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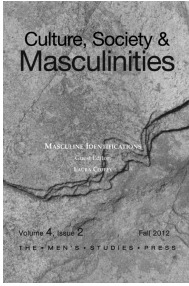
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OSCAR WILDE AND THE PLAISTOW MATRICIDE: COMPETING CRITIQUES OF INFLUENCE IN THE FORMATION OF LATE-VICTORIAN MASCULINITIES

This paper examines the ways in which the concept of “pernicious influence” was mobilized in late-Victorian periodical publications to reinforce a normative conception of masculinity through powerful discourses on the relationship between textual consumption and identity. Discussion of the threat posed by “penny dreadfuls” drew not only on widely held assumptions regarding the criminalizing influence of popular fiction, exemplified by the case of Robert Coombes, but also made connections with the supposedly corrupting effeminacy of the “degenerate” intellectual, with the trials of Oscar Wilde as the main focus. The paper goes on to explore Wilde’s engagement with the concept of influence across a wide range of his writings, in the course of which he developed an alternative critique of *all* influence as a perversion of self-realization. This relates in some respects to existing strands of critical debate relating to Wilde’s sexuality (for a summary of this scholarship which dominated critical discussions of Wilde in the 1990s, see Small, 2000; and Bashford, 2002). However, the current essay seeks to frame Wilde’s contribution in terms of late-Victorian debates on the cultural significance of reading practices and in relation to Wilde’s own critique of influence, by means of which he contested many of the assumptions underpinning bourgeois conceptions of normative masculinity.

Keywords: influence, literature, Victorian, masculinity, criminality, Wilde

Late-Victorian debates on the root causes of criminality worked sometimes through the demonization of elements of popular culture such as “penny dreadfuls” — cheap magazines featuring sensational and often violent tales in which criminals were frequently cast in the role of heroic underdog. These penny dreadfuls were thought to exercise a degrading influence over the working-class boys who were presumed to be their principal readership. But the social reach of concerns over degenerate masculinities went beyond any single subcultural formation, taking in decadent intellectuals and bohemian artists as well as the urban *residuum*. Accordingly, the middle-class periodical press mulled over social distinctions not just in terms of a vertical social hierarchy but also in accordance with a wide-ranging

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division between bourgeois normativity and the typology of these various forms of degeneration. Anxieties relating to reading—or, to be precise, the “pernicious influence” of reading—were thus a common feature, from the penny dreadful to the poetry of decadence.

Of particular significance in this regard is the fact that the critique of pernicious influence, like the discourse on degeneration more broadly, was articulated from within the dominant masculinist culture itself (Smith, 2004, p. 4) and is thus best understood as a defensive strategy against a perceived threat to its norms and privileges. Late-Victorian theories of masculinity operated on the basis of what Andrew Smith describes as a “bifurcated model” of the subject in which male identity was deemed to be under threat from an innate tendency towards debasement. This discourse denoted the non-normative as a pathological tendency and, in seeking to delimit the scope of such diseased states of being, sought to quarantine them and thereby preserve the status and privilege of bourgeois masculinities at a time when, as John Tosh has shown, they were felt to be under threat (Tosh, 1999). This was evident in the critical discourse of the middle-class periodical press, which policed both popular and highbrow literary genres for pernicious influence. The ideological work that such criticism performed will be explored in the current essay with reference to two landmark legal cases from 1895, both of which hinged, in different ways, on the question of corrupting textual influence. One of these—the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde for gross indecency—scarcely needs any introduction. The case of the Plaistow Matricide, on the other hand, has sunk into comparative obscurity, though it was reported internationally at the time. It therefore seems fitting to begin with an account of it.

At around 4am on July 8th 1895, Robert Allen Coombes, aged thirteen years, stabbed to death his mother, Emily Harriet Coombes, at their house at 35 Cave Road, Plaistow, East London. He killed her with a knife he had bought specially for the purpose. The day after the murder Coombes and his younger brother left their mother’s corpse where it lay on the bed and went to watch cricket at Lords. The boys’ father, a steward on a transatlantic liner, was in New York so that the murder was not discovered for ten days. During this time Robert and his younger brother spent the housekeeping money their father had left on dining out, taking taxis and otherwise living the high life. When the murdered woman’s sister-in-law eventually forced her way into the house and discovered the body Robert admitted to the crime but attempted to shift some of the blame onto his younger brother, whom he alleged had given an agreed signal that he should go ahead and stab their mother. The younger boy was subsequently acquitted (“Old Bailey Online”, 1895).

When the Plaistow Matricide case came to court, the judge stated that “he did not remember ever having read a case, so far as the depositions disclosed the facts, that was marked with such cruelty and so much heartlessness” (Central Criminal Court, September 9, 1895). An article in *The Lancet* in September 1895 described the case as “one of the most remarkable in the history of legal medicine,” and Coombes’s crime as the most “revolting, foul, and unnatural” it is possible to conceive (“The Plaistow Matricide”, 1895a). The case was reported internationally and press coverage appeared in local papers up and down England. It went on to become the subject of editorial columns in *The Times* and *The Daily News* and of a lurid front cover for the *Illustrated Police News* depicting the act of murder and the discovery of the corpse in an advanced state of decomposition—ironic, given its own disapproving comments upon Coombes’s appetite for sensational literature.

Both Robert and Nathaniel have been greedy devourers of sensational literature; indeed, there have been found in the house all kinds of penny 'dreadfuls' and blood-curdling narratives ... The demoralizing influence of pernicious reading had begun to tell on the boys for some months, particularly on the elder, who a few years ago was treated by a now deceased doctor at Bow for a brain affection. ("Murder of a Mother at Plaistow", 1895)

The journalist Hugh Chisholm, writing in *The Fortnightly Review* in the immediate aftermath of Coombes's conviction for the murder, also picked up on the boy's reading habits, asserting that a police search of the house at Plaistow had turned up "a pile of cheap romances, reeking with bloodshed and all modes of criminal horrors," which were "immediately and naturally associated in the public mind with the motiveless act for which this wretched boy and his brother have so nearly escaped the gallows" (Chisholm, 1895, p. 765). Chisholm was drawing upon a widely held view that perceived a causal relationship between the reading of sensational fiction and the emergence of tendencies towards juvenile delinquency (Springhall, 1998, pp. 71–97). Indeed, the jury of the Coroner's Court investigating Emily Coombes's death, prior to any criminal proceedings, seemed already to have made up its mind when it added a statement to the verdict of "Willful murder" to the effect that "the Legislature should take some steps to put a stop to the inflammable and shocking literature that is sold, which we are of the opinion leads to many a dreadful crime being carried out" ("Inquests", 1895).

This view of sensational fiction as a stimulus to criminality was evident in periodicals and newspapers before and after the Plaistow Matricide case was tried—for example, see (Greenwood, 1873) (Salmon, 1886a) (Salmon, 1886b) (Gattie, 1889) (Hitchman, 1890) (Humphrey, 1893) (Ackland, 1894). During Coombes's trial itself this bed of assumptions underpinned the prosecution's suggestion that the boy had been corrupted by books discovered at 35 Cave Road, which "related to crimes of one kind or another," to which Mr Justice Kennedy replied "Some do certainly, *judging from the titles*" (emphasis added) ("The Plaistow Matricide", 1895b).

Later in the trial the medical officer of Newgate and Holloway, where he had been on remand, was called to give testimony regarding the boy's history of "excitability," and a pattern of headaches and "cerebral irritation" was invoked. These were ascribed by the witness to pressure on the brain caused by the use of forceps at birth. The same witness further commented that "[p]ernicious literature would be worse for a boy who was suffering from a mental affection" ("Old Bailey Online", 1895). The bifurcated model of masculine identity associated with fin de siècle theories of degeneration is evident in this assessment, as is the role of the pernicious external stimulus as a trigger to activate latent criminality and thus erode moral agency and the ability to repress anti-social impulses in line with norms of respectable masculinity (Smith, 2004, p. 4). Robert Coombes appeared to have been doomed twice over to a criminal disposition, by an immanent tendency towards degeneration and by the pernicious influence of sensational fiction, rendering him an object of both pity and dismay. Another significant medical assessment of Coombes appeared in *The Lancet* in September 1895, which did not mention Coombes's reading habits directly but settled on a more general suggestion that "his life-history points to moral alienism as his usual state." The same article also noted that this form of mental disturbance, culminating in Coombes's "impulsive homicidal mania," was distinct from the legal category of "intellectual insanity"

(that is to say, the inability to distinguish right from wrong), which was the only one deemed to relieve defendants from criminal responsibility. *The Lancet* openly stated that Coombes was legally culpable for a capital sentence; however, it “unhesitatingly endorse[d] the verdict of the jury” because to “have convicted Coombes would have been an injustice; to have sacrificed his life would have been a crime” (“The Plaistow Matricide”, 1895a, p. 743).

In an editorial commentary on the case, *The Times* also welcomed the court’s acceptance of Coombes’s plea of temporary insanity on the grounds that the 1890s were “more tender times” than the days in which “a boy of eight was hanged for setting fire to a barn” (“The Trial of Robert Allen Coombes, A Boy”, 1895). Like *The Lancet*, *The Times* expressed no doubt over Coombes’s guilt nor his lack of remorse. It also pointed out that there was evidence of premeditation in the purchase of the knife and in statements Robert Coombes made to his brother signaling his intention to kill their mother that night. This made a “temporary insanity” defence seem unsupported but the sentencing decision was nevertheless approved by the editorial because “In no event could Robert Coombes have been hanged.” If the *Times* expressed doubts regarding what was seen as a rather “peculiar kind” of insanity it ultimately agreed with the jury’s verdict to ameliorate a capital sentence because of the influence upon Coombes of “the vile, sensational books which seem to have been his favourite study.” Thus, Coombes’s implausible mitigation was approved once again, in this instance because of the absence of legal provisions relating to “pernicious influence” that could have ascribed his murderous impulse and callous indifference to his exposure to demoralizing literature.

The various branches of the periodical press and the court alike appear to have taken the view that, without the penny dreadful as a source of pernicious influence, the case of the Plaistow Matricide would not have come about. Gavin Sutter notes, however, that no clear evidence was ever presented to support the idea that penny dreadfuls really did have a criminalizing influence (See Sutter, 2003, p. 163–8). Moreover, as John Springhall points out, none of the books named in *The Daily News* in its reporting of the trial of Robert Coombes were actually bloodthirsty tales of criminal life. In reality they were commonplace detective, mystery and light gothic romances: *The Crimson Cloak*; *The Secret of Castle Cloney*; *The Witch of Fermoyle*; *Revenged at Last*; *The Mesmerist Detective*; *Joe Phoenix’s Unknown*; *Cockney Bob*; *The Rock Rider* and *The Witch* (Springhall, 1998, p. 91). None of these books matched the descriptions provided by the Coroner’s jury, the prosecution or the judge in Coombes’s trial. The conclusions derived from these false impressions by the *Illustrated Police News*, *The Times* and Hugh Chisholm must therefore have been equally false. And yet such views held sway because they belonged to the dominant discourse on mass culture, which they shared with moral campaigners such as the Pure Literature Society, promulgating anxiety over the pernicious influence through the printed word and forming the basis of supposedly “natural” assumptions linking literary consumption to transgressive performance.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the relationship between reading and character was explored as a topic of considerable concern in periodical publications (Turner, 2000, p. 239–40) (Sutter, 2003, p. 166). For example, Henry Mansel’s polemical “Sensation Novels” (1863) (reproduced in (Regan, 2001, pp. 44–47)) inveighed against the spreading “virus” of “morbid” appetites from lower to middle-class readerships and concern over the effects of the sensational effects of literature upon “unruly female physiology” (Talairach-Vielmas, 2007, p. 99). Dia-

tribes against the penny dreadful were sustained and widespread throughout the period, focusing on the concern that working-class boys were particularly susceptible to what Francis Hitchman denoted as “literature which has done much to people our prisons, our reformatories, and our Colonies, with scapegraces and ne'er-do-wells” (Hitchman, 1890, p. 152). In both instances the perceived dangers indicate above all the anxieties of Victorian middle-class and patriarchal hegemonies during the second half of the nineteenth century in respect of the challenges posed by women and the working class to their social dominance. Hitchman flags up the ideological significance of textual influence explicitly, quoting at the outset of his essay Lord Sherbrooke’s remark during the 1867 Reform Bill debate that “We must educate our masters’ (Hitchman, 1890, p. 150). Such concerns about sensation fiction and penny dreadfuls thus provide specific points of focus on class and gender within a more general and growing sense of unease about the socially transformative potential of mass culture.

Victorian critics often discussed literature and reading practices in terms of their physiological or nervous impact (Dames, 2007). Cultural anxieties relating to print media were similarly couched in terms of their degenerative psychological influence, with Alfred Austin complaining in 1874 that “such reading as at present prevails has, by reason both of its quality and quantity, led to a deterioration of the human species” (Cited in Mays, 1995, p. 175). This generalized anxiety, in which the appetite for reading was feared in and of itself as a cause of mental addiction and moral decline, reached its peak in 1885/6 according to Kelly J. Mays (Mays, 1995, p. 165). The Plaistow Matricide case took place almost a decade later and the publicity it generated reignited debates regarding the demoralizing effects of popular fiction and the relationship between reading and degeneration. The editorials and polemics the case spawned worked over the same ground as earlier campaigns against the penny dreadful in terms of the threat from below. But in the wake of Oscar Wilde’s trials a few months earlier, the case also became the means by which concerns over pernicious influence were invoked not only in relation to the pitiful figure of Robert Coombes, but were also connected to the supposedly corrupting effeminacy of elite literary formations of which Wilde had become the icon (for a fuller discussion on the significance of Wilde’s trials in the construction of the stereotypical image of the male homosexual, see (Sinfield, 1994 and Cohen, 1993).

Wilde’s three trials—the initial libel case against the Marquis of Queensberry and two subsequent criminal trials for gross indecency—had taken place during April and May 1895. At the end of the first criminal trial, which ended inconclusively, an editorial in *Reynold’s Newspaper* entered the fray with the comment that “this whole case has stamped as pernicious the kind of literature with which Wilde’s name is closely identified. That literature is one of the most diseased products of a diseased time” (cited in Arata, 1996, p. 54). The murder of Emily Coombes was reported in July and the inquest and trial in August and September. Then, in November, Chisholm’s essay “How to Counteract the Penny Dreadful” was published, whose first paragraph drew together the two cases in a fashion that would have been unmistakable for a contemporary readership, though Wilde’s name seems already to have entered the realm of the unmentionable:

Coming so soon after the exposure of the abominable immoralities of an accomplished producer of non-moral literature for the upper circles of the reading world, it is not surprising that there should be an outcry against

such publications as these, which incite a less cultivated section of the public to even more dangerous crimes. (Chisholm, 1895, p. 765)

Chisholm not only exhorted the authorities to prosecute the publishers of “quasi-criminal’ literature,” but also to classify penny dreadfuls alongside literature considered to be sexually immoral as both being “punishable, criminal, and obscene, within the meaning of the law” (Chisholm, 1895, pp. 767, 766).

The cases of Wilde and Coombes were dissimilar in terms of the characteristics of the defendants and the nature of their offences, except insofar as they could be deemed to illustrate the dangers posed by “one corrupting sort of literature as well as another” (Chisholm, 1895, p. 767). The fact that the law in 1895 made a distinction between, on the one hand, obscenity (which was prosecutable) and, on the other, “murder-mongering” fiction (which was not) was, Chisholm argued, an anomaly because both forms of writing possessed a tendency “to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to immoral influences” (Chisholm, 1895, p. 768; 770). The connection he makes between the cases of Wilde and Coombes is, at one level, mere opportunism, intensifying the notoriety of one case by combining it with another—both of which had featured in sensationalizing illustrations on the front page of the *Illustrated Police News*. However, Chisholm’s essay is also perhaps revealing of something else insofar as it shows how public discourse on literature and reading practices in the late-Victorian period were concerned with policing a variety of masculinities whose only obvious similarity was their divergence from a prescribed norm. In addition, though, the cases of Wilde and Coombes are unified not only in terms of late-Victorian debates over the nature of manliness (see Adams, 1995; and Tosh, 1999), but also through the desire to exercise control over the development of masculinities by structuring *influence*, which thus becomes a key term in the debate. Chisholm tapped into the dominant discourse on print culture and degeneration, directing it towards Wilde and Coombes together and, in so doing, defining deviations from normative masculinity in terms of a common pathology of “pernicious influence,” with the bourgeois periodical press not simply guiding public taste and standards but, as the Victorian journalist and author E.S. Dallas suggested, creating “to a very large extent ... in fact—the public” (cited in Mays, 1995, p. 168).

Such definitions run the risk, however, of over-simplifying the relationship between varieties of print media and their constituent readerships. As Laurel Brake points out, the readers of daily newspapers in the late-Victorian period were still predominantly men, whilst middle-class women made up a substantial proportion of the audience for periodicals carrying the kind of essays debating the merits of reading matter (L. Brake, 2001, p. 139). The creation by the Victorian periodical press of a sense of the public as an entity was thus complicated by the fact that this did not designate a unified field of discourse. For example, *The Artist*, a periodical with a significant female readership and a proportion of male homosexual readers, was prepared to refer more or less openly to the homosexuality at the centre of the Cleveland Street scandal in 1889, whilst the male-dominated daily press suppressed such details, which Brake argues shows “an articulation of male anxiety about masculinity by a male press in a heterosexual male space” (L. Brake, 2001 op. cit. see also the discussion of W.T. Stead’s popular journalism coverage of the scandal in Laurel Brake & Codell, 2005, pp. 213–235). It is thus important to maintain awareness of the distinctions between Victorian periodicals and their audiences (between,

for example, penny dreadfuls, daily newspapers, salacious magazines such as the *Illustrated Police News*, and critical reviews).

However, whilst essays such as Chisholm's, published in middle-class periodicals, may have had a significant female readership they nonetheless frequently sought to reinforce the residual ideal of muscular Christianity that had facilitated male privilege in the mid-nineteenth century when it was disseminated through the fiction of Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley (Vance, 2010). Such efforts should be read as a defensive response to the perception that male authority was increasingly in question. As John Tosh has noted "the contradictions which had always been inherent in masculine domesticity had by the end of the century come into the open" and in particular "the role and capacities of fathers were widely disparaged, and children of both sexes were less inclined to accept paternal authority" (Tosh, 1999, pp. 194, 145; Griffin, 2012, pp. 99-100; see also Nelson, 2007, pp. 46-71). Reading, on the other hand, was thought to exercise a substantial influence over the formation of character and, as Kelly J. Mays notes, the debate that took place in the 1880s around the "reading problem" functioned "to establish and sanctify social boundaries in new terms" (Mays, 1995, p. 181), with middle-class periodicals attempting to offset the declining authority of the Victorian patriarch through prescriptions and proscriptions of popular taste.

Edward G. Salmon, for example, in an essay in the *Fortnightly Review* entitled "What Boys Read" (1886) described boys' fiction as "a system of hero-worship" with the potential either to reinforce manly virtues of hard work and fair play or to pose the risk of "pernicious influence" if "filled with stories of blood and revenge, of passion and cruelty" (Salmon, 1886a, pp. 250, 255). Chisholm, writing in the same vein, decried "these 'penny dreadfuls'—for most of them are sold at that moderate figure," in which "the foulest crimes are discussed and described in a purposely seductive and exciting manner; the attraction of adventure and the halo of publicity being cast over their dare-devil heroes in a way calculated to occupy the mind and inflame the imagination of any boy, particularly in the lower classes, with a spark of untutored enthusiasm in him" (Chisholm, 1895, p. 765). Chisholm foregrounds the significance of class and the affordability of sensational publications because, in his opinion, the threat of criminalization was "essentially a Board School question" (Chisholm, 1895, p. 770). He was not alone in this view. In fact, the danger posed to Board School boys by penny dreadfuls was raised as early as 1873, when James Greenwood wrote an article decrying the fact that the London School Board were not empowered "to root up and forever banish from the paths of its pupils those dangerous weeds of literature that crop up in such rank luxuriance on every side to tempt them" (Greenwood, 1873, p. 161). For Chisholm, the problem with Board School boys was due directly to a presumed deficit in authority figures in their lives, because, according to Chisholm, their teachers were "afraid to enforce discipline" and their parents were "incapable of controlling their own children ... or too much occupied ... to attend to them" (Chisholm, 1895, pp. 770-771). By the time of the Plaistow Matricide trial such assumptions about Board School boys like Robert Coombes had hardened into received wisdom and the penny dreadful was widely believed to possess the capacity to transform a wayward youth into a cold-blooded killer. Given the absence of any compelling evidence to support such a view, its pervasiveness is in itself quite extraordinary, and indicates its importance as an ideological support to the authority of bourgeois masculinity.

Not everyone was prepared to go along with it, though. G.K. Chesterton, in his "Defence of Penny Dreadfuls" (1901), ridiculed "the custom, particularly among magistrates, to attribute half the crimes of the Metropolis to cheap novelettes" and was critical of the idea "firmly fixed in the minds of most people that gutter-boys ... find their principal motives for conduct in printed books." Chesterton was certainly not opposed to the enforcement of traditional values—far from it. However, he saw the threat to bourgeois norms coming not from below, but from what Dr Bull in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) would call "dirty modern thinkers" (Chesterton, 2001, p. 141). Whereas Chisholm connected the pernicious influence of the penny dreadful and the decadent artist as equally dangerous, Chesterton sought to pull them apart, insisting that it was "the modern literature of the educated, not of the uneducated," which was "avowedly and aggressively criminal" because it promoted "profligacy and pessimism" (Chesterton, 1904, p. 15). Chesterton's contrarian intervention highlights not only how general the view of the penny dreadful as a criminalizing influence had become, but also how readily the upper and lower ends of the literary hierarchy were linked in terms of their perceived threat to normative values. Similar concerns to Chesterton's had been expounded almost a decade earlier by Max Nordau in *Degeneration* (1892), in which he focused on the degenerate intellectual as the culturally privileged analogue to the criminal, with both groups threatening to exercise a corrupting influence over "many who are only victims to fashion and certain cunning impostures." It was therefore, Nordau contended, "the sacred duty of all healthy and moral men to take part in the work of protecting and saving those who are not already too deeply diseased" (Nordau, 1920, pp. 551, 557).

The policing of reading habits thus extended beyond a concern with the criminalization of Board School boys to include studies and commentaries on the textual consumption of all social groups. According to Joseph Ackland, who in 1894 produced a survey of reading patterns since the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, the growth of mass readership and the attendant expansion of periodical publications were linked to a concomitant "decay of literature" which he claims commenced in 1885. This association of mass culture with a degradation of aesthetic value was picked up by Wilde himself when he wrote in "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated" (1894) in the *Saturday Review* that "In old days books were written by men of letters and read by the public. Nowadays books are written by the public and read by nobody" (Wilde, 1988, p. 1203). Wilde also reworked the rhetoric of decline in his dialogue, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," (1889) in which he takes up the example of the penny dreadful as the basis for the idea that "Life imitates Art."

The most obvious and the vulgarest form in which this is shown is in the case of the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate apple-women, break into sweet-shops at night, and alarm old gentlemen who are returning home from the city by leaping out on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded revolvers.... The boy-burglar is simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct. He is Fact, occupied as Fact usually is, with trying to reproduce Fiction, and what we see in him is repeated on a grand scale throughout the whole of life. (Wilde, 1988, pp. 982, 983)

Wilde's response to the moral panics relating to mass culture, as manifested in notions of aesthetic decline and pernicious influence, was thus oblique. On the one hand he recast the despondent concerns of critics such as Ackland in the comic aloofness of his aesthetic pose. On the other hand Wilde converted the fear and hostility regarding the penny dreadful into a general theory of self-realization through Art:

Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realises in fact what has been dreamed in fiction ... [T]he basis of life ... is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which the expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt. (Wilde, 1988, p. 985)

The corruption of a boy and his pursuit of self-destruction by means of an imitation of art are themes at the core of Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1891), which, Norbert Kohl suggests, is a kind of parody of the classic *Bildungsroman* narrative with its movement from self-absorption to self-knowledge and compassion for others (Kohl & Wilson, 2011, pp. 160–161). Dorian Gray's pursuit of narcissistic hedonism and moral ruin provoked critical consternation when the novel was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in June 1890. Famously described in a hostile review in the *Scots Observer* as being fit "for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys" (Beckson, 1970, p. 75), Wilde's novel was linked by some to the Cleveland Street scandal, in which it was revealed that post office boys had been working as prostitutes for upper-class male clients (Ellmann, 1987, p. 266). The reviewer condemned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a danger to "public morals" claiming that its subject matter was "only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera*."

The question of the pernicious influence of decadent literature has a particularly interesting twist here because Dorian Gray himself is corrupted, above all, by a "poisonous book" that Wotton gives to him:

For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it. He procured from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control. The hero, the wonderful young Parisian in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it. (Wilde, 1985, p. 158)

Dorian says to Harry Wotton, "you poisoned me with a book once ... promise me that you will never lend that book to anyone. It does harm" (Wilde, 1985, p. 257), reconfiguring the 1880s debate over the "disease of reading" within an elite literary milieu (the original source for the "poisonous book" being Huysmans's novel of aristocratic decadence, *A Rebours*). But the conception of pernicious influence underpinning *Dorian Gray* is the same, drawing upon the bifurcated model of

masculinity and the widespread concern that exposure to sensational literature would trigger dormant regressive impulses, those “poisonous influences that came from [Dorian’s] own temperament,” and an appetite for the sensuous pleasures derived from “those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin” (Wilde, 1985, pp. 149, 156).

Sin and art, criminality and self-realization, beauty and scandal: these conjunctions are not incidental motifs in Wilde’s writings. Wilde theorized these ideas, with mischievous humour, in his essays published in *Intentions* (1891) such as “The Decay of Lying,” “The Critic as Artist,” “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” and in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891) in which he argued that “Disobedience ... is man’s original virtue” (Wilde, 1988, p. 1081). In “The Critic as Artist,” for example, Wilde suggests (only half-jokingly) that criminals should be viewed alongside avant-garde artists as agents of History, by virtue of the challenges they present to the status quo: “What is termed Sin,” he writes, “is an essential element of progress” (Wilde, 1988, p. 1023). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde combines a Paterian doctrine of maximal aesthetic experience with the lurid subject matter of popular fiction and the New Journalism, crossing back and forth between these distinct, but related, registers of the literature of sensation. The plot is woven around a thematic exploration of the relationship between connoisseurship and debauchery, and it is developed through the signature incidents of sensational fiction: deception, seduction, drug-taking, a graphic murder followed by blackmail and the disposal of a corpse—plus numerous hints of other, undisclosed crimes—achieving what Ian Small and Josephine M. Guy describe as “a perfect balance ... [of] both “high” and “low” art (Guy & Small, 2006, p. 169). Wilde’s treatment of Dorian Gray’s character capitalizes upon the popular taste for such sensational subject matter in order to explore the possibilities of what Jonathan Dollimore has called Wilde’s “transgressive aesthetic” (Dollimore, 1991, pp. 64-73). Wilde’s novel, in other words, seems in many respects to support the argument put to him in court that books and the flattery of older men can indeed exert a corrupting influence. In the libel case against the Marquis of Queensberry the Lippincott’s edition of *Dorian Gray* was quoted extensively during Wilde’s cross-examination by Edward Carson Q.C. Amongst the passages quoted by Carson was Basil Hallward’s confrontation of Dorian over the rumours surrounding him, in which he raises the question of Dorian’s influence:

Why is your friendship so fateful to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton, and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent’s only son, and his career? I met his father yesterday in St. James Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him? (Wilde, 1985, pp. 183-184)

Carson, leading up to a series of questions about the propriety of a letter Wilde sent to Lord Alfred Douglas, suggested that Hallward’s words implied “a charge of unnatural vice,” to which Wilde responded: “It describes Dorian Gray as a man of very corrupt influence, though there is no statement as to the nature of the influence. But as a matter of fact I do not think that one person influences another, nor do I think there is any bad influence in the world.” Carson pursued the point

A man never corrupts a youth?

- I think not.

Nothing could corrupt him?

- If you are talking of separate ages.

No, sir, I am talking common sense? [sic]

- I do not think one person influences another.

You don't think that flattering a young man, making love to him, in fact, would be likely to corrupt him?

- No. (Hyde, 1948, p. 132)

Wilde's responses here are strategic, but they emerge from a strong existing preoccupation in Wilde's writings not only with transgression but also with the question of influence. This includes *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, collections of aphorisms, stories such as "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" (1887) and "The Portrait of Mr W.H." (1889), and the dialogue "The Critic as Artist" (1891). In "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated," for example, Wilde wrote that "Education is an admirable thing. But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught" (Wilde, 1988, p. 1203). Similarly, in "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" (1894) he asserted that "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it" (Wilde, 1988, p. 1205). The strategy of such paradoxical aphorisms is to invert the common sense understanding of things, which might be to view education as the transfer of knowledge or define truth as a statement that is universally valid. But beyond the frisson of the paradoxical inversion, the thrust of Wilde's critique is directed at precisely the model of character formation that underpinned the controversies over reading and pernicious influence in the late-Victorian periodical press. The things that are *worth* knowing—those things that are "true" in the sense of an epiphany—are, for Wilde, the outcomes of self-realization (a key concept in F.H. Bradley's critique of utilitarian ethics in *Ethical Studies* (1876)—see Kohl & Wilson, 2011, p. 158). Truth, for Wilde, can never arise from instruction or from indoctrination but only from moments of illumination gained from openness to experience and from encountering new possibilities for self-expression. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) Wilde further developed his radical conception of Individualism into a utopian ideal of "the full development of Life to its highest mode of perfection," a condition that was available in the nineteenth century only to "the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in a word, the real men, the men who have realised themselves" (Wilde, 1988, p. 1080). Wilde's conception here of what defines "real men" departs from normative masculinity in two respects. Firstly, it is not bourgeois but rather is based on the experiences of an intellectual elite; and secondly it validates the individual precisely by virtue of their fidelity to their own personality and not by virtue of conformity to a social norm. Wilde's critique of influence—including that of socially sanctioned role models as well as the Mephistophelean Harry Wotton—suggests therefore that it is *always* pernicious because any acquired personality trait would tend to pervert the immanent tendencies of individuals from being realized. Hence Wilde's affirmation of the value of an inchoate nature: "Those whom the gods love grow young" (Wilde, 1988, p. 1204). What may seem in this last aphorism like a romantic ideal of innocence is illuminated within this context as an injunction to resist influence of all kinds, prescribed or proscribed alike. The narrator in "The Portrait of Mr W.H." articulates

this same critique on influence, which he describes as “simply a transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one’s self, and its exercise produces a sense, and, it may be, a reality of loss” (Wilde, 1988, p. 1196).

Wilde’s statement during cross-examination that there is no such thing as a bad influence contradicts the critique he had developed throughout his writings, but his reasons for evading the implication of an older man corrupting a younger one are obvious. Notwithstanding this understandable contradiction, Wilde repeatedly invoked the theme of influence in such a way as to eschew not only agents of corruption like Harry Wotton, but also and equally that demand for positive influence that was so ingrained within late-Victorian public discourse on the formation of masculine character. In *Dorian Gray*, as in “The Portrait of Mr W.H.,” the disastrous effect of influence is thematically encoded into the tragedies of each narrative. Basil Hallward, for example, opens up the story by telling Sir Henry Wotton of his trepidation when he first met Dorian: “I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life” (Wilde, 1985, p. 28). Hallward’s anxiety of influence gives way, however, to intemperate adoration once he yields to temptation. He comes to embrace Dorian’s influence as revealing his own true self as well as renewing his artistic vision through a kind of telepathic transference, as though “Some subtle influence passed from him to me” (Wilde, 1988, p. 33). But Hallward’s artistic fascination is qualified by what Harry Wotton perceives about his friend’s new muse, namely Dorian’s “finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (Wilde, 1985, p. 39). Under Wotton’s lingering gaze Dorian’s fascination shifts from his personality to his visible, corporeal qualities, and the nature of his influence changes from some kind of spiritual-artistic sympathy to a more physical appeal that suggests both innocence and sexual objectification.

If Wotton’s perspective on Hallward and Dorian slips between these aesthetic and erotic registers, Hallward’s warning against Wotton using his dandyish charisma on Dorian suggests a shift from the pleasurable effects of an aesthetic/erotic influence to the dangers of a moral (or rather, immoral) one, as he jealously pleads “Don’t spoil him. Don’t try to influence him. Your influence would be bad” (Wilde, 1985, p. 36). But, despite Hallward’s pleading, Wotton *does* meet Dorian and seeks to charm him with flattery and wit, at the same time re-casting Hallward’s concerns about his own immoral influence as a general critique:

“There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view.”

“Why?”

“Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for.” (Wilde, 1985, pp. 40-41)

Wotton’s speech, laden with seductive aphorisms, exemplifies a performative contradiction in warning against external influence at the same time that it seeks to

mould Dorian's thoughts and feelings through sententious injunction and seductive flattery. Wotton, whilst speaking up for the fulfillment of an inner self, infuses Dorian with his own influence. Dorian is left stupefied, figuratively compared to a pollinated flower as he sees a bee in the garden crawling into the "stained trumpet of a Tyrian convolvulus" (Wilde, 1985, p. 47), an image that combines connotations of aesthetic, moral and sexual impregnation. And Wotton's warning against external influence is borne out by ensuing events. The aesthetic/erotic influence that Dorian exercises over Hallward appears in his portrait as the uncanny figuration of shameful secrets, setting in motion the events that lead inexorably to the artist's murder. Similarly, Wotton's influence over Dorian leads him to overvalue his own beauty and experience of pleasure, which turns into an ultimately self-destructive narcissism. For both Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward, influence is quite literally fatal.

In both *Dorian Gray* and "The Portrait of Mr W.H." the masculinities on display, and the modes of influence exercised, fall outside the parameters of middle-class norms. Cyril Graham, the central character of "The Portrait of Mr W.H." is an "effeminate" youth who, like Dorian, was raised not by his parents but by an aristocratic grandfather "who swore like a costermonger, and had the manners of a farmer" (Wilde, 1988, p. 1152). This represents a double-blow to the idea of the paternal reinforcement of normative masculinity both in terms of the absence of actual fathers and in the characterization of this residue of patriarchal influence as a course and outmoded figure. The homoerotic possibilities of Graham's effeminacy are reinforced by the subject matter of the narrative, which explores a theory regarding the identity of the beloved youth of Shakespeare's sonnets. This becomes a consuming and, ultimately, fatal passion that is exchanged between a series of men, a sequence whose eroticism is foregrounded by what Stephen Arata describes as "the cycles of critical tumescence and detumescence undergone by each reader in the story" (Arata, 1996, p. 69). "The Portrait of Mr W.H." also codifies criminality explicitly within the narrative because it is a story of forgery (Graham fakes an Elizabethan portrait of "Will Hughes" in order to substantiate his theory). Both "The Portrait of Mr W.H." and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* combine aestheticism, effeminacy and overt criminality with a thematic preoccupation with fatal influence. But in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime: A Study of Duty," Wilde takes a protagonist who is perfectly conventional, aside from his aristocratic status, and shows how even an apparently admonitory influence against moral danger has its own deadly consequences. Lord Arthur has a chance encounter at a party with Mr Podgers, a cheiromantist, who reads the young aristocrat's palm with a look of horror, eventually revealing that he is destined to commit murder. The premise of the story plays upon the motifs of degeneration and pernicious influence with Lord Arthur's identity split between a respectable social persona and a latent criminality that is triggered by the influence of an act of (palm) reading. As a dutiful man, however, Lord Arthur sets to work immediately to get the murder over and done with, in the hope that this will leave him free to marry with a clear conscience provided he is not caught and does not debase himself in the commission of the crime. After a series of failed attempts to assassinate an elderly aunt and the Dean of Chichester, Sir Arthur wanders along the bank of the Thames in despair, only to encounter Podgers leaning over the parapet. In a flash he seizes his opportunity, grabs the man by the ankles and hurls him into the river, thereby completing the prophecy. Thus, a good man pursuing his duty is transformed by the ostensibly improving in-

fluence of a warning of moral danger into a murderer he would not otherwise have become. Wilde satirizes bourgeois efforts to structure influence and in so doing he unpicks the apparently unassailable virtues of normative masculinity and renders catastrophic the attempts to classify and reform those who fall outside of it.

This same bourgeois preoccupation with the role of positive and pernicious influences in the formation of masculinities is evident in the prominence of penny dreadfuls in the Robert Coombes case and was central to the allegation of Wilde's corruption of young men in his own trials. There is a profound irony in the fact that Wilde's writings offered a fully developed critique of this model of character formation and its role within the rhetoric of reactionary cultural politics. In its place, Wilde proposed a theory of self-realization that seems still quite radical today in its critique of any kind of structured influence as a stultifying ideological apparatus. Alongside transgression as a motif and an aesthetic strategy in Wilde's writings, then, it is important to consider the significance of his critique of influence as a key part of his intellectual contribution to late-Victorian debates over masculinity.

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