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Wilde on Trial: Psychic Injury, Exhibitionism and the Law

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The basic facts of Oscar Wilde's descent into the maelstrom of scandal and prison have been clear from the beginning. In the 1890s Wilde increasingly flaunted his homosexuality and, inadvertently if not tragically, aroused the wrath of his lover Bosie Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, who proved to be as tenaciously vindictive as he was unstable. Provoked by Wilde's public romance with his son, Queensberry harassed the lovers. Finally he accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite," famously misspelling "sodomite" in his fury, and the exasperated Wilde, goaded by Bosie, retaliated by having the outraged father prosecuted for libel. The trial went awry when evidence of Wilde's homosexuality surfaced. Not only did Wilde have to abandon the libel prosecution, he was indicted for "acts of gross indecency" under section 11 of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act. The trial produced a hung jury; the retrial returned a conviction that sent Wilde to prison for two years and destroyed his career.

Most explanations of Wilde's downfall have a core of truth to them, yet they often conflict with one another. Hyde's summary of the case shows again and again how chance, irrational motives, and careening ironies combined to crush Wilde. Class prejudice, for example, seems to have colored the decision to proceed against Wilde, yet Queensberry's peers seem to have detested him as much or more than they did Wilde. The attorney Edward Carson, who defended Queensberry in the libel trial, tried to have the indecency prosecution dropped. But unluckily for Wilde, eminent names had surfaced in the libel trial which the Solicitor-General claimed would create the impression of a cover-up if he dropped charges against Wilde (Hyde 79). Among others, the Solicitor-General's nephew by marriage, Maurice Schwabe, came close to being implicated in gross indecency during the libel trial. Lord Alfred Douglas--Bosie--never faced prosecution, though he was widely suspected of being an accomplice in Wilde's indecencies. But as much as the upper classes despised the upstart Irishman, ordinary Londoners also vilified Wilde, egged on by inflammatory newspaper coverage and mocking broadside ballads.

The trials evoked a complex squall of emotions. The Daily Telegraph hysterically denounced "moral damage of the most hideous and repulsive kind as no single individual could well cause" (Hyde 11), as if Wilde were the ringleader of a criminal gang or endowed with superhuman malevolence. The vindicated Queensberry gloated over a pile of congratulatory messages he received. Feminists and labor advocates, among others, had their own reasons for censuring Wilde.

To explore this moral panic and the catastrophe that befell Wilde, I want to relate them to the Victorians' preoccupation with psychic injury, which crystallized at the end of the century in the trope of trauma. By expanding the law to cover private lives and
emphasizing the "shock" of psychic injury, the Criminal Amendment Act of 1885, and especially its attack on "gross indecency," can be understood as a response to increasing attention to inner life. The intensified sexual policing resonates with a growing awareness of private, psychic injury which is reflected in contemporary thinking about trauma, which in turn can be related to rising standards of living and expectations of security. These developments are linked to similarly expanded laws against exhibitionism, inasmuch as public opinion also condemned Wilde for his provocative self-display. Exhibitionism itself is a response to concerns over interiority—in this case, an effort to corroborate interior life by displaying one's "privates" to "shock" others, especially social inferiors. The reactions of women and children to sexual displays confirm the significance of insecure men in a competitive society by testing their primal male power in reality. Other forms of exhibitionism such as showing one’s buttocks or "mooning" more aggressively act out competition for status. Wilde's displays of his sexuality disguised aggression with teasing equivocation, but they became increasingly brazen, until at last, in the courtroom, he lost control of the disguise, and the prosecution lashed out at his exposed motives.

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The furious reaction to Wilde's downfall opens the crucial question: what psychological work was the new "gross indecency" law doing in this case? Sodomy had long been a capital crime (until 1828), and public homosexual acts remained a punishable offense in common law at the end of the century, although "according to most if not all Continental codes of law, [Wilde's indecency] was not a crime at all" (Hyde 13). Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act created "the new offense of indecency between male persons in public or private" (Hyde 6), giving the court power to punish private behavior. Parliament had passed the Act itself in 1885, at a time of sensational journalistic exposes of sexual abuse and serious efforts at social reform, "for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels and other purposes" (Hyde 357).

One of those exposes--"one of the most successful pieces of scandal journalism of the nineteenth century" (Walkowitz (81)—was W. T. Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (1885), which "documented in lurid detail how poor 'daughters of the people' were 'snared, trapped, and outraged, either when under the influence of drugs or after a prolonged struggle in a locked room.' The series had an electrifying effect: by the third installment, mobs of 'gaunt and hollow-faced men and women with trailing dress and ragged coats' were rioting at the Pall Mall Gazette offices, in an attempt to obtain copies of the paper. . . . Telegraphic services rapidly transformed the 'Maiden tribute' into an international event" Despite hostility from envious rival newspapers and some members of Parliament, "Stead's campaign forced the passage of age-of-consent legislation that had been stalled in Parliament for years" (Walkowitz 82).

Once aroused, moral panic, like hysteria, can be self-intoxicating.ii The "gross indecency" legislation was meant to allay public anxiety, yet in mapping an underworld of criminal horrors, the laws inevitably focused public attention on—and gave official weight to—the vices it sought to crush. Like psychoanalysis probing "the unconscious," the concern with "private" crimes directed attention to what could not be measured or even seen. Moral panic, after all, is as shapeless as the "unnamable" horrors it fears.
is not an object that can be isolated under a microscope, but a form of psychocultural turbulence whose origins may defy easy analysis. The law registered the turbulence in terms such as "shock" which had complex implications of military assault (as in shock troops), unsettling electro-mechanical technology, and neurological disorder.

It is puzzling that psychic distress should command attention as living conditions were gradually improving. The paradox disappears, however, once we factor in people's rising expectations. Not only could people look for improvements in health and comfort, they also generated higher ideals, one measure of which was the swelling voice of reform. Rising expectations may well increase intolerance for the limitations of the present, and most acutely with obstacles to improvement. If basic standards of living are guaranteed, then life's inescapable catastrophes are apt to seem particularly outrageous and hard to bear. To awaken from a state of numbed fatalism to a consciousness of choice and possibility is to sharpen the reality of injury as well as to enlarge the play of fulfillment.

At the same time, from another angle, the relaxation of survival anxiety is likely to make life more boring. In nearly every story of Wilde's, for example, a world of creature comforts has become empty and arbitrary, and people are struggling to fill that void with thrilling ideals, liberating wit--or even crime. In this perspective late Victorians suffered as their hero Sherlock Holmes did in the absence of invigorating crime. The Sign of Four opens with Holmes using cocaine to fight depression. "Crime is commonplace," he complains to Watson, "existence is commonplace" (Doyle 20). What he "craves" is the "mental exaltation" of detective work (Doyle 5). What excites Holmes and his audience is not crime but detection, the inner world of criminal motives and secret injury. This is the same tension that Wilde develops by playing on Dorian Gray's portrait as a hidden criminal self, symbolic portal to an underworld of forbidden experience. In its fascination with the criminal mind, The Picture of Dorian Gray--and the trials of Oscar Wilde--are shaped by the model of the detective story.

Angus McLaren puts the problem lucidly:

"Ninety-five percent of nineteenth-century lawbreaking consisted of property crimes, but Victorian readers interested themselves primarily in crimes against the person. Reading about violence was perhaps a compensation for not engaging in it; the growth of docility or civility seemed to be matched by the rise of the 'thriller.' Certainly the fascination with violent deaths increased as they declined in relative incidence. In past ages high levels of violence had been matched by high levels of illness. As sickness came increasingly under control, even declining rates of violence seemed all too high. Its literary depiction hypnotized the masses . . . . It still took courage to survive in the mean streets of London. The city had its own particular dangers; its deadly fog was responsible in the year 1886 alone for over ten thousand bronchitis deaths. Nevertheless, it is true that the attention of the reading public was won, not by the struggle of the health reformer against the microbe but by the contest between the detective and the arch criminal. The appeal of such conflicts was that they unambiguously demarcated the forces of good and evil" (McLaren 1993,106).

McLaren envisions readers "hypnotized" by the conflicts on the page. His metaphor aptly suggests that they did not always distinguish clearly between fiction and journalistic reality. They read with obsessive, to some extent unconscious concern, working out parabolically through the narratives of life and art problems that affected them. It is not incidental that the court became preoccupied with the blurred boundary between art and life, insinuating that The Picture of Dorian Gray exerted a sinister
influence over innocent readers. What troubled the court was not a conflicted public's palpable need for regulated, "dangerous" self-stimulation, but rather art's dangerous sway art within the vulnerable imaginations of readers.

In short, late Victorians suffered distress as people always have, but they were arguably less used to--and less well defended against--it. Injury came to seem more unwarranted, unpredictable, uncontrollable. Hence the vocabulary of psychic shock. To the extent that people experienced such pain in an atmosphere of heightened competition and radically ambivalent idealism, they could more easily overestimate the malevolence of others. Dorian Gray was shocking not only because of his particular offenses, from homosexuality to murder, but also because his hidden criminality is the radical opposite of his idealized public identity. What's more, the idealization is produced by intense social competition. Others continually evaluate Dorian and his "perfection," ranking and mystifying his qualities. The portrait of him symbolizes that social value-making system at work. It is fitting that in its symbolic logic the portrait neatly expresses the way competitive idealization produces a vicious secret self.

Attention also "interiorized" criminality in other ways. By the 1890s criminologists, for example, were turning from socioeconomic theories of criminal motivation to speculation about heredity and degeneration, which made inner life the source of vicious behavior. It is just such an inner hereditary taint that Dorian Gray fears in himself as he contemplates family portraits in a well-known passage: "To him, man was a . . . complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins. . . . Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?" (Wilde 111). For Dorian, an obscure ancestral taint is a kind of traumatic injury that keeps repeating in the afflicted body and psyche long after the original shock has passed. In effect, this fantasy registers the late Victorians' need to conceptualize--to "picture"--the challenging vision of human motivation that science put before an uneasy public.

Like his readers, Wilde sometimes used the idea of psychic injury to explain exceptional distress. While serving his two-year sentence, for example, Wilde was transferred to Reading prison. "Handcuffed and in prison clothing, he had to wait on the platform at Clapham Junction from two to half past two on a rainy afternoon. A crowd formed, first laughing and then jeering at him. One man recognized that this was Oscar Wilde and spat at him. 'For a year after that was done to me,' Wilde wrote in De Profundis, 'I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time'" (Ellmann, 495-96). Wilde's post-traumatic reaction--the sort of intrusion Freud called "repetition compulsion"--dramatizes the social nature of identity, but also the extreme inwardness of the injury. For the supreme individualist and champion of Epicurean self-control, rejection was devastating. At the same time, the ever-histrionic Wilde was tacitly arguing that like the motives behind his supposedly criminal "indecency," the injury was too deeply in his nature to be suppressed.

Shock to the nervous system is the core idea of traumatic injury, whose modern form crystallized in the decades before World War One. In attacking the condemned Wilde, The Daily Telegraph naively drew upon the trope of trauma. The "sordid" case, growled the editor, "has done enough, and more than enough, to shock the conscience and outrage the moral instincts of the community" (Hyde 11). The editorial tacitly sees
one man sexually assaulting "the community." The London Evening News fulminated against the criminal and his "unhealthy boys" whose "degeneration" threatened manly society (Hyde 12). Immoral sexuality menaced the health of the body politic by overtaxing its nervous system. What evokes the trope of trauma is the sense that outrage and anxiety in the victims are intrusive. A criminal insult or injury imposes upon the victim's imagination at the disturbingly inaccessible--and potentially irremediable--level of moral "instinct."

As these rhetorical flights illustrate, the idea of trauma drew upon many epiphenomenal anxieties and conflicts. In a time of unprecedented change, when references to "the sickness of modern life" were commonplace, increasing leisure allowed unsettling new degrees of subjectivity. The late Victorians suffered--and groped toward an understanding of--psychosomatic distress. It took a long time to arrive at a psychological understanding of anxiety. Railroads hired neurologists to examine accident victims and sort out physical injury from psychic shock. For many years--and even today--researchers sought anatomical "lesions" that could account for crippling anxiety.

With hindsight we can see that the late Victorians experienced a storm of psychocultural conflicts. The self-restraint of an earlier era was giving way to a more expressive ethos--which Wilde among others championed. Reformers publicized economic and class injustice. In the several years before the Wilde trials, London newspapers ran stories suggesting an "epidemic" of suicides among overstressed citizens (Stokes 115-44). Industrialism and mechanized transportation speeded up the pace of life. As Freud and others developed a complex new vocabulary of motives to better account for the stresses of interior life, so European cultures reached for new concepts to describe threats to traditional verities. To defang the frightening implications of Darwinism, for example, Victorians invented Social Darwinism and the consolation of progress through dog-eat-dog competition. In lambasting criminal and artistic "degenerates"--including Wilde--writers such as Max Nordau were scapegoating others to defend the troubled belief in progress.

As Frederick Drinka remarks in The Origins of Neurosis, "Beyond the widespread fear of machines, the popular press, and the spread of alcoholism, was a growing fascination with sexuality." Drinka sees late Victorian society perplexed by its affluence--the uneasiness that Wilde ministered to in recommending aestheticism on his lecture tours. Tracing developments in Rossetti's art, Drinka notes that "The Sensual Woman, the ultimate rendition of the Angelic Invalid, symbolized the sensibility of society at large, growing plump and sexually aware, succumbing to material progress and creature comforts" (307). "Lower on the social scale," Michael Mason proposes, marriage may also objectively have weakened its hold on youthful sexuality, so that gradually the ethic of sexual restraint . . . is eroded, and eventually becomes a subject of nostalgia. Already by 1859 some young working-class Londoners are allegedly articulating a quite developed libertine ideology to undermine the morality of young girls of their class" (Mason 171).

At the same time middle-class men faced unwelcome regimentation and loss of autonomy in the workforce (Bederman 1-23), creating uneasiness about their ability to live up to traditional gender roles and support a family. Predictably such insecurities gave rise to worries that made competition for status and challenges to conventional manliness such as homosexuality appear more dangerous.
Nordau summed up these themes in his sensational best-seller Degeneration (1895). He invites "us" to share a respectable vigilante indignation against the "decadent" forces that have undermined conventional values and exposed "us" to death-anxiety. "Christendom," he reports, "is held to be a creature reeling to its death ... in dire exhaustion.' A millenialist 'horror of world-annihilation has laid hold of men's minds,' and 'more highly developed' imaginations dread that 'mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the middle of a dying world.' This is the mood of 'a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches . . . . the envy of a rich, hoary voluptuary, who sees a pair of young lovers" (Nordau 2-3).

Nordau repudiates this image of exhausted European society, but the fears represented by the image were real. In Nordau's vision, sexual competition is closely linked to death-anxiety. An older, affluent generation envies the sexual vitality—the symbolic immortality—of the young. An obsession with wealth has allowed a troubled merchant mentality to reach old age, but with traditional consolations now exhausted, the old discipline now turns to "voluptuary" jealousy and a terror of the grave. If we add to this image the compensatory preoccupation with control that became so contentious in this period, then it can argued that the Marquess of Queensberry, "the sorely provoked and cruelly injured father" (Hyde 11), himself something of a sexual rogue, was projecting onto Wilde and his son self-indulgent sexual fascination, not necessarily even homosexual, that he could not bear to acknowledge in himself. This scenario is nothing less than the central obsession of Wilde's Picture of Dorian Gray, in which sexual compulsion and the terror of age lead to criminal loss of self-control.

The "envy" Nordau describes turned "hoary" survival anxiety into jealous control over the erotic lives of others, especially the young. Adults policed each other's desires through the cult of Respectability, creating the shadow world of blackmailers and detectives (McLaren, chs. 8 & 10). In this respect coercive moral legislation such as the "gross indecency" Act intensified respectable society's powers of intimidation at a time when temptations and tolerance were in fact on the rise.

Nordau's figure of the "rich, hoary voluptuary" also plays upon popular indignation about the injustices of class. He denies—but also fears—that respectable wealthy men have a secret envy and hostility of the young. Half-unwittingly, Nordau draws on the shrilly despised figure of the upper class sexual predator. Stead's "Maiden Tribute" had earlier invoked the same bogeyman as the principal villain in white slavery. "Radical workingmen, trade unionists, and socialists responded warmly to Stead's attack on upper-class profligates and readily integrated the "Maiden Tribute' into a traditional political analysis of 'Old Corruption" (Walkowitz, 102-3). Feminists "heralded Stead as a 'champion' of women whose campaign broke down a great barrier of silence surrounding the sexual crimes of men" (Walkowitz 103). It is easier to fathom the intensity of lower-class outrage against Wilde if we keep in mind Michael Mason's association of "the rise of sexual moralism" with "the general if patchy growth of a new working-class respectability" (Mason 170).

In this intersection of cultural conflicts, what stands out is the psychic nature of the distress. In this light moral panic is a form of anxiety disorder, especially destabilizing at a moment when traditional institutions such as medicine and the church could offer only limited relief, forcing the patient to look to the law to restore order outside—and inside—the injured self.
The effort to maintain social controls in this atmosphere of complex, contentious emotions proved equivocal. Legislation against vice paradoxically called attention to vice. Journalists policed society with profitable jeremiads whose thrills incited fascination with the vices they condemned. Even Victorian doctors enhanced taboos by forbidding them. In Drinka's account,

The Victorian doctor who treated the degenerate neurasthenic frequently placed himself, unsuspectingly, in the role of parent. Doctors have always been parental figures in many respects, giving their patients solace, advice, and . . . admonishment. Since degenerate neurasthenics were supposedly suggestible human beings who Lombroso and Krafft-Ebbing feared were capable of homosexuality, perversion, and murder, the doctor wished to influence them to use their limited energies in safe ways. This was the heart of their struggle. . . . The doctor warned against sexuality; the patient became a dreamy lover of unattainable women, a masturbator (235). Or in Wilde's case an exponent of homosexual "indecency." Drinka goes on to clinch the latent analogy between parent and prosecutor: "By admonishing their patients to eschew so much of modernity, doctors may have locked themselves, and their patients, into a struggle for control over the patients' moral code. . . . They hovered over their patients like moral policemen. Obviously, sexuality was one of the evils most to be avoided and therefore one of those areas around which a battle of control was most bitterly fought" (235). Drinka's metaphor--"a battle of control"--is melodramatic, yet it tacitly recognizes the survival anxiety at stake and thereby helps to explain how the climate of moral emergency could come about.

But moral passion also had practical, strategic dimensions, for psychic injury became associated with financial compensation. In The Laws of England, the language which would come to define psychological trauma was already emerging early in the nineteenth century, as in number 807, which stipulates that "special damage may be recovered for pecuniary loss sustained . . . or for any other loss or injury actually suffered which follows in the ordinary course of thing from the negligent act" (Halsbury 21:483). A footnote specifies that "this includes damages which result from nervous shock causing physical injury, whether the incident creating the shock was accompanied by physical impact or not, and whether the injury results directly from the shock or from a cause of action induced by shock." Legal precedents cited begin with a case from 1816 (Jones v. Bayes). The ambiguities in this footnote reflect the perplexities that called the concept of trauma into being later in the century (Halsbury 21:483). In 1846 the Campbell Act mandated compensation for victims of fatal accidents caused by the negligence of a second party. Parliament expanded the Act in 1864 to include compensation for victims of railway accidents, and so railway injuries became associated in the public mind with potential monetary settlements (Farrell 9).

Like the "gross indecency" law (Section 11), legislation supporting the concept of psychic injury opened up private experience to the oversight of the courts. In effect, the prosecutor implicitly became part policeman and part doctor. The courts sought to punish "indecency" while restoring to health "shocked" sensibilities and reputations. In theory, the courts had to evaluate the injuries suffered, just as the railways, for example, had to hire neurologists in an effort to sort out fraudulent, physical, and psychosomatic accident claims. In Wilde's case, however, the courts identified strongly with the victims
without seriously evaluating the alleged harm suffered. In this way, like many Victorian physicians, the court was unwittingly following cultural scripts rather than evaluating a particular offense or pathology.

Medical and judicial monitoring of morality were part of a larger concern with surveillance. As Foucault pointed out, social science sought to catalog and quantify social behavior, and in some ways the central project of psychoanalysis was to overcome patients' resistance and peer into the innermost recesses of self. While much social reform was generous in its motivation, social science notably included criminologists such as Lombroso and theorists such as Nordau who used eugenics and Social Darwinism to ferret out symptoms of degeneration. Similarly, the popular use of detectives to penetrate the mysteries of private life suggests how charged with disturbing significance privacy and secrecy became at the end of the century. As the preoccupation with respectability hardened the concept of public identity, interior life became potentially more murky and dangerous.

The drive to control suspicious inner life is epitomized in society's use of incarceration. Prison violently strips away an inmate's interior life in stripping away all markers of civil identity, from street clothes to personal belongings. Potentially prison does away with even the idea of an interior life, since it reduces all prisoners to enforced conformity whose goal is uniform repentance. Correspondingly, prison authorities are at least in theory as impersonal as social scientists in stripping and punishing offenders in the name of a higher authority.

This constellation of themes governs Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper." A kindly but firm physician-husband keeps Gilman's unhappy narrator in a state of valetudinarian helplessness in an attic sick room. Whenever the woman tries to assert her will, her husband prolongs her therapeutic imprisonment. Feeling herself caged in by the grillework pattern of the room's yellow wallpaper, the patient finally rebels, assaulting her keeper and escaping into the world. The husband in the story controls his wife through her own inhibitions. The intimidating idea of his authority produces self-disablement in her. Each time she proposes taking action, the slightest sign of resistance on his part reduces her to tears.

If we extrapolate from that attic room, it is tempting to conclude that the indecency law's invasion of private space is a sign that the Victorian system of elite social control grew less effective as conditions changed toward the end of the century, so that the authorities became more inclined to intrude, often through professional surrogates, into psychic life. But in Gilman's story the suffocating husband remains serenely oblivious to his patient's growing frustration, and the tale concludes with wife's berserk escape over his prostrate body. Gilman dramatizes pent-up rage, but more generally, the story suggests a growing awareness of repression. It is likely that like the wife in Gilman's story, the public was ambivalent about the increasing choices and responsibilities opened up by socioeconomic change, and resented but also embraced the new legal restraints because they reassuringly fortified self-control.

Not surprisingly, the determination to police suspect interior life sometimes incited more of the indecency it sought to suppress. In this light Wilde's entire career was a calculated rebellion. He became expert at using daring self-exposure--in effect,
exhibitionism--as a provocation. This is the peculiar focus of the Daily Telegraph's outrage. After Wilde's conviction, the paper's editorial feverishly excoriated his "insolent braggadocio" and "flagrant immorality." The editorialist accordingly saw social death as the fit punishment for Wilde's illicit self-display: "The grave of contemptuous oblivion may rest on his foolish ostentation, his empty paradoxes, his insufferable posturing, his incurable vanity" (11)

Angus McLaren has observed that "The last third of the nineteenth century witnessed, if one is to judge by the legal and medical writings of the time, an epidemic of male exhibitionism" (McLaren 1997, 182). Even though exhibitionists tended to be shy and "eccentric" rather than "violent or otherwise criminal, exhibitionists were treated severely" (McLaren 1997, 204). McLaren notes that "Such acts were 'naked' demonstrations of male power," although he plays down assertions of power, emphasizing instead the "new sensitivity to male nudity" that led to both the creation of the psychiatric syndrome "exhibitionism" and legal sanctions against "indecent exposure" (183). But in an "envious" and anxious society--to use Nordau's figure--the intense competition for status meant that the fear of social death was ever present. Failure or disrepute could mean social death, but even everyday encounters implicitly took place in an aura of intimidation and coercion. To neglect or fail in the rituals of class could mean a rejection gravely injurious to self-esteem. Hence the Victorian preoccupation with the specter of the "down-going man," as in the dismay over Watson's brother in Conan Doyle's The Sign of Four (Doyle 16).

In this atmosphere, at least some exhibitionism must have acted out wishes to confirm masculinity and power, the more revealing inasmuch as medical authorities viewed exhibitionism as a "feminine" weakness (McLaren 1997, 205). It can be regarded as an effort to corroborate the self, and its satisfaction would lie in the shock plainly caused in the women or children who were its victims. That its victims were in fact women and children is a sign not only of erotic fantasy, but also of the class fantasy of displaying power and status to inferiors.

Wilde's "posing" and tacit exhibitionism were most provocative in the ostentatious assignations that he, Bosie, and assorted rent boys enjoyed in London hotels. This public display especially infuriated Queensberry. But then, Wilde's entire public persona took its energy from the shock generated by the startling candor of his wit. His "paradoxes" allowed him simultaneously to exhibit and hide himself. Since his celebrity and income depended on these displays, it is important not to underestimate or euphemize them. In their way the displays were aggressive acts, prodding and pushing others in the competition for status. McLaren points out that bodily propriety was a marker of elite status, a convention which lent force to the diagnosis of exhibitionists as "degenerate."

Change the focus slightly, however, and bodily impropriety becomes a way of contesting elite status. It was Wilde's genius to refine self-exposure--at times tantamount to vulgar mooning--so it could be a weapon in the struggle over status. His brilliant equivocation exasperated Queensberry. When Queensberry showed up to confront him in his house in Tite Street, Wilde asked, "[D]o you seriously accuse your son and me of improper conduct?" The enraged father had to choose his threat carefully: "I do not say you are it, but you look it, and you pose as it, which is just as bad. If I catch you and my son together in any public restaurant, I will thrash you" (Hyde 25).
Nordau's treatment of Wilde in *Degeneration* fixes first upon his self-display, which Nordau excoriates with malicious enthusiasm as a "pathological aberration" (318), "anti-socialistic [and] ego-maniacal" (318). Nordau sees clearly that Wilde's shows are competitive and defiant: "The adornment of the exterior has its origin in the strong desire to be admired by others--primarily by the opposite sex--to be recognised by them as especially well-shaped, handsome, youthful, or rich and powerful, or as pre-eminent through rank or merit" (318). But if the display of self "excites disapproval instead of approbation--it then runs exactly counter to the object of the art of dress, and evinces a perversion of the instinct of vanity" (318). Nordau never specifies exactly what the source of this "perversion" is, though he associates it with the wish to be confirmed by the shocked reactions of others.

Nordau's attack slides from Wilde's self-display to his flirtation with criminality in his art: "Wilde apparently admires immortality, sin and crime" (320). He goes on, humorlessly, to quote some of Wilde's quips about the cleverness of the criminal Thomas Griffith Wainwright and the artistic energy aroused by crime. Nordau never quite recognizes how infuriated he is that Wilde can flaunt his enthusiasm for vice and get away with it by using irony as the exhibitionist does the proverbial raincoat, to hide and also to focus and heighten shock.

During the libel trial Wilde's strategy of equivocation backfired with grave consequences when Carson, cross-examining Wilde, asked if Wilde had ever kissed one of Bosie's servants, boy named Grainger. Wilde answered, "Oh, dear no! He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly" (Hyde 52). Using wit as a mask, Wilde was defying or even taunting his cross-examiner, slyly exposing and yet not admitting his homosexuality. Carson, however, zeroed in on the joke and the self-protective irony vaporized, with a damaging effect on the course of the trial. With more rhetorical grandeur and considerably less candor--not to mention daring --Wilde made a more successful revelation of his convictions in his celebrated speech about "the love that dare not speak its name."

One reason for Wilde's fascination with masks, then, is the devious self-assertion they permitted. The near-hysterical public reaction to his conviction implicitly recognized and reproved this deeper, aggressive motivation. Masks, "posing," and other devices keep the audience from seeing the inner--private--motivation of the performer. They function like the exhibitionist's raincoat (or for that matter, the magician's cloak), allowing for the control of self-protection and disclosure. The Criminal Amendment Act's extension of the law to the private sphere is in some ways an effort to spy out the offender daringly--and "offensively"--naked inside the closed raincoat. While the law originally sought to protect the public from manifest shock, the new concern with privacy implies that awareness the offender, and the idea of the offense, could also be considered injuries that warranted legal intervention.

"English common law held that for an act to be indecent it had to be made in public; that is, more than one person had to see it occur. Early-nineteenth-century judge were fairly cautious in defining what was Public," even if it meant morality was on occasion outraged. In the 1840s one judge stoically opined that although the law could not be applied to cases where a man exposed himself to one woman, there were in any event many offenses against morality that the law could not hope to reach" (McLaren 1997, 193).

Toward the end of the century the climate of opinion changed. In 1884, for example, just before the "gross indecency" statute was passed, an ex-convict named
Frederick Wellard "paid seven or eight girls between the ages of eight and eleven a few pennies to observe him exposing himself." Unluckily for the exhibitionist, he was also spotted by some boys who followed him. Convicted for indecency in "public place," As McLaren summarizes, "His appeal was based on the fact that he carried out his act on private property, but the court held that the 'offense may be indictable if committed before divers subjects of the realm, even if the place be not public.' Indeed Mr. Justice Huddleston argued that even indecencies committed in a private place should be punishable" (McLaren 1997, 193). The Victorian doctors came to understand that "those who felt a compulsion to expose themselves and achieved sexual pleasure thereby were not just the old and the debauched, the drunk and the mad; they included the married and others who were otherwise 'normal'" (McLaren 1997, 197). The true exhibitionist was not trying to seduce or harm his victim, but rather themselves victims of an obsession. "The courts, however, treated indecent exposure "more and more severely, the authorities regarding it as a legal rather than a medical problem" (McLaren 1997, 194).

This split in attitudes toward exhibitionism is symptomatic of deeper conflicts that disturbed late Victorian society. Beneath concerns about morality ran powerful undercurrents of survival anxiety that were channeled through social status and belonging. If I am right, much exhibitionistic behavior was an effort to corroborate masculine identity and power at a time of unnerving competition for status and temptations to self-aggrandizement as compensation for fears of social death. To appreciate this radical existential motivation, recall the death threats that shadowed the otherwise hypercivilized principals in the Wilde-Queensberry struggle. At different times both the Marquis and his son Bosie threatened to shoot each other. Lord Queensberry at one point showed at Wilde's house on Tite Street accompanied by a man Hyde identifies as a "prize-fighter." The Marquess and Wilde accused and threatened each other, and Wilde brought the struggle to a close by wit--and angrily--mocking Queensberry's rules of boxing by quipping, "I do not know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot at sight" (Hyde 25). To his son before the climactic confrontation with Wilde, Queensberry vowed that if he thought his suspicions and public rumors were true, "I should be quite justified in shooting him at sight" (Hyde 23). After Queensberry's acquittal, when the tables were turned on his accuser, he received a pile of congratulatory letters, one of which, he gloated, read: "Every man in the City is with you. Kill the-----!." (Hyde 63). These homicidal fantasies or even impulses reflect the stressful nature of social competition. Their grotesque excesses would be perfect material for a Wilde comedy if they had not done so much damage in the real world.

In the decades before the First World War, it would be no exaggeration to say that competition over reputation and respect was implicitly a struggle over life and death--or more precisely, life and social death. When Wilde was first arrested and plainly in jeopardy, the evening paper The Echo editorialized that "Lord Queensberry is triumphant, and Mr. Oscar Wilde is 'damned and done for'" (Hyde 62). In its fussy slang the newspaper was opposing death and life, hell and immortal heaven, social failure and triumph. In his charge to the jury at the climactic trial, Mr. Justice Wills vowed that
"I would rather try the most shocking murder case that is has ever fallen to my lot to try than to be engaged in a case of this description" (Hyde 329). The offense and injury before the court, he asserts, is comparable to--and more atrocious than--homicide.

Needless to say, such a social system was ambivalent and highly volatile. The need to regulate that volatility helps to explain why the law and the reception of the verdict in Wilde's case proved to be so vindictive. At stake was not simply the sexual misdeeds of one or a few men, but a sense that the meaning of respectable identity was in truth more unstable than society acknowledged, and that breaches in the belief system exposed people to survival anxiety. Once you become aware of this survival dread in Victorian ideation, you begin to recognize its presence--and pressure--in many everyday disguises. In his charge to the jury, for example, Mr. Justice Wills expressed the connection between identity and death-anxiety in the most conventional sort of dead metaphor. An improper intimacy such as Wilde had with Alfred Douglas, he maintained, is "fatal to the reputation" of both parties (Hyde 333). Use of the commonplace "fatal" is the courtroom reveals how chillingly metaphor encodes the threat of social death.

Imprisonment carries out the metaphorical threat of social death, nullifying the identity of the prisoner in every way, from clothing to regimented, meaningless labor. The prisoner at hard labor is a slave and, in precisely Orlando Patterson's sense, socially dead. Prison owed much of its terror to its near-demystification of the underlying polarization of respectability and social death in Victorian culture. In a startling insight H. G. Wells brings the larger cultural polarization into focus when in Mankind in the Making he protests against the survival-mania latent in eugenics and its campaign against social inferiors: "No longer are we to say, 'There but for the grace of God, go I'--when the convict tramps by us--but, 'There goes another sort of animal that is differentiating from my species and which I would like to see exterminated'" (Wells 54).

Wilde was especially sensitive to this polarization. His narratives obsessively rework the opposition of idealization and social death--The Picture of Dorian Gray and the fairy tale "The Happy Prince" are only the most accessible examples. In both of these tales the protagonist is in effect cursed by a compulsion to idealize the self--a compulsion that Wilde suggests is both culturally imposed and yet fatally sacrificial. In the mood swings recorded in his prison memoir De Profundis--extremes that brought him to fear for his sanity--Wilde careens between messianic self-aggrandizement and abnegation.

Viewed as a system, late Victorian society generated much of its energy from its polarization. Hypervigilance about respectability made "down-going" slippage or failure a terror that intensified competition for acceptance and pumped up idealism--which in turn magnified fears of failure. The result was a psychic economy with the self-intoxicating dynamic of hysteria. The mob reactions to Wilde's downfall illustrate the dynamic at work--scapegoating the celebrity who had made such an enviable career of celebrating quasi-rebellious means of "making it," public opinion was policing its own hopes and fears. As perverse as it was, the attack on Wilde was a means of manufacturing social meaning and self-esteem at a stressful historical moment.

One of the details of Hyde's account of the trials may illustrate this social system at work. Charles Brookfield was an actor and minor dramatist who became maliciously jealous of Wilde's success. Brookfield parodied Lady Windemere's Fan in a piece called The Poet and the Puppets, but "the good-natured tolerance with which Wide regarded this effort only served to fan the flames of Brookfield's hatred." He accepted a
role in *An Ideal Husband*, and as Hyde shrewdly notes, "reconciled his action with his conscience" by telling Wilde "that as I did not want to learn many of his lines I would take the smallest part, and I took the valet" (Hyde 40). In time "the subject of Oscar Wilde . . . developed into a positive obsession with Brookfield" (Hyde 40), and he actively sought out damaging information and supplied it to Wilde's persecutors.

We cannot know for certain the actor's motives, but his jealousy was probably fueled by displaced self-hatred at his own less-than-ideal achievement, and rage at Wilde's easy, "good-natured" defiance of limits. His refusal to learn Wilde's lines can be seen as a metaphor for struggles over personal autonomy and the control of psychic space that perplexed his society. It must have been an exasperating irony for Brookfield to resist Wilde's domination by disparaging his lines and nevertheless end up in the role of servant, acting out Wilde's highly successful fantasy. Brookfield was no "hoary voluptuary" in Nordau's sense, but his malignity poignantly illustrates the motives that Nordau feared--"envy" of young lovers and anxiety at the specter of failure--and that makes it easier to understand the actor's determination to help the law destroy Wilde.

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1 Walkowitz, 81. Walkowitz is quoting from "The Maiden Tribute," which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 6, 7, 8, 10 July 1885.
2 Walkowitz follows Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (1989) in calling attention to "the special role of representation and mass media in energizing and shaping moral panics, particularly the media's intrinsic involvement with excess" (Walkowitz 121).
3 For a naively profound example from popular fiction, see the analysis of Doyle's *The Sign of Four in Post-Traumatic Culture* (54-79).
4 Orlando Patterson, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the 90s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).
5 For readings of these two narratives that unfold these radical existential themes, see my *Post-Traumatic Culture* (129-51).

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Bibliography


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