simply a man participating in deviant sexual behavior but, as evidenced by his peculiar personality, he was a sexual deviant.

At the time of the Wildean trials and immediately after, there was a marked increase of the translation and publication of scientific works regarding sexuality and the connection between sexual desire and personality for the British public. Sections of Nordau's *Degeneration* that discussed Wilde were translated and made available to the British public during and immediately after the trials. A long footnote was added regarding Wilde to *Degeneration* in 1896, a year after the trials. Havelock Ellis' work *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* was influenced, even if only circumstantially, by the Wildean trials. Less than a decade after the trials, James Shaw's *Physiognomy of Mental Diseases and Degeneracy* contained theories which depend on the breakdown of the tie between sexual anatomy and sexual and gender preferences.

Oscar Wilde's three trials pushed to the forefront and confirmed theories of sexuality that were already present and circulating among the scientific community. In the courtroom, his artistic views and persona were understood as symptoms of sexual disease rooted in the mind. This disease differentiated Wilde from other perpetrators of "gross indecency" leading to his conviction and punishment. Wilde unintentionally fortified burgeoning theories of sexuality as fact to a large audience of Europeans. As he blatantly embodied the independence of sexuality from anatomy and publicly displayed his unique personality throughout his career and trial, Wilde helped to move away from general identity based on sexual anatomy towards sexuality based identification.

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